
GEO POLITICS

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GEO POLITICS

Issue №20

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Our Mission

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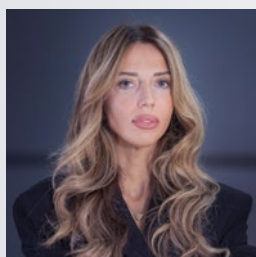
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

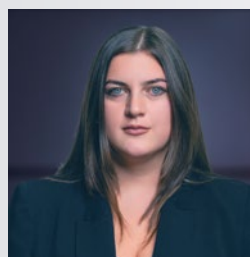
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia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



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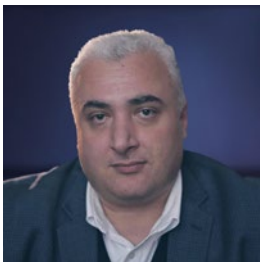
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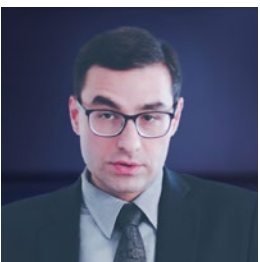
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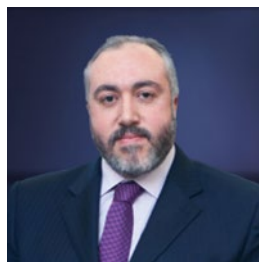
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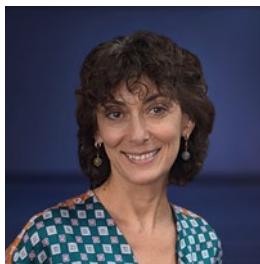
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Russia's Mission Impossible – Restoring the Soviet Empire – Should Remain Just That: Impossible!

For almost two years, *GEOpolitics* has chronicled how Russia has sought to defy gravity—geopolitical, economic, and historical—by attempting to restore its imperial power. Twenty issues later, it is time to say what should have long been evident: the mission has hitherto failed and must fail in the future. The dream of a new Russian century, cemented by the annexation of Crimea and launched into full-scale war in Ukraine, now lies in strategic and moral ruin. Russia may still occupy territory, take lives, shatter cities, and spread fear. Still, its deeper objective—to build a durable empire recognized by the world and welcomed by its neighbors—has proved impossible. What Moscow holds today, it holds by force, not legitimacy; what it destroys, it cannot rebuild. Even where it wins, it loses.

And yet, the Kremlin clings to its imperial delusions, lashing out from Ukraine to Africa, from Georgia to the Arctic, as if destruction alone might compensate for decline. This is not a rising empire—it is a power trapped in regression, armed with nuclear weapons, flush with oil money, but lacking genuine allies, economic dynamism, or an attractive model of governance. The tragedy is that Russia's failure does not make the world safer. Quite the opposite: the wreckage left behind—frozen conflicts, broken societies, destabilized regions—will take decades to repair.

This issue of *GEOpolitics* focuses on Russia, the tools Moscow employs to feign strength, the

cracks it exploits in the international order, and the costs borne by those forced to live next to a neighbor that mistakes fear for influence.

Thornike Gordadze opens the issue with the analysis of how authoritarian regimes like Georgia's use elections not as democratic exercises but as tools of control, legitimacy, and elite management. Focusing on the upcoming October 2025 local elections, he argues that the Georgian Dream has mastered the authoritarian art of staging votes to entrench power while fragmenting and demoralizing the opposition. Drawing on global examples from Russia to Iran, Gordadze warns that participation without strategy risks legitimizing the regime, while boycotts without mobilization lead to irrelevance. In authoritarian contexts, he concludes, elections are not about choosing leaders—they are about reinforcing dominance unless the opposition can turn them into moments of exposure and resistance.

Sergi Kapanadze continues with a chilling roadmap for Georgia's full-scale absorption into Russia's orbit, arguing that the Georgian Dream's trajectory is no longer speculative—it is strategic, deliberate, and dangerously advanced. With NATO and EU ties severed, U.S. relations suspended, and Kremlin-style laws, actions, and rhetoric firmly entrenched, Kapanadze warns that Georgia is entering the final phase of de-sovereignization. This process, already marked by repression, propaganda, and institutional capture, now points toward diplomatic normalization

with Moscow, direct talks with the occupied regions, and eventual integration into Russian-led regional formats. Far from a sudden annexation, he describes a slow-motion capitulation sold as pragmatism but engineered to dismantle Georgia's democracy and Western identity—one legal tweak, one media narrative, and one “non-use of force” agreement at a time.

Natalie Sabanadze examines why the fate of Crimea is not just a Ukrainian issue, but a strategic and existential question for Georgia and the wider international order. She argues that Donald Trump's proposal to recognize Crimea as Russian would not only legitimize territorial conquest but unravel the legal and normative foundations that have protected small states like Georgia since the Cold War. Through historical parallels, legal analysis, and geopolitical context, the article shows how such a concession would embolden Russia, destabilize the Black Sea region, undermine Georgia's territorial integrity, and destroy the credibility of international norms. It warns that in a world where power overrides principle, Georgia risks being pulled fully into Moscow's orbit—especially as its own government retreats from European integration and adapts to a no-rules international order.

Shota Gvineria continues with dissecting Russia's long-game of ideological subversion in Georgia, showing how Moscow has moved the country from years of quiet demoralization into an active destabilization phase that erodes every pillar of national resilience—from schools and churches to media, bureaucracy, law enforcement, and the economy. Borrowing Yuri Bezmenov's four-stage framework (demoralization, destabilization, crisis, normalization), he traces how Kremlin-linked oligarch media, clerical patronage, Soviet-era curricula, politicized purges of diplomats and police, and booming Russian trade have hollowed out Georgia's democratic immune system, preparing the ground for an engineered crisis

that would justify authoritarian “normalization.” Gvineria warns that tanks are no longer Russia's sharpest weapon; patient manipulation of perceptions, loyalties, and dependencies can win a nation without firing a shot unless Georgia—and other open societies—treat cognitive resilience and institutional trust as core elements of national defense.

Yet, even now, the momentum is not irreversible. Vano Chkhikvadze argues that Brussels still holds the sharpest tool for halting Georgia's authoritarian slide—the EU-Georgia Association Agreement itself—and that by triggering its dispute-settlement clauses, the Union can hit the Georgian Dream where it hurts without punishing the population. He shows how Tbilisi's foreign-agent law, rigged elections, and sweeping repressions violate the treaty's Article 2 “essential elements,” its civil-society and non-discrimination chapters, and even Georgia's own constitution, yet the EU has so far wielded only rhetoric. Chkhikvadze urges the Commission to launch formal consultations under Article 246, escalate to arbitration, and, if non-compliance persists, suspend DCFTA trade preferences by qualified majority. Partial economic suspension, paired with targeted sanctions and amplified pro-EU messaging, would squeeze regime-aligned business elites, restore Brussels' credibility, and give Georgia's pro-European majority a fighting chance before 2028 turns the country's drift into a permanent divorce.

GEOpolitics has a tradition of revisiting Georgia's history, which often offers insights into the past and advice for the future. Jaba Devdariani returns to the twilight years of Georgia's first republic to draw strategic lessons for resisting modern-day Russian subversion. Through a gripping historical narrative, he shows how the 1918-1921 Georgian state built ideologically coherent, overlapping, and often rivalrous intelligence and security services that managed to dismantle both Bolshevik and White Russian threats—until a full-scale in-

vasion toppled the republic. Devdariani argues that what ultimately enabled Georgia to punch above its weight was not firepower but clarity of purpose, civic cohesion, and deep familiarity with Russian imperial and Bolshevik tactics. These lessons, he warns, are more relevant than ever: in an era when the Kremlin is once again deploying propaganda, proxies, and sabotage instead of tanks, Georgia must reclaim the strategic coherence, nationalist mobilization, and institutional vigilance that once allowed it to hold the empire at bay.

Temuri Yakobashvili closes the issue with an optimistic take on Russia's retreat from the wider region. He traces Moscow's centuries-old quest for "warm-water" access—from Peter the Great's Baltic window to Putin's seizures in Crimea and Syria—and shows how that grand design is now imploding: overstretched in Ukraine, bled by sanctions, outflanked in the Middle East by Türkiye and Israel, displaced in Central Asia by China, and even spurned by once-reliant Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia is retreating from every strategic chokepoint it fought to control. Yet, while the Kremlin's influence shrinks across the Black Sea,

the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Arctic, one implausible foothold remains: Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgia, the lone Black Sea state that has chosen to echo Russian propaganda, copy Russian laws and sabotage its own EU future just as the region pivots westward. Yakobashvili warns that unless Georgians and their Western partners act fast, Tbilisi could end up as the last warm-water prize Russia keeps, not through conquest, but through the Georgian Dream's willing capitulation.

The bottom line of this issue is that impossible missions only become possible if you allow them to unfold. Russia's empire-building has collapsed everywhere but one place—Georgia—and only because its leaders have chosen accommodation over resistance. This issue of *GEOpolitics* does not simply document the Kremlin's strategic retreat; it also maps the one front where the outcome is still undecided. The future of Georgia—and the credibility of the democratic West—hangs in that balance ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

Content

The Elections Trap: Why Authoritarians Always Want You to Vote	10
THORNIKE GORDADZE	
The Doomsday Scenario – Back to the USSR?	21
SERGI KAPANADZE	
Why Crimea Matters to Georgia	31
NATALIE SABANADZE	
Ideological Subversion and the Strategic Logic of Influence	37
SHOTA GVINERIA	
The EU-Georgia Association Agreement: The Unused Lever	47
VANO CHKHIKVADZE	
Empire vs. Republic: A New Hope	53
JABA DEVDARIANI	
Cold Feet, Warm Waters: Russia's Strategic Retreat	60
TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI	

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GEOpolitics offers space for a wide range of perspectives, fostering independent thinking and open discussion. The journal articles reflect contributors' views and may not represent the editorial team's position.

The Elections Trap: Why Authoritarians Always Want You to Vote

In my first year of studies at Sciences Po, among the many definitions of democracy, the one that struck me the most was Giovanni Sartori's. He defined democracy as a political system in which political parties lose elections, and not always the same ones.

What appealed to me in this short, almost minimalist definition was its lack of moral, teleological, or normative references. It was concise, clear, no-frills, and implacable. For a student burdened by the heavy Soviet intellectual legacy, who found no comfort in the literature of the “end of history” and the supposed inevitable triumph of liberal democracy worldwide—which had started to feel just as oppressive and irritating—this definition was refreshing. It helped me stay grounded and focus on the essential: as long as those in power can be replaced through elections, we are living in a democracy. Full stop.

Democracy does not guarantee social equality or universal happiness. It does not even ensure competence, let alone honesty, in those who govern. In short, it is far from an ideal regime. But it gives citizens the power to replace their rulers regularly—and that, in itself, is fundamental.

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After Georgia's fraudulent parliamentary elections of October 2024, and the non-recognition of the



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 Sciences Po 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 Sciences Po Paris (2005).



results by opposition parties and Western countries, the Georgian Dream regime—which transitioned in record time from a hybrid regime to a consolidated authoritarian one—is now planning to hold mayoral and municipal council elections across the country on 4 October of this year.

Since the last legislative elections—already deemed neither free nor competitive—the Georgian regime has adopted an impressive array of repressive measures, including the [arrest](#) of the majority of opposition party leaders, and has [passed](#) draconian laws, effectively destroying any chance of a level playing field.

The question of boycotting the upcoming local elections, therefore, arises with particular urgency. A majority of opposition parties—eight out of ten—have [announced](#) a boycott, while two (For Georgia and Lelo) have confirmed that they will [participate](#).

Should one take part in elections known to be lost in advance, in a game where the dice are loaded? The Georgian opposition is currently engaged in intense internal debate on this very question.

Elections: A Fool's Trap?

During those same student years, a group of my classmates—positioning themselves on the far left of the political spectrum—were openly hostile to the institution of voting and often repeated the old rhyming slogan of the 1960s leftists, anarchists, and Situationists: “*Élections, piège à cons!*” (“Elections, a fool's trap!”). For them, real change could only come through revolution. Elections, in their view, merely perpetuated the bourgeois-capitalist system, deceiving the people and effectively stripping them of power. They diverted popular energy toward superficial, cosmetic changes while the structures of domination remained intact.

Pierre Bourdieu, the iconic sociologist of those years, explained that the working classes were above all culturally and ideologically dominated, and that the most effective form of violence was soft violence, one of whose key elements was the acceptance of existing institutions, including the vote itself. This acceptance, in turn, only reinforced the alienation of citizens, making elections, ultimately, an unlikely instrument for real transformation.

The Sixties and Seventies passed without revolution. A few far-left militant groups took the path of violence—*Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in Germany, *Brigate Rosse* in Italy, *Action Directe* in France—but they failed to seriously destabilize liberal representative democracy in Europe. After the end of the Cold War, with the democratization of the former Eastern Bloc, the collapse of military dictatorships in Latin America, and the end of apartheid in South Africa, many believed that democracy would soon triumph everywhere.

Elections are held almost everywhere, even in the harshest dictatorships.

But this victory was short-lived. From the 2000s onward, authoritarianism and repressive regimes began gradually regaining ground. One important detail, however, is that today, according to *The Economist's* Democracy Index, published annually, “highly autocratic,” “authoritarian,” and “hybrid” regimes make up the vast majority of states worldwide—yet elections are held almost everywhere, even in the harshest dictatorships.

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, which remains an absolute monarchy, and Eritrea (a bizarre, hermetically closed regime), all authoritarian systems organize elections—often with great fanfare. The situations vary: from North Korea, where only one candidate is allowed to run, to Russia, where

only Kremlin-approved candidates can compete, to China and the Central Asian republics, where elections are purely symbolic and appear as a sort of celebration. But elections, referendums, plebiscites—they are now everywhere.

Why Autocrats Love the Ballot Box

In fact, authoritarian leaders love elections. In an authoritarian context, elections are not meant to be lost, as Sartori once put it, but quite the opposite.

In fact, authoritarian leaders love elections. In an authoritarian context, elections are not meant to be lost, as Sartori once put it, but quite the opposite. When elections no longer pose any threat to the ruling regime—so thoroughly has it learned to control the process well before the actual voting day—their organization offers many advantages.

When the opposition has been silenced, its leaders are in prison or forced into exile, the media is under pressure, the regime has full control over both local and central electoral commissions and when the ruling party enjoys not only lavish financial support from businessmen enriched through public contracts but also has access to state resources to buy votes with cash, public sector jobs, or a wide range of social services and welfare benefits—then elections are no longer a risk, but an asset.

Beyond material rewards and the commodification of the vote, authoritarian regimes can also rely on intimidation and coercion to influence voters. This can involve the mobilization of law enforcement bodies, intelligence services, or criminal groups to whom the state delegates repressive tasks in exchange for impunity or sentence reductions. We [described](#) these practices of the Georgian Dream party in the June 2024 issue of *GEOPOLITICS*.

The cynicism of certain autocrats extends to criticizing the electoral processes of free countries, accusing them of lacking democracy.

In 2020, Russian [media](#) and [officials](#) (Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin) criticized the highly competitive U.S. presidential election, portraying American democracy as dysfunctional, divided, and hypocritical, especially in contrast to Russia's so-called “stability.”

Even more absurdly, Putin—elected, as everyone knows, in a flawless, free, and transparent vote (!)—has begun [questioning](#) the legitimacy of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who remains Ukraine's president despite the expiration of his term. Given the state of war, occupation of territory, and massive displacement of the population, it is objectively impossible to organize elections in Ukraine.

We thus find ourselves in a situation both absurd and deeply ironic: the world's foremost symbol of authoritarianism, Vladimir Putin, questions the electoral legitimacy of the *de facto* leader of the free world, doing so with the clear aim of undermining that leader's international standing. Even more troubling is the fact that this brazen posture by Putin [received](#) endorsement from none other than the President of the United States. That grim reality speaks volumes about the current state of global affairs, though we will leave that discussion for another time.

Elections Can Solve Many Problems for the Authoritarians

Dictators want information and legitimacy from elections, but they fear losing control or triggering mass mobilization.

A few years ago, a Japanese political scientist, Ma-saaki Higashijima, in his book, *The Dictator's Di-*

lemma at the Ballot Box (2022), explained why authoritarian rulers hold elections—and how they use them not to democratize but to strengthen their grip on power. What he calls the “Dictator’s Dilemma” is that dictators want information and legitimacy from elections, but they fear losing control or triggering mass mobilization. That is why they employ electoral manipulation (fraud, repression, co-optation) and economic maneuvering (patronage and selective redistribution) to mitigate risks while benefiting from the façade of electoral legitimacy. Higashijima’s main contribution is that he challenges the idea that elections are always liberalizing in nature; instead, they can entrench autocracy.

What objectives do authoritarian regimes pursue while organizing elections? Far from being mere window dressing, elections in authoritarian contexts serve to consolidate power, legitimize authority, and maintain control.

First of all, they seek legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Of course, this legitimacy cannot be complete and universal. However, authoritarian regimes recognize that their elections will be identified by like-minded regimes, which already comprise a significant portion of the international community. For some time now, authoritarian governments have established their own election observation missions, whose sole purpose is to validate elections conducted with irregularities. For example, the Russian Federation, along with several Central Asian countries, established a sort of “anti-ODIHR” composed exclusively of observers (parliamentarians, members of GONGOs, and diplomats) from non-democratic states. I had the opportunity to witness their activities during the 2005 Tajik elections while serving as a member of the OSCE observation mission. Their report, as usual, was the complete opposite of that of the ODIHR.

Sometimes, authoritarian countries go even further and invite observers from democratic coun-

tries, but ones who represent populist or radical parties (from both the left and the right). Figures from Germany’s AfD, Austria’s FPÖ, France’s *Rassemblement National*, Italy’s *Lega Nord*, and Hungary’s *Fidesz* regularly “observe” elections in Russia and even in territories illegally occupied by the Russian Federation (such as Crimea, for example). Likewise, radical left-wing parties such as France’s *La France Insoumise* and Germany’s *Die Linke* openly support the “democratic nature” of elections in Venezuela, Cuba, and similar regimes.

To be fully honest, the often ambiguous and carefully worded conclusions of ODIHR reports can be exploited by authoritarian or hybrid regimes, which selectively cite them to claim that their elections were legitimate. Even partial acknowledgment by observers is enough for such regimes to argue that international assessments are inconsistent—and therefore politically motivated. They point out that while some observers raise concerns, others offer praise, and for their narrative, that contradiction is more than enough.

This strategy is particularly effective for domestic consumption, which remains a top priority. The aim is to convince the public that a genuine majority elected the regime. Endorsements from select international observers or congratulatory messages from foreign leaders help reinforce this perception. What matters most is that a critical portion of the public believes the regime has broad support—or at least accepts its claim to authority. This perception also works to demoralize the opposition, draining its energy and will to resist.

The regime also needs elections for elite control and co-optation. Elections allow authoritarian rulers to distribute power selectively, monitor loyalty, and rotate elites within the system.

The regime also needs elections for elite control

and co-optation. Elections allow authoritarian rulers to distribute power selectively, monitor loyalty, and rotate elites within the system. Candidates from the regime party or tolerated opposition compete for access to resources or local influence. New figures can be promoted and co-opted. The regime, although authoritarian, needs to renew its faces and talking heads and remove the most corrupt, hated, or scandal-prone figures. Even the most hardline authoritarian regimes see some internal changes and purges, and new personalities are promoted through elections. The same happens with dissenters within the regime's circles, who can be filtered out or marginalized through internal party politics and electoral outcomes. The succession of ultraconservative and moderate leaders at the helm of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past 30 years (Khatami-Ahmadinejad-Rouhani-Raisi-Pezeshkian) illustrates the regime's ability to adapt to both international and domestic environments, and to periodically renew its political elites—without ever affecting the “core of the reactor” composed of the elite military forces, the Revolutionary Guards, and the religious leadership.

Thus, Irakli Gharibashvili—once Bidzina Ivanishvili's most loyal lieutenant, a former personal assistant and house employee elevated to Prime Minister, who consistently addressed Ivanishvili before even acknowledging the public during media appearances—has vanished from the political scene, along with his cabinet ministers and top officials. In their place, a new cohort emerged during the October 2024 elections, with more expected to rise in the upcoming electoral cycle. It is entirely plausible that Tbilisi's current mayor, Kakha Kaladze, may also exit politics, paving the way for a fresh Georgian Dream aspirant heavyweight to take his place.

In an authoritarian context, elections also serve to monitor and manage the population, acting as a form of mass survey. Turnout rates and voting pat-

terns provide valuable insights into support, dissent, or apathy among different regions or social groups. The Iranian presidential elections of 2024, held after the worst mass repressions of 2022 (the movement Women, Life, Freedom), despite the efforts of the government to monetize citizen participation or the use of threat to force people to cast their ballots, [showed](#) the lowest participation ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic (39.9%) and this includes fraud. Through the elections, even when they are flawed, the ruling party learns about the true support among the overall population. Areas with low turnout or opposition votes may later face targeted repression or increased propaganda efforts.

Elections in non-democratic states also serve as a form of political theater, demonstrating the dominance of the ruling party and its leader, as well as the weakness and impotence of the opposition.

Elections in non-democratic states also serve as a form of political theater, demonstrating the dominance of the ruling party and its leader, as well as the weakness and impotence of the opposition. In some countries, the vote is an actual “popular celebration” or holiday, a practice I have observed in Central Asian states, which is inherited from the Soviet Union. A French philosopher, Guy Debord, in his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), argued that elections were nothing more than a ritualized performance, a simulation of popular participation. Of course, Debord's target was not specifically non-Western dictatorships; he was a critic of modern mass politics in general. However, his reflection on voting as playing a role in a theater, where the script has already been written, applies most bluntly to authoritarian contexts.

And now we come to perhaps one of the most – if not the most – important objectives that an au-

thoritarian regime seeks to obtain: to divide and tame the opposition.

Authoritarian regimes often use elections not to foster genuine competition but to divide, neutralize, or co-opt the opposition.

Authoritarian regimes often use elections not to foster genuine competition but to divide, neutralize, or co-opt the opposition. One common tactic is to permit a few carefully selected opposition parties or candidates to run, creating the illusion of pluralism, while genuine challengers are excluded through disqualification, intimidation, or imprisonment. In Russia, for example, parties like the Communist Party, A Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) serve this function—presenting a controlled alternative without posing any real threat to power.

The Georgian Dream has adopted similar strategies, drawing inspiration from more entrenched authoritarian systems. In the past, it supported the rise of loyal opposition parties such as the Alliance of Patriots, a far-right, openly pro-Russian group that just [cleared](#) the electoral threshold with 5.01% of the vote in 2016. That party was later supplanted by People's Power, another far-right, anti-Western formation whose leadership curiously overlaps with Georgian Dream's own political bureau. In fact, members of People's Power have run on Georgian Dream's party list and consistently endorse its policies and decisions.

Another example is the European Socialists party, led by Pridon Injia, a relic of post-Soviet politics and former Telecommunications Minister under Eduard Shevardnadze, widely associated with corruption. Despite its misleading name, the party openly opposes both European integration and socialist values. Like People's Power, it owes its parliamentary presence to inclusion on the Georgian

Dream's electoral list. These so-called opposition parties serve not to challenge the ruling party, but to fragment the opposition space, muddy the political waters, and give authoritarian rule a façade of democratic legitimacy.

The aforementioned parties function as *de facto* subsidiaries of the Georgian Dream, frequently serving as instruments for carrying out political tasks the ruling party prefers to distance itself from. More noteworthy, however, is the stance taken by genuinely oppositional parties regarding participation in elections.

To Boycott, Or Not - This Is the Question

What the Georgian Dream did during the 2024 elections, and even more so since then, leaves no illusion about the possibility of an opposition victory in the upcoming municipal elections.

Not only do dictators have dilemmas regarding elections. The dilemma of the opposition forces is even more dire. Indeed, opposition parties know that victory in an election organized by an authoritarian—or even hybrid—state is virtually impossible. My Serbian friends have been telling me since at least 2020 that they no longer believe power can change hands in Belgrade through electoral means. What the Georgian Dream did during the 2024 elections, and even more so since then, leaves no illusion about the possibility of an opposition victory in the upcoming municipal elections. The regime has already crossed red lines and will stop at nothing, including the outright falsification of results as seen in Venezuela last year. The Georgian Dream cannot afford to lose even a mid-sized city, let alone the capital, where the opposition clearly enjoys a strong majority. Participating in this election would mean certain defeat and, on

top of that, contribute to the re-legitimization of the regime through participation.

It must also be understood that participation in this electoral farce would divide the opposition, as the majority of the parties remain firmly committed to the decision to boycott.

But let us consider the other side of the dilemma. Non-participation in the elections would grant the ruling party near-total control over local institutions. Opposition parties would lose the seats they currently hold in municipal councils. These positions not only provide a platform for elected officials to criticize the ruling majority's decisions and expose nepotism, corruption, and opacity in local administration, but also constitute a source of income for opposition politicians.

Opposition parties in Georgia suffer from a chronic lack of financial resources as the authorities severely restrict the ability of companies or individuals to make donations. Many political parties survive solely upon the public funding to which they are entitled based on their electoral performance.

Opposition parties in Georgia suffer from a chronic lack of financial resources as the authorities severely restrict the ability of companies or individuals to make donations. Many political parties survive solely upon the public funding to which they are entitled based on their electoral performance. As stable organizations—with offices, staff, logistical and communications teams—they depend upon elections for their very existence. Giving this up would significantly weaken them.

A boycott of the elections by opposition parties would also be exploited by the Georgian Dream to portray them as weak and cowardly, incapable

of truly confronting the ruling party. State media would depict boycotting parties as disorganized, afraid, or irrelevant, reinforcing the regime's narrative and demoralizing opposition supporters.

The partisans of participation in uneven playing field elections claim that there are few successful boycott examples, and they are right. Election boycotts in authoritarian or hybrid regimes rarely achieve their intended goals, such as delegitimizing the regime, triggering international pressure, or provoking reform. Authoritarian regimes do not require the same level of legitimacy as democracies; instead, they often manufacture legitimacy through controlled media and symbolic rituals. Boycotts can backfire, allowing regimes to fill parliaments with loyalists and claim a "landslide" without real opposition. International reactions are often muted, especially when geopolitical or economic interests dominate. When they are not, they rarely go as far as heavy sanctions or banning the country from all international fora. One should not forget that authoritarian regimes can easily find sponsors and supporters in Russia, China, Iran, etc.

In Venezuela (2005, 2018), Egypt (2014, 2018), and Russia (on several occasions, notably in 2018), the boycotts had no effect. On the contrary, the ruling regimes achieved astronomical scores, such as Al-Sissi's 97% in 2018, despite continued repression. In Albania, the opposition boycotted the local elections in 2019, but Edi Rama remains Prime Minister and has been at the helm of a fourth cabinet since 2013.

On the other hand, the cases where boycotts had some impact are rare. One can recall the Serbian example of 2000 when the Milošević regime was toppled. Still, the boycott had been helped by mass protests since 1996, economic collapse, NATO bombings due to the war crimes committed by the regime in Kosovo, and important elite defections (especially from the nationalist camp, who tradi-

tionally supported Milošević). The boycott was just one phase in a broader, multi-pronged resistance strategy. Two other non-European examples also come to mind: those of Bangladesh in 1996, when the legislative elections, boycotted by the main opposition party, had a very low participation rate, and the mass protest that followed immediately after the polls forced the government, whose legitimacy was severely affected, to resign. A partial success was also reached in Zimbabwe during Mugabe's attempt to rig the presidential elections in 2008. The opposition boycotted the second round of the presidential elections and started mass protests against the incumbent. As a result, and with South Africa's Thabo Mbeki's mediation, a compromise agreement was reached and Mugabe accepted nominating Tsvangirai, his rival, as Prime Minister.

What Makes a Boycott Work: Beyond Abstention

These election boycotts only work if they are part of a broader strategy involving mass mobilization and protest, unified opposition with a clear plan, severe internal crisis or economic breakdown, international leverage and pressure, and a credible alternative narrative to the regime's legitimacy.

These election boycotts only work if they are part of a broader strategy involving mass mobilization and protest, unified opposition with a clear plan, severe internal crisis or economic breakdown, international leverage and pressure, and a credible alternative narrative to the regime's legitimacy.

Success is possible, but the decision to boycott alone does not guarantee it; in fact, it often has the opposite effect. A successful boycott must consist of two phases. The first takes place before the

election. Opposition parties must campaign just as actively as they would if they were running in the election. But this time, the goal is not to secure votes for themselves, but to mobilize the highest possible number of citizens to boycott the rigged election organized by the regime. The abstention rate measures success.

But that is only part of the story. If the opposition's action (as unified as possible) ends on election night, then the boycott will not be effective. After the vote, the dynamic and momentum generated during the boycott campaign must be transformed into mass protest: strikes, rallies, calls to the international community demanding new elections under radically different conditions—with a revised electoral law, election commissions free from ruling party control, and a strong presence of both international and domestic observers.

The Logic of Participation in Rigged Elections: Survival, Strategy, or Self-Interest?

Some opposition parties will choose to participate. Here, we are not referring to fake opposition parties, but to those who sincerely want the regime to end, yet do not believe that a boycott can achieve that goal. For tactical reasons, they cannot admit that they have no real chance of success—otherwise, they would be unable to mobilize protest voters, who, if they know the fight was lost in advance, would simply stay home on election day. Instead, they will claim that victory is possible, at least in major cities or the capital.

In reality, the objective of such an approach is different. The party that accepts its subordinate position from the outset in an authoritarian-controlled election seeks above all to preserve its organizational structure, finances, and electoral machinery so that it can be utilized when better days come. The leadership of such a party may believe

that strategic patience is needed and that the time to go on the offensive will come when the circumstances are more favorable—for example, when the international focus shifts away from other crises, when the authoritarian regime's external backer (such as Russia) is weakened, or when there is an economic, societal, or political crisis at home.

Another, less openly stated objective may be to capitalize on the absence of other opposition parties from the election by attempting to win over their voter base, or at least a segment of it. Even without realistic chances of winning, such a party might aim to position itself as the leading opposition force, both in the eyes of international observers and the domestic electorate. While this ambition is largely self-serving, it is not uncommon in the competitive world of politics. However, achieving it would be difficult, as pro-boycott forces would likely launch strong attacks against the participating party, branding it as “collaborationist,” a “traitor to unity,” or dismissing it as merely a “systemic opposition.”

If the anti-boycott party's main priority is organizational survival, then it has every incentive to participate—even in an election whose outcome is heavily skewed by an authoritarian regime—while maintaining a visibly critical and confrontational stance toward those in power.

Still, just as successful boycotts are rare, so too are effective non-boycott strategies, especially given the long and often discouraging nature of struggles against authoritarianism. One example is Russia's *Yabloko* party, which continues to run in elections despite facing impossible odds. Similarly, elements of Türkiye's *Republican People's Party* (CHP), particularly under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have opted to remain in the political process even after the 2024 arrests of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and other elected CHP officials.

In the few instances where opposition forces managed to prevail after years of contesting unfair elections, their success was typically catalyzed by major crises, mounting regime fatigue, strong international pressure, or exceptional internal unity. For example, in Mexico, the opposition *National Action Party* (PAN) finally broke the *Institutional Revolutionary Party's* (PRI) 71-year grip on power in 2000, when Vicente Fox won the presidency. This breakthrough was made possible by internal reforms—spurred by pressure from the growing middle class and independent media—most notably the increasing autonomy of the electoral commission. Public exhaustion with PRI corruption also played a critical role. A similar political shift occurred in Malaysia, where an entrenched ruling party lost power after six decades of dominance.

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Between Strategy and Survival

Elections in authoritarian regimes are not just hollow rituals—they are strategic tools, wielded to consolidate power, fragment dissent, and simulate legitimacy at home and abroad. They offer little risk and much reward to the rulers while posing impossible dilemmas to the ruled. For opposition forces, every electoral cycle becomes a test not of victory, but of strategic survival.

In Georgia, as in many other hybrid or authoritarian regimes, the choice between boycott and participation is not merely tactical—it is existential. A boycott without a plan leads to marginalization; participation without illusions requires an almost ascetic discipline and long-term resilience. Both

options carry immense risks, and neither offers immediate rewards.

The opposition cannot afford to enter into this trap blindly. Whether choosing to boycott or participate, the decision must be anchored in strategy, not despair or division.

Yet, one thing is clear: the opposition cannot afford to enter into this trap blindly. Whether choosing to boycott or participate, the decision must be anchored in strategy, not despair or division. Boycotts must mobilize, not retreat; participation must challenge, not normalize. The goal is not to win the rigged game, but to change the rules entirely.

Sartori's dictum—that democracy is the regime in which parties lose elections—remains a powerful benchmark. Today, its absence defines much of the world in which we live. However, even in authoritarian contexts, elections are moments when regimes reveal their vulnerabilities and expose their fears. They are opportunities, not because they offer fair competition, but because they can reveal the cracks beneath the surface of manufactured unanimity.

The task of the opposition, then, is not simply to play or to quit the game—but to expose it for what it is, to defy it where possible, and to organize for the day when elections, once again, may mean choice ■

The Doomsday Scenario – Back to the USSR?

Predicting the future is always a risky business, especially when it involves authoritarian leaders with opaque motives and unchecked power. But when autocrats-in-the-making begin repeating recognizable patterns and their actions align neatly with the strategic objectives of an external power, the direction becomes hard to ignore. In the case of Georgia, the path chosen by the Georgian Dream government under Bidzina Ivanishvili is no longer a matter of speculation. It is a matter of evidence. And the evidence points squarely toward Moscow.

Moscow has already achieved all of its key strategic objectives in Georgia. Yet, there is still room for the country to become even more Russian in its laws, its institutions, its political culture, and its foreign policy.

Moscow has already achieved all of its key strategic objectives in Georgia. Yet, there is still room for the country to become even more Russian in its laws, its institutions, its political culture, and its foreign policy. And I argue that this final transformation is not only possible, but likely. Full capitulation, leading to the de-sovereignization of Georgia, is expected to happen, which I will map in the second part of this article. I pray to be wrong, though.

However, historical trajectories tend to follow their internal logic to the end. The evidence today points to a Georgian Dream not merely diverging from Georgia's historic and strategic aspirations, but actively colliding with them, while aligning ever more closely with the Kremlin's agenda. This needs to come to a logical conclusion. Unless this damning trajectory is disrupted by the Georgian people with the support of Western friends, Geor-



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gia might end up where it spent 188 out of the last 225 years, a whopping 84% of time – in the den of the Russian bear.

Russia's Strategic Goals Achieved – Check

The Kremlin's strategic objectives toward Georgia were always to prevent its integration into NATO and the EU, maintain leverage through the continued occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and ensure Georgia remained within Russia's geopolitical orbit. Moscow sought to shape a compliant government in Tbilisi, obstruct democratic consolidation, and promote legal, political, and cultural alignment with Russian interests. It aimed to control regional transit routes, limit Western influence, and use Georgia as a buffer zone to safeguard its southern flank. Most of these goals have been achieved.

For over two decades, Georgia's North Atlantic aspirations were a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy. That is no longer the case. For the first time in over 15 years, Georgia did not even earn a [mention](#) in the NATO Summit Declaration. The 2025 Hague Summit came and went, and Georgia was not invited. What was once unthinkable has become routine. NATO no longer sees Georgia as a credible [partner](#).

Georgia has not *de jure* refused NATO membership, but that is to come in due course.

The Georgian Dream has made its position unmistakable, adopting Kremlin-style rhetoric that frames NATO membership as a reason for the war in Ukraine. That narrative has been backed by deliberate institutional dismantling. The NATO-Georgia Information Center, founded in 2005 to build public support for integration, has been [abolished](#). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is being

stripped of its strategic core, with the department responsible for security policy being [eliminated](#). And now, even Georgia's diplomatic presence in NATO is being quietly downgraded: the deputy ambassador post, crucial for daily coordination, has been cut. Georgian Dream leaders rarely discuss NATO, and when they do, it is not within the context of Georgia's aspirations. NATO-Georgia military exercises have come to a standstill, and no new major NATO program has started with Georgia in years. Yes, Georgia has not *de jure* refused NATO membership, but that is to come in due course.

Virtually every action by the Georgian Dream in the last two years has undercut the political, legal, and value-based reforms that underpin the EU accession process.

Georgia's EU trajectory has suffered a similar fate. Virtually every action by the Georgian Dream in the last two years has undercut the political, legal, and value-based reforms that underpin the EU accession process. The most striking example is the adoption of the so-called “foreign agent” legislation—a copy-paste of the Russian playbook to crush civil society. The set of laws directly contradicts multiple provisions of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement ([AA](#)), including commitments to democratic governance, human rights, and the role of civil society.

Moscow is happy to see that traditional Georgian strategic partners are out of the picture. Washington has already walked away from the relationship that once sat at the heart of the South-Caucasus security architecture. In November 2024, the U.S. State Department formally [suspended](#) the 2009 Strategic Partnership Charter, froze all four bilateral working groups, and warned that further cooperation would be “reviewed comprehensively” after the Georgian Dream's decision to halt

EU accession and brutalize protesters. That policy shift has been backed by [sanctions](#) on Bidzina Ivanishvili and senior Interior Ministry [officials](#) for protest-related abuses, and by the indefinite [postponement](#) of the joint Noble Partner exercises. In short, the instruments that once underpinned U.S.-Georgia defense, economic, and democratic cooperation have either been mothballed or weaponized against Tbilisi's rulers.

The diplomatic tone has collapsed just as decisively. Outgoing U.S. Ambassador Robin Dunnigan [revealed](#) on 3 July 2025 that the Georgian Dream had sent a “threatening, insulting, and unserious” private letter to the new Trump administration, so abrasive that Washington needed “time to come up with a response.” Dunnigan said that the Georgian Dream had been told to stop its anti-American rhetoric as a precondition for any reset, only to double down three days later with a [public letter](#) and insulting statements. In fact, the last three U.S. Ambassadors, Ian Kelly, Kelly Degnan, and the outgoing Robin Dunnigan, have been [publicly](#) insulted, decried, and criticized by the Georgian Dream's leaders—a practice long observed in Moscow.

In the eyes of the Kremlin, the Georgian Dream achieved something unthinkable – the Yankees are out.

The public rhetoric of the Georgian Dream's leaders, [branding](#) congressional sanction bills “absurd” and [accusing](#) the United States-based “deep state” of infringing on Georgian sovereignty, is constant music to Moscow's ears. In the eyes of U.S. policymakers, Georgia has shifted from a frontline ally to a sanctioned outlier, courting Russia and China. In the eyes of the Kremlin, the Georgian Dream achieved something unthinkable – the Yankees are out.

Brussels is out as well, except for frantic attempts by true Georgia friends, [dubbed](#) by the Georgian

Dream as “deep state agents,” to save the relationship. Since late 2024, the EU announced the downgrading of all high-level contacts, a review of financial aid, and the possible suspension of European Peace Facility funds. Member states have since cancelled senior visits, excluded Georgia from informal gatherings of candidate countries, and debated the suspension of visa-free travel. Rather than repair the breach, the Georgian Dream has escalated the situation: Prime Minister Kobakhidze publicly [called](#) EU Ambassador Paweł Herczyński “complicit in violence” and part of a “deep-state” plot. The [German ambassador](#) and [Baltic friends](#) are enemies who are often blamed for promoting and financing violence. At the same time, party heavyweights frequently deride friendly capitals as agents of the “collective UNM” and “deep state.” The EU is poised to continue supporting civil society over the government's head—an unmistakable sign that Tbilisi is no longer treated as a partner but as a problem. Yes, Georgia remains an associated state and still has an Association Agreement, but for how long, that remains to be seen, as [Vano Chkhikvadze](#) explains elsewhere in this issue.

Russian DNA Imported – Check

The Georgian Dream has actively imported the legislative DNA of the Kremlin.

The legal environment in Georgia now resembles that of Russia. The Georgian Dream has actively imported the legislative DNA of the Kremlin. From laws targeting civil society to sweeping anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions, the Georgian Dream government has been systematically embedding legal norms that echo the Kremlin's own toolkit of repression. Beyond substance, the pattern of implementation also mirrors Russia's legislative autocracy: speed, opacity, and weaponization.

In May 2025, parliament empowered the Constitutional Court to [outlaw](#) any party whose “activities or party list substantially repeat” those of an

already banned group—the very legal sleight of hand Moscow used to liquidate Alexey Navalny's network. The Georgian Dream is wasting no time: a special investigative commission is [branding](#) the United National Movement and its “satellites” as anti-state actors while courts have started to cage dissent. Within one month, six high-profile opposition figures—Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, Zurab Japaridze, Giorgi Vashadze, Badri Japaridze, and Mamuka Khazaradze—were all placed in jail for refusing to legitimize that commission, prompting even the pro-government president to [dangle](#) pardons if they “behave” and agree to participate in elections. Mikheil Saakashvili, former President and a clear leader of the opposition, has been in jail since 2021. The parliamentary investigative commission, once it concludes its work in August, will definitely proceed with banning the United National Movement and other parties. This is as Russian as it gets, save the poisoning and killing of the opposition leaders. But that will come in due course, too.

The protests in Georgia have been [criminalized](#)—Bolotnaya-style. December 2024 amendments imported Russia's protest playbook almost line by line: face coverings, laser pointers, or fireworks now carry four-figure fines, blocking a road can trigger criminal charges, and police may detain people pre-emptively on the mere assumption they might offend in the future. New changes to the law [will allow](#) the police and courts to send to jail those persons who have already been fined for blocking the streets. If yours truly gets another fine (already a proud owner of one), the jail time will be guaranteed.

Russian-style conservative traditional laws have also been [imported](#). A 2024-2025 mega-package bans “LGBT propaganda” across education, media, and business, outlaws Pride events, prohibits all gender-affirming healthcare, and scrubs the word *gender* from the statute book—going further than Russia's own 2023 trans ban and earning Georgia

its [steepest drop](#) ever in ILGA-Europe's equality ranking.

A [revived](#) treason article gives prosecutors a catch-all tool used so effectively in Russia and Georgian Dream propaganda a new line of attack. Parallel laws now let the government [veto](#) foreign grants to NGOs, [dismiss](#) civil servants en masse, and recruit police without competitive exams—mechanisms tailor-made to create the compliant bureaucracy and security apparatus that props up Putin's regime. These laws have been put into practice swiftly. Almost all civil servants who signed pro-European petitions in late 2024 and expressed discontent with the detour from the European path [have been](#) either fired, demoted, or reprimanded. The numbers are in the hundreds, and possibly even in the thousands, when the full picture becomes available at the end of the year.

Just like in Russia, elections have lost their purpose. As [Thornike Gordadze](#) thoughtfully explores elsewhere in this edition, participation in local elections has become increasingly fraught. While he examines both the potential merits and the growing challenges, it is clear that the Georgian Dream—mirroring the Kremlin—ultimately benefits from holding elections with minimal opposition party involvement. The autocrat's dilemma is present—elections are needed to ensure the visibility of legitimacy, but not to the extent that they jeopardize the power of the oligarch. The amendments [rushed through](#) in 2024-2025 allow the Central Election Commission to take binding decisions with nine ruling-party votes, [bar](#) observers from recording voter data, and punish anyone who “obstructs” the movement of polling stations—a carbon copy of the rules that neutered OSCE monitoring in Russia. Combined with party-ban powers and the jailing of opposition leaders, Georgia's next elections risk looking less like a contest than the kind of managed plebiscite staged in Moscow.

The Russian playbook would not be complete

without the limitations on free media. Just like the Kremlin taking over NTV in the early 2000s, the Georgian Dream took over the opposition Rustavi 2 in 2019. However, since then, it has built a propaganda empire, spearheaded by Imedi and POSTV. The remaining opposing free media have been strangled with [biased](#) regulations and decisions by the Communications Commission, run by a multimillionaire businessman. New broadcasting [laws](#) impose “coverage standards,” allowing lawsuits against critical TV stations for using words like “regime,” “oligarch’s parliament,” or “so-called speaker”—criminalizing opinion as “disinformation,” exactly as Russia does. Unlike Russia, however, one can get fined for Facebook posts published even before the law entered into force—a creative retroactivity. The Georgian Dream has also proceeded with [banning](#) foreign funding for broadcasters, directly mirroring Russia’s prohibition on “foreign interference” in domestic journalism. To add insult to injury, surveillance and [fines](#) against journalists covering protests have intensified, with AI-powered tracking and crippling penalties—a tactic honed in Moscow. Critical journalists have been [beaten up](#) in a show of mockery and brute force, something the Kremlin has mastered. Yes, Georgia does not yet have Anna Politkovskaya, but that may come in due course, too.

Russian Style Propaganda in Place – Check

Over the past three years, the transformation of the Georgian Dream’s media empire into a fully operational arm of Russian propaganda has become impossible to deny. Once nominally pro-European, channels like Imedi and POSTV now function as Georgian-language megaphones for the Kremlin’s worldview, not by accident, but by design. Western partners are no longer friends, but meddlers. Civil society became an “agent of chaos.” Protests are not expressions of democracy, but foreign-or-orchestrated destabilization campaigns.

The Georgian Dream’s media outlets do not just repeat Kremlin talking points—they anticipate them. When protesters flooded Rustaveli Avenue in 2024 to oppose the foreign agent law, Imedi and POSTV aired segments entitled “*Common Signs of a Color Revolution*,” framing the demonstrations as an American-sponsored coup. Shortly thereafter, Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) [issued](#) an official statement warning of a “Tbilisi Maidan.” The language was identical. The sequencing was not coincidental—it was coordinated.

In February 2025, Imedi [ran](#) a breathless investigation questioning EU-funded youth seminars in Georgia, suggesting they were part of a covert regime-change effort. A week later, the SVR [released](#) a statement accusing the EU of paying Georgian demonstrators EUR 120 per day. Within hours, that claim was rebroadcast on Georgian Dream-affiliated media as fact. The same pattern repeated in May when the UK became the next target. A Russian pseudo-documentary [accused](#) British intelligence of embedding agents in Georgian ministries—and days later, first the [Russian SVR](#) and then Imedi and POSTV launched a coordinated smear campaign accusing the UK of financing “extremism and LGBT propaganda.”

It is no longer just narrative alignment. It is a synchronized disinformation warfare—a textbook case of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) with local execution.

A single episode captures this new ecosystem in chilling detail. In April 2025, Russian pranksters [released](#) a doctored video of Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, edited to make it appear as though she confessed to collaborating with Western powers to overthrow the government. Russian media aired it first. Within hours, Imedi repackaged the clip and broadcast it as evidence of Western interference without a single question about its authenticity.

Even fabricated or AI-generated Russian content makes its way seamlessly into the Georgian Dream's media broadcasts: conspiracy theories about Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska's luxury shopping sprees, USAID funding Hollywood to prop up President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, fake mobilization raids, and even a deepfake of Donald Trump Jr. urging support for Russia. Each piece of content passes through the same pipeline: Moscow produces, Imedi rebroadcasts, and Georgian Facebook pages reinforce.

To lend their narratives an air of international legitimacy, Georgian Dream channels are platforming Kremlin-favored Western voices, such as Jeffrey Sachs, Larry Johnson, Glenn Diesen, and fringe European MEPs like Thierry Mariani and Mick Wallace. They appear on Georgian screens to denounce NATO, question Ukraine's sovereignty, or claim that the EU is "imposing its values" on Georgia. In reality, these figures are already staples of Russia's disinformation ecosystem, now repurposed for domestic consumption in Georgia.

What Comes Next?

Some might ask: could it get worse? The signs suggest it not only can, but it will.

In recent weeks, the Georgian Dream's leadership has floated multiple trial balloons designed to test the boundaries of what the public will accept and how the international community will react.

A [public letter](#) from the Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze to Donald Trump sought to appeal directly to the U.S. president, undermining current U.S. policy while aligning Georgia with the MAGA wing's isolationist worldview and implying that Georgia would not hesitate to pivot fully toward illiberal alliances and anti-Western narratives if its overtures to the Trump camp continue to be ignored.

At the same time, [calls](#) to reestablish diplomatic relations with Russia are surfacing from figures linked to Russian intelligence networks in Georgia. Leading the charge is Mamuka Pipia—closely connected to Russia's SVR and known for orchestrating the prank call with Salome Zourabichvili—who is now actively promoting the idea of reopening formal ties between Tbilisi and Moscow.

The parliamentary commission "investigating" the 2008 war is laying the groundwork for historical revisionism—shifting blame for the war onto Saakashvili's government and absolving the Kremlin. This narrative, long pushed by Russian officials, may soon become official Georgian state policy.

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None of these are isolated statements. Together, they constitute a roadmap for a doomsday scenario.

Doomsday Scenario

Let us now speak plainly. Bidzina Ivanishvili appears to be preparing the final phase of Georgia's pivot into Russia's sphere of influence.

This pivot might not come as a dramatic announcement. It will unfold as a gradual sequence of "pragmatic" decisions—legal tweaks, diplomatic gestures, and media narratives—each eroding Georgia's Western identity while creating the illusion of sovereignty and stability. The goal is not just geopolitical neutrality—it is submission cloaked in sovereignty.

This total submission strategy will be based on re-writing history. The Georgian Dream-controlled investigative commission is expected to conclude that Georgia started the 2008 war with Russia—echoing the Kremlin’s long-standing narrative. The blame will be laid at Saakashvili’s feet, and criminal liability for former officials will be launched. This fabricated “*mea culpa*” will then serve as the moral and legal groundwork for a normalization process with Moscow. It will likely be followed by a signature of the “non-use of force” agreement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Georgia has long held a unilateral non-use of force obligation, the signing was overruled because of the issues related to legitimizing the other signatory. But this will likely change. Apologize for the war in 2024, convict the war criminals in 2025, sign the non-aggression pact in 2026, and start with a clean slate. Sounds like a plan.

Russia, predictably, will “accept” Georgia’s contrition. In return, it will undoubtedly offer, as it [has done](#) before, the restoration of diplomatic relations—something already hinted at by Georgian Dream proxies. This normalization will be sold to the public as progress and pragmatism. Talk of “normalization,” “dialogue,” and “realism” will dominate the narrative. Meanwhile, the issues of recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as all related matters concerning status, the return of displaced persons, and other problematic areas, will be set aside for the time being.

Stage Two – Illusion of a Peace Process

Stage two of the doomsday scenario is likely to hinge upon the restoration of diplomatic ties and joining the 3+3 format, as well as demonstrating that trade and commerce across the closed occupation line are mutually beneficial and can alter the status quo on the ground.

Restoring diplomatic relations with Russia would mark a dramatic departure from Georgia’s long-standing position that normalization cannot occur while Russian troops occupy Georgian territory. The re-opening of embassies would be framed as pragmatic diplomacy, but in reality, it would be a defeat for Georgia’s sovereignty. It would allow Russia to claim a major geopolitical victory without making any concessions, particularly regarding Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Moreover, this would not be a return to the pre-2008 status quo. Russia will most definitely maintain its embassies in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, continuing its recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia as “independent states.” Georgia’s acceptance of this arrangement, even tacitly, would severely weaken its own legal and diplomatic claims. It would allow the Kremlin to normalize the abnormal, treating occupation as a bilateral dispute rather than an international violation.

Internally, such a move would also legitimize the growing pro-Russian sentiment being cultivated by the Georgian Dream and its satellite groups. The re-establishment of diplomatic ties would be sold as necessary for trade and peace, while public outrage would be suppressed through propaganda and repression. This move can be done easily by signing the diplomatic relations protocol. The central aspect of such protocols is usually a recognition of each other’s “territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders”. However, if this phrase is not present for any reason, “constructive ambiguity” can allow any party to interpret the protocol as it deems necessary.

Formal accession to the 3+3 platform (Russia, Türkiye, Iran, plus Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) would mark the end of Georgia’s independent foreign policy orientation, but it could also soften the blow of restoring diplomatic ties. Although framed as a “regional cooperation initiative,” the format is explicitly designed to exclude Western actors from

the South Caucasus. Georgia's entry would signal a pivot away from its Euro-Atlantic course toward authoritarian regionalism.

States with poor democratic records and close ties to Moscow dominate the 3+3 platform. Participation would make Georgia complicit in regional agendas that often contradict its own interests. However, proponents will point to previous [protocol](#) language about “territorial integrity” and “inviolability of internationally recognized borders.” While such phrases are strategically vague and do not prevent backroom deals or political erosion of sovereignty, Georgian Dream propaganda can sell it as a “strategic gain.” After all, Georgia will be joining the format in which all states recognize each other's sovereignty within internationally recognized borders. On the protocol paper, but still recognize...

Moscow has long pushed for Tbilisi to enter into direct talks with Sokhumi—and possibly Tskhinvali—as part of a calculated trap. Such negotiations would bypass international mechanisms and elevate the breakaway authorities to equal footing with Georgia, delivering the Kremlin a major strategic win. Even without formal recognition, bilateral talks would effectively legitimize the *de facto* regimes, reframing the conflict from one of foreign occupation to a domestic or intercommunal dispute. This shift would severely weaken Georgia's position in international law and undermine the West's policy of non-recognition.

Crucially, such talks would sideline the Geneva International Discussions—the only forum where Russia is recognized as a party to the conflict. While flawed, Geneva preserves the legal framing that Moscow desperately seeks to escape. Direct formal Tbilisi-Sokhumi dialogue would let Russia off the hook, allowing it to pose as an outsider while cementing the status quo.

Domestically, the consequences would be equally dangerous. These talks would be spun as peace

efforts, but in reality, they would deepen polarization, marginalize IDPs, and demoralize the public. Critics—especially from civil society and the opposition—would be smeared as saboteurs or foreign agents.

Moves like opening the Enguri Bridge for formal trade or restoring railway links to Sokhumi may appear technical, but carry massive political costs. Formalizing trade would legitimize Sokhumi's governance and reframe the occupation line as a border between trade partners, not a ceasefire line imposed by war. Without progress on IDP return or political status, economic engagement becomes not reconciliation but the consolidation of separation. Russia will exploit this to showcase “practical cooperation” and blur the reality of occupation.

Reopening the Abkhazia railway, or even starting the talks about it, would go even further, requiring legal agreements, customs arrangements, and infrastructure coordination with the *de facto* authorities. These steps, even if branded as temporary or technical, would cement recognition in practice. Once running, the railway would be hard to shut down, especially under Russian guarantees. It would serve as a powerful symbol of normalized occupation—masking coercion with connectivity, and burying justice beneath steel rails.

Final Phase – Joint Entity of Some Kind

The final and most perilous phase would be the manipulation of Georgia's political status, which could come at the expense of its sovereignty and independence, without exaggeration. Once diplomatic and economic steps appear to normalize the breakaway regions, Georgian Dream-aligned propagandists may begin floating ideas such as a “loose confederation” or “special arrangement” with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Or, potentially even with Russia. After all, if the confederation is loose, and

it implies restoration of the country's territorial integrity, what is the problem of reestablishing some sort of formal, historically tested ties with Russia? In Abkhazia, at least, many have been [worried](#) over such a prospect.

These ideas are not new—Russia has used them before in Moldova (Transnistria) and Ukraine (Donbas). Their purpose is to grant veto power to pro-Russian regions over national policy, effectively paralyzing the central government and anchoring the country in Moscow's orbit.

Alternatively, Georgia and its occupied territories might be invited to join a broader supranational structure like the Union State (Russia-Belarus) or a rebranded BRICS+ format. While far-fetched, these ideas serve a narrative purpose: to frame the shift as regional integration rather than capitulation.

Such status ambiguity would destroy the constitutional unity of the Georgian state. It would also complicate EU and NATO accession permanently, as both organizations require clear, uncontested borders and centralized authority.

Most dangerously, the public may be sold the illusion of peace and reunification when, in fact, the opposite would be occurring: a finalization of Georgia's fragmentation and absorption into the Russian sphere of influence. This would be packaged by propaganda as a "historic resolution" of the conflict.

The price for this reorientation? Full abandonment of NATO aspirations, de jure suspension of the EU candidacy process, and open hostility toward the United States, the European Union, and its allies. To prepare for this, the Georgian Dream is doing what every aspiring autocracy does: arrest, censor, and destroy.

The price for this reorientation? Full abandonment of NATO aspirations, *de jure* suspension of the EU candidacy process, and open hostility toward the United States, the European Union, and its allies. To prepare for this, the Georgian Dream is doing what every aspiring autocracy does: arrest, censor, and destroy. To make this betrayal sustainable, the Georgian Dream needs to (a) neutralize civil society through legislation, defunding, and public discrediting; (b) silence dissenting voices, especially in media and academia; (c) shift public opinion via propaganda and manufactured crises and (d) legitimize new alliances under the guise of multipolar alignment and multi-vector foreign policy. Each of these steps is already underway ■

Why Crimea Matters to Georgia

Since President Donald Trump's return to the White House, there has been a strong push to end the war in Ukraine and establish parameters for sustainable peace. The way this war ends will also define the emerging world order, shaping foundational principles of interstate behavior and global governance. Moscow has always made it clear that it is not fighting for Ukraine itself, but to end global Western dominance that has "humiliated" Russia and denied it its rightful place among the world's great powers. [In Putin's words](#), "the crisis in Ukraine is neither a territorial conflict nor an attempt to restore regional balance. The question is much broader and more fundamental. We are talking about the principles upon which the new world order will be based."

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In what appears to be an attempt to satisfy Russia's ambitions and seek compromise, Trump has raised the possibility of [recognizing Crimea](#) as Russian. This would mark a dramatic departure from long-standing U.S. policy, exemplified by the 1932 [Stimson Doctrine](#), which established the refusal to recognize territorial changes achieved by force. The doctrine was also applied to the Baltic States after their forced incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, an act the United States never recognized throughout the Cold War. Recognizing Crimea would deal a severe blow to the international legal order, effectively legitimizing territorial revisionism based on selective, self-serving historical narratives.

While Trump's proposal may be intended to end the bloodshed, it also reveals a worldview that accepts—if not embraces—the right of great powers to carve out spheres of influence and redraw borders by force. It reflects a deeply transactional approach to international affairs where norms are expendable and contested histories become tools to justify aggression. By suggesting that Putin can



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“have” Crimea, Trump normalizes his own rhetorical claims over places like [Canada, Greenland, or Panama](#). While no one expects the U.S. to pursue wars of territorial conquest, this stance risks encouraging greater adventurism among other powers less constrained by domestic accountability or international obligations.

Whether or not Crimea remains de jure part of Ukraine, even if de facto occupied by Russia, would directly affect Georgia’s chances of restoring its territorial integrity.

Georgia exemplifies how a seemingly pragmatic approach to resolving one dispute—while disregarding international law—can backfire elsewhere, setting a dangerous precedent. Whether or not Crimea remains *de jure* part of Ukraine, even

if *de facto* occupied by Russia, would directly affect Georgia’s chances of restoring its territorial integrity. Accepting Russia’s claims would signal an end to the multilateral conflict settlement process, firmly placing occupied Abkhazia under Russian control and posing a long-term security threat to the rest of Georgia. The balance of power in the Black Sea would shift again in Russia’s favor, enabling Moscow to reassert influence throughout the South Caucasus, including Georgia. Most importantly, it would signal the primacy of power over norms, leaving smaller states like Georgia more vulnerable and less secure. Ultimately, it could hasten the unravelling of Georgian democracy. If the global order that once constrained great powers and promoted democracy collapses, it will be replaced by one more hospitable to autocracies, shielding them from external scrutiny and enabling domestic abuses.

Norms, Precedents, and International Law

Georgia has been one of the beneficiaries of the post-Cold War international order; that is, the one that emerged with the Western victory in the Cold War and which was underpinned by U.S. power. The so-called liberal international order was based upon a strong normative consensus about the behavior of states within and amongst each other. It allowed for small states to achieve independence and claim sovereign equality, taming the predatory instincts of great powers through international law. It championed democratic governance and respect for human rights as the foundation not only for domestic stability but also international security.

Thanks to the spread of these principles, the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity has not been accepted or recognized, preserving at least a faint hope for a negotiated solution. Russia's efforts to secure recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have failed, largely due to the mobilization of Georgia's Western partners—one of Tbilisi's biggest diplomatic victories. Georgia has also [received](#) EU candidate status, which, if pursued in good faith, could have offered an opportunity to engage the EU more directly in conflict resolution efforts.

International norms alone do not prevent wars, but they do provide the criteria by which state behavior can be judged and by which we distinguish between just wars and unjust wars.

International norms alone do not prevent wars, but they do provide the criteria by which state behavior can be judged and by which we distinguish between just wars and unjust wars. Norms that are upheld by major powers have a stabilizing impact

on the international system, reducing incentives for adventurism and creating a framework for identifying aggression, prosecuting war crimes, and deterring future violations. To abandon these norms in the name of multipolarity or to draw moral equivalence between those who protect and abuse human rights is to open the door to a wave of instability, conflict, and authoritarianism.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the principle of *uti possidetis juris* was adopted to recognize new states within their existing administrative boundaries, aiming to prevent territorial disputes and ensure a smoother post-Soviet transition. Russia, while formally adhering to the principle, never fully respected its application to its former imperial subjects. Beginning from the 1990s, Moscow encouraged separatist tendencies among Russian speakers in the Baltic States and autonomous regions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to apply pressure and maintain influence. In 2008, Russia openly violated the principle of the inviolability of internationally recognized borders in the case of Georgia, recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow once again rejected the principle of recognizing Soviet successor states within their administrative boundaries, making a bogus historical claim that Crimea has always been Russian and that its transfer to Ukraine was a mistake reflecting national weakness. In both Georgia and Crimea, Moscow has invoked Russia's responsibility to protect citizens and ethnic kin abroad, referencing the Kosovo precedent to justify its actions.

Kosovo, however, represents a clear case of remedial secession, grounded in international law and backed by international oversight. Violation of territorial integrity is permissible only in cases where there is compelling evidence of gross and systematic oppression. The [absence](#) of such evidence is the crucial distinction between the cases of Abkhazia and Crimea and internationally recognized

instances of secession, such as Kosovo. In no case, however, is annexation by another state permitted as a remedy for the violation of human rights. Purposefully ignoring these important distinctions, Russians have repeatedly argued that there is no distinction between Kosovo, on the one hand, and Abkhazia or Crimea, on the other. [In the words of Putin](#): “Our Western colleagues created this precedent with their own hands in a very similar situation when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia – exactly what Crimea is doing now – was legitimate and did not require permission from the country’s central authorities.” He further questioned: How come Russians in Crimea are not allowed to exercise the same rights as Albanians in Kosovo?

While Kosovo cannot serve as justification for unilaterally violating another state’s territorial integrity, recognizing the illegal seizure of Crimea risks doing exactly that. For Georgia—a state with territorially concentrated ethnic minorities—such a precedent could encourage further fragmentation as respect for international law erodes. All state borders are, to some extent, arbitrary, shaped by historical contingencies, conflict, and compromise. Allowing their revision by force, especially on the basis of unsubstantiated historical claims or unilateral aggression, invites instability across Eastern Europe and beyond.

Power Imbalance in the Black Sea

Despite historical and symbolic references, Crimea’s primary importance to Russia [lies](#) in its value as a military base and launchpad to project power across the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and Africa. Russia annexed Crimea in response to Ukraine’s signing of the Association Agreement ([AA](#)) with the EU, fearing the loss of Ukraine to the West—and, with it, the strategic Black Sea fleet base. This demonstrates

Moscow’s willingness to act not only against potential NATO expansion in areas which it deems its sphere of influence, but also in retaliation for closer ties with the EU. Accepting Russia’s territorial revanchism against an independent state strips it of the right to make sovereign choices and emboldens Moscow to pressure others, including Georgia. Tbilisi seems to have taken the cue and unilaterally abandoned the decade-long ambition of European integration in the name of preserving peace.

A stronger Russian position in the Black Sea would further distance Georgia from its European and Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. With Crimea firmly under Russian control, Moscow would dominate the longest coastline, including Abkhazia, where it is building a new naval base. This would leave Georgia highly vulnerable to Russia’s conventional and grey zone operations, undermining national and economic security and damaging its potential as a reliable transit corridor. The Russian naval base in Ochamchire, for example, directly threatens the strategic Anaklia deep-sea port, a key [project](#) along the East-West Middle Corridor transit route.

The Middle Corridor connects Europe primarily via two key routes: the Black Sea (by sea) and Türkiye (by land). If Russia asserts dominance in the Black Sea or repositions its fleet there, it could pose a significant security threat to these connectivity projects. Control of the Black Sea is crucial for Russia to maintain influence over Europe-East Asia transit, disrupt the logistical and supply chain integration of its neighbors with Europe, and undermine connectivity initiatives that bypass Russia.

If Russia were to capture Odesa, it would dominate Black Sea grain and energy trade routes, influence global food security, and project power toward the Global South.

Moreover, Russian control of Crimea poses a continuous threat to Ukraine's remaining coastline, especially the vital port city of Odesa. If Russia were to capture Odesa, it would dominate Black Sea grain and energy trade routes, influence global food security, and project power toward the Global South. This would significantly bolster Russia's position in the Black Sea, expanding its instruments of influence and creating new dependencies. Handing Crimea to Russia, therefore, would not be a symbolic concession but rather a strategic gift to a revisionist power set to expand its global geopolitical ambitions and upend the rules of the international order.

No-Rules-Based International Order

Conceding Crimea as part of peace talks without Ukraine's explicit consent appears to rest on two main fallacies. First, it assumes Russia's objectives are primarily territorial and that a land-for-peace approach could deliver lasting stability. Yet, Putin has repeatedly stated that his goals are broader and non-territorial: to destroy Ukraine as an independent nation or subjugate it entirely. In doing so, Russia asserts its claim to a sphere of influence and seeks great power status as a rule-maker in a new multipolar world. If allowed to succeed in Ukraine, nothing would stop Russia from pursuing similar strategies against other neighbors, including Georgia.

Crimea could become a highly destabilizing precedent, influencing the international system for decades to come. International law, by establishing norms, constrains states in their aggressive pursuit of naked self-interest and reduces the instances of negative precedents.

The second fallacy assumes that a 'solution' ap-

plied to one case, justified by context-sensitive expediency, will not be applied or repeated elsewhere. Yet, if there is one enduring principle in international relations, it is the power of precedent. Russia's use of the Kosovo precedent, even if entirely in bad faith, is a case in point. As noted earlier, Crimea could [become](#) a highly destabilizing precedent, influencing the international system for decades to come. International law, by establishing norms, constrains states in their aggressive pursuit of naked self-interest and reduces the instances of negative precedents. This is precisely why global revisionist powers such as Russia seek to rewrite the rules to impose the least possible constraints on their behavior.

Russia's vision of the global order assumes that some states are more sovereign than others and that their choices should be constrained by great power interests. It emphasizes non-intervention in internal affairs as a core principle, asserting the equal legitimacy of all forms of domestic governance. This is an international order where support for democratic forces is delegitimized, regime security outweighs human security, and autocracies feel safer than democracies. Georgia is emerging as a clear example of how a self-serving ruling elite can adapt to this new no-rules order—dismantling democratic institutions, jailing opponents, and pulling the country back into Russia's orbit.

Georgian democracy is endangered not so much by Russia's strategic gains but by the retreat of the U.S. from supporting democracies and breaking from its tradition of legitimizing the results of aggression. As Ivan Krastev [wrote](#) in the *Financial Times* in May: "The historical period that started with the unification of Germany ends with the partition of Ukraine." By making an exception out of Crimea, Trump risks normalizing land grabs justified by half-truths and strategic expediency. What is framed as a singular concession could become a template for future violations of sov-

ereignty. Georgia should be worried and working with European partners to avoid such a scenario. However, its ruling elite is more preoccupied by

its own survival and sees the erosion of normative constraints as serving its own narrow political interests ■

Ideological Subversion and the Strategic Logic of Influence

Ideological subversion, also referred to as active measures, psychological warfare, or cognitive warfare, is a distinct and often misunderstood element of strategic confrontation. It is frequently conflated with hybrid warfare, yet the two operate on fundamentally different principles. While hybrid warfare combines conventional, irregular, cyber, and kinetic tools to achieve short to mid-term objectives, ideological subversion unfolds primarily through non-military means over the long term. Its core strength lies not in aggression or sabotage but in its ability to shape perceptions, values, and loyalties well before any visible confrontation takes place. When ideological subversion is effective, there may be no need to escalate to hybrid warfare, which remains a fallback option to reinforce and accelerate the desired outcomes through more coordinated and assertive measures.

A concise conceptual root of ideological subversion can be traced back to Sun Tzu's *The Art of*

War, which describes the highest form of warfare as achieving one's political objectives without fighting. More than 2,000 years later, this philosophy was formalized and operationalized by the Soviet KGB. Active measures, as [defined](#) in KGB doctrine, are "a secret form of political struggle which makes use of clandestine means and methods for acquiring secret information of interest and for carrying out active measures to exert influence on the adversary and weaken his political, economic, scientific, technical, and military positions." At its core, it is a strategy for winning a nation without firing a single shot.

One of the most illuminating interpreters of this strategy beyond official definitions is Yuri Bezmenov, a former KGB agent who defected to the West in 1970. In a series of [interviews](#) and [lectures](#), Bezmenov broke down ideological subversion into an identifiable multi-stage pattern. Contrary to popular imagery of spies blowing up bridges or conducting sabotage missions, he emphasized



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that throughout most of its lifecycle, ideological subversion is overt, legal, and non-violent. It is carried out not by secret agents or saboteurs, but by journalists, educators, entertainers, academics, civil society organizations, celebrities, and influencers. These agents of influence often act within the bounds of law and free speech, projecting their worldview with persuasive consistency. Over time, the accumulated effect is strategic indoctrination, which changes the DNA of the targeted nation.

In this state, the target population no longer recognizes what interests it should defend, nor how to defend them. Individuals become unable to distinguish truth from propaganda, and even when confronted with factual evidence, their reactions are shaped by pre-programmed ideological responses.

The objective of ideological subversion is simple yet profound: to distort a population's perception of reality to such an extent that people can no longer make rational decisions in the interest of themselves, their communities, or their nation. In this state, the target population no longer recognizes what interests it should defend, nor how to defend them. Individuals become unable to distinguish truth from propaganda, and even when confronted with factual evidence, their reactions are shaped by pre-programmed ideological responses. Once this process reaches full saturation, it becomes irreversible. No amount of truth or data can recalibrate a mind that has been systematically reconditioned. Only a generational shift can reverse it, and only if the new generation is educated differently.

To illustrate how these abstract principles manifest in a real-world context even today, this article will first unpack Bezmenov's framework of ideological subversion, showcasing the four distinct stages: *demoralization*, *destabilization*, *crisis*, and

normalization. Then it will analyze how these stages correspond with Russia's influence efforts in Georgia, illustrating how the country may represent a contemporary case of subversion unfolding in real time in the 21st century.

Bezmenov's Pattern: The Four Stages of Ideological Subversion

According to Bezmenov, subversion does not rely on direct confrontation. It is built on infiltration, manipulation, and influence, designed to break a society from within. Carefully sequenced phases of ideological subversion target specific domains of a society's functioning, beginning with psychological and ideological conditioning, and gradually progressing toward the paralysis and replacement of a nation's core fabric.

Phase 1: Demoralization (10 to 15 years)

The demoralization phase is the most crucial and time-consuming stage of ideological subversion, aiming to reshape an entire generation's values through sustained psychological and informational manipulation. Operating openly within legal frameworks, it often goes unnoticed, or is even embraced, by its targets. Bezmenov likens this phase to jiu-jitsu: rather than attacking head-on, it utilizes a society's own internal tensions—class, ethnicity, ideology, and identity—as weapons. These divisions are deepened, dissent is encouraged, and contradictory narratives are amplified to breed confusion and cynicism.

During this phase, influential figures are co-opted or manipulated while activist groups and fringe movements that challenge traditional norms are supported, often unknowingly serving the agenda. This creates an ecosystem that shifts public discourse and undermines national cohesion.

This phase targets all major domains that shape

public opinion and institutional trust: religion, education, social life, administration, law enforcement, and economy. The tactics are primarily informational, psychological, and cultural and aim to reshape values, beliefs, and identity over time through the following tools and tactics:

- **Disinformation campaigns:** Designed to confuse, divide, and erode trust in institutions by flooding the information space with contradictions and falsehoods;
- **Propaganda:** Promotes distorted or revisionist versions of national identity, history, and values to delegitimize the mainstream;
- **Front organizations:** These appear independent but serve as tools for foreign influence, especially in civil society, media, education, and religious life;
- **Political interference:** Involves political and material support to political actors who undermine national unity or promote pro-adversary narratives;
- **Psychological conditioning:** Focuses on making populations passive, comfort-seeking, and disengaged from civic duties, thereby weakening their resilience.

By the end of this phase, people lose the ability to recognize truth or assess evidence objectively. Rational thinking becomes impossible for large segments of the population. National interests are no longer clearly understood or defended. Once the mental and cultural conditioning is complete, it becomes nearly irreversible. Attempts to present facts or alternative perspectives are dismissed because the subverted mind can only process them through a pre-programmed frame of reference. Reversal, if at all possible, would necessitate a generational shift and comprehensive reform of the educational and cultural systems.

Phase 2: Destabilization (2 to 5 years)

Once the ideological foundations have been eroded, the destabilization phase begins. This phase targets a society's ability to function coherently. Consensus disappears. People become so polarized that even basic agreements become impossible. Common ground vanishes, and compromise gives way to antagonism.

Media channels, once seen as a mirror of society, increasingly position themselves as adversaries, becoming the frontline of societal frictions. Radical voices that once existed at the margins begin to move into the mainstream. At this point, it is no longer about ideological and theoretical debate as in the demoralization phase. Now, the aim becomes to subvert a narrower array of key domains, administration, law enforcement, and the economy, but more aggressively and profoundly. These domains are infiltrated and gradually brought under the dependency of hostile interests and effective control. Tactics aim to undermine the functioning of key institutions, polarize society, and foster systemic dysfunction:

- **Bribing and corruption:** Utilized to compromise decision-makers, disable institutional integrity, and build loyalty through material incentives;
- **Economic and financial dependencies:** Creating leverage through debt, energy reliance, or market capture to erode sovereignty;
- **Changing the laws:** Legislative manipulation to weaken democratic checks and balances, restrict freedoms, and legitimize authoritarian measures;
- **Espionage:** Moves beyond intelligence gathering to include disruption, such as sabotage, leaks, and infiltration of strategic domains.

As a result, institutions that once ensured national resilience are slowly weakened from within. Legal systems are altered, freedoms are restricted through legislative means, and rules are rewritten to favor those who act in alignment with the subverting force. Corruption, economic entanglement, and the erosion of trust complete the architecture of dependency. The grounds have been prepared and processes are steadily gearing toward the crisis.

Phase 3: Crisis (2 to 6 weeks)

Crisis is the shortest and most intense phase. By this point, core institutions are no longer able to function. Governance is paralyzed, law enforcement is discredited, and civil society is disabled and fragmented. Into this void step artificial structures such as unelected committees, self-appointed councils, and radicalized factions claiming the role of defenders of national interest and values, each pulling power in its own direction. Law enforcement and administrative structures are at the forefront of the response, but the more they attempt to assert control, the deeper the crisis becomes.

This is the moment when society fractures to the point of no return. Groups begin consolidating control, often by intimidation or direct action. Chaos becomes the environment and fear becomes logic guiding behavior within society.

This is the moment when society fractures to the point of no return. Groups begin consolidating control, often by intimidation or direct action. Chaos becomes the environment and fear becomes logic guiding behavior within society. The average citizen, desperate for security and stability, begins to accept the idea of strong leadership, even authoritarian rule.

The crisis may result in one of two scenarios: either a foreign actor intervenes directly or local frictions escalate into a civil confrontation. In both scenarios, the targeted society loses its internal cohesion and sovereignty. The defeat is not merely political but generational. Only a black swan event pushing society to unify around something tangible can reverse a disaster.

Phase 4: Normalization (Indefinite)

Normalization is the final phase. It works as an exact reverse mirror of the demoralization phase. Instead of cultivating pluralism and dissent, normalization imposes order and uniformity. Once the desired regime is in power, dissent is no longer tolerated. Institutions are hollowed out or restructured to ensure total control. Former allies who resist the authoritarian consolidation of power, including politicians, activists, intellectuals, and media figures, are sidelined or neutralized. They are no longer useful.

The language of stability, security, sovereignty, and tradition now replaces the slogans of freedom and diversity that accompanied the early stages. The regime becomes entrenched. Opposition, even in thought, is criminalized. Fear becomes institutional. And the population, exhausted by the previous chaos, accepts authoritarian rule as the only path forward. Ideological subversion is now complete.

Ideological Subversion in Georgia: Interpreting the Russian Playbook

Bezmenov's framework, developed in the context of the Cold War, offers an eerily precise structure for interpreting Russia's long-term influence in Georgia. While not every tactic is centrally orchestrated or explicitly visible, the cumulative effect of these active measures is observable across Georgia's institutions, identity, and public life.

The true strength of active measures lies in their ability to harness and redirect a society's own internal dynamics.

As warned by Bezmenov, much like a martial arts technique, ideological subversion capitalizes on existing tensions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities, using them to steer a nation's trajectory in a direction favorable to the subverter. The true strength of active measures lies in their ability to harness and redirect a society's own internal dynamics.

Every society contains elements working at odds with its interests and values. What distinguishes subversion is not the existence of such groups, but the systematic exploitation of their actions. The subverter identifies these fractures and amplifies them until they become strategic pressure points. In Georgia, distinguishing between genuine grievances and manipulated interests is not always possible. However, mapping the evolution of fringe movements and key inflection points can help reconstruct the broader architecture of Russian ideological subversion.

The challenge lies not only in tracking actors but also in drawing clear boundaries between the phases and in determining when the demoralization phase truly began. Russia's influence in Georgia spans centuries, from imperial annexation to Soviet occupation. The Soviet era alone could be seen as a prolonged period of both demoralization and normalization, with institutionalized Russification, cultural suppression, ideological indoctrination, suppression of religious identity, the cultivation of dependencies, and the promotion of loyalty to Moscow.

Following Georgia's independence in 1991, Russia recalibrated rather than abandoned its influence strategy. Active measures became more targeted at maintaining and reinforcing the instruments

of Russia's influence embedded in Georgia since Soviet times. The early instigation and militarization of conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia served as enduring sources of pressure, which would normally emerge during the crisis phase according to the standard pattern. However, in Georgia's case, these unresolved conflicts have since become levers used to challenge Georgian sovereignty, destabilize, and terrorize its population, serving as the enabler as well as the crown jewel of the demoralization effort.

The ideological foundations of Georgian society have been deeply eroded. The degree of polarization has reached a point where uniting even around the most basic and self-evident national interests is no longer possible.

As the previous editions of this journal have [detailed](#), the ideological foundations of Georgian society have been deeply eroded. The degree of polarization has [reached](#) a point where uniting even around the most basic and self-evident national interests is no longer possible. Georgian society now exists in two parallel realities—one shaped by narratives propagated by the Russian Federation and its proxies and the other formed by those who oppose the current regime's trajectory and policies. The latter group is increasingly subjected to pressure, intimidation, public discreditation, and various forms of harassment. This [collapse](#) of shared reality and the rise of irreconcilable ideological silos are among the clearest indicators that Georgia is already deep into the destabilization phase of ideological subversion.

Since there are no clear criteria for establishing the exact start and end of the demoralization phase, for the purposes of this analysis, the starting point for Russia's destabilization phase in Georgia will be set at the beginning of the 2000s. At this point, President Shevardnadze openly de-

clared Georgia's aspirations toward Euro-Atlantic integration, and later, with the pro-reformist agenda of President Mikheil Saakashvili, the demoralization of Georgia's post-Soviet society began to roll back quickly. A good example of Russia's diminishing leverage and influence infrastructure is the 2006 [spy scandal](#). This event served as both a catalyst for increased confrontation and a stimulus for the Kremlin to intensify and restructure its influence strategy after losing its network of active-duty espionage.

Mapping Ideological Subversion Across Georgia's Core Domains

From the mid-2000s onward, Georgia's political and societal trajectory has revealed a sustained and multi-layered process of ideological subversion, unfolding across all domains identified in Bezmenov's framework. This process has not necessarily required overt coordination; instead, it has evolved through a combination of direct influence operations and the strategic exploitation of internal vulnerabilities. The cumulative effect, however, is undeniable.

Public trust in independent civil associations weakened as moral authority and influence became increasingly concentrated in figures who owed their prominence to political patronage rather than authentic public engagement.

In the social sphere, early signs of the demoralization phase were evident in the rise of media platforms tied to Russian-linked oligarchs, which helped co-opt cultural elites through informal patronage systems. At the beginning of the 2000s, a Russia-connected billionaire, Badri Patarkatsishvili, founded channels Imedi and Art-Imedi, through which he brought prominent figures—intellectuals, celebrities, and opinion leaders—into a

controlled network. Thus, their public voices reinforced curated narratives pushed through media platforms. Later, from 2011, the same pattern was adopted by another Russia-linked billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who founded TV9 and engaged the charity Cartu Fund in alternative funding of social projects. Over time, the control of the narrative and the financial dependency of elites on informal payroll eroded organic civic discourse, displacing genuine grassroots activism with state-aligned or bureaucratically controlled entities. Public trust in independent civil associations weakened as moral authority and influence became increasingly concentrated in figures who owed their prominence to political patronage rather than authentic public engagement.

As the demoralization phase continued, religion was also gradually brought under political influence. The symbolic gesture of building the Holy Trinity Cathedral, funded by Bidzina Ivanishvili, marked a fusion of wealth, faith, and national identity in the service of soft power. An informal financing of the religious authorities and normalization of the transfer of state assets to the church reconfigured spiritual authority, reinforcing media control and philanthropic initiatives that blurred the lines between religious charity and political loyalty. Religious institutions became increasingly aligned with state power, and theological voices were subordinated to the interests of politics. Traditional faith was neither openly suppressed nor strictly manipulated like in Soviet times; it was subtly overshadowed by pseudo-religious symbolism and opportunistic messaging designed to weaken society's ethical and spiritual anchors. The Georgian Orthodox Church, the most trusted and influential institution in the country, has become the strongest amplifier of pro-Russian narratives.

Education is the cornerstone of the demoralization phase precisely because it enables long-term ideological conditioning.

The absence of consensus and reform has left education, one of the most critical domains, vulnerable to ideological drift during the demoralization phase. The continued reliance on outdated post-Soviet structures, combined with divisive debates over identity and curriculum content, has stalled meaningful progress. Although direct foreign interference may be less visible here, the resulting stagnation serves subversive goals by producing a generation ill-equipped for critical thinking and civic responsibility. National identity remains fragmented within the education system, providing ample space for external narratives to take root in the minds of critical masses who lack the intellectual tools to question or resist them. As described by Yuri Bezmenov, education is the cornerstone of the demoralization phase precisely because it enables long-term ideological conditioning. This phase, he argued, takes ten to 15 years, the time needed to educate a full generation of students. In Georgia's case, the education system never underwent a full de-Sovietization. Soviet-era pedagogical frameworks, centralized control, and rote-based learning were preserved while Western-educated youth never reached a critical mass to drive structural change. As a result, the process of demoralization was not only uninterrupted but also effective, laying the psychological and cultural groundwork for a smooth transition into the destabilization phase.

The most evident indication of Georgia's transition to the destabilization phase is the administrative sphere. Once energized by the post-Rose Revolution drive for professionalization, it has now [succumbed](#) to the pressures of political interference. The reintroduction of figures tied to Soviet-era or post-Soviet power networks under the Georgian Dream government reversed many of the initial reforms. Informal loyalty networks and opaque decision-making processes replaced meritocratic governance. The boundaries between public service and partisan politics became blurred, ushering in a model of governance closer to Russian-style state-

craft, where decisions are shaped more by backroom influence than institutional norms.

A striking example is the recent purge of pro-Western diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [orchestrated](#) by political loyalists under party directives. At least 18 diplomats, including ambassadors and long-serving senior staff, have been dismissed or resigned under pressure since early 2024, following the government's open antagonism toward EU and U.S. positions. By 1 July, over 50 diplomats are reported to have relinquished their positions, and dozens more are awaiting purges of the Georgian embassies abroad. The dismantling of institutional expertise severely undermines Georgia's ability to uphold the national interest as enshrined in its constitution, specifically, the pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration, and indicates the Ministry's increasing subjugation to Russian geopolitical objectives. It is not incidental that the NATO/EU Information Center was also [scrapped](#) in 2025.

Destabilization and its accompanying paralysis are also evident in law enforcement, which has undergone purification from dissent and the crystallization of loyalists in several waves of reforms and transformations over recent years. Once viewed with increasing trust during reformist periods, police and judicial institutions have lost credibility under growing political control. Cases of selective justice, politically motivated arrests, and heavy-handed tactics have proliferated, often accompanied by disinformation campaigns that undermine public confidence. As formal institutions lose legitimacy, the population increasingly turns to informal mechanisms of authority. Criminal networks and radical elements are subtly rehabilitated in public discourse while law enforcement is depicted as oppressive or corrupt. The result is a gradual shift in societal loyalty from the official rule of law to shadow systems of power. This erosion of state authority was on full display in the [recent](#) armed confrontation, where two rival groups,

one allegedly loyal to a local religious leader and the other linked to civilian authority - engaged in a shootout over a land dispute. Despite the public nature of the clash and reports of weapons being used, law enforcement failed to intervene decisively or hold any perpetrators accountable. This case illustrates not only the weakening of law enforcement's monopoly on violence but also the extent to which informal, factional power has supplanted state control in parts of the country.

Finally, the economic domain, as is usually the crown jewel of the destabilization phase, has become one of the most visibly [compromised](#). Georgia's deepening trade ties with Russia, especially in energy and key import sectors, have created a structural dependency that undermines policy autonomy. The explosion of Russian-owned businesses, the surge in real estate acquisitions, and the influx of tourists have extended Russia's leverage beyond the symbolic to the tangible. What emerges is an economic environment shaped less by legal norms and competitive markets and more by patronage networks, informal deals, and politically sanctioned favoritism. These networks often involve foreign agents, compromised officials, or opportunists whose personal gain aligns with broader subversive goals. Over time, legitimacy in economic life is no longer tied to merit or legality, but to one's proximity to informal centers of power.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how ideological subversion in Georgia has not been imposed solely by brute force and occupation, but rather through a slow and methodical erosion of institutional trust, cultural confidence, and civic cohesion. Each domain—social, religious, educational, administrative, legal, and economic—has been targeted with the goal of total control: to recast the foundations of Georgian society in ways that benefit authoritarian influence, diminish democratic resilience, and prepare the ground for crisis through deeper political capture.

Resilience as Defense

Russia's ideological subversion in Georgia is not a product of a single event or directive but rather the cumulative result of multiple, often self-sustaining lines of influence. As Bezmenov emphasized, not every element of subversion is meticulously planned. Once a strategic direction is set, whether through media control, elite co-optation, religious manipulation, or economic dependency, it often continues to grow in momentum, expanding in scale and consequence like a snowball.

The challenge for open societies like Georgia is that subversion operates unilaterally. Only open systems, with free speech, democratic institutions, and pluralistic media, can be infiltrated and redirected in this way. Authoritarian regimes face no such vulnerability. This asymmetry does not mean democracies must imitate authoritarian controls. Still, it does require them to acknowledge the nature of the game they are in and develop new rules to defend against it.

Military superiority alone can no longer secure national resilience. The experience of two decades in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Ukraine shows that conventional strength, without ideological cohesion and cognitive resistance, is insufficient. This type of conflict is not easily measured in tanks or troops. It demands agility, public awareness, and a will to engage across the cognitive domain.

Russia's technological capabilities may lag behind those of Western powers, but Georgia's case shows that its analogue toolkit, rooted in Soviet-era tactics of infiltration, co-optation, and manipulation, remains remarkably effective.

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that its analogue toolkit, rooted in Soviet-era tactics of infiltration, co-optation, and manipulation, remains remarkably effective. What it lacks in precision, it compensates for with strategic patience, human networks, and the ability to exploit inertia.

To respond effectively, Georgia and other democracies, vulnerable or mature, must treat cognitive

resilience as a core element of national security. This means strengthening critical thinking, restoring institutional trust, and inoculating the public against the corrosive effects of ideological subversion. Only by doing so can the subversive momentum be slowed and ultimately reversed ■

The EU-Georgia Association Agreement: The Unused Lever

When the European Council [conferred](#) candidate status on Georgia in December 2023, Brussels hoped that the gesture, symbolically closing the gap with Moldova and Ukraine and showing respect for the Georgian people's European identity, would prompt the Georgian Dream government to return to the European track. Instead, it triggered what is now certainly a deliberate skid away from the Union.

Barely six months later, the Georgian Dream rammed through its “foreign agents” law, shrugged off street protests with mass arrests, street beatings, intimidation campaigns, and powerful propaganda, before engineering a rigged October 2024 election that the European Parliament would [brand](#) “neither free nor fair.” Irakli Kobakhidze’s subsequent declaration that accession talks would stay off the agenda until 2028 was more than a tactical pause; it was an open breach of Article 78 of Georgia’s own constitution, which obliges every state body to pursue EU integration.

Over the past six months, Georgia has undergone a full-speed authoritarian transformation. The ruling party has launched an all-out assault on democratic institutions, opposition parties, civil society, and the free press. Peaceful protesters and activists have been beaten and jailed, opposition leaders prosecuted or imprisoned, and citizens and journalists fined for Facebook posts critical of the government.

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and the free press. Peaceful protesters and activists have been beaten and jailed, opposition leaders prosecuted or imprisoned, and citizens and journalists fined for Facebook posts critical of the government. The courts have been closed off from public scrutiny, and “a parliamentary commission” is now preparing to ban opposition parties altogether. Most alarmingly, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) has come into force, compelling civil society organizations to register as “foreign agents,” disclose sensitive data, and face criminal prosecution, thereby paving the way for raids and arrests of NGO leaders. The anti-corruption bureau is even considering dubbing active NGOs as having political aims, which would entail confiscation of all donor-provided funds. This coordinated campaign of repression, anti-Western propaganda, and legislative control stands in direct violation of Georgia’s EU Association Agreement ([AA](#)) and its constitutional commitment to European integration.

Notably, during his November 2024 address, Kobakhidze [promised](#) that Georgia “will continue to implement the obligations based on the association agenda and the free trade agreement, as foreseen by the government’s program,” aiming to fulfill 90% of these obligations by 2028. In reality, with the anti-democratic steps taken only in 2025, the ruling party violated a number of articles of the Association Agreement.

The Preamble and Article 350 of the Association Agreement pledge the parties to nurture civil society, while Chapter 20 (Articles 369-371) obliges the government to facilitate, rather than criminalize, NGO cooperation financed by the EU. By branding EU-funded organizations “foreign agents,” the Georgian Dream openly discriminates against the EU-based legal persons and their Georgian partners in violation of Article 79’s national-treatment and MFN guarantees. The new constraints also contravene Articles 80 and 81, which promise progressive liberalization and legal predictability, and they also impede the cross-border service delivery and

presence of service providers protected by Articles 91-92.

More importantly, Article 2 of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement clearly states that “respect for the democratic principles, human rights, and fundamental freedoms ... shall form the basis of the domestic and external policies of the Parties and constitutes an essential element of this Agreement.”

This raises the question: if Georgia is in such a stark violation of its Association Agreement obligations, will the EU take action against the blatant breaches by the Georgian Dream, or will it continue to refrain from using the Association Agreement as a lever?

How (and When) Can Brussels Pull the Brake?

The review of the Association Agreement was one of the issues discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council on 23 June 2025. Before that, the EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos [indicated](#) the possibility of reviewing a free trade deal with Georgia. In reality, a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area ([DCFTA](#)) is an integral part of the Association Agreement. Legally and politically, the DCFTA is embedded within the broader treaty framework—it forms Title IV (Trade and Trade-related Matters) of the Association Agreement, covering Articles 25 to 249, with its enforcement and dispute-settlement mechanisms linked directly to the agreement’s general provisions.

Therefore, reviewing the DCFTA necessarily entails reviewing the Association Agreement itself, as any suspension, amendment, or arbitration related to the trade chapter must follow the procedures and legal channels set out in the agreement. While the EU could theoretically suspend trade preferences (such as tariff reductions or market access) without terminating the entire Association Agreement, such a move would still constitute partial suspension un-

der the treaty and not a separate or isolated action. In practice, initiating a DCFTA review sends a clear political signal that the EU is questioning Georgia's overall compliance with the Association Agreement, particularly its core principles outlined in Article 2.

A complete freeze of the entire Association Agreement would require unanimity among the EU member states. Article 218 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) [regulates](#) the suspension of the agreements signed between the European Union and third parties. The article states that the Council, on a proposal from the Commission or the HRVP, shall adopt a decision suspending the application of an agreement. However, it also states that the Council shall act unanimously regarding the Association Agreements and contracts which are candidates for EU accession. Lacking a consensus in place, primarily due to Budapest's support for the Georgian Dream, the European Union is less likely to be able to suspend the Association Agreement with Georgia. Moreover, many in Brussels and the EU capitals (as well as in Tbilisi) think that such a scenario might give the Georgian Dream a pretext to further push Georgia away from the European Union rather than bringing about any positive changes.

Lessons from the Precedents

Precedents matter. In 2022, the Council [froze](#) EUR 6.3 billion in cohesion funds to Hungary under the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation due to endemic corruption and judicial interference. Cambodia [lost](#) a third of its "Everything but Arms" trade preferences in 2020 after dismantling its political opposition, and Sri Lanka saw its GSP+ status [revoked](#) in 2010 following an EU investigation into allegations of war crimes. None of these cases involved full treaty suspension; yet, every one leveraged market access to defend human rights clauses.

The most relevant example is unfolding right now

with Israel. Spurred first by Spain and Ireland and then formalized by a Dutch-led bloc of 17 member states, the Council asked High Representative Kaja Kallas on 20 May 2025 to review Israel's compliance with Article 2 of its Association Agreement because it blockaded Gaza. The External Action Service produced its [analysis](#) in barely a month, and a "structured dialogue" with Israel is now underway; if talks fail, the EU could suspend tariff preferences by qualified majority, setting a live precedent for Georgia.

It is true that the EU has historically been reluctant to invoke human rights clauses for suspending international agreements.

It is true that the EU has historically been reluctant to invoke human rights clauses for suspending international agreements. According to the European Parliament [report](#), most such suspensions have been made under the Cotonou Partnership Agreement—a comprehensive treaty between the European Union and African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries. Article 96 of that agreement (detailing the procedure for opening consultations and adopting appropriate measures) has been applied 17 times since 2000, following violent government overthrows, election irregularities, or human rights violations. While in some of these cases, EU action did not extend beyond opening consultations, in others, the EU took appropriate measures, such as reducing development aid and suspending certain forms of cooperation. There is no case where the EU has activated the non-execution clause, leading to the suspension or termination of the agreement on the grounds of the 'essential elements' clause being breached. In 2011, the EU [partially suspended](#) the application of the 1977 Cooperation Agreement with Syria, invoking the United Nations Charter, as that agreement did not contain a human rights clause.

First Things First

Brussels is not powerless. But it needs to be strategic.

Brussels is not powerless. But it needs to be strategic. The European Union can sidestep the absence of consensus by halting the engagement with Georgia in selected policy fields, such as trade arrangements or various programs. Unlike imposing personal sanctions, these parts do not require unanimity from the EU side.

But before jumping to the punishment, the EU should first initiate the Association Agreement review through the process spearheaded by the European Commission and the EEAS. Process matters. Through the launch of the process, the EU can send a signal that the Georgian Dream is about to lose something big—trade preferences.

The Association Agreement is a binding treaty. Article 420 obliges both sides to “take any general or specific measures required” to reach the pact’s objectives, while Articles 257-259 allow either party to suspend DCFTA concessions.

To act effectively, the EU should operationalize the dispute settlement procedures built into the Association Agreement. First, the Commission should submit a formal request for consultations under Article 246, citing Georgia’s foreign agent law and other restrictive laws as a breach of Articles 76, 78-85, and 88-92, which guarantee the enabling environment for civil society, non-discrimination, and transparency in policymaking. The EU could also refer to Article 2 of the Association Agreement and its breach, citing numerous non-democratic steps taken by the Georgian Dream. These consultations must begin within 30 days and even faster in cases of urgency.

If the Georgian side refuses to modify or repeal the

laws, the EU can escalate under Article 248 by requesting the establishment of an independent arbitration panel. Within 120 to 150 days, that panel would issue a binding ruling, but it can certainly act sooner. If the verdict confirms that Georgia is in violation, and Tbilisi still fails to act within a 50-day grace period, the EU can invoke Articles 257-259 to suspend selected benefits of the DCFTA, which is part of the Association Agreement framework.

If the Georgian side refuses to modify or repeal the laws, the EU can escalate under Article 248 by requesting the establishment of an independent arbitration panel.

Yes, the timeframes outlined in the Association Agreement raise eyebrows, since many in Georgia and in the EU feel that we are running out of time. The pace of tyrannical laws, actions, and rhetoric is indeed unmatched. However, the EU must understand that reviewing the agreement is not about the final punishment, but more about the process. Obviously, this legal challenge must be accompanied by other concrete steps, including the continuation of the support for civil society, sanctioning Georgian Dream officials, and conditioning a prospect of the EU supported regional infrastructure projects (such as under the Black Sea electricity cable or the digital link between the EU and Georgia) on the reversal of the autocracy in Georgia.

The EU should clearly frame the process as a defense of its legal order, not an act of political pressure. The EU should also be ready to counter imminent Georgian Dream propaganda that the EU is “punishing Georgians.”

This legal route can provide Brussels with a powerful and rules-based toolset to defend European values without appearing politically vindictive. But

to succeed, the EU must also prepare a coherent inter-institutional effort. DG TRADE, the EEAS, the EU Delegation in Georgia, and the Legal Service should jointly develop the case and designate arbitrators. Simultaneously, strong political messaging is essential: the EU should clearly frame the process as a defense of its legal order, not an act of political pressure. The EU should also be ready to counter imminent Georgian Dream propaganda that the EU is “punishing Georgians.” Pro-active campaigning by the EU delegation in Georgia and the frequent statements by the Commission spokesmen, HRVP, and the Member States can help in this regard.

Brussels should be prepared to take further action if the Georgian Dream refuses to comply with the adverse ruling. In that case, the EU should be ready to coordinate parallel responses: working with the international financial institutions to suspend loans and financial aid, to further sanction Georgian Dream leaders, including the MPs who stand behind every piece of restrictive legislation, and even review Georgia’s EU candidacy status and visa liberalization (regularly discussed by Brussels and the EU Member States) for the architects and backers of the oligarchic regime. The message must be clear – the Georgian Dream cannot violate the legal commitments it undertook with the EU and still expect to benefit from them. The EU must not punish the Georgian people, but must go to great lengths to punish the regime architects and enablers.

If Brussels were to trigger such a review with Georgia, it would establish two immediate pressure points. First, the DCFTA underpins more than 21 percent of Georgia’s total exports; suspending even a slice of tariff-free access would hit Georgian Dream-linked business elites who have so far skirted personal sanctions. Second, the review itself would provide a structured, time-limited process with clear benchmarks, replacing the current pattern of open-ended “concern” statements that the ruling party has learned to ignore.

In the long run, Georgia’s drift from Brussels is not irreversible, but time is no longer on the EU’s side.

In the long run, Georgia’s drift from Brussels is not irreversible, but time is no longer on the EU’s side. The Israel review shows that Article 2 clauses can be activated swiftly when a critical mass of member states demands it. Cases of Cambodia and Hungary demonstrate that partial suspensions of economic benefits bite hardest when tied to concrete remedial steps. If Brussels wants to preserve its relevance in Georgia—and “vindicate” the 80 percent of Georgians who still wave EU flags in the streets—it must decide whether to move from carrots to consequences before Kobakhidze’s self-declared 2028 horizon becomes a self-fulfilling exit ■

Empire vs. Republic:

A New Hope

In January 1921, just a month before the Red Army seized Tbilisi, Georgian authorities announced the arrest of 513 Bolshevik-Communists, including foreign agents and members of the local Communist Party. An official report from the Special Detachment (Security and Counterintelligence Service) to the Minister of the Interior detailed how these individuals had been secretly working to undermine the Georgian state and its democratic order. They had gathered and distributed weapons to hostile groups, passed on classified military and civil information, spread propaganda, circulated funds to incite unrest, and engaged in other covert activities aimed at destabilizing the republic. Over a century ago, Georgian intelligence successfully exposed and dismantled this vast network of anti-state conspirators, halting Russia's subversive operations—yet within weeks, brute military force crushed the fledgling Georgian state.

When the Georgian Democratic Republic was established in 1918, the aftermath of World War I was

still being addressed. The young republic, led by the Social Democratic Party, which enjoyed widespread popularity, was facing existential threats from multiple directions. The military frontline was stabilized quickly. First, Germany helped by controlling its Ottoman allies and then the Entente powers. However, the threat from the former imperial patron, the Russian Empire, persisted.

In fact, until 1920, Georgia had to deal with not just one but at least two Russias. The Volunteer Army of General Anton Denikin exercised control over the North Caucasus and the northwestern shores of Georgia's Black Sea border. Denikin's primary objective was the restoration of the Russian Empire, and he regarded the existence of an independent Georgia as a temporary anomaly. However, his primary concern was to challenge the Bolshevik regime in Russia itself and later, to resist the onslaught of the Red Army led by Leon Trotsky. The Russian civil war had created a challenging security environment for Georgia, particularly given the continued instability along its northern borders.



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The illustration is inspired by the artwork of Polish artist Pawel Kuczynski.

The republic fell due to a military invasion, yet the “fighters of the invisible front” achieved notable victories in countering and mitigating the Russian threat. These lessons remain applicable in modern times as well.

Georgia established diverse security services to address these threats while the political leadership prioritized resilience. Ultimately, the republic fell due to a military invasion, yet the “fighters of the invisible front” achieved notable victories in countering and mitigating the Russian threat. These lessons remain applicable in modern times as well.

Ideological Coherence Enhances Resilience

Georgia’s nascent security services were operational even before the establishment of the republic.

Following the Bolshevik coup in Russia, the imperial army disbanded. The command system had largely collapsed. Bolshevik sympathizers were numerous in the Tbilisi garrison of the troops, creating a credible threat of a coup that would capture the erstwhile capital of the Russian “Transcaucasian” provinces. On 12 December 1917, following a tip-off from intelligence sources, 250 fighters from the Public Security Commission proceeded to disarm the Tbilisi garrison and seize armaments. This decisive victory prevented the Bolsheviks from immediately seizing control of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The fighters, primarily Social-Democratic militants led by Valiko Jugheli, became the core of the National Guard, an armed people’s militia largely created along party lines.

The ideological coherence of the National Guard and their visceral resentment of the Bolsheviks made them the most resilient security formations in the early days of the republic, when its police and army were still in infancy. Jugheli, who had previously engaged with Bolshevism before re-

joining the Social Democrats, had a deep understanding of his opponents and their methods. This allowed him to predict and preempt their actions, giving him a significant advantage. Beginning in 1918, the National Guard played a pivotal role in quelling Bolshevik-inspired riots and rebellions in multiple provinces and towns across the country.

Gogita Paghava, a young delegate of the Constituent Assembly from the Social Democratic Party, was soon appointed to the position of Head of the Information Department of the National Guard Headquarters. He was the emerging leader within the Georgian intelligence services, demonstrating a high level of proficiency in establishing and sustaining networks of assets throughout Georgia as well as in the North Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire. In this case, ideological proximity and loyalty proved to be the primary factors contributing to cohesion.

This coherence is evident in the strategic roles often assumed by National Guard personnel during the planning and execution of intelligence operations against the Soviet regime while in exile.

Institutional Memory - An Invaluable Asset

The National Guard of the First Republic was a quasi-military formation with intelligence components that played a role in stabilizing the security situation. However, in (relative) peacetime, the primary responsibility of counterintelligence fell to investigative and police functions. By mid-1919, the Bolsheviks and Denikin's army had shifted their focus to undermining and sabotaging the government in Tbilisi with the aim of destabilizing it. This task required a different approach, a longer-term perspective, and diligent sleuthing.

The former Imperial security officers' extensive experience proved invaluable in this regard, al-

though they were subject to strict oversight from the executive. The People's Militia, also known as the police force, was established under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, led by Noe Ramishvili, a highly skilled administrator and a prominent figure in the political arena. Following the Social Democratic Party's vision, standard policing functions were transferred to local and city self-governments as soon as they were established. The Ministry of the Interior retained the functions of general coordination and training.

However, when it came to combating organized crime and counterintelligence operations, these units were strategically positioned at the core of the Ministry. The "Special Detachment" was established in the summer of 1918. Melkisedek Kedia, a former Gendarmerie officer, had been appointed to the command position. In close coordination with the Special Detachment of the Criminal Militia, which also oversaw the rapid reaction units, the Special Detachment's influence expanded significantly. Initially comprising 20 officers and 40 line militiamen, it doubled in size by 1920.

The "Specials" had a significant advantage in this regard, having maintained a substantial network of informers and agents from the times of the Russian Empire. Given their previous service to the Tsars, these individuals rightly viewed the Bolsheviks with greater concern than the Social Democrats, their declared adversaries. Therefore, in regions facing an imminent Bolshevik threat, the Special Detachment had an extensive network that extended deep into Russian territory, particularly in the North Caucasus via Vladikavkaz, which boasted a substantial and well-established Georgian community.

In the Georgian government's efforts to counter Denikin's army, there were instances of agents demonstrating allegiances that were not necessarily aligned with the Georgian side. Kedia's team relied on networks within the left-wing move-

ments, sometimes including the Bolshevik faction, as well as local nationalist movements. The former Bolshevik field commander of the National Guard, Valiko Jugheli, was able to tap into these networks easily.

Diversity of Services – Assets and Risks

The National Guard and the Special Detachment were undoubtedly setting the standard. In addition, the Army headquarters' intelligence department was responsible for handling military classified information and counterintelligence.

The National Guard demonstrated the most significant ideological coherence and loyalty to the government, making it the most difficult unit for adversaries to infiltrate.

The diversity of the Georgian security services contributed to their resilience as they leveraged various networks and were able to withstand certain threats more effectively than others, thereby fostering a sense of complementarity. The National Guard demonstrated the most significant ideological coherence and loyalty to the government, making it the most difficult unit for adversaries to infiltrate. The Special Detachment was the most professional and capable of exploiting human intelligence networks more extensively for counterintelligence. The Army intelligence unit was particularly susceptible to infiltration by former comrades-in-arms, namely Tsarist army officers. Many of these officers had served on Denikin's side and subsequently joined the Red Army. However, they were staunchly anti-Communist and sought to enlist their former comrades who had joined the Red Army under duress rather than out of personal conviction. This vulnerability proved advantageous in the Army's efforts to recruit a ro-

bust network at the points of contact with the Red Army in the North Caucasus in 1920. This network provided crucial intelligence, enabling the Army to receive advance warning of operations.

The National Guard commander was skeptical of the Army and did not fully trust the Special Detachment's Gendarmerie cadre. However, he had a positive relationship with the Minister of the Interior, whom the party had appointed. This enabled two services to work closely together. Notably, following his emigration, Giorgi Paghava assumed command of the Special Detachment, which subsequently provided crucial intelligence to Allied forces, offering vital insights into Russian and later Soviet activities in the occupied South Caucasus region.

The efforts of Georgia's security services proved to be a swift success. By August-September 1919, clandestine Bolshevik cells had been largely dismantled, with many of their members arrested or deported to Russia. In May 1920, a treaty was concluded with the Soviet Union, recognizing Georgