

GEO POLITICS

№18 | MAY 2025



GEO POLITICS

Issue №18

May, 2025

Our Mission

Issue	№18
-------	-----

May	2025
-----	------

www.politicsgeo.com

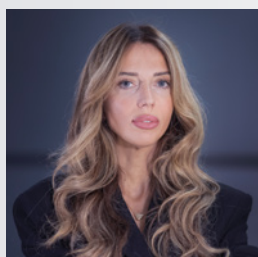
info@geopoliticsjournal.org

[follow](#)

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.

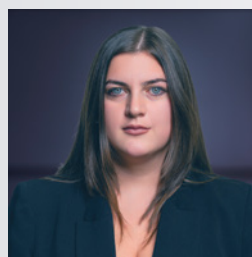
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must advance the dissemination of 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, the U.S., 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.



Ana Khurtsidze

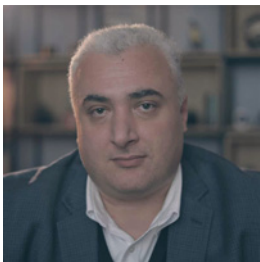
President of Gnomon Wise
and Dean of Law School
of the University of Georgia



Irina Gurgenchashvili

Executive Director of
Gnomon Wise

Contributors



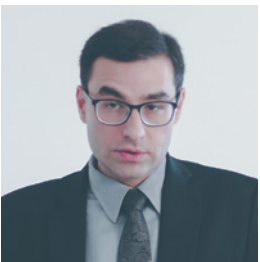
Sergi Kapanadze Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi-based think-tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice-speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016-2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011-2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



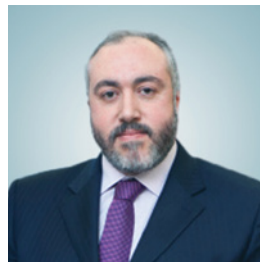
Thornike Gordadze Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



Shota Gvineria Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

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



Natalie Sabanadze Contributor

Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze has been a Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College between 2021–23. Prior to this, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the EU and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. From 2005–13, she worked as a senior official at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, where she held several positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. She holds an MSc in International Relations from London School of Economics and D.Phil in Politics and International Relations from Oxford University. Natalie Sabanadze has published and lectured extensively on post-communist transition, nationalism and ethnic conflict, Russian foreign policy, and the EU in the world.



Vano Chkhikvadze Contributor

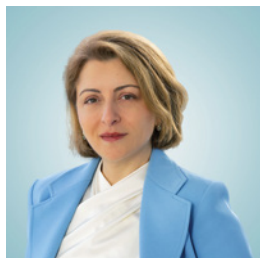
Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



Jaba Devdariani Contributor

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

Guest Contributors



Eka Tkeshelashvili Guest Contributor

Eka Tkeshelashvili is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Democracy Working Group and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. She previously led Dexis Consulting Group's Anti-Corruption Practice and held senior leadership roles in EU and USAID programs in Ukraine. A former Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, she played a key role in Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reforms. Eka Tkeshelashvili serves on the Board of Trustees of the Nizami Ganjavi International Center and is a member of the European Leadership Network. She holds degrees from the University of Notre Dame, Oxford University, and Tbilisi State University.



Tornike Zurabashvili Guest Contributor

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher and practitioner with a focus on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the broader Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike Zurabashvili also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, as well as master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.

When an Angry Peace Is Worse Than War: The Perils of a Bad Deal for European Security

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine grinds into its fourth year, the prospect of a meaningful peace deal remains distant—not because negotiations haven’t been proposed, but because Russia’s ongoing atrocities, territorial ambitions, and refusal to face real consequences make genuine compromise impossible. Instead of a mutually hurting stalemate, we are witnessing an increasingly one-sided war of attrition, where Kyiv is pressured to concede and Moscow is emboldened to wait. In this context, the temptation to pursue a “bad peace” that freezes the conflict on Russian terms—often pitched as a pragmatic solution—would not only entrench injustice but jeopardize European security and embolden authoritarian backsliding across the region. From Ukraine’s besieged cities to Georgia’s creeping authoritarianism, the cost of appeasement is already visible. Sustained Western pressure—economic, military, and diplomatic—is the only way to prevent a regional descent into coercive spheres of influence and defend what remains of the post-Cold War security order.

This issue of *GEOpolitics* looks at the main developments of regional security, democratic resilience, and great power competition in and around the Black Sea. From Russia’s strategic push to dominate the region, to Georgia’s political drift, Türkiye’s opportunistic realignment, and Western responses both bold and belated, the articles examine how contested narratives and fractured alliances are reshaping the geopolitical fault lines of Europe’s eastern frontier.

Natalie Sabanadze opens the issue with an argument that the Black Sea has become a pivotal arena in Russia’s geopolitical strategy to reassert itself as a global power, using a combination of military aggression, hybrid warfare, and ideational influence to control regional dynamics. Central to this strategy is the drive to dominate Ukraine’s Black Sea coast, as control over trade, energy routes, and strategic naval positions enables Russia to project power into the Mediterranean, Balkans, and beyond. The article warns that the return of Donald Trump and his transactional, non-normative foreign policy weakens democratic resilience in the region and emboldens authoritarian regimes like Georgia’s, while also undermining longstanding principles of territorial integrity by entertaining potential recognition of Russia’s control over Crimea. With Türkiye playing a complex balancing role and the EU struggling to fill the void left by the U.S., the region faces a dangerous shift from contested multipolarity toward coercive regionalism, where small states like Georgia risk being trapped in a geopolitical grey zone with little leverage or protection.

Eka Tkeshelashvili argues that Georgia is a critical test of the EU’s geopolitical credibility in an increasingly multipolar and unstable world. As Russia escalates its efforts to dominate its neighborhood and dismantle the post-Cold War order, Georgia—a small state with overwhelming public support for EU integration—is caught between democratic aspirations and an authoritarian, oligarchic government drifting toward Moscow. The EU’s failure to respond decisively to Geor-

gia's democratic backsliding and Russian interference would signal a dangerous retreat from value-based alliances and embolden autocratic forces regionally and globally. To remain a credible global actor, the EU must reassert its strategic will by accelerating enlargement, sanctioning democratic saboteurs, and directly supporting Georgia's pro-European society.

Sergi Kapanadze continues with an analysis of the Trump administration's 2025 peace proposal, claiming that it fails to account for the core interests of the key actors—Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., and the EU—and thus reinforces, rather than resolves, the conflict. The plan demands sweeping and politically suicidal concessions from Ukraine, including the recognition of Russian territorial gains and abandonment of NATO aspirations, in exchange for vague, unenforceable European security guarantees and economic sweeteners like the U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal. Meanwhile, Russia sees no reason to compromise, as its current war strategy remains sustainable and cost-effective, lacking the mutually hurting stalemate necessary for genuine negotiations. The U.S., driven by short-term electoral gains and strategic disengagement, risks undermining its own global credibility and emboldening authoritarian aggression. Ultimately, the article warns that without serious costs imposed on Russia and enforceable guarantees for Ukraine, any peace deal will be unstable, unjust, and detrimental to European security.

Thornike Gordadze looks at the Black Sea and European security through the prism of Türkiye's transactional "multi-alignment" approach—balancing between NATO, Russia, BRICS, and the EU. President Erdoğan capitalizes on crises to expand influence, leveraging geography, defense capabilities, migration management, and soft power to increase Türkiye's relevance in Europe's new security architecture. Despite backing Ukraine militarily and diplomatically, Türkiye avoids sanctions on Russia and maintains ties with Moscow,

underscoring its flexible, interest-based diplomacy. As the U.S. retreats and Europe seeks defense autonomy, Ankara sees an opportunity to shape continental security—reviving its EU engagement and demanding concessions like customs union modernization, visa liberalization, and defense industry participation, while sidelining democratization. For Georgia and the South Caucasus, this recalibration offers both risks and opportunities: if Türkiye becomes embedded in European defense, it could anchor Western influence in the region, benefiting Georgia, provided it returns to a pro-European path. But with Tbilisi drifting toward Russia, the window for seizing this alignment may soon close.

Shota Gvineria stays on the topic of Russia's efforts to destabilize the Black Sea region, with a sobering assessment of how Moscow executed coordinated, evolving hybrid operations across three vulnerable democracies in Eastern Europe to destabilize institutions, polarize societies, and derail European integration. While Moldova and Romania mounted partial resistance to Russia's electoral interference, through civic and institutional responses, Georgia stands out as a case of internal complicity, where the ruling party actively facilitated Russian tactics, from disinformation and diaspora vote suppression to voter intimidation and Kremlin-aligned propaganda. The article outlines Russia's adaptive toolkit—micro-targeted digital content, illicit financing, clergy involvement, and societal fearmongering—employed with country-specific precision. It warns that Moscow's methods are becoming more embedded, effective, and cumulative, and that unless democracies develop anticipatory, coordinated countermeasures, the institutional takeover model seen in Georgia could spread. The article calls for urgent investment in media resilience, electoral transparency, and cross-border enforcement mechanisms to safeguard electoral integrity and halt the normalization of authoritarian influence within democratic systems.

Jaba Devdariani and Tornike Zurabashvili dismantle the Georgian Dream government's narrative that engagement with China reflects a sophisticated geopolitical balancing act. Instead, the authors argue, this eastward pivot is neither strategically grounded nor beneficial to Georgia's security or sovereignty. Tbilisi's embrace of Beijing—exemplified by symbolic agreements, infrastructure projects, and talk of Chinese-language education—is portrayed as opportunistic, driven by strained ties with the West and domestic elite interests rather than a viable foreign policy doctrine. The article critiques the concept of “multi-vector” alignment as a rhetorical façade masking authoritarian consolidation and geopolitical U-turn, warning that China has limited interest in Georgia beyond extractive infrastructure deals, and certainly no intention of counterbalancing Russian influence. As Georgia isolates itself from the EU and the U.S., it forfeits its appeal to China and weakens its leverage with regional powers. Without credible democratic governance and Western alignment, Georgia's foreign policy risks becoming directionless, reactive, and increasingly beholden to Moscow's interests.

Temuri Yakobashvili steps in with the analysis of a bipartisan MEGOBARI Act, adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives. This “unfriendly act”, as labeled by the Georgian Dream, in reality, is a defining moment in U.S.-Georgia relations, signaling a sharp rebuke of Georgia's current authoritarian drift under the Georgian Dream government. While framed as an act of “tough love,” the legislation is unambiguously friendly toward the Georgian people and hostile toward a ruling elite increasingly aligned with Russia, China, and Iran. The bill proposes targeted sanctions against officials obstructing Georgia's democratic and

Euro-Atlantic trajectory, while simultaneously offering substantial incentives—expanded defense cooperation, academic exchange, trade opportunities—should Tbilisi recommit to reform. The MEGOBARI Act could fracture the regime's authoritarian apparatus and reset the relationship in favor of the Georgian public. With Senate passage looming and Trump poised to sign, time is running out for Georgia's rulers to change course—or face escalating consequences.

Vano Chkhikvadze closes the issue with a stark warning about a new, politically driven wave of emigration that is hollowing out Georgia's youth, talent, and democratic potential. Unlike earlier migration waves caused by war or poverty, today's exodus is fueled by disenchantment with the country's deepening authoritarianism under Georgian Dream, economic stagnation, and a failing social contract. As young, educated, civically engaged Georgians flee, they leave behind a more demobilized and manipulable electorate, which suits the ruling regime. While the government reaps economic benefits from rising remittances, it systematically disenfranchises emigrants by limiting their political participation. The EU's looming visa liberalization suspension mechanism reform could soon close the door for Georgian migrants, ironically accelerating migration before the window shuts. The article argues that without urgent democratic and structural reforms, Georgia risks becoming an aging, depopulated state whose best and brightest have already run, not just from poverty, but from a regime intent on silencing their future ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

Content

The New Black Sea (Dis)Order: Russia's Trump Card 10

NATALIE SABANADZE

Small States, Big Stakes: Why Alliances Still Matter 17

EKA TKESHELASHVILI

Why Peace Remains Elusive in Ukraine 22

SERGI KAPANADZE

A Man with Cards: Will Türkiye's Multi-Alignment Policy Bring Results? 31

THORNIKE GORDADZE

Targeted Disruption: 39

Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia

SHOTA GVINERIA

The False Promise of Georgia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy 47

JABA DEVDARIANI & TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI

"Friendly" Fire 54

TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI

Looming Emigration from Georgia – Run, Forrest, Run! 60

VANO CHKHIKVADZE

The New Black Sea (Dis)Order: Russia's Trump Card

Russia's war against Ukraine, among other things, is about the control of the Black Sea. This is where Putin's territorial and non-territorial ambitions converge, ranging from expanding Russia beyond its borders to securing its place among the world's great powers. From Moscow's perspective, controlling the Black Sea is vital for cementing its dominance over its sphere of influence and extending its reach into the Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas. The Black Sea's strategic importance to Russia's global ambitions has also increased with the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, which has weakened Russia's position in the Baltic. Ukraine's successful asymmetric offensive against the Black Sea fleet has, in turn, made naval reconstitution one of Russia's urgent priorities.

Russia aims to establish undisputed military dominance in the Black Sea and to secure control over

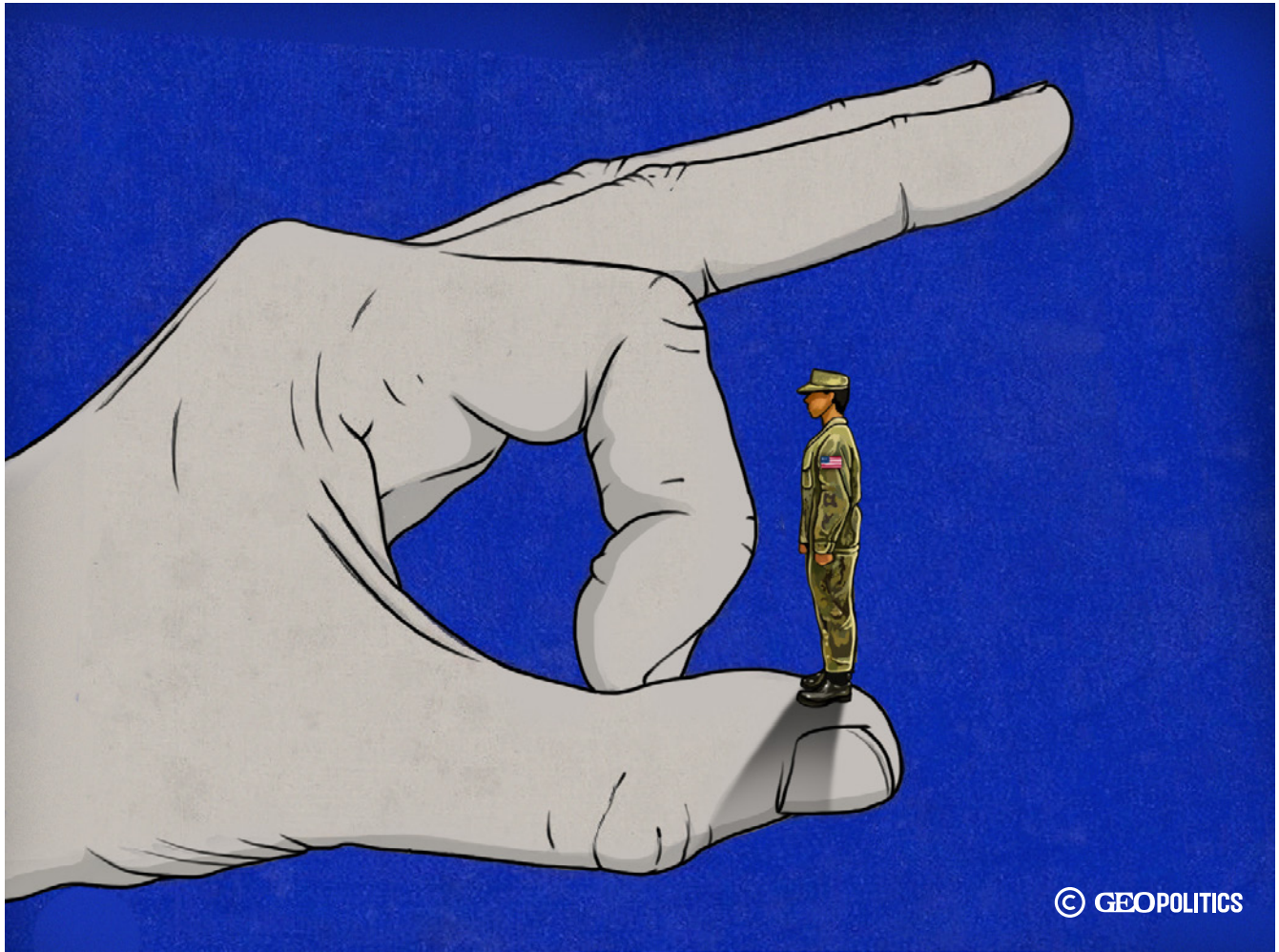
key trade and energy routes. To achieve this, Russia must limit Western, particularly NATO's, expansion, 'demilitarize' Ukraine, and manage its relations with Türkiye to its advantage. These are essential preconditions for Russia to deal successfully with the growing influence of non-Western actors such as China and Iran and to engage in so-called '[friendly balancing](#)' within a framework of competitive cooperation. Russia's success or failure in realizing these aims will define the emerging order in the greater Black Sea region.

Russia aims to establish undisputed military dominance in the Black Sea and to secure control over key trade and energy routes. To achieve this, Russia must limit Western, particularly NATO's, expansion, 'demilitarize' Ukraine, and manage its relations with Türkiye to its advantage.



NATALIE SABANADZE
Contributor

Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze has been a Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College between 2021–23. Prior to this, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the EU and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. From 2005–13, she worked as a senior official at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, where she held several positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. She holds an MSc in International Relations from London School of Economics and D.Phil in Politics and International Relations from Oxford University. Natalie Sabanadze has published and lectured extensively on post-communist transition, nationalism and ethnic conflict, Russian foreign policy, and the EU in the world.



Russia's political and military priorities in the Black Sea illustrate its broader strategic outlook in the fracturing international order. First, the West is an enemy *par excellence* while others are partners and rivals, depending on circumstances. Second, power political competition, not international cooperation, is a defining feature of the international system. In this context, mastering below-the-threshold grey zone operations is indispensable for maintaining a competitive edge. Third, balancing power is achieved not only through military, political, and economic means but also, crucially, through ideational factors. Ideological alignment can turn a foe into a friend and advance geopolitical interests by expanding a network of supporters.

Much of this outlook reflects Cold War-era thinking; the outcomes of its application to the Black Sea region, however, will be shaped by today's political circumstances. Despite its global ambitions,

Russia is not the superpower that the USSR once was. While the Cold War saw the geopolitical order in the Black Sea defined by uncontested Soviet hegemony, the patterns of contestation today are far more complex and multilayered, creating a deeper regional security vacuum and risking greater disorder.

The Black Sea and Russia's Post-Soviet Revisionism

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia became one of the 15 successor nation-states. [The Belavezha Accords](#), which formalized the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adhered to the principle of *uti possidetis juris* according to which the mutual borders of successor states follow administrative boundaries of the prior shared state. Within those boundaries, however, Russia struggled to conceive of itself as a nation-state. It formally recognized

the independence of the former Soviet republics but never fully respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its former imperial subjects. Russia adopted a 'policy of compatriots,' asserting a special role in determining the fate of Russian speakers beyond its borders. It fueled separatist movements, from the Baltic to the Caucasus, by exploiting strained state-minority relations, thus creating leverage to undermine efforts by these states to break free from Russia's sphere of influence. Defiance, in turn, invited retaliation. As Putin famously quipped, "[Russia's border doesn't end anywhere](#)."

The Black Sea region has been the primary theatre of Russia's post-Soviet revisionism. It lies at the heart of [Putin's Novorossiia project](#)—greater Russia conceived as a civilizational state uniting Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Crimea is intended as the cradle of Novorossiia whose revival will make Russia "great again". It was here that Moscow signaled its readiness to escalate as necessary to prevent further NATO expansion and to resist what it viewed as Western encroachment on its sphere of influence.

The Black Sea has become the battleground where Russia confronts the West in both conventional and hybrid ways, asserting itself as a power to be reckoned with. By attacking Georgia, Russia engaged in its first open state-on-state war since the end of the Cold War; it violated Georgia's territorial integrity and effectively blocked its NATO integration prospects. Following the war, Russia expanded its control over the northern Black Sea coast by occupying Abkhazia. Fearing the loss of Crimea as a military and economic base after the Maidan revolution in 2014, Russia annexed the peninsula, evoking a right to self-determination as a justification for violating Ukraine's internationally recognized borders and [the Budapest Memorandum](#). Because Ukraine continued to pursue Western integration despite the loss of Crimea and ongoing war in the Donbas, Russia launched a full-scale in-

vasion in 2022, making Ukraine's Black Sea coast a primary target.

Russia's assertiveness in the Black Sea region reflects its dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War normative and geopolitical order.

Russia's assertiveness in the Black Sea region reflects its dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War normative and geopolitical order. Russia has accused the West of double standards in the application of international law, particularly criticizing NATO's intervention in Kosovo without UN Security Council approval. In Georgia and then in Crimea, [Russia justified](#) its actions by claiming to follow the "precedent" set by the West in Kosovo.

While violating the territorial integrity and interfering in the domestic affairs of other states, either through force or malign influence, Moscow simultaneously pushed back against Western interventionist tendencies. It interpreted sovereignty as an exclusive right, in contrast to the more liberal conception of sovereignty as responsibility, and placed the principle of non-intervention at the top of the international norms hierarchy. For Russia, the liberal internationalism promoted by the West is a façade, masking an escalating power-political competition. Through military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has asserted the right to veto the sovereign choices of its neighboring states regarding their foreign alliances and political development.

The Black Sea has served as a springboard for Russia's pursuit of global ambitions. Russia's military campaigns in Syria could not have been executed without its naval bases on the Black Sea. In turn, Syria became a critical foothold for Russia to extend its influence further into Africa, challenging and even displacing Western legacy presences in some regions, particularly the Sahel. The Black Sea is an essential and critical factor in Russia's pro-

jection of influence beyond its original post-Soviet sphere of influence. When Russia blockaded Ukraine's Black Sea ports, it demonstrated its leverage over the Global South. The grain trade has become a key instrument for advancing Russia's interests. As Jens Stoltenberg has [stated](#), Russia is "weaponizing hunger." If Russia were to capture Odesa and control Ukraine's ports, it would control 30 percent of the global grain trade—the largest share any country has ever held.

If Russia were to capture Odesa and control Ukraine's ports, it would control 30 percent of the global grain trade—the largest share any country has ever held.

The biggest obstacle to Russia realizing its ambitions is Ukraine's valiant resistance. Thanks to Ukraine's highly effective asymmetric naval warfare, the Black Sea has become one of the areas where Russia suffered its most significant wartime defeat. Despite lacking a fleet of its own, Ukraine's innovative use of sea drones has destroyed one-third of Russia's Black Sea fleet, forcing the remainder to seek refuge away from Sevastopol.

Another significant obstacle is Türkiye. Its enforcement of the [Montreux Convention](#), which restricts access by navies to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, prevents Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet and thus hinders its ability to launch a large-scale amphibious assault against Ukraine. In 2022, Moscow welcomed Ankara's strict application of the Montreux Convention because it stopped NATO ships from entering the Black Sea. Ukraine has benefited from the restrictions since Russia's fleet has been effectively neutralized. Türkiye has avoided antagonizing Moscow; it has not joined sanctions against Russia and remains one of the major purchasers of Russian oil. But it has also supported Ukraine. Ankara was quick to supply Ukraine with Bayraktar drones. It has pursued a strategic partnership with Kyiv and advocated

for its NATO membership. Türkiye has uniquely positioned itself in a manner that both Russia and Ukraine see as beneficial.

Enter Trump

Protecting Odesa and keeping what remains of Ukraine's Black Sea coast out of Russian control is vital for Ukraine's survival, European security, and global food security.

With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the U.S. has scaled back its support for Ukraine, re-engaged with Russia, and embarked on a diplomatic effort to bring the war to an end. A ceasefire at sea and in the air was a precondition to a sustainable settlement; making the Black Sea safe for navigation would open trade routes and reduce associated costs. While Ukraine accepted the ceasefire terms unconditionally, Russia bargained for more, including a partial lifting of sanctions. A proposed ceasefire in the Black Sea might allow Russia to reconstitute its fleet there and to reverse its defeat. As a Carnegie Russia publication [argues](#), Russia has much to gain and little to lose from a Black Sea ceasefire. Ukraine has continued to trade through the safe route along Romania's coastline. Although the trade volumes are lower than before the war, Ukraine has secured a viable export route and can gain little from what is proposed. The risks are significant, however, particularly if a cessation of hostilities pressures Türkiye to open the Straits. Russia would likely seize the opportunity to bring submarines and other naval assets back to the Black Sea from its base at Tartus in Syria. Odesa, a prime objective for Moscow, would be at risk. Grain exports via Odesa and other Black Sea ports are an economic lifeline for Ukraine. Its economic viability would be severely compromised without access to global shipping routes. Protecting Odesa and keeping what remains of Ukraine's Black Sea coast out of Russian

control is vital for Ukraine's survival, European security, and global food security.

Russia is also expected to put forward 'soft' demands for any future settlement with Ukraine. These would likely include granting special status to the Russian language and the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Russia would probably pursue uninhibited operation by Russian cultural institutions and the holding of elections. In the past, Russia has weaponized such seemingly democratic and reasonable provisions to further its geopolitical interests. At particular risk would be Odesa. If Russia cannot capture the city by force, it can use hybrid methods to mobilize the large Russian-speaking population to support its cause. According to the latest reports, pro-Russian sentiment in Odesa [has fallen](#) significantly. With time and effort, however, Russia might succeed at rebuilding its 'soft' leverage to destabilize Ukraine.

Trump's return has had an unexpected impact on Russia's ideological instrument of influence projection. As part of its hybrid strategy, Russia has deployed anti-liberal, anti-status quo rhetoric across the Black Sea region for some time, including its NATO states. Russia's interference in Romania's elections and information operations in Bulgaria are recent examples. By supporting nationalist, anti-establishment, and anti-liberal political figures and parties, Russia has framed anti-liberalism as anti-Westernism and capitalized on the growing popularity of its traditional values ideology to foster pro-Russian political stances. Now, however, Russia and the new U.S. administration appear to be aligned in the global culture wars. Trump's conservative, anti-woke stance has decoupled anti-liberalism from anti-Westernism, weakening Russia's monopoly over populist conservatism and blunting one of its most potent instruments of influence.

At the same time, however, by abandoning the promotion of democracy and embracing inter-

est-driven transactionalism, the Trump administration has inadvertently boosted the authoritarian trend sweeping much of the Black Sea region. The shift benefits Russia, which supports anti-liberal, autocratic political elites opposed to Western influence in domestic affairs. There is a clear correlation between regime and geopolitical alignment which Russia will likely promote and exploit. Without U.S. support for democratic forces, all Black Sea states will become more vulnerable to Russian influence and interference.

By abandoning the promotion of democracy and embracing interest-driven transactionalism, the Trump administration has inadvertently boosted the authoritarian trend sweeping much of the Black Sea region.

Trump has suggested recognizing Russian control of Crimea as part of a deal to end the war in Ukraine. That would mark a significant shift in U.S. policy and deal a blow to international law that would reverberate for years. The norms of the inviolability of internationally recognized borders and the non-recognition of forceful territorial revisions have played a stabilizing role in the post-Cold War international order. To be sure, those norms have been violated. But the violations have rarely been recognized or rewarded. Smaller states have been shielded from the predatory actions of great powers and the incentives for territorial conquest have shrunk. Recognizing Russia's control of Crimea would upend valuable norms and set a dangerous precedent. Even if the U.S. were to withdraw from the Black Sea, restoring the Russian hegemonic order would not be easy. Russia has turned Ukraine into an enemy with the population resolutely determined to resist and fight for its independence. Ukraine's collapse would undermine European security, making it crucial for Europe to step up and defend its eastern flank, from north to south. The withdrawal of U.S. commitments to European

security, coupled with an emboldened, revisionist Russia at Europe's doorstep, poses a direct threat to the survival of the European project.

Despite its balancing act, Türkiye is not interested in seeing Russia regain uncontested hegemony in the Black Sea.

Moreover, despite its balancing act, Türkiye [is not interested](#) in seeing Russia regain uncontested hegemony in the Black Sea. Türkiye's position vis-à-vis Russia has been significantly strengthened following Assad's fall and Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara's security interests now align more closely with Europe's than with Russia's. Consequently, the geopolitical order in the greater Black Sea region looks neither certain nor orderly.

Georgia's Grey Zone Trap

International conditions that have reduced the costs of authoritarianism and increased opportunities for balancing one regional actor against another have contributed to Georgia's democratic backsliding.

As the smallest Black Sea state and as a state with unresolved territorial disputes, Georgia is particularly vulnerable to the impact of regional and global shifts such as the destruction of the rules-based international order. The turn toward Russia and the shedding of the democracy promotion agenda by the Trump administration are likely to influence Georgia's domestic political development and foreign policy outlook. The two have been closely interconnected; Georgia's determination to join Western institutions, particularly the EU and NATO, was a driving force behind its domestic democratization efforts. Although never a fully consolidated democracy, Georgia was eager to meet

European and Euro-Atlantic integration criteria. With its recent pivot away from the West, however, the domestic governance model has shifted from a partially democratic system to an increasingly authoritarian one. International conditions that have reduced the costs of authoritarianism and increased opportunities for balancing one regional actor against another have contributed to Georgia's democratic backsliding. Trump's transactional approach and rejection of value-based diplomacy may further fuel the autocratic tendencies of the Georgian Dream government.

If Ukraine is defeated and the Russian occupation of its Black Sea coast is unchallenged, the prospects for Georgia regaining its territorial integrity would be close to nil. Moscow would likely maintain its grip on Abkhazia and might integrate Sokhumi more tightly. Russia is already expanding the [Ochamchire naval base](#) to establish a new base for its Black Sea Fleet. Within the framework of European integration, Georgia had the opportunity to engage in a conflict-settlement process that offered Abkhazia a credible future in the European Union. With Georgia's EU prospects now suspended, the likelihood of a negotiated and lasting settlement to the conflict appears remote.

As Georgia distances itself from the U.S. and the EU, it will face mounting pressure to engage in regional formats, such as the 3+3, which excludes Western states and is led by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran.

The emerging regional order relegates Georgia to a perpetual grey zone where rules do not apply and 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' Lacking Western backing, Georgia will have to balance the interests of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and other non-Western actors from a position of weakness. Although Tbilisi is closely engaged in cooperation with Türkiye and

Azerbaijan, the balance of power in this triangle is rapidly shifting away from Georgia. The logic of transactional competition suggests that Tbilisi will become increasingly accommodating toward Russia, while facing resistance from the population, which harbors no pro-Russian sentiments. As Georgia distances itself from the U.S. and the EU, it will face mounting pressure to engage in region-

al formats, such as the 3+3, which excludes Western states and is led by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. A likely outcome would be the collapse of rules-based multilateralism in the greater Black Sea region. For a small state with an unaccountable authoritarian leadership, navigating the troubled waters of the new, competitive, and fragmented Black Sea order promises to be a risky business ■

Small States, Big Stakes: Why Alliances Still Matter

As the post-World War II order fractures and a multipolar world takes shape, the defining question is no longer whether or not power will shift, but how this will happen. Will the emerging global architecture be anchored in multilateralism and enduring alliances, or descend into spheres of influence where coercion, and not consent, sets the terms? The answer will depend not only upon great powers but also upon how effectively geopolitical players can forge resilient, value-driven partnerships and prove their resolve in decisive arenas where strategic lines are drawn. Georgia, a small Eastern European state with overwhelming public support for European integration, is a frontline test case of the EU's geopolitical credibility. The EU's response to democratic backsliding and Russia's interference in Georgia will demonstrate whether or not it is prepared to defend its political space and play a meaningful role in shaping the new global order.

Fracturing Security Environment

As the post-World War II order fragments and a multipolar world takes shape, a critical question arises: will multilateralism shape this new era, or will it descend into competing spheres of influence where might makes right and partnerships are driven by transactional interests rather than enduring values and strategic alignments?

Much will depend upon the powers that emerge as the architects of this new world order. Given the current geopolitical uncertainty, marked by looming trade wars, intensifying rivalries between major actors like the United States and China, and the increasingly destructive behavior of revisionist Russia, the survival of multilateralism in any meaningful form hinges upon the European Union's ability to assert itself as a strong geopolitical actor, capable of operating across multiple fronts.



EKA TKESHELASHVILI
Guest Contributor

Eka Tkeshelashvili is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Democracy Working Group and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. She previously led Dexis Consulting Group's Anti-Corruption Practice and held senior leadership roles in EU and USAID programs in Ukraine. A former Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, she played a key role in Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reforms. Eka Tkeshelashvili serves on the Board of Trustees of the Nizami Ganjavi International Center and is a member of the European Leadership Network. She holds degrees from the University of Notre Dame, Oxford University, and Tbilisi State University.



The EU is uniquely positioned to play this role because of its economic strength and the type of power it can project—normative, inclusive, and stabilizing. Unlike actors that often operate through zero-sum frameworks, the EU has built its identity upon peaceful transformation, economic and legal integration, and a community of values. In a world at risk of fracturing along geopolitical and ideological lines, what will ultimately distinguish those capable of shaping global architecture is the ability to build versatile alliances grounded in enduring commitments and partnerships that are resilient, trust-based, and aligned in purpose.

From World War II through the Cold War, the strength and durability of alliances were shaped not only by military capabilities but by political will and the decisive roles of both major powers and smaller states. Resistance movements in occupied Europe helped bolster the legitimacy and moral authority of the Allied cause. In the post-war era, NATO's ability to uphold transatlantic security relied not solely upon American power but upon the integration of smaller democracies such as Denmark, Norway, and Iceland—countries whose inclusion proved essential. Their participation reinforced the common security and political cohesion and contributed to economic stability and institutional alignment. More recently, the accession of Sweden and Finland reaffirmed that even militarily relatively modest democracies can enhance the credibility, cohesion, and effectiveness of alliances.

The EU remains the most credible champion of a rules-based international order and has the potential to build alliances centered on legal norms, economic interdependence, and democratic governance as an alternative to predatory trade and coercive diplomacy. But to maintain that credibility, it must act decisively, reenergizing enlargement as its most powerful geopolitical tool and rethinking its partnership framework with the Global South to reflect a more adaptive and equitable model.

Georgia at the Fault Line

Whether the EU can meet this challenge is not just a question of global relevance. It is a matter of existential importance for small countries in contested geopolitical environments. Despite its imperfections, the post-war system upheld the independence of smaller states by rejecting spheres of influence and affirming the primacy of legal norms. The dissolution of the Soviet Union reinforced this trajectory, fostering optimism in countries like Georgia that the EU and NATO membership could secure sovereignty, democratic consolidation, and prosperity.

If a new iron curtain were to fall, Georgia would, in Moscow's calculus, belong on its side without too much resistance from Europe or the U.S..

Today, that optimism has eroded. Georgia, a candidate for EU membership and long-standing NATO aspirant, is now mired in a democratic crisis and facing mounting pressure from an increasingly aggressive Russia. An oligarchic elite has captured the state. The current government, widely seen as lacking legitimacy, has grown overtly anti-Western. Its rapprochement with Moscow is no longer subtle. For many Georgians, the government [appears](#) more aligned with the Kremlin than the European future the public overwhelmingly supports. If a new iron curtain were to fall, Georgia would, in Moscow's calculus, belong on its side without too much resistance from Europe or the U.S..

In today's geopolitical climate, integration into the EU and NATO is no longer a long-term aspiration rooted in shared values, institutional commitments, and the security guarantees those alliances offer. Still, it is a matter of the survival of Georgia's sovereignty.

A Test of EU Resolve

This moment should matter to the EU. In a multipolar world, treating countries like Georgia as peripheral is not just shortsighted, it is a strategic miscalculation. For Europe to emerge as a true geopolitical center of gravity, it must build alliances rooted in shared values and trust, adaptability, and strategic coherence. This is not about lofty ambition—it is about stern necessity at a time when the transatlantic alliance can no longer be taken for granted.

A faster, more determined pace of enlargement would signal that Europe is ready to act. The EU's indecisiveness and continued overreliance on U.S. leadership have weakened its geopolitical standing. The drawn-out accession process, particularly in the Western Balkans, has cast doubt on the Union's commitment to enlargement. The path Ukraine takes will further shape perceptions of the EU's resolve. But it is Georgia that now presents a unique and urgent test.

Here is a candidate country where public support for EU membership [remains](#) overwhelming. And yet, the process is being deliberately undermined by an entrenched oligarchic elite with [clear ties](#) to Moscow. This is not accidental. It is a key piece of Russia's strategy: to derail Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory through indirect control. How the EU responds—when governance in a pro-European country is being captured by actors hostile to the European project—will reveal whether Europe can defend its own strategic space.

The timing is critical. Just as the 1990s opened a fleeting window for post-Soviet states to join Western institutions—a window seized through the enlargements of the early 2000s—today presents another such opportunity. That moment, decades ago, did not just stabilize Europe's eastern periphery; it made the Union stronger: expanding the single market, boosting resilience, and enhanc-

ing competitiveness. Despite those gains, today's EU appears hesitant. In Georgia, where civic mobilization continues and popular backing for the EU remains unwavering, Europe risks missing yet another strategic opportunity. To dismiss Georgia as peripheral—rather than seeing it as a frontline in the struggle over Europe's future—would be a grave error.

Georgia is not only a partner in values—it is a geostrategic asset. Situated at the crossroads of East and West, Georgia plays a critical role in Europe's energy diversification and connectivity agenda.

Georgia is not only a partner in values—it is a geostrategic asset. Situated at the crossroads of East and West, Georgia plays a critical role in Europe's energy diversification and connectivity agenda. The Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia to European markets, cannot be fully realized without Georgia's cooperation and alignment. Georgia becomes indispensable as the EU races to secure energy alternatives and build resilient supply chains.

A democratic, stable Georgia is also crucial to broader regional stability, particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, it is a gateway for deeper engagement with Central Asia. Supporting Georgia, then, is not merely about defending democracy—it is about investing in long-term regional security and European resilience.

The democratic trajectory in Georgia is not self-correcting. If it collapses, it will signal that authoritarian encroachment is a viable and effective tool for undermining European security and cohesion.

The EU has tools and must be willing to use them. Targeted sanctions—especially personal ones against those responsible for democratic erosion—

are on the table and have already been called for by the European Parliament. Diplomatic pressure for free and fair elections must be sustained. Financial and technical support for independent media and civil society must be ramped up. Most importantly, the EU must clearly distinguish between Georgia's state institutions, which are currently compromised, and its overwhelmingly pro-European population. The democratic trajectory in Georgia is not self-correcting. If it collapses, it will signal that authoritarian encroachment is a viable and effective tool for undermining European security and cohesion.

Geopolitical contests are not won with long-winded declarations or technocratic caution. They are won through political will. From Latin America to Southeast Asia and across Africa, governments are watching closely—not just to see whether the EU stands by its partners but whether or not it can defend its long-term interests. If Europe fails to uphold its influence in a candidate country like Georgia, where support for the EU is not just rhetorical, it sends a damaging message: that authoritarian actors are more decisive, more reliable.

Georgia is more than a country in need. It is a mirror reflecting Europe's own uncertainties. The choices Brussels makes now will show whether or not the EU can lead in shaping a global order defined not by coercion but by resilient alliances and strategic resolve.

Georgia is more than a country in need. It is a mirror reflecting Europe's own uncertainties. The choices Brussels makes now will show whether or not the EU can lead in shaping a global order defined not by coercion but by resilient alliances and strategic resolve. As the international system shifts, the EU must decide: will it act with confidence and clarity, or cede the initiative to more assertive powers?

The determination of Georgia's citizens—especially its youth—to defend their democracy and European future is a vivid reminder of what is at stake. In their courage lies a challenge—and an invitation. The question is whether or not Europe is ready to meet it ■

Why Peace Remains Elusive in Ukraine

As the war between Russia and Ukraine enters its fourth year, a durable ceasefire remains out of reach. Efforts by U.S. President Donald Trump to broker a peace deal have reignited debate but not optimism. The recent April [proposal](#)—framed as a “final offer”—demanded sweeping concessions from Ukraine, including recognition of Russian control over Crimea and other occupied territories, the abandonment of NATO aspirations, and acquiescence to a vaguely defined European-led security guarantee. While pitched as a pragmatic path to peace, the plan fell far short of meeting the fundamental interests of Ukraine and failed to create a viable exit strategy for either Moscow or Kyiv.

Careful examination of the interests of the four key actors—Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and Europe (the EU + UK) shows why the Trump proposal, rather than bridging gaps, exacerbated them. In-

stead of creating a foundation for compromise, the deal incentivized one side (Russia) to wait and the other (Ukraine) to resist, prolonging a war that is as much about territory as it is about the survival of the rules-based order in Europe. Precisely for this reason, Russians all but rejected the proposal, effectively [watering](#) it down to a three-day ceasefire during the May holidays, while Ukraine never responded positively.

Trump’s “Final Offer”

President Trump’s “final offer” for peace in Ukraine, circulated in April 2025, lays out a framework aimed at freezing the war in place, but on terms skewed in Russia’s favor. The plan includes formally recognizing (at least on paper) Crimea as Russian territory, *de facto* acknowledgment of Russia’s control over most of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts, and a commitment from Ukraine to abandon any NATO membership aspirations. In



SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi - based think - tank GRASS (Georgia’s Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice - speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016 - 2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011 - 2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



return, Ukraine would receive a vague “robust security guarantee” from a group of European countries, without U.S. involvement—and the symbolic return of a small sliver of the occupied Kharkiv oblast. Additional elements include provisions for Dnipro River access, a U.S.-administered Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant shared between Ukraine and Russia, and an undefined compensation mechanism for reconstruction.

Trump’s public statement that Ukraine will never join NATO is not just a tactical concession—it could turn out to be a strategic error.

Trump’s public statement that Ukraine [will never join NATO](#) is not just a tactical concession—it could turn out to be a strategic error. It undermines the principle of sovereign choice in security alignments, the cornerstone of the post-Cold War order, enshrined in the [Paris](#) and [Istanbul Charters](#) on European Security. It also effectively codifies Russia’s right to dictate its neighbors’ alliances and makes clear that the U.S. is willing to trade Ukrainian security for geopolitical convenience.

From a negotiation standpoint, the Trump proposal creates a zero-sum dynamic rather than a compromise framework.

For Russia, the plan offers sanctions relief, normalization of economic relations with the U.S., and a *de facto* codification of territorial gains won through military aggression. This would be a *de jure* acquiescence to the forceful changes of European borders since World War II – a precedent no European nation is keen to allow. For Ukraine, the tangible benefits are minimal—limited territory reclaimed, vague third-party security guarantees, no guarantee that Russia would not retaliate

in the foreseeable future, and a separate minerals deal. The costs, however, are existential: possible political suicide for Kyiv’s leadership, a major blow to sovereignty, and the potential unraveling of the post-Cold War international order, not to mention the sunk cost of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives. From a negotiation standpoint, the Trump proposal creates a zero-sum dynamic rather than a compromise framework. It asks Ukraine to concede its constitutional red lines in exchange for promises with no enforcement mechanism and sidelines the European Union by excluding it from central security guarantees.

Unbridgeable Interests

Russia

For the Kremlin, the war in Ukraine is about much more than territory. It is a campaign to reassert control over the post-Soviet space, dismantle NATO’s eastern flank, and challenge the legitimacy of the Western-led order, especially on the European continent.

For the Kremlin, the war in Ukraine is about much more than territory. It is a campaign to reassert control over the post-Soviet space, dismantle NATO’s eastern flank, and challenge the legitimacy of the Western-led order, especially on the European continent. Russia’s strategic goals include permanent control over Crimea and the Black Sea, dominance over eastern and southern Ukraine, and the transformation of Ukraine into a neutralized buffer state, which would be on the verge of becoming a failed state and susceptible to political pressure and instability. Russia is a master of such status quo, which can well be observed in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. The Trump proposal moves

substantially in this direction. It offers *de jure* U.S. recognition of Crimea, *de facto* recognition of other occupied territories, sanctions relief, and NATO rollback.

Putin has little incentive to sign a deal that stops short of full Ukrainian capitulation if time and battlefield attrition continue to shift the balance in Moscow's favor.

Yet paradoxically, the plan does not fully meet Russia's interests either which, from a mediator's perspective, is one way to bridge the disagreements of the conflict parties – making them both unhappy. Putin has little incentive to sign a deal that stops short of full Ukrainian capitulation if time and battlefield attrition continue to shift the balance in Moscow's favor. Russia's BATNA (Best Alternative to the Negotiated Agreement) – continuing the war with low-level escalation while the West fragments—remains attractive. The Trump plan, far from altering this calculus, reinforces it. There are no costs in the proposal that increase pressure on Russia to negotiate sincerely.

Negotiation theorists and practitioners are well aware of William Zartman's [concept](#) of a *Mutually Hurting Stalemate* (MHS) – a phase in a conflict where the parties realize that they are locked in a situation that is not only unwinnable but also increasingly costly—politically, economically, or militarily. According to Zartman, it is only when all sides perceive that continued confrontation will bring more harm than benefit—and that no decisive victory is possible—that they become willing to seek a negotiated solution. The stalemate must be mutually recognized and perceived as painful, creating what Zartman calls a “ripe moment” for mediation or settlement.

For Russia, currently, there is no mutually hurting stalemate, and the Trump Plan does not contrib-

ute to one. To transform the current context into a genuine hurting status quo for Moscow, the West would need to impose significantly higher costs on Moscow. This could include:

- A new round of escalated economic sanctions targeting energy exports, banking, shipping, and insurance;
- Secondary sanctions on countries and companies aiding Russia's evasion tactics;
- A dramatic increase in weapons transfers to Ukraine, including long-range strike capabilities and advanced air defense systems;
- Accelerated training and integration of Ukrainian forces into Western military standards;
- Clear, unwavering political declarations from both the U.S. and the EU that Ukraine will receive continued support until victory, not merely survival, is achieved.

When it becomes clear that time no longer favors the Kremlin and that Western support for Ukraine will not erode, the cost of continued war may exceed the gains.

Such a strategy would alter the incentive structure for Moscow. When it becomes clear that time no longer favors the Kremlin and that Western support for Ukraine will not erode, the cost of continued war may exceed the gains. Only then will the conditions for a true MHS emerge. And then, maybe, Russia would be willing to concede.

Ukraine

Ukraine's position is constitutionally grounded: the country cannot recognize the loss of territory nor abandon its NATO aspirations without violating its own legal framework. Politically, the Trump

plan is a non-starter for President Zelenskyy and his team, or the majority of the Ukrainian population. No Ukrainian leader could retain public support after conceding Crimea and Donbas. Even if, as Trump later [clarified](#), Kyiv would not be required to formally recognize Crimea's annexation, the mere acknowledgment by the U.S. or other Western powers that Crimea is permanently off the negotiating table—and the suggestion that Russia might legally retain it—would constitute both a political and legal catastrophe for Ukraine.

Moreover, the plan's vague European security guarantee lacks credibility, especially given that it excludes U.S. participation and remains undefined in scope, command structure, or duration.

Trump's public declaration that Ukraine's NATO aspirations must be abandoned fundamentally damages Kyiv's long-term security framework. Unlike other neutral country models, this one offers no sovereignty safeguards or security umbrella.

Trump's public declaration that Ukraine's NATO aspirations must be abandoned fundamentally damages Kyiv's long-term security framework. Unlike other neutral country models, this one offers no sovereignty safeguards or security umbrella. The strategic trade-off is completely lopsided. Ukraine is being asked to become a permanently weakened, non-aligned state in exchange for an ephemeral promise of peace, which Russia could violate the very moment it considers the military, political, and diplomatic status quo favoring future intervention.

From a strategic perspective, Ukraine's BATNA, while painful, remains preferable to diplomatic surrender. Continued military resistance—bolstered by Western aid, EU accession negotiations, and the domestic mobilization of a war economy—

is seen as the only way to prevent a permanent occupation. In short, Ukraine assesses that it stands to lose less by continuing the fight than by accepting the proposed terms—even if those losses are severe.

It is true that the human cost of the war is tremendous. The calculation of President Trump is precisely that – unbearable military and civilian life loss. As he [often said](#), 5,000 soldiers dying per week must be stopped. However, the loss of life, no matter how dramatic and tragic, is not always the main factor when a nation is facing the survival task. The Soviet Union, when faced with the invasion of Hitler, stood up, sacrificing millions of unarmed, unprepared, and frightened young soldiers. The cost of human life, often, in the calculation of the statesmen, fails to outweigh the cost of losing sovereignty and independence, precisely a threat that Ukraine now faces.

United States

The Trump administration's interests are shaped less by long-term strategic calculations and more by immediate political considerations. As President Trump [noted](#) there is a “big beautiful ocean” separating the war from the United States. So, for Washington, the perception of threat is not as imminent, and the war in Europe poses no existential threat to its vital interests, unlike for Ukraine and Europe.

The main interests of President Trump and his team are political. He seeks to deliver a foreign policy win ahead of the 2026 midterm elections, reset relations with Russia, reduce U.S. overseas obligations, and cast himself as a global deal-maker – things that he promised during the 2024 campaign. The peace proposal reflects this narrow frame. It is designed to be signed quickly, announced with fanfare, and spun as a triumph of diplomacy, regardless of whether or not it is implementable or sustainable.

It must also not be overlooked that Trump could genuinely believe that once the war stops, Russia will not dare to relaunch it. At least, as long as Trump is in office. This might be true, since the costs of Russia reigniting the conflict shortly after the peace deal will likely come with a very high cost, maybe even higher than now. However, Putin's time horizon is far longer than Trump's presidential term. To give a perspective – Putin started the planning of Georgia's invasion in 2006 (as he [acknowledged](#) himself), invaded Georgia in 2008, proposed a European Security Treaty, guaranteeing the revamping of security order in 2009, masterminded the annexation of Crimea in 2014, invaded Donbas in 2014, armed and controlled in Eastern Ukraine in 2014-2022, prepared the further military action and invaded Ukraine in 2022. Waiting a couple of more years, recuperating from the losses, rearming, remobilizing the army, and relaunching an offensive once Trump is out of office can easily be imagined. While this might not be on the radar of U.S. interests right now, it certainly is for Ukrainians and Europeans who fear that they will be the next target of Russian aggression.

By forcing Ukraine into a bad deal and abandoning NATO's open-door policy, the U.S. would embolden China, destabilize Eastern Europe, and fracture transatlantic unity. Not to say that it would give a green light to Russia to aim at eastern EU and NATO members once the situation is more permissive.

This short-termism in reality contradicts broader U.S. national interests: deterring authoritarian expansionism, protecting European allies, upholding non-recognition norms, and preventing further erosion of the international rules-based order. By forcing Ukraine into a bad deal and abandoning NATO's open-door policy, the U.S. would embolden China, destabilize Eastern Europe, and fracture

transatlantic unity. Not to say that it would give a green light to Russia to aim at eastern EU and NATO members once the situation is more permissive.

European Union and the UK

European interests lie in securing its eastern flank, preventing mass migration and economic collapse in Ukraine, and preserving the credibility of its enlargement policy. While some European capitals may welcome a reduction in military confrontation, most EU policymakers view the Trump plan as dangerous and exclusionary. It offers no role for the EU in security guarantees, relegates it to a funding source for reconstruction, and undermines the legal basis of its support for Ukraine's sovereignty.

Recognizing Russian territorial gains would nullify the principle that borders cannot be changed by force—a foundational tenet of the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policy, as well as wider European security architecture.

Recognizing Russian territorial gains would nullify the principle that borders cannot be changed by force—a foundational tenet of the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policy, as well as wider European security architecture. Although some European actors may push for a ceasefire, few are willing to bankroll a peace built on appeasement.

For the Baltic States and Poland, a peace deal, which would give Russia more time to prepare further aggression, is a non-starter. Ukraine, without any security guarantees, is an invitation for Moscow to cross into NATO and the EU, through Estonia, Lithuania, or Poland.

The peace plan put forward in April also fails to align with Europe's broader security interests.

While some European states may attempt to enhance the agreement by offering a more “visible presence” in the non-conflict regions of Ukraine—albeit with a limited mandate and without firm U.S. security guarantees—this approach carries significant risks. On one hand, such a deployment could deter Moscow from further aggression; on the other, it might tempt the Kremlin to probe European military resolve. If, in the face of renewed Russian offensives, European forces prove unwilling to engage or eventually withdraw, the consequences would be all too familiar. History offers a stark warning—Britain’s retreat from Dunkirk being a prime example of the perils of unprepared or unsupported commitments.

Minerals Deal as a Sweeteners

The so-called minerals deal [signed](#) by the U.S. and Ukraine on 30 April 2025 should be understood in the context of improving the parties’ BATNA and making a peace deal seem more acceptable. According to the agreement, Washington and Kyiv will establish the United States-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund to be financed by revenues from new natural resource projects, stimulating Ukraine’s post-war economic recovery and attracting foreign investment. Critically, according to the deal, Ukraine retains full sovereignty over its natural resources and the fund will operate on a 50/50 revenue-sharing model for future—not existing—projects. The agreement excludes retroactive repayments of U.S. military aid, a major shift from earlier proposals under which Ukraine was expected to repay up to USD 500 billion. Instead, the deal credits future U.S. security assistance as capital contributions to the fund, making it far more palatable for Kyiv. Moreover, the U.S. gains commercial access to offtake agreements for future critical mineral extraction—but only on competitive, market-based terms. While the deal stops short of providing formal security guarantees, it outlines a “long-term strategic alignment” and explicitly condemns Russia’s aggression.

The minerals deal must be understood not only as a reconstruction framework but as a political instrument: a transactional sweetener designed to make a peace agreement more acceptable to Ukraine by offering a pathway to economic sovereignty and strategic alignment with the West once the peace is reached.

The minerals deal must be understood not only as a reconstruction framework but as a political instrument: a transactional sweetener designed to make a peace agreement more acceptable to Ukraine by offering a pathway to economic sovereignty and strategic alignment with the West once the peace is reached. By tying investment potential to stability, the U.S. is subtly incentivizing Ukraine to engage seriously in peace talks while ensuring that such talks do not come across as capitulation. The agreement addresses Ukrainian concerns over resource control, foreign influence, and historical exploitation while also reinforcing Ukraine’s Western trajectory. It also implies (albeit not in a written form) that once the U.S. economic interests appear in Ukraine, the security component might follow. After all, American mining companies will need protection.

Therefore, while not framed explicitly as a peace agreement, the U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal functions as a structural incentive for peace. It creates the economic conditions and strategic reassurance needed for Ukraine to consider, and eventually enter, a peaceful settlement on its own terms. The true test will be whether or not this pathway proves robust and attractive enough to counterbalance Russia’s continued aggression and Ukraine’s deeply rooted resistance to territorial compromise.

BATNA and the Asymmetry of the Stalemate

Ukraine finds itself in a deteriorating position: losing lives, territory, and economic stability. Its BATNA is harsh—a prolonged war with dwindling U.S. support. But a bad deal offers no credible alternative. In fact, the proposed deal threatens to erode Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity even further.

Russia, by contrast, does not perceive the war as “hurting” in the Zartman sense. Sanctions are manageable, economic adaptation is ongoing, and domestic opposition is suppressed. The Kremlin sees the current trajectory as sustainable. That removes the basic precondition for successful negotiations.

To induce a genuinely hurting stalemate and improve Ukraine's bargaining position, the West must increase pressure on Russia while enhancing Kyiv's military and institutional resilience.

Therefore, to induce a genuinely hurting stalemate and improve Ukraine's bargaining position, the West must increase pressure on Russia while enhancing Kyiv's military and institutional resilience. The message must be unequivocal: continued aggression will bring increasing isolation and attrition while negotiations offer the only off-ramp. Only then will Moscow face a cost-benefit calculus that favors compromise.

A viable peace deal must offer reciprocal gains and acceptable losses to all parties. Trump's “final offer” fails on both counts. It transforms Ukrainian concessions into permanent outcomes while offering only nebulous promises in return. The return of minor territories and river access is trivial when weighed against the recognition of annexation and

NATO abandonment. Even the offer of reconstruction assistance lacks clarity and enforceability.

Moreover, the absence of U.S. involvement in security guarantees renders them politically weak and militarily hollow. For a country at war with a nuclear-armed aggressor, ad hoc European troops are no substitute for credible deterrence. The deal also creates a dangerous international precedent: it rewards territorial conquest, legitimizes war crimes, and erodes the principles of sovereignty and self-defense.

To be sustainable, any peace deal must be:

- Rooted in international law and Ukraine's sovereignty;
- Backed by enforceable multilateral security guarantees—ideally including U.S. involvement;
- Conditioned on phased sanctions relief tied to withdrawal timelines and compliance;
- Designed with EU leadership in reconstruction and reintegration;
- Flexible on sequencing, but not on principles—Crimea's status could in theory be deferred, but not recognized.

This is not to say that American diplomacy is doomed to fail or that a deal is entirely out of reach. But the persistent lack of progress stems from several hard realities. First, the proposals on the table do not address the core interests of either Ukraine or Russia. Second, the “bad deal” currently circulating is less appealing than the grim status quo, even at the cost of continued bloodshed. And third, for Russia, the current stalemate has not yet become painful enough to force a serious compromise.

Donald Trump may have sufficient leverage to pressure Ukraine into accepting an unfavorable

deal, through a mix of incentives like the minerals agreement and coercive tactics such as suspending arms deliveries. Yet, to succeed in this, Washington would need to neutralize the Europe-

an Union's influence or convince EU leaders that a bad deal for Ukraine somehow serves their interests—a task far easier said than done ■

A Man with Cards: Will Türkiye's Multi-Alignment Policy Bring Results?

“Only Türkiye can save Europe from the deadlock it has fallen into, on matters including economy and defense,” [declared](#) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the foreign ambassadors based in Ankara on 24 February. It is already well known that the Turkish president has a unique talent for exploiting any opportunity presented to him, whether in domestic or foreign politics, making him a formidable political animal. In current turbulent times when traditional geopolitical schemes are being disrupted, Türkiye can emerge as an even stronger geopolitical actor as it holds “many cards” that are envied by all. Nevertheless, Ankara needs to increase trust and inspire confidence in its European partners and allies, things that have been sorely lacking in recent years.

What Cards?

Türkiye is indispensable for multiple reasons. Its unique geography places it at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, bordering key countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the South Caucasus, and giving it significant influence in the Middle East and beyond. It controls vital maritime chokepoints—the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—which can be closed to foreign warships under the [Montreux Convention](#). Although not rich in fossil fuels, Türkiye is a crucial transit hub for gas and oil from the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and potentially Iran. It also plays a central role in migration, hosting over three million Syrians and managing flows to Europe under a [2016 EU deal](#). Demographically, Türkiye's 85 million citizens and its influential



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



© GEOPOLITICS

diaspora in Europe further enhance its strategic importance.

On the defense side, Türkiye is a key NATO member, with the Alliance's second-largest army after the U.S., extensive combat experience, and major NATO infrastructure like Incirlik and Izmir bases. It hosts U.S. nuclear weapons and wields veto power over new NATO accessions, as seen with Finland and Sweden. Türkiye's defense industry has rapidly advanced, reaching 80% self-sufficiency and producing everything from rifles to Bayraktar drones and the upcoming TAI Kaan fighter jet. Defense exports [hit](#) USD 7.1 billion in 2024 with growing partnerships in Europe and beyond. Its global diplomatic reach, leadership in the Muslim world, and cultural soft power further amplify Türkiye's strategic influence.

Türkiye's Multifaceted Trans-actionalism: Playing on Several Tables

Türkiye remains a key NATO member but its internal and external policies have shifted significantly over the past two decades. Once a Western outpost during the Cold War, it now seeks strategic autonomy and a leading regional role. Ankara aligns with the West when beneficial but does not hesitate to oppose it when necessary. In Ukraine, Türkiye has backed territorial integrity, supplied TB2 drones via a joint venture, and [invoked](#) the Montreux Convention in 2022 to block additional Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, thus helping Ukraine secure naval victories. Türkiye supports Ukraine's NATO bid and offered President Zelensky a warm welcome with Erdoğan's viral umbrella photo seen as symbolic solidarity.

Yet, Türkiye has [resisted](#) joining the EU and U.S. sanctions on Russia and has profited from continued trade. In 2024, it [applied](#) for BRICS membership and was granted "partner country" status at

the Kazan summit. Just months later, Ankara [renewed](#) its push for EU membership, highlighting the elasticity of its foreign policy. This flexibility is not new; Türkiye grew less constrained by its traditional anti-communist and anti-Iranian role after the Cold War. Under Turgut Özal and his successors, it expanded ties with post-Soviet states, especially Turkic countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, relying on soft power tools like trade, investment, and education. As Süleiman Demirel put it, Türkiye aimed to be a central player "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China."

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) continued Türkiye's global push in foreign policy but gave it a new tone—more focused on the Middle East, the Islamic world, and a revisionist, sovereigntist identity. This shift is not abrupt but the product of both internal changes—the AKP's social engineering over two decades—and external shifts, including the decline of dominant global powers and Türkiye's stalled EU membership bid. Economic growth in the 1990s-2000s empowered Ankara to seek greater global status and regional leadership, even through seemingly contradictory moves.

Türkiye's foreign policy today resembles "multi-alignment," a model seen in India, where alliances shift by circumstance rather than fixed values. Unlike the West's value-based alliances, especially Europe's NATO paradigm, Türkiye plays all sides.

Türkiye's foreign policy today resembles "multi-alignment," a model seen in India, where alliances shift by circumstance rather than fixed values. Unlike the West's value-based alliances, especially Europe's NATO paradigm, Türkiye plays all sides. It remains in NATO, supports Ukraine and missions like the ISAF, yet clashes with members like Greece and criticizes Western actions in the Middle East and North Africa. It cooperates with

the U.S. but opposes its Syria policy and support towards the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

This transactionalism extends to the EU as well. Ankara demands full membership while presidential advisors [call](#) the EU “the sick man of our times.” The results are mixed—Türkiye has scored wins in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh but its unpredictable posture has eroded trust, particularly in Europe. With member states wary after experiences like Hungary, Türkiye’s EU path remains blocked. Though it has many partners, it has few true allies—mostly Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Hamas, each tied more to ideology or culture than enduring strategic alignment.

Europe’s New Security Architecture and the Role of Türkiye

Türkiye is largely doing what Kyiv expects: blocking new Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, supplying and co-producing military hardware, backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity and NATO bid, and voting for all UN resolutions condemning Russia, even after the U.S. voted against.

As noted above, Türkiye is largely doing what Kyiv expects: blocking new Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, supplying and co-producing military hardware, backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity and NATO bid, and voting for all UN resolutions condemning Russia, even after the U.S. voted against. Erdoğan, unlike others, did not delete pro-Zelensky tweets following Trump’s attacks. Yet this support does not mark a return to Cold War-style Western alignment. Türkiye maintains political ties with Russia and avoids sanctions, framing its Ukraine stance as loyalty to international law and bilateral friendship, not bloc solidarity.

Russian victory in Ukraine would undermine Turkish interests. A weakened Russia offers Türkiye more leverage and deepens Moscow’s dependence.

In truth, a Russian victory in Ukraine would undermine Turkish interests. A weakened Russia offers Türkiye more leverage and deepens Moscow’s dependence. Despite recent rapprochement, the two remain historical rivals with brief episodes of cooperation. Their closeness surged after the 2016 coup attempt, when Russia quickly backed Erdoğan, sharing intelligence and paving the way for Türkiye’s controversial purchase of Russian S-400 systems—undermining NATO ties and provoking U.S. CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act) sanctions and exclusion from the F-35 program.

This post-coup thaw came after tensions, notably in Syria and the [downing](#) of a Russian jet. But clashes resumed across Syria, Libya, and the Black Sea. Türkiye’s backing of Azerbaijan in its wars with Armenia (2020, 2023) further weakened Russia’s grip in the South Caucasus. In Syria, the rise of HTS, reportedly backed by Türkiye, led to Russian military withdrawals from key bases—moves that Moscow resents. Some analysts link Türkiye’s limited BRICS status to this friction.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s halting of Russia’s Black Sea advance at Kherson and its naval victories benefit Ankara which has no interest in Russia dominating the entire Black Sea coast. The crippling of the Russian fleet only enhances Türkiye’s own maritime influence in this strategic region.

Trump – A New Best Friend?

While it is believed that Trump’s U.S. and Erdoğan’s Türkiye can get along, the reality is far more uncertain. The fact that relations between Ankara and Washington were extremely poor un-

der Biden does not automatically mean they will inevitably improve. One thing is certain: Trump likes authoritarian leaders and will not trouble his Turkish counterpart with concerns about democracy or the rule of law. However, U.S.-Turkish relations were far from smooth during Trump's first presidency and even experienced significant turbulence.

In 2019, Trump [sent](#) an infamously bizarre and threatening letter to Erdoğan after the Turkish army entered northern Syria: "Don't be a fool, don't be a tough guy. It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen. I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy," he wrote. For his part, Erdoğan was [furious](#) over the Pentagon's deployment in eastern Syria and its support for the YPG Kurdish militias which Türkiye sees as an extension of the PKK and an existential threat. It was also under Trump's first term that Türkiye [was sanctioned](#) for purchasing the Russian S-400 missile system.

It is true that contacts between the two leaders are easier than under Biden (Erdoğan met Biden only 16 months after his inauguration while Trump and Erdoğan have already spoken by phone and are planning a live meeting in the coming weeks), but the core disagreements—especially in the Middle East—remain unresolved. Türkiye still expects the U.S. to withdraw from Syria and end support for the YPG and it opposes America's near-unconditional backing of Israel. Erdoğan strongly [criticized](#) Trump's plan to relocate Palestinians from Gaza and turn the area into a "Riviera of the Middle East," calling it a major threat to world peace. He instead backed an alternative peace and reconstruction proposal approved by the Arab League.

Even though Trump declared he had "a great relationship with a man named Erdoğan," Türkiye is not Washington's preferred interlocutor in the region.

Moreover, even though Trump declared he had "a great relationship with a man named Erdoğan," Türkiye is not Washington's preferred interlocutor in the region. It is not even the second-most preferred after Israel—Saudi Arabia's relationship with Trump appears far more solid and reliable.

Europe – Still a Good Option

While Ankara has long been dissatisfied with U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the prospect of an American withdrawal from Ukraine—or even from Europe and NATO—is a source of deep concern for Türkiye. Such a retreat would strengthen Russia and raise the risk of losing the Ukrainian coastline. It could also call into question the American nuclear umbrella, leaving Türkiye in a precarious position between a nuclear Russia, a nuclear-armed Israel, and an Iran on the nuclear threshold. In this context, Türkiye's interest in Europe and a common European defense project is bound to increase.

Europe, newly motivated to build a credible autonomous defense, opens a space for Türkiye to expand its political and economic influence.

This interest stems not only from Türkiye's fears and anxieties but also from the opportunities that Europe's vulnerability presents. A Europe, newly motivated to build a credible autonomous defense, opens a space for Türkiye to expand its political and economic influence. With the strategic assets at its disposal and Europe's growing needs, a productive synergy becomes possible.

Türkiye has re-engaged at the highest level in European discussions, notably during the early days of Trump's return to global politics. After years of absence, Turkish officials reappeared at key summits: Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Paris and Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz in London, signaling

Ankara's intent to shape the new European security architecture.

President Erdoğan himself, in talks with Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Antonio Costa, and Polish PM Donald Tusk—visiting Türkiye as the EU's rotating president—[voiced](#) his desire to revive Türkiye's European trajectory. Days later, in a speech to foreign ambassadors, Erdoğan [declared](#) that “EU security without Türkiye is unthinkable” and “Europe cannot survive as a global actor without Türkiye.” He reaffirmed that EU membership remains a “strategic priority.”

Reassessing both the risks and the opportunities of the shifting geopolitical landscape, Türkiye offers Europe full cooperation—but also sets conditions. The most ambitious of these is the demand for rapid EU accession. Türkiye, which applied in 1987 and was granted candidate status in 1999, began accession talks in 2005. But after two decades, only one of 35 chapters has been closed. Negotiations are now frozen, primarily due to the democratic backsliding and erosion of civil liberties under Erdoğan's rule.

The Turkish public and government are bitter and disillusioned, especially as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were suddenly granted candidate status—two of them already advancing toward membership faster than Türkiye. Realistically, any resumption of accession talks is highly unlikely under current conditions. The arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, the main opposition candidate with a real chance of winning the presidency, makes EU membership virtually impossible—something Erdoğan knows all too well.

It is precisely because the AKP perceives the international context as favorable—a Europe in need of defense partners and a U.S. administration that no longer prioritizes democracy—that the regime dares cross red lines such as imprisoning its most serious opponent. Beyond domestic politics, Tür-

kiye's candidacy also faces resistance from several EU member states that have experienced prolonged tensions with Ankara.

AKP perceives the international context as favorable—a Europe in need of defense partners and a U.S. administration that no longer prioritizes democracy—that the regime dares cross red lines such as imprisoning its most serious opponent.

Cyprus sees 35% of its territory as illegally occupied by Türkiye since 1974. Greece remains in conflict over Aegean maritime boundaries, exacerbated by Turkish naval maneuvers. In addition to the Greek-speaking states, France and the Netherlands have recently faced harsh rhetoric from senior Turkish officials, amplified by pro-government media and parts of the Turkish diaspora. While diplomatic efforts continue on all sides to ease tensions, mutual trust and stable relations remain elusive.

If Not Membership, Then What?

However, a likely refusal from Brussels and the member states to relaunch Türkiye's EU accession bid gives Ankara's other demands a better chance of success while pushing concerns about the rule of law and democracy into the background.

These alternative demands are fourfold. First, Türkiye seeks full participation in shaping Europe's new security architecture with real influence over the process. Second, it wants Turkish defense companies involved in European procurement and reconstruction efforts—initiatives with Italy's Leonardo and the UK are already underway. Third, Türkiye continues to push for visa liberalization, a longstanding demand since talks began in 2013, with little progress. And fourth, Ankara calls for renegotiating the customs union agreement, in place since 1 January 2016, aiming to expand it to

include agriculture, services, and public procurement. Studies [suggest](#) a modernized deal could boost Türkiye's economy by 1.5-2.5%.

Türkiye could step up arms deliveries to Ukraine and join a coalition of willing states to help guarantee a ceasefire and Ukraine's stabilization. It can actively contribute to a new European security framework where full EU membership is not a prerequisite.

Despite the political hurdles preventing rapid EU accession, the shifting global context is nudging both sides toward deeper cooperation. Türkiye could step up arms deliveries to Ukraine and join a coalition of willing states to help guarantee a ceasefire and Ukraine's stabilization. It can actively contribute to a new European security framework where full EU membership is not a prerequisite (as shown by the UK and Norway's roles).

Türkiye's defense industry may benefit from the *Rearm Europe* initiative announced at the March 2025 EU summit. Member states like France, which have insisted these funds go only to EU-based firms, may now soften their stance. In return, as a committed supporter of European defense, Türkiye could gain a renewed customs union and a more flexible visa regime.

Ultimately, Europe is evolving toward a multi-speed or concentric model. Türkiye could be fully integrated into the defense circle, partially into the economic one (via the customs union), but remain outside the political institutions—the Council, Commission, and Parliament—reserved for member states. Given the uneven nature of Türkiye's bilateral ties with EU countries, its deepening cooperation may focus on select partners such as Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and southern European countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

What Prospects for Georgia and the South Caucasus?

Like the Middle East, the South Caucasus is a region where Türkiye sees itself as a principal stakeholder and is wary of outside powers like the U.S. or the EU. This thinking shaped the “Stability Platform for the South Caucasus” proposed after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. Although politely rejected by Tbilisi, it envisioned regional security managed by the three South Caucasus states and three regional powers: Türkiye, Iran, and Russia. The same concept lives on in the current 3+3 format.

Türkiye's main regional partner is Azerbaijan. Once captured in the slogan “*Bir millet, iki dövlət*” (One nation, two states), their cultural proximity has evolved into a deep strategic partnership, underpinned by defense agreements and military interoperability. In the early post-Soviet years, Türkiye focused on economic, energy, and logistical ties, avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. However, Azerbaijan's victories over Armenia in 2020 and 2023, backed by Türkiye, have shifted the regional power balance.

Nagorno-Karabakh was a critical lever of Russian influence in the region; its loss and the departure of Russian peacekeepers have weakened Moscow's grip on both Baku and Yerevan.

Nagorno-Karabakh was a critical lever of Russian influence in the region; its loss and the departure of Russian peacekeepers have weakened Moscow's grip on both Baku and Yerevan. Armenia, in turn, has begun seeking alternatives to Russian tutelage. Türkiye is interested in normalizing relations with Armenia and this now seems more attainable with Yerevan's leadership open to it. The long-standing “Azerbaijani mortgage” that hindered progress, so

long as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue remained unresolved, may now be lifted. Should a peace deal be signed, Turkish-Armenian ties could normalize quickly and Armenia would have little need for Russia's military presence. Türkiye could even pressure Baku to accelerate peace efforts. Still, Russia is unlikely to remain passive and may resort to hybrid tactics to preserve its influence.

Meanwhile, Georgia's drift back into Russia's orbit under the Georgian Dream keeps Moscow's hopes alive. Under earlier pro-Western governments, ties with Türkiye were framed through NATO, Türkiye being the only Alliance member with which Georgia shared a border. Turkish-Georgian defense cooperation, dating back to the Shevardnadze era, was both practical and politically symbolic.

From the 2010s onward, dynamics shifted. Türkiye grew more ambivalent toward the West while Georgia slowly pivoted toward Moscow—a trend that has since accelerated. Although Türkiye continues to support Georgia's NATO aspirations, this is no longer Tbilisi's priority.

Even if Türkiye is unlikely to join the EU soon, its role as a key pillar in European security is in Georgia's vital interest.

In the new geopolitical landscape shaped by Russian aggression and U.S. retrenchment, Türkiye's rapprochement with Europe presents a potential opportunity for Georgia, provided it remains on a European track rather than veering toward the Russian sphere. Even if Türkiye is unlikely to join the EU soon, its role as a key pillar in European security is in Georgia's vital interest.

One likely scenario is a multi-tiered Europe: a Defense Europe, a Customs Union Europe, a Single Market Europe, and a Political Europe. The EU today is three out of four with security outsourced

to NATO. But if U.S. disengagement continues, Europe will have to assume responsibility for its defense.

Georgia's 30-year pursuit of EU and NATO membership has achieved many milestones—an Association Agreement, DCFTA, visa liberalization, EU candidate status, and the 2008 NATO pledge—but actual membership remains distant. The current crisis demands faster, more pragmatic approaches. If Türkiye joins Defence Europe and renews its customs union with the EU, the core of integration will already be in place.

Containing Russian imperialism must go beyond Ukraine; the Caucasus is the next front.

Türkiye straddles the Caucasus and anchors the Black Sea. It is tied to Azerbaijan through a strategic alliance. Once Türkiye is integrated into Europe's security architecture, Europe will already have a foothold in the Caucasus where the same adversary looms as in Ukraine: Russia. Containing Russian imperialism must go beyond Ukraine; the Caucasus is the next front. This could create new openings for Georgia which may find joining this emerging alliance easier than NATO. And if the EU's "four freedoms" (goods, services, capital, and people) are extended, Georgia's economic integration with Europe would be nearly complete.

Every crisis carries opportunity as the well-known Chinese saying goes. The ability to seize it determines success. The Türkiye-Europe rapprochement, born of today's global instability, could be Georgia's chance—if it is led by a government elected by its people and loyal to the constitution, especially Article 78 which enshrines European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Not by proxies of a foreign power bent on revenge against the free world and reversing the course of history ■

Targeted Disruption: Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia

Russia interfered in the 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia. In each case, the Kremlin deployed a mix of disinformation, covert financing, cyber operations, and exploitation of societal divisions to skew democratic outcomes and undermine trust in electoral institutions. These were not isolated incidents; they were part of a coordinated campaign targeting vulnerable democracies along Russia's periphery.

In Moldova, despite a technically well-managed presidential runoff, evidence [surfaced](#) of Russian networks funding proxy media, mobilizing diaspora votes through manipulated narratives, and attempting to engineer street-level unrest. In Romania, security services [uncovered](#) an extensive Russian influence operation aimed at shaping the presidential vote, involving front organizations, illicit money flows, and propaganda channels. In

Georgia, observers [reported](#) systematic voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, and [alignment](#) of local actors with Kremlin narratives, suggesting domestic-authoritarian complicity in amplifying foreign influence.

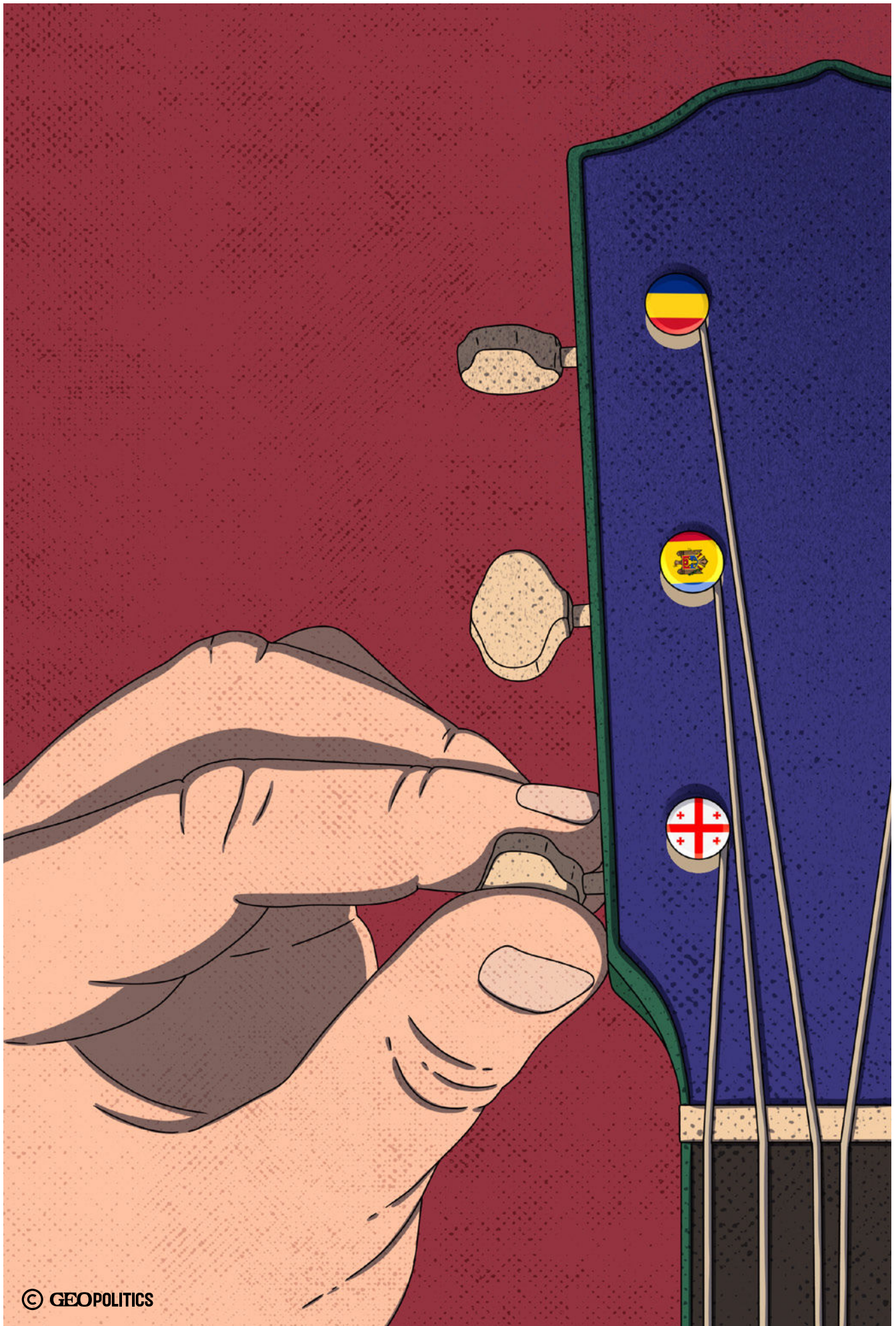
Moscow's electoral interference machine is not only active—it is adapting.

These cases confirm that Moscow's electoral interference machine is not only active—it is adapting. Following its military setbacks in Ukraine, Russia is reverting to and refining the hybrid warfare [pattern](#) it used extensively in the 2010s: information manipulation, covert interference, and strategic disruption of democratic cohesion. The goal is not just to support pro-Russian candidates but to weaken institutional trust, divide societies, and erode the West's democratic model from within.



SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010–14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



© GEOPOLITICS

By examining these three concurrent operations, we gain insight into how Russian interference is evolving, shifting from blunt-force propaganda to more tailored, data-driven, and context-specific approaches. The shared experience of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia underscores the urgency of developing anticipatory defenses, greater societal resilience, and closer regional cooperation in the face of persistent hybrid threats.

Russia's Playbook: Tools, Tactics, and Strategy

Russia's foreign interference strategy has become increasingly exposed in recent years. At its core, it operates on three well-established objectives: to undermine public trust in democratic institutions, to discredit pro-European political actors, and to promote pro-Russian or radical alternatives. These efforts are carried out by exploiting societal divisions and using a broad spectrum of communication platforms, particularly Telegram, TikTok, and VKontakte. In the 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, these goals were pursued through carefully adapted methods aligned to each country's vulnerabilities and political environment.

Across the three countries, Russia deployed an expansive toolkit involving digital and offline channels. These included state-controlled media outlets, troll farms, bot networks, politically affiliated NGOs, clerical figures, and a growing reliance on micro- and macro-influencers to seed and normalize Kremlin-aligned narratives. The Romanian [declassified](#) intelligence reports uncovered the systematic use of AI-generated content, fake news, and deep fakes to pollute the digital space with rapid-response propaganda. The reports also revealed sociological profiling and micro-targeting to segment audiences and adapt messages for maximal resonance. These tactics were not limited to Romania. Similar methods were identified in

Moldova and Georgia, reinforcing that the same tools were repurposed across borders with local variations.

Pro-Russian narratives emphasized Moscow's solid standing as a geopolitical partner and positioned NATO as an aggressor. Techniques included disinformation, polarization, content flooding, election noise, and co-optation of public discourse.

The most prominent narrative across all three elections portrayed the European Union as threatening national sovereignty, economic stability, and traditional values. Disinformation campaigns framed the EU as a foreign project undermining national identity and family structures. In Moldova and Georgia, the legacy of unresolved conflicts was [exploited](#) to revive fear and instability. Pro-Russian narratives emphasized Moscow's solid standing as a geopolitical partner and positioned NATO as an aggressor. Techniques included disinformation, polarization, content flooding, election noise, and co-optation of public discourse.

While nuanced in each case, the strategic goal underpinning these operations remains consistent: to erode confidence in democratic institutions, obstruct integration with NATO and the European Union, and empower political proxies or friendly actors aligned with Russian interests. These influence efforts are designed to weaken pro-Western coalitions, destabilize internal politics, and ultimately foster dependency on or alignment with Moscow.

In all three cases Russia's overarching goals were similar, however, the tools and tactics were contextually adapted. In Romania, the interference focused on a highly coordinated TikTok campaign to elevate a fringe candidate. Moldova's operations concentrated on vote buying and corruption, ex-

exploiting economic precarity and weakened electoral oversight. In Georgia, interference took a more [systemic](#) form, with the ruling party openly cooperating with Russian-linked actors and adopting elements of authoritarian governance promoted by the Kremlin.

In Moldova and Romania, influence operations were resisted by pro-European governments and security institutions. This limited the effectiveness of the campaigns. In contrast, Georgian authorities have acted in concert with Russian objectives, allowing the three pillars of interference—corruption, disinformation, and intra-societal confrontation—to unfold with less resistance. The result has been a tangible success for pro-Russian forces in Georgia, while similar actors continue to be challenged in Moldova and Romania.

Russian electoral interference in 2024 was not static but reactive to key electoral moments. [Vote buying schemes](#) involving large-scale cash transfers to voters were [reported](#) in all three [countries](#). Evidence points to sedition, fraud, and money laundering operations that funneled illicit funds to pro-Russian parties and groups. Local media outlets, public figures, and influencers were financially [incentivized](#) to amplify Kremlin narratives, often funded by oligarchs closely tied to Moscow, such as Ilan Shor in Moldova, Gabriel Prodanescu in Romania, and Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia. These strategies were not new, but failing to internalize lessons from previous election cycles has left observers and institutions vulnerable to persistent disruption.

Moldova

Russia's strategic objectives in Moldova's 2024 presidential election were clear: reverse the country's pro-European momentum and destabilize reform efforts, particularly in the lead-up to a constitutional referendum that aimed to enshrine EU integration as a foreign policy priority. To this end,

Russia weaponized local pro-Russian elites and Russian-speaking populations, leveraging widespread poverty and information vulnerabilities.

The centerpiece of the interference was a vast vote buying operation. According to Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), Ilan Shor, head of the pro-Russian Victory bloc, acted as a key implementer of this strategy. Utilizing Russian-sanctioned banks, notably *Promsvyazbank*, more than USD 39 million was [funneled](#) to over 138,000 Moldovan citizens, primarily through virtual accounts. The campaign targeted vulnerable communities with direct financial incentives.

Supporting [tactics](#) included coordinated cyberattacks, fake bomb threats at diaspora polling stations in Germany and the UK, and illegal voter transportation from Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Transnistria. Identity-based disinformation also played a role. In the days before the second round, journalists received threats in broken Romanian, falsely attributed to President Maia Sandu's team.

Russian efforts extended to psychological operations, including a fabricated video in which Sandu was [portrayed](#) banning the harvest of rosehips, a culturally significant plant. The footage provoked emotional backlash by evoking Soviet-era limits on national characteristics and traditions. Another viral piece falsely [claimed](#) Romania was massing troops near the Moldovan border, while the promoted footage was from an earlier military parade.

Russia's long-practiced use of cyberattacks reached a new level of coordination. Hack-and-leak operations, fake bomb threats, and DDoS attacks targeted the electoral infrastructure. Disinformation, political corruption, and staged unrest were used in tandem, mainly to discourage diaspora voting and reduce trust in the electoral process.

Russia's long-practiced use of cyberattacks reached a new level of coordination. Hack-and-leak operations, fake bomb threats, and DDoS attacks targeted the electoral infrastructure. Disinformation, political corruption, and staged unrest were used in tandem, mainly to [discourage](#) diaspora voting and reduce trust in the electoral process. In the final days of the campaign, TikTok was [flooded](#) with anti-European content designed to sway the outcome of both the election and the EU referendum.

Romania

In Romania, the 2024 presidential elections were targeted by a sophisticated influence campaign to undermine trust in EU institutions and fracture the country's pro-Western consensus. The strategic objective was to cultivate internal dissent and install a disruptive political figure who could serve as a Trojan horse within NATO and the EU.

The primary tool was social media. Over 25,000 TikTok accounts were [allegedly](#) used to boost the candidacy of fringe politician Calin Georgescu artificially. Coordinated via Russian-linked Telegram channels, these accounts exploited platform algorithms to drive rapid surges in online engagement. Georgescu's support leapt from 1 to 35 percent in just two weeks.

Cyberattacks against the Central Electoral Bureau and the Permanent Electoral Authority were [recorded](#) on election day, originating from more than 30 countries. Romanian intelligence services (SRI) reported that TikTok had flagged manipulative activity linked to Sputnik-affiliated accounts. Financial traces [pointed](#) to payments totaling USD 381,000 coordinated by Bogdan Peschir, a tech entrepreneur with suspected Russian ties.

Tactics included stoking anti-EU sentiment, amplifying nationalist rhetoric, and targeting diaspora voters with fear-based messaging. Disinformation

campaigns [framed](#) the EU as hostile to Romanian traditions and sovereignty. Telegram groups supporting Georgescu had been created years in advance, suggesting a long-term strategic build-up.

Tactics included stoking anti-EU sentiment, amplifying nationalist rhetoric, and targeting diaspora voters with fear-based messaging. Disinformation campaigns framed the EU as hostile to Romanian traditions and sovereignty.

Though the Romanian government remained pro-European, its response was limited by the plausible deniability built into Russia's hybrid tactics. No overt evidence was sufficient to prompt immediate international repercussions. In the aftermath, Moscow leveraged this ambiguity to question Romania's narrative and sow division. The campaign did not succeed in electing a pro-Russian candidate in the first round of elections, but it succeeded in polarizing public discourse, eroding trust, and weakening institutional legitimacy.

Georgia

Georgia's 2024 elections presented a different interference model, shaped by the ruling Georgian Dream party's direct [alignment](#) with Russian interests. Unlike Moldova and Romania, where pro-European governments attempted to counter interference, in Georgia, the authorities themselves became enablers.

Russia's strategic goal was to block Georgia's path to EU and NATO membership. To achieve this, it offered Georgian Dream the political support necessary to remain in power in exchange for abandoning integration efforts. This alliance enabled Russia to deploy a layered disinformation strategy through pro-government propaganda channels, orthodox clergy, and pseudo-civil society organizations.

Narratives were tailored to promote a false choice between peace and war. Pro-Western opposition figures were portrayed as warmongers, while Georgian Dream presented itself as a guarantor of stability and traditional values. Russian state media and senior officials echoed and directly endorsed these messages. The ruling party further reinforced them with the ruthless pre-election propaganda campaign, including the billboards and videos [contrasting](#) destroyed Ukrainian cities with peaceful Georgian landscapes.

A central tactic was transposing the Kremlin's domestic propaganda model into Georgian politics. Civil society actors and independent journalists were labeled as foreign agents. Online disinformation campaigns alleged the presence of Ukrainian snipers and U.S.-sponsored coup attempts.

A central tactic was transposing the Kremlin's domestic propaganda model into Georgian politics. Civil society actors and independent journalists were [labeled](#) as foreign agents. Online disinformation campaigns [alleged](#) the presence of Ukrainian snipers and U.S.-sponsored coup attempts. Conspiracy theories and cultural nationalism were mobilized to shift public discourse away from democratic reforms and toward sovereignty and survival.

This environment, [saturated](#) with fear and manipulated messaging, allowed Georgian Dream to maintain control. The October 2024 election was widely seen by opposition and civil society leaders as manipulated. 5th President Salome Zourabichvili explicitly [accused](#) Russian intelligence of shaping the outcome, citing propaganda tactics identical to those used in Putin's reelection campaign.

Comparative Insights

Across Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, the 2024 elections reveal a complex picture of shared vulnerabilities and varied responses to Russian interference. A comparative lens shows both common tactics used by Russia and significant differences in how governments and societies responded to the challenge.

One clear pattern is Russia's continued use of electoral disruption to achieve strategic geopolitical objectives. In all three countries, the Kremlin deployed disinformation, cyberattacks, financial operations, and influence campaigns to destabilize the democratic process. Yet, the methods were tailored to local conditions. In Moldova, economic hardship made vote buying a particularly effective tactic. In Romania, the information space was the primary battleground, while in Georgia, the ruling party became a central vector of Russian influence.

A notable shared feature was the targeting of diaspora voters. In Moldova, as in 2016, efforts were made to suppress the diaspora vote. In the earlier election, shortages of ballot papers and administrative obstacles prevented many Moldovans abroad from voting. In 2024, this was compounded by bomb threats and transportation blockages. Similarly, Georgian authorities restricted access for diaspora communities, understanding that these voters, many of whom left the country in search of better opportunities, were unlikely to support the ruling party. In both cases, diaspora suppression was calculated to remove a pro-reform voting bloc from the electoral equation.

Responses to interference varied widely. Romania's authorities initially underestimated the scale and speed of Russian influence operations. However, once identified, national institutions—ranging from intelligence services to the presidency and judiciary—reacted with a united, resilience-based

strategy. This included exposing manipulation attempts and engaging in strategic communication to rebuild public trust.

Moldova, too, demonstrated moments of institutional strength. The public campaign “They cannot steal as much as we can vote” reminded citizens that selling their votes was not a victimless act but a criminal offense. This message helped shift perceptions and mobilize voters to resist manipulation. Still, Moldova’s capacity to block foreign funding and illegal logistics remains limited, especially given the sophisticated laundering methods used by actors like Ilan Shor.

Georgia stands in contrast. There, state institutions did not attempt to counter the interference. Instead, they were complicit in facilitating it. The ruling Georgian Dream party used the tools of Russian hybrid warfare—including disinformation, fear-based messaging, and vote buying—as part of its official campaign strategy. While civil society in Georgia showed remarkable resilience by organizing large-scale protests and documenting abuses, institutional checks were absent or actively working against democratic integrity.

Societal resistance is essential, institutional leadership and coordination are equally critical. Where institutions stood firm, interference was mitigated; where institutions aligned with the malign actor, democratic integrity was deeply compromised despite strong societal resistance.

This comparison underscores a fundamental lesson: democracy under pressure requires both a vigilant, well-informed public and independent, capable state institutions. While societal resistance is essential, institutional leadership and coordination are equally critical. Where institutions

stood firm, interference was mitigated; where institutions aligned with the malign actor, democratic integrity was deeply compromised despite strong societal resistance.

Policy Reflections

Russia’s electoral interference is not a new phenomenon. What makes it effective is not innovation, but adaptation. Its strength lies in its ability to be localized, context-specific, and constantly evolving. The 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia illustrate this with alarming clarity. The most sobering lesson may be that we still have not fully learned the lessons from previous interference campaigns. While Romania and Moldova may have escaped the worst outcomes this time, the underlying trend continues to shift in Russia’s favor. Russia learns and constantly improves its influence operations.

The patterns observed in 2024 are not likely to diminish. Instead, they are becoming more precise, covert, and embedded. This year, Moldova faces parliamentary elections, and the Georgian Dream regime will conduct scheduled local elections or will have to rerun parliamentary elections because of internal and external pressure on its lame legitimacy. While the regime in Georgia doubles down on its authoritarian Russian style rule, Moldova’s political landscape remains a high-stakes battleground, with each election a narrow contest between Russian-backed forces and pro-European actors. All signs point to a repeat of the same tactics: hybrid messaging campaigns, diaspora vote disruption, disinformation via social media platforms, and illicit financial flows supporting extremist or proxy candidates.

These operations become more effective with each cycle, producing cumulative effects. As former KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov famously [explained](#), once the first phase of psychological warfare called demoralization is complete, affected people lose the

capacity to process factual information. Instead, they cling to the narratives pushed by propaganda, even when faced with clear evidence to the contrary. Romania's second round of elections illustrates this vividly. Although Calin Georgescu was banned from running due to proven Russian influence operations on his behalf, the impact of those operations intensified like a snowball gaining momentum. As a result, in the first round of the rerun elections on May 4, 2025, another far-right candidate, George Simion, who built on Georgescu's support and capitalized on his earlier campaign, secured 40% of the vote.

The interference model seen there is already being replicated, at different scales, in Western democracies where populist and extremist parties on both the left and right are gaining traction. They are learning from past mistakes, testing new methods, and taking full advantage of the openness of democratic systems. The asymmetry is stark. Authoritarian actors do not follow rules. Electoral ethics or transparency norms do not constrain them. They possess immense financial resources, criminal infrastructure, propaganda ecosystems, and offensive cyber capabilities. And once they help bring a regime to power, they support its transformation into a political system designed not to lose elections.

The case of Georgia is a warning. Once Russian-aligned forces consolidate power, democratic reversal becomes deeply entrenched. Georgia shows what happens when authoritarian influence is normalized and institutionalized. The exported model—one where elections are held but never truly competitive—now mirrors systems in Russia, Belarus, and increasingly, Hungary. It is a system that cannot be voted out once it is fully embedded.

This must be a wake-up call. If democratic actors continue to approach electoral security reactively, they risk permanent losses.

This must be a wake-up call. If democratic actors continue to approach electoral security reactively, they risk permanent losses. It is no longer sufficient to monitor ballots. Investing in independent media, digital literacy, and civic trust-building is essential for strengthening democratic resilience, but these efforts must be complemented by effective accountability measures against malign actors to be truly effective. Election integrity must now include protection of the broader information ecosystem, cyberspace, and financial transparency of political campaigns. European countries must urgently prioritize coordinated cross-border efforts in law enforcement and counterintelligence to clearly distinguish between legitimate domestic grievances and malign foreign influence operations. Key priorities should include:

- Developing tailored countermeasures based on integrated defense and security frameworks, moving beyond generic, one-size-fits-all bureaucratic responses;
- Establishing a commonly acknowledged enforcement mechanism for transparently and effectively sanctioning and reprimanding malign actors involved in anti-democratic activities;
- Expanding election monitoring to cover not only traditional voting processes but also information operations, social media manipulation, and suspicious financial flows linked to influence campaigns.

The longer democracies wait to seriously study and counter these influence networks, the more likely they are to succeed. The goal must be to prevent malign actors from ever capturing institutions, because once they do, the game changes, and the costs of reclaiming democracy become far greater ■

The False Promise of Georgia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

When the Ministry of Education abruptly announced its plan to introduce “Chinese as a second language” in Georgia’s secondary schools, the social media furor among opposition-minded Georgians ensued. The Ministry later [clarified](#) that it only meant to approve the language programs due to “growing demand” for the language but the bitter aftertaste remained. And for a good reason.

The Georgian Dream has been actively cultivating ties with Beijing. In 2023, then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili – himself a [former employee](#) of a Chinese company – signed a [declaration](#) of Strategic Partnership. On 18 April 2025, at the 9th meeting of the Sino-Georgian Trade and Economic Cooperation Commission, the sides touted the [17% trade growth](#), making China Georgia’s fourth-larg-

est trading partner. Cozying up to China while the relations with the U.S. and the EU are strained to the breaking point gets many Georgians worried. Where is the country heading? Once a poster child for reforms and a success story of Western integration, Georgia now appears increasingly engaged with non-Western (not to say anti-Western) countries. Tbilisi’s once gung-ho official posture on Euro-Atlantic integration has shifted, as has the political language. It is now touting the benefits of “sovereignty.” Domestically, this shift has been accompanied by ever-growing illiberal rhetoric as the authorities ramped up pressure on media, civil society organizations, and political opposition.

So, what lies behind the country’s pivot to China? For government-aligned experts and commentators, the answer is straightforward: it is all part of a carefully crafted strategy to survive in a dif-



JABA DEVDARIANI
Contributor

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



TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI
Guest Contributor

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher and practitioner with a focus on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the broader Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike Zurabashvili also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, as well as master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.



difficult geopolitical setting as well as a way to reduce threats from Russia. The argument goes that since Europe is in decline while the U.S. is increasingly isolationist, Georgia needs a “multi-vector” foreign policy—a supposedly balanced approach aimed at diversifying the country’s partnerships in a world dominated by power politics.

But much like the uncertainty surrounding Georgia’s political direction, these explanations raise more questions than they answer. What accounts for the timing of this sudden eastward reorientation? And why, of all potential partners, China? It also raises a broader question: is the concept of a “multi-vector” foreign policy relevant to Georgia’s geopolitical realities, or even feasible? Or is it merely a rhetorical tool without real substance to it?

Eyes Eastward: A Brief History of Sino-Georgian Relations

While the roots of China-Georgia relations can be traced back centuries, from ancient trade routes to intermittent cultural exchanges, the modern iteration of their relationship is relatively fresh. Diplomatic ties were established in 1992 but the following two decades saw little substantive action. Although 3rd President Mikheil Saakashvili made some gestures toward Beijing, with China responding in the form of modest economic investments, Chinese interest in Georgia—and the broader region—remained limited, trailing much behind Tbilisi’s express enthusiasm. Still, the two sides made sure to cross off the basics from their agendas: Tbilisi secured Beijing’s support for Georgia’s territorial integrity while in return, Tbilisi backed Beijing’s One China policy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged as a game-changer in this equation, generating greater Chinese interest in the Black Sea-Caspian Sea

transit corridor in the mid-2010s. Georgia quickly positioned itself as one of the early and eager supporters of the initiative, viewing it as an opportunity to boost connectivity, attract investment, and enhance its role as a vital transit hub between Europe and Asia. Importantly, this also aligned with Georgia’s long-standing rhetorical framing of itself as a bridge between East and West—a narrative used to signal not a shift away from the West but rather to reinforce Georgia’s crucial relevance to trade links.

Interestingly, when the Georgian Dream assumed power, it signaled initial hostility to China. Fresh out of election victory in 2013, the ruling party’s patron and newly minted Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was [scaremongering](#) about “126 thousand Chinese” that the previous administration allegedly agreed to settle in Tbilisi (that claim was later [proven wrong](#)). Similarly, Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani, in 2015, was [crediting](#) herself for limiting tourism from China which she alleged helped secure visa-free travel with the EU (also [fact-checked](#) as incorrect).

But by 2017, these early qualms were already gone: Tbilisi and Beijing penned the [free trade agreement](#). Still, the real momentum emerged only after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Georgian Dream souring with the West. In the following months, Tbilisi began quickly dispatching high-level delegations to Beijing, signaling a clear desire for deeper, more active engagement. China reciprocated cautiously at first but after some initial reluctance, the two sides [sealed](#) the strategic partnership in July 2023. There is talk that a Chinese company may [take over](#) a strategic port project in Anaklia – much to U.S. [chagrin](#). Less than a year later, they also signed an [agreement](#) on visa-free travel. Does this mean Georgia is embracing a fully-fledged “multi-vector” foreign policy?

On Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Although there is no universally accepted definition of “multi-vector” foreign policy, the term has been part of the diplomatic parlance since the early 1990s, thanks to President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, who first introduced the concept. Broadly understood, it refers to a pattern in which small states engage simultaneously, although not equally, with multiple external powers, seeking to extract political and economic benefits from them while avoiding firm alignment with any single actor. Rhetorically, it is framed as a pragmatic response to geopolitical difficulties: a strategy for preserving sovereignty and advancing national interests without taking explicit sides. In this sense, it draws clear parallels to the Cold War-era policy of non-alignment – think Tito’s Yugoslavia – and is often viewed as its post-Soviet successor in states like Kazakhstan and Belarus (until Russia consolidated its hold there following the failed 2021 protests). At different times, the foreign policies of Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have also been described as multi-vectoral. In Georgia, this idea also has a history: 2nd President Eduard Shevardnadze tried to pursue the balancing act between Russia and the West, although more out of the harsh realities of a nearly-failed state, rather than a wanton strategy.

Noble as it may sound, portraying these cases as rational actions of states engaged in a sophisticated balancing act – serving the *raison d’état* – is highly misleading. Behind the maneuvering lies a far more self-serving agenda. In many cases, the primary goal is the consolidation of domestic power in the context of great-power or regional competition: maintaining control, entrenching clientelist networks, and eliminating threats to the ruling elite by courting investment, sourcing arms, enhancing security cooperation, and soliciting political protection.

Importantly, these days, the “multi-vector” policy

is often viewed gracefully from Moscow, [approved](#) among other signs of “sovereign independence,” emancipation from the “vortex of liberal democracy,” as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [put it](#). It also serves as an affirmation of the Kremlin’s “multipolar” worldview, an implicit recognition of its primacy in the “near abroad” region. Curiously, the quest for “sovereignty” (from the U.S. and then also from the USSR) was one of the key words of Mao’s domestic policy which he proceeded to actively deploy as a foreign policy instrument in seeking recognition and alliances with former Western colonies worldwide.

Today, “multi-vector” policy is thus part and parcel of a broader pattern in which often authoritarian (or rapidly moving in that direction) political regimes in the post-Soviet space seek to reap economic benefits from external engagements while fastening their grip on power.

Today, “multi-vector” policy is thus part and parcel of a broader pattern in which often authoritarian (or rapidly moving in that direction) political regimes in the post-Soviet space seek to reap economic benefits from external engagements while fastening their grip on power.

Why Is Georgia’s Multi-Vector Policy Aimless?

Tbilisi’s declared hopes vis-à-vis China rest on two key justifications. First, Georgian Dream pundits [argue](#) that China’s economic power will serve as a catalyst for Georgia’s economic development, bringing necessary investments, growth, and prosperity. Second, government-affiliated experts suggest that deeper Chinese involvement in Georgia will eventually enhance the country’s security, making Beijing a potential counterbalance to both the (imaginary) threats to Georgian identity from

the EU and the U.S. and the real Russian security threat. Implicit in this assumption is the belief that China would be both willing and able to challenge foreign ([including Russian](#)) influence in the region and in this line of argumentation, China is not only a source of economic opportunity but also a stabilizing factor in a volatile geopolitical environment.

Behind their justifications, however, lies an uncomfortable reality: China is not that much into Georgia or the region.

It is true that post-COVID and after Russia's new invasion of Ukraine began, China developed a strategic interest in diversifying its trade routes towards the EU across the Eurasian continent. Especially after Houthi attacks endangered sea links, [writes](#) *The Economist*, China decided to think strategically about the Middle Corridor (MC) transportation route, a portion of which (Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan-Black Sea) goes through Georgia. Yet, while the Middle Corridor is shorter, it takes longer and would require substantial investments to upgrade infrastructure. The model developed by the World Bank study [says](#) MC trade volumes may triple by 2030 but this "will remain mostly a regional corridor." And while the China-Europe trade accounts for the biggest increase of corridor use in this model, it would still carry around 1% of EU-China trade. Thus, the MC is not so strategic for Beijing and its value hinges primarily on regional actors, especially Kazakhstan, trading with each other while avoiding Russia. It goes without saying that such a scenario may meet political resistance from the Kremlin and be more expensive. Thus, Tbilisi's assumed importance to Beijing's agenda appears more aspirational than real.

No less notable is the nature of the existing Chinese economic engagement in Georgia. As is typical for China in developing countries, its involvement in Georgia has been largely extractive, centered on implementing large-scale road infra-

structure projects which are often funded by loans taken by the Georgian government (i.e., to be paid back by Georgian taxpayers) and often from China itself.

This pattern may hide the highest private interest the Georgian Dream government has in courting China. The infrastructure projects are notoriously opaque and the funds are fungible. CEFC China - the company that employed Gharibashvili - has been notorious for kickbacks to foreign leaders and its once stellar founder was [arrested](#) by the FBI in 2017 for bribing officials in Chad and Uganda, falling rapidly in disgrace in Beijing, too.

Citizens in Serbia have been protesting for months after the railway canopy collapsed in the provincial city of Novi Sad, killing 14 people. The station was a part of the multi-billion-dollar railway infrastructure project implemented by the Chinese company under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Starting last November, citizens in Serbia have been protesting for months after the railway canopy collapsed in the provincial city of Novi Sad, killing 14 people. The station [was a part](#) of the multi-billion-dollar railway infrastructure project implemented by the Chinese company under the Belt and Road Initiative, which ran massive overruns, and the financial documentation for which remains classified. The Serbian example shows how Chinese investment can be both lucrative and risky. President Aleksandar Vučić, otherwise confidently exerting increasingly authoritarian control over Serbia by - among other things - pursuing a "multi-vector" policy, has already sacrificed his Prime Minister and is facing perhaps the first serious challenge to his rule.

However, the risks are not only felt in the capitals

that court and receive China's largesse. According to a [researcher](#) of China's projects in Africa, after multiple countries fell into debt traps and failed to reimburse Beijing, "the key word for both the Chinese government and private entrepreneurs became 'risk.'" The Chinese have also become increasingly concerned about the political backlash in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Guinea-Conakry. In Montenegro, the Bar-Boljare motorway project, financed by China, put the government under heavy political pressure and [triggered](#) an acute debt crisis. Only by EU intervention and borrowing heavily did Podgorica manage to avoid its key port being taken as collateral. True, few in the elite benefited hugely from these Chinese loans. Still, their results were often disastrous for the countries and their political effects were sometimes contrary to Beijing's interests which now treads more carefully.

Expecting China to serve as a stabilizing force against Russian pressure not only overstates Beijing's intentions in Georgia but also misreads its broader geopolitical positioning.

Talks about China as a potential security guarantor are even more inflated. There is little in China's behavior to suggest that it would be willing to counter Russia's influence in the region, let alone to act as a safeguard for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Beijing says its cooperation with Moscow is "[back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder](#)." Even in regions where Chinese stakes have been traditionally higher, such as Central Asia, Beijing has shown a clear preference for operating only within the economic domain, carefully avoiding deeper engagement in the politically sensitive areas. It follows from there that expecting China to serve as a stabilizing force against Russian pressure not only overstates Beijing's intentions in Georgia but also misreads its broader geopolitical positioning. Georgia sits on the periphery of China's strategic

interests—physically distant, relatively small, and economically feeble. Yes, Beijing has engaged with Serbia or Hungary which are both closely integrated with the EU (one as a candidate, the other as a member) and which can offer more effective access to the EU markets. Georgia - especially as it recklessly burns bridges with Brussels - lacks the same appeal.

Without a Rudder

The Georgian Dream likes to say that it can reassert its "sovereignty" from the EU (i.e., freedom to ignore its values) by effecting the pivot towards Asia with a particular accent on China. This has worked for Serbia and Hungary, but in less stormy times, and even then, only partially.

In the current, rapidly polarizing and hardening international context, the dream of a "non-aligned" Georgia is illusory. Nothing about Georgia makes it indispensable to a major player like China. Indeed, Beijing's economic interest in Serbia, Montenegro, and Hungary was to better access Europe and Georgia's value in its eyes would have increased by getting closer to Brussels, not running away from it.

By burning its bridges with Europe and the United States, the Georgian Dream will likely reduce, rather than boost, Georgia's space for sovereign maneuver.

By burning its bridges with Europe and the United States, the Georgian Dream will likely reduce, rather than boost, Georgia's space for sovereign maneuver. As official Tbilisi is weakened internationally, beset by internal political crisis and unstable in terms of security and economy, Georgia's foreign policy agency is likely to be reduced and its choices subsumed to the whims of regional (Russia, Türkiye) and sub-regional (Azerbaijan) powers.

There can be no meaningful multi-vector foreign policy for Georgia in general and especially while the Georgian Dream, in want of legitimacy, cannot firmly hold the rudder. Any flirting with such an approach risks pushing the country closer to the Russian Federation by default or by design.

The EU must take note. Talking up economic cooperation [projects](#), such as the Black Sea power

cable sponsored by Hungary and Azerbaijan, created an impression in Tbilisi that values take a back seat when economic interests are concerned. And while the harsh realities may justify such attitude, Brussels must make clear where it draws the geographic redline: those who want to get into (or stay in) the EU - even if by 2030 - cannot do so on promises of cheap energy or by indebting themselves in China and cracking down on dissent ■

“Friendly” Fire

On 6 May 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted the [MEGOBARI Act](#) with 80% support. While MEGOBARI stands for “Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia’s Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence,” it also means “friend” in the Georgian language, underlying the authors’ intent of applying tough love.

Votes and Numbers

Voting patterns and numbers always tell an interesting story. Of the 349 members who voted in favor, 168 were Republicans and 181 were Democrats. Meanwhile, 42 representatives voted against the measure—34 Republicans and eight Democrats—and another 42 did not vote at all. In the current composition of the House of Representatives, there are 220 Republicans and 213 Democrats. The quorum for passing legislation stands at 218 votes. Among those who opposed the measure were several progressive Democrats, including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Rep. Ayanna

Pressley (D-MA), Rep. Summer Lee (D-PA), and Rep. Delia Ramirez (D-IL). Also voting “no” were Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), who has consistently expressed opposition to unilateral US sanctions, and Rep. Hank Johnson (D-GA), well-known for disliking Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC), the bill’s main champion.

Republicans who voted against the Act are primarily [known](#) for their anti-Ukrainian stance, including Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Lauren Boebert (R-CO). Some are just freshmen without clear foreign policy agendas.

For a sharply divided Congress, consensus among 80% of members is rare and reflects the body’s overall mood regarding events in Georgia.

Overall, it appears the majority of the Act’s opponents represent either the ultra-left or the ultra-right fringes of the American political establishment. For a sharply divided Congress, con-



TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

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



sensus among 80% of members is rare and reflects the body's overall mood regarding events in Georgia.

The title rejects the notion of Georgia as “Russia’s backyard” – a narrative Russia has fiercely promoted – and implies that the current Georgian regime, against the will of its population, is dragging the country into the camp of America’s adversaries.

The bill's official title – “To Counter the Influence of the Chinese Communist Party, the Iranian Regime, and the Russian Federation in the Nation of Georgia” – sets the tone and explains the reasoning for the legislation. All three nations have long been considered America's principal adversaries; thus, keeping Georgia on the Western fold is a clear goal of U.S. foreign policy. The bill explicitly states that “the consolidation of democracy in Georgia is critical for regional stability and United States national interests.” At the same time, the title rejects the notion of Georgia as “Russia’s backyard” – a narrative Russia has fiercely promoted – and implies that the current Georgian regime, against the will of its population, is dragging the country into the camp of America's adversaries.

It is important to note that the bill's Statement of Policy questions the legitimacy of Georgia's current regime. Section 4, Paragraph 11 states: “Call on the Government of Georgia to thoroughly investigate all allegations emerging from the recent national elections, which took place in October 2024, make a determination on whether or not the elections should be judged as illegitimate and hold those responsible for interference in the elections.” Translated from diplomatic language, this essentially means “we are unsure how legitimate you are.”

The shorter title of the bill – “Mobilizing and En-

hancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence Act” or the MEGOBARI Act – is self-explanatory. Simply put, Georgia is on the wrong trajectory, and the U.S. intends to support its population through a concrete set of actions.

In terms of methodology and practicality, the bill emphasizes sanctioning individuals, including officials from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, deemed to be undermining Georgia's prior democratic achievements, good governance, and independence. The initial list [floated](#) by Rep. Wilson on his X account includes almost a full list of top decision-makers in the Georgian Dream hierarchy but also reaches judges, heads of various “independent” agencies, and propaganda instruments.

As stated in the bill's official summary: “This bill requires the President to impose sanctions upon certain foreign persons, including Georgian government officials, who are undermining Georgia's security or stability.

Specifically, the bill requires the President to impose visa-blocking sanctions and authorizes the President to impose property-blocking sanctions on any foreign person the President determines is involved with actions or policies to undermine Georgia's security or stability. Immediate family members of a sanctioned individual are also subject to these sanctions if they benefited from the sanctioned individual's conduct.

The bill also requires the President to impose visa-blocking sanctions on the following foreign persons if the President determines such persons knowingly engaged in significant acts of corruption or acts of violence or intimidation in relation to the blocking of Euro-Atlantic integration in Georgia.”

Additionally, the bill mandates visa-blocking sanctions on foreign persons who knowingly engage in

significant acts of corruption or violence/intimidation to obstruct Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Notably, the sanctions will apply not only to individuals but also to their immediate family members. Sanctions extend beyond travel bans to include the freezing of assets directly or indirectly owned under U.S. jurisdiction.

While the bill questions cooperation with the Georgian government, it clearly states continued support for civil society, independent media, and humanitarian assistance, which is exempt from sanctions.

The bill empowers the White House, the Department of State, and USAID to implement its stated goals. While interagency coordination is essential, it is often slowed by differing methodologies and institutional interests. Recently, former senator and now distinguished Trump administration official, Marco Rubio, has assumed a unique dual role as both National Security Advisor and Secretary of State - a combination not seen since Henry Kissinger. This combination makes him the chief National Security Advisor and the chief Foreign Policy Advisor to the President. With USAID now part of the State Department, Secretary Rubio holds sweeping authority over implementation. This consolidation may reduce interagency friction and expedite policy execution.

Although the bill is valid for five years (a sunset clause), it introduces specific time-bound benchmarks for engagement, reporting, and action.

U.S. legislative procedures require the Senate to consider the bill before it reaches the President. Typically, it takes two to three weeks for Senate approval. Still, on 27 March 2025, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee endorsed the bill in its current form, greatly increasing its chances of swift passage.

Carrots

The bill is designed as a “carrot and stick” mechanism. It allows the Georgian leadership to reverse course and adjust policies. However, failure to address U.S. concerns may trigger the full enactment of sanctions.

The MEGOBARI Act outlines a series of incentives the United States is prepared to offer Georgia—should the country recommit itself to democratic reform and its Euro-Atlantic path. At the heart of the Act is a clear message: if Georgia makes “significant and sustained progress” in reviving democratic standards, the U.S. is ready to respond with deeper political, economic, and defense cooperation. These are not abstract promises. They include tangible benefits such as liberalizing the visa regime, expanding academic exchanges, increasing defense assistance, and opening new economic opportunities through enhanced trade frameworks.

In the educational and people-to-people sphere, the MEGOBARI Act envisions a scaling-up of academic exchanges—potentially allowing hundreds or even thousands of Georgian students to study at U.S. universities. It also encourages closer professional and cultural ties across sectors. On the security front, the Act calls for maintaining and, where appropriate, expanding defense cooperation with Georgia, including the provision of defensive military equipment tailored to counter Russian aggression. This also extends to broader support in de-occupation efforts—whether through financial assistance, diplomatic backing, or joint security programs.

The United States asks for something basic: that Georgia restore democratic standards to a minimal threshold of credibility.

In return, the United States asks for something basic: that Georgia restore democratic standards to a minimal threshold of credibility. A rational government would use the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter and its four bilateral working groups to advance these goals year after year. Instead, the Georgian Dream has abandoned this framework, dismantling existing cooperation platforms and jeopardizing the very opportunities that serve the interests of the Georgian people. The MEGOBARI Act reminds us what is still possible—if Georgia chooses to turn back toward its democratic and Euro-Atlantic path.

Timing and Purpose

The bill was [first introduced](#) on 23 May 2024 by Congressman Joe Wilson, chair of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, in response to Georgia's adoption of the Russian-style "foreign agents" law ("On Transparency of Foreign Influence"). With the upcoming U.S. presidential elections, most members of Congress appeared to defer the issue to the incoming administration and Congress, avoiding the appearance of a "last-minute legacy."

It is notable that the House vote occurred shortly after the first 100 days of the new administration, during which foreign policy priorities became clearer. China is now viewed as the main U.S. challenger and a target in the emerging "tariff war." Simultaneously, the Trump administration is becoming more realistic toward Russia, with President Trump openly acknowledging the need to pressure Russia into a peace deal with Ukraine. Iran and its proxies are also seen as obstacles to Middle East peace under Trump's "Abraham Accords" initiative.

Thus, the bill's focus on China, Iran, and Russia is no coincidence. The Georgian leadership has demonstrably aligned with China, contrary to public sentiment favoring Western integration. This shift

is evident not only in official statements and frequent visits to China but also in major infrastructure decisions—such as selecting a Chinese company over U.S. or European firms for the Anaklia deep seaport. Georgia remains the only viable access point to resource-rich, landlocked Central Asia, where Chinese influence is rapidly growing. If Georgia is locked into the Russo-Chinese orbit, so too will be Central Asia.

The bill's focus on China, Iran, and Russia is no coincidence. The Georgian leadership has demonstrably aligned with China, contrary to public sentiment favoring Western integration.

Ample evidence [suggests](#) that Georgia has become one of the hubs for undermining Western sanctions on Russia. Eroding these sanctions and benefiting from it appears to be the "economic policy" for the current Georgian regime. As President Trump considers tightening sanctions on Russia, Georgia's mercantilist policies are increasingly intolerable. Georgian territory is actively used by Russian intelligence agencies for malign operations targeting opposition figures and pro-Western actors, compounding challenges for the West.

The same applies to Georgia's cooperation with Iran. Georgia has become a base for anti-Israeli activity. A [foiled](#) assassination attempt on Mr. Itsik Moshe, head of the Georgia-Israel Chamber of Commerce, points toward Iranian involvement. Unlike prior Georgian governments that disrupted Iranian smuggling networks, the current regime appears more accommodating to Iranian-linked enterprises.

Against this backdrop, the MEGOBARI Act increasingly looks like a key instrument in the U.S. foreign policy toolkit.

Reactions

Passage of the bill by the House sparked celebration and renewed hope among Georgia's pro-Western forces who see it as a result (among other reasons) of their tenacious resistance, endured humiliation, exuberant fines, physical assaults, arrests, and continuous street protests for more than 160 consecutive days. For them, international pressure and sanctions are crucial to countering a regime that has reversed Georgia's pro-Western and democratic trajectory. Their hopes are echoed in bipartisan U.S. statements, such as those from the Helsinki Commission, [describing](#) the bill as an "effort to help restore Georgian democracy." Rep. Wilson even proposed a comprehensive, although not exhaustive, list of potential sanction targets, including senior officials across Georgia's government.

The regime clings to the hope that the Senate will not pass the bill or the President will not sign it, buying time without clear signs of policy reversal.

Meanwhile, Georgia's ruling regime is less celebratory. Traditional narratives blaming an international cabal - dubbed by misinterpreted jargon, like "the party of war" or "deep state" - are losing traction. The regime clings to the hope that the Senate will not pass the bill or the President will not sign it, buying time without clear signs of policy reversal. The Georgian Dream's leaders even went as far as to argue that the Act was a hostile act towards Georgia.

Ironically, the Georgian Dream is right about one thing: the MEGOBARI Act is indeed an unfriendly step—toward them. But it is a profoundly friend-

ly act toward the Georgian people. The message is unambiguous: the Georgian Dream and its oligarchic leadership are adversaries of the United States with all the consequences that follow; the Georgian people, by contrast, are seen as friends and allies, with all the opportunities that entail.

Ironically, the Georgian Dream is right about one thing: the MEGOBARI Act is indeed an unfriendly step—toward them. But it is a profoundly friendly act toward the Georgian people.

Until now, Western reactions to Georgia's backsliding have come in the form of warnings, aid freezes, halted interstate cooperation, and travel restrictions mainly targeting unnamed individuals. So far, the regime seems to digest such "inconveniences" and has tightened its grip against any sort of opposition by adding more restrictive legislation and more punitive actions. This time may be different. Sanctions targeting a broad range of enforcers and their families may finally disincentivize repression, creating cracks in the regime's already fragile but still functional punitive apparatus.

A potential image of President Trump signing the bill into law could turn the Georgian Dream into a foreign policy nightmare. Normally, we might say "the clock is ticking," but judging by the regime's reaction, they do not hear - or do not want to hear - the sound. If it is not a clock, surely it is an hourglass, flipped 180 degrees. We will likely know within 180 days how long the sand will fall ■

Looming Emigration from Georgia – Run, Forrest, Run!

Since gaining independence, Georgia has experienced several waves of emigration. The first major outflow occurred between 1990 and 1995, largely triggered by armed conflicts and severe economic hardship. A second wave followed between 1996 and 2004, driven by continued instability and financial difficulties. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, a modest return of migrants, particularly skilled professionals, took place, reflecting renewed optimism. The introduction of visa-free travel to the EU and the Schengen area in 2017 prompted another surge as many Georgians took advantage of the opportunity to seek better prospects abroad.

Today, there are strong indications that Georgia may be on the verge of yet another emigration wave, this time rooted in the country's democratic backsliding. This new outflow is likely to be characterized by selective migration with highly educated and civically engaged individuals choosing to leave. As a result, those who remain may be less

involved in democratic processes, potentially enabling the ruling Georgian Dream party to further entrench authoritarian rule.

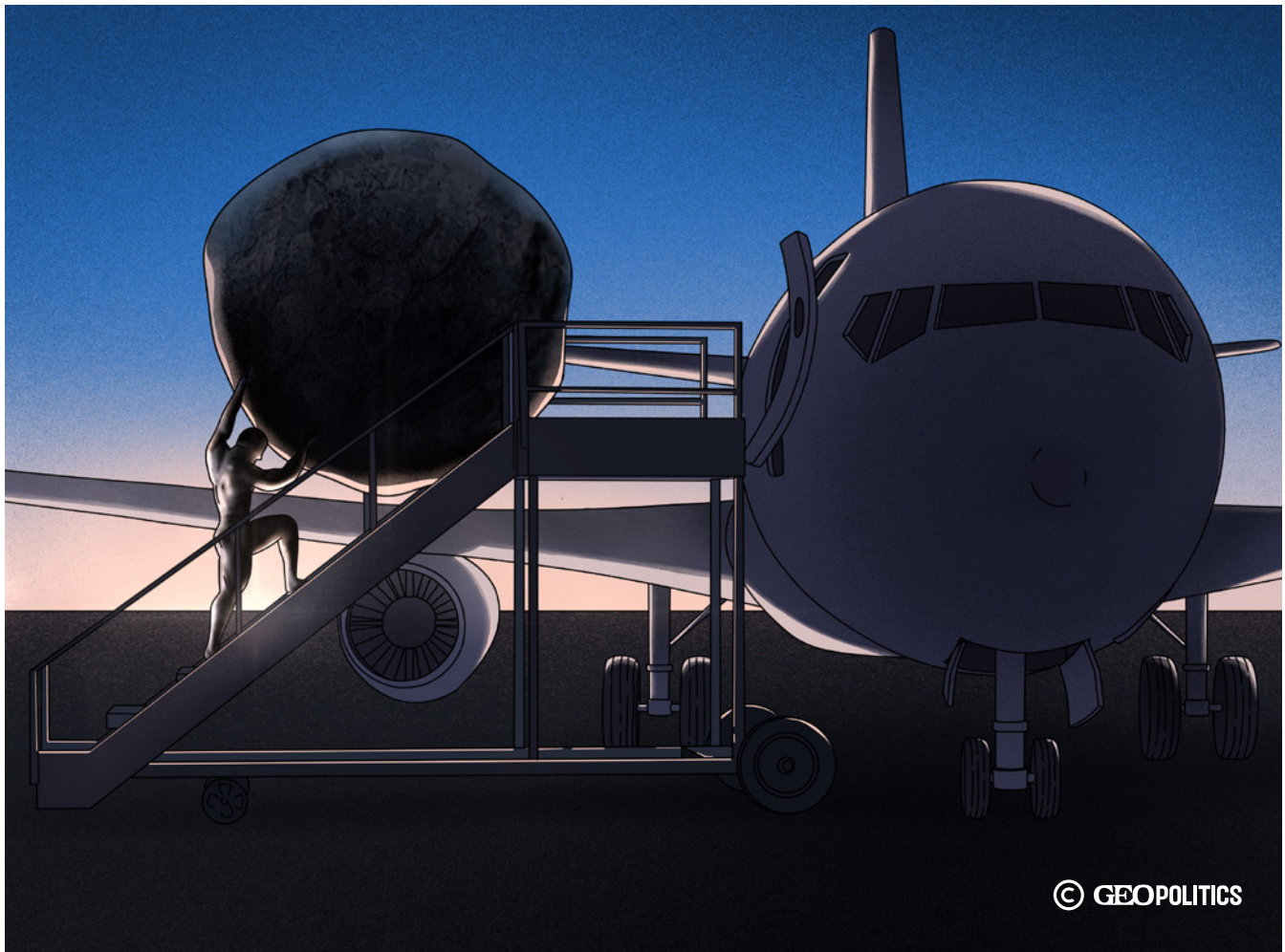
As the Georgian Dream steadily consolidates its grip on power, large numbers of citizens, particularly the young and educated, are leaving the country, reshaping its demographic and political landscape in ways that reduce the prospects for meaningful democratic change.

The dual phenomenon of rising authoritarianism under the Georgian Dream government and the intensifying wave of emigration is deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. As the Georgian Dream steadily consolidates its grip on power, large numbers of citizens, particularly the young and educated, are leaving the country, reshaping its demographic and political landscape



VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



© GEOPOLITICS

in ways that reduce the prospects for meaningful democratic change.

Despite promising macroeconomic indicators, including periods of double-digit growth, the benefits of development remain unevenly distributed. Growing economic hardship, inadequate social protections, a dysfunctional healthcare system, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness are prompting more and more Georgians to seek opportunities abroad. Nearly [45%](#) of the population—mostly young people aged 18 to 34 years—express a desire to emigrate temporarily. This demographic is particularly hard-hit, with youth unemployment [hovering](#) at 35%.

Migration figures reflect this trend starkly: while 74,000 people [left](#) Georgia in 2020, that number soared to 245,000 by 2023. At the same time, the country's birthrate plummeted from 56,000 in

2016 to just 39,000 in 2023, accelerating the demographic decline.

The departure of politically active and potentially reform-minded citizens reduces domestic resistance to authoritarianism.

This exodus plays directly into the Georgian Dream's hands. On one side, the departure of politically active and potentially reform-minded citizens reduces domestic resistance to authoritarianism. On the other hand, emigrants contribute significantly to the economy through remittances, supporting relatives back home while remaining excluded from the political process. To further neutralize their influence, the ruling party has imposed artificial obstacles—such as limiting the number of polling stations abroad—to suppress

diaspora voting. In effect, the government treats migrants as sources of income, not as citizens with political agency. It is a strategy designed to extract economic benefit while silencing potential dissent—a model where emigrants are seen as “cash machines” rather than stakeholders in the nation’s future.

Remittances have become a vital pillar of Georgia’s economy, playing a disproportionately larger role than in most neighboring countries.

Remittances have become a vital pillar of Georgia’s economy, playing a disproportionately larger role than in most neighboring countries. As of 2023, remittances [accounted](#) for 13.7% of Georgia’s GDP—significantly higher than in Armenia (6%) or Moldova (12.2%). According to the [Caucasus Barometer 2024](#), one in five Georgian households receives money from abroad. This figure has risen steadily over the past decade—from 14% in 2013 to 22% in 2024—underscoring the growing reliance of Georgian families on external income.

In global terms, Georgia [ranked](#) ninth in the world in 2023 for remittances per capita, receiving an average of USD 1,121 per person in 2022. The total inflow of remittances reached USD 4.18 billion in 2023 and remained substantial at USD 3.4 billion in 2024, highlighting the enduring economic significance of the Georgian diaspora.

The United States [has emerged](#) as the top source of remittances in 2024, contributing USD 573 million. Among EU countries, the leading senders were Italy (USD 567 million), Germany (USD 267 million), and Greece (USD 263 million). All three countries have seen a steady rise in remittance volumes: Italy’s contribution grew from USD 386 million in 2021 to USD 432 million in 2022; Germany’s rose from USD 113 million to USD 164 million in the same period; Greece, while showing some fluctuation, remained consistently high.

Transfers from Russia also remained significant, amounting to USD 541 million in 2024. However, a considerable portion of this may reflect the spending of Russian nationals who relocated to Georgia after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, rather than remittances in the traditional sense.

The core destinations for Georgian economic migrants remain the USA, Italy, Greece, and Germany. Due to stringent visa requirements, migration to the United States often occurred through irregular routes—particularly via the U.S.-Mexico border. In contrast, travel to the EU and Schengen countries has been more accessible since the introduction of visa-free travel in 2017. Nevertheless, the United States still remains a more attractive destination for many due to better-paying job opportunities. How Trump’s new stance on illegal immigration will affect this mood remains to be seen.

There is also a gendered aspect to this migration pattern. Women more commonly find employment in domestic and care work in Italy and Greece, where demand for such labor remains high, while men often face greater difficulty securing stable employment, particularly in the EU job market.

Run, Forrest, Run!

Georgia is racing headlong into a demographic crisis. Already one of the countries with a rapidly aging population, it is now also grappling with large-scale emigration that is hollowing out its youth base. According to UN DESA, by 2020, some 861,000 people had left Georgia—an astonishing 23% of the total population—with women accounting for 51% of the emigrants. Meanwhile, the share of citizens aged 65 years and older has [surged](#) from 10.9% in 2000 to 17.5% in 2023, reflecting a dangerous imbalance between the working-age population and dependents.

GEOSTAT data from 2023 [reveals](#) that 245,000 people emigrated from Georgia in just one year. Of these, 30% were between the ages of 20 and 39

years—prime working and reproductive age—and a striking 60% were women. This trend not only accelerates demographic decline but also undermines Georgia's future labor force, economic sustainability, and social cohesion.

The outlook among young people is particularly grim. A 2023 [study](#) shows that 73% of Georgian youth either strongly or somewhat support emigrating abroad for up to ten years. Their motivations are clear and alarming: 38% cite the desire to improve living conditions, 17% seek better education, and 13% aim to find more stable employment.

The economic pressures driving this migration are stark. Sixty-five percent of young Georgians report that their families cannot afford basic necessities like food, clothing, and shoes. Two-thirds are financially dependent on others and lack any stable income of their own.

When it comes to destinations, the top choices reflect where they believe opportunity lies: 30% wish to emigrate to the United States while 17% prefer Germany. These aspirations highlight both the desperation for better prospects and the persistent failure of Georgia's political leadership to create a future of which young people want to be a part.

Unless reversed, this flight of the young and able will not only drain the country's economic potential but leave it demographically imbalanced and politically stagnant—an aging, hollowed-out nation where the best and brightest have long since run.

Beneath Georgia's celebrated macroeconomic growth lies a stark social and regional reality: the country's prosperity is neither broad-based nor inclusive. As of 2024, 671,337 citizens—18.1% of the population—were [receiving](#) social assistance. While poverty rates have slightly decreased in recent years, absolute poverty still [affected](#) 11.8% of the population, with the burden falling disproportionately on rural regions, where every sixth person lives in dire conditions.

Despite [sustained](#) economic expansion—10.6% in 2021, 11% in 2022, 7.8% in 2023, and 9.4% in 2024—unemployment remains persistently high. Official figures [show](#) some improvement, from 20.6% in 2021 to 14.2% in 2024, yet these numbers conceal deeper structural problems. A quarter of Georgia's employed population works in the public sector, reflecting a stagnant private economy. In 2022, public sector employment reached 308,000, while private sector jobs remained static at around 975,000.

On the ground, the situation is bleaker than government data suggests. According to a recent CRRS [survey](#), 50% of respondents say they are unemployed, and one in three [report](#) that no one in their household is employed. Forty percent of households are [burdened](#) with debt, reflecting chronic economic insecurity.

Education, often seen as a long-term solution to poverty and unemployment, is also in crisis. The 2022 PISA [report](#) places Georgia near the bottom of the global rankings: 60th out of 81 countries in math, 67th in reading, and 66th in science. Academic performance is declining, compounding the country's human capital deficit and further dimming prospects for youth.

The combination of deepening regional inequality, an imperfect healthcare system, chronic unemployment, weak educational outcomes, and a tightening authoritarian grip is driving emigration, not just as a search for opportunity, but as an act of survival.

The combination of deepening regional inequality, an imperfect healthcare system, chronic unemployment, weak educational outcomes, and a tightening authoritarian grip is driving emigration, not just as a search for opportunity, but as an act of survival. And while the ruling Georgian Dream party cam-

paigns on promises of reform, these promises rarely materialize beyond pre-election slogans.

Instead of addressing structural issues, the Georgian Dream focuses on entrenching power, often invoking conspiratorial threats like the so-called “Deep State” to deflect attention from real governance failures. Meanwhile, for many Georgians, especially the young and educated, the European Union remains the only accessible escape hatch—at least for as long as visa-free travel is still available. Unless the country breaks this cycle, another wave of large-scale emigration is not just likely—it is inevitable.

Migrating West

The United States, France, Italy, and Germany have emerged as the primary destinations for Georgian migrants. According to Georgia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an estimated 1.5 million Georgians now [live abroad](#). Of these, 700,000 reside in Russia, 200,000 in Greece, 120,000 in the United States, and around 50,000 each in Italy and Germany. However, official statistics often understate the actual numbers, particularly in Italy, where, according to 2024 [data](#), 33,674 Georgian citizens are legally registered, although the real figure is likely much higher due to undocumented migration. Notably, 85% of the Georgian residents in Italy are women.

The European Union remains a major destination not only for labor migrants but also for asylum seekers. In 2024 alone, Georgian nationals filed 15,509 asylum applications in EU member states, with 82% submitted in just three countries: Italy, France, and Germany. Historical trends reinforce this concentration. In 2020, 6,870 asylum applications were [lodged](#) by Georgians, 63% of which were filed in these same countries. In 2021, 12,440 applications were submitted, with 77% going to France, Germany, and Italy. A record was set in 2022 with 25,940 asylum requests—again, 77% directed to these three states. While the number slightly de-

creased to 21,815 in 2023, their share rose to 80%, underscoring the persistent attractiveness of these destinations.

The United States, once a top choice for Georgian migrants, has now become more difficult for migration. Although 120,000 Georgians currently reside in the U.S., access remains restricted due to high visa refusal rates. Between 2020 and 2024, the refusal rate for B-category visas fluctuated between 41% and 66%. As a result, many Georgian migrants have taken irregular routes, including dangerous journeys through Latin America to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

In contrast, visa-free travel with the EU since 2017 has made European countries more [accessible](#), particularly for labor migration. Yet the migration wave also has a humanitarian dimension. In France, many Georgians have sought asylum due to political persecution, domestic violence, and ethnic discrimination, particularly for those displaced from occupied Abkhazia. In 2021, health concerns also became a leading factor, with 1,178 Georgians applying for asylum in France due to untreated or poorly covered chronic illnesses under Georgia’s inadequate healthcare system. That year, Georgians ranked [fourth](#) among asylum seekers in France, applying on health grounds.

A less discussed, but politically sensitive issue is the involvement of some Georgian nationals in organized crime across Europe. Europol’s [report](#), *Decoding the EU’s Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, lists Georgian groups among the active players in burglaries and robberies across Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland, Spain, and Portugal. In France, Italy, Malta, and Spain, these networks have become a significant concern. In Poland, Georgian criminal activity is particularly [notable](#): in 2023, police reported 2,714 Georgian nationals committing crimes, while the legal Georgian resident population stood at just over 27,000. In 2024, Polish police detained 1,895 Georgian citizens, prompting a [wave](#) of deportations.

Georgian migration to the West is multi-layered, driven by economic desperation, political instability, systemic poverty, and weak public services.

In sum, Georgian migration to the West is multi-layered, driven by economic desperation, political instability, systemic poverty, and weak public services. While many seek dignity, opportunity, or refuge, others have fallen into criminal networks, adding to the growing policy and perception challenges Georgia faces abroad. Without meaningful reform at home, this complex migration trend is unlikely to abate—and may even intensify.

Visa Liberalization Suspension Mechanism: A Ticking Clock for Georgian Migrants

While repression under the Georgian Dream government continues to intensify—marked by attacks on civil society, political opposition, and independent media—external avenues of escape may soon narrow.

Georgia's potential migrants are facing mounting pressure from two converging forces: growing domestic authoritarianism and impending changes to EU visa policy. While repression under the Georgian Dream government continues to intensify—marked by attacks on civil society, political opposition, and independent media—external avenues of escape may soon narrow. The European Union is in the final stages of amending its visa liberalization [suspension mechanism](#), which allows the temporary revocation of visa-free travel for third countries that fail to meet specific benchmarks. Currently, the

suspension can be triggered by four factors: a sharp increase in irregular migration or asylum applications (over 50%), particularly from countries with low recognition rates (3–4%); reduced cooperation on readmission of deported nationals, and rising security threats to EU member states.

The proposed amendments will significantly broaden the scope of this mechanism. Four new criteria are expected to be added: misalignment of a third country's visa policy with that of the EU, the emergence of hybrid threats, the operation of investor citizenship (or “golden passport”) schemes, and serious and abrupt deterioration in diplomatic relations with the EU. Georgia's growing divergence from EU standards—visible in its foreign policy leanings, increasing hybrid threat perceptions, democratic backsliding, and tensions with Brussels—means that it may fall afoul of several of these new criteria. Once the changes are adopted, Georgia's visa-free regime with the EU will become far more fragile, exposing Georgian citizens to the risk of losing one of their most valuable avenues of mobility and opportunity.

Ironically, the prospect of losing visa-free travel may accelerate the very migration the EU aims to regulate. Fearful that the window to Europe is closing, many Georgians—especially young people, professionals, and politically disillusioned citizens—may rush to leave before new restrictions are enforced. This urgency is compounded by a deteriorating domestic context in which hope for change is fading. The combination of authoritarian consolidation at home and looming external constraints abroad is likely to trigger a new wave of strategic emigration—further draining the country's democratic potential and deepening its demographic crisis. If unaddressed, the EU's well-intentioned policy shift could paradoxically hasten the exodus it seeks to manage ■

Credits

Content Manager

Tinatin Nikoleishvili

Editorial Assistant

Lika Khutsiberidze

Illustrators

Nina Masalkina

Mariam Vardanidze

Mashiko Mindiashvili

Graphic Designer

Paata Dvaladze

Proofreader

Jeffrey Morski

GEO POLITICS

Issue №18

May, 2025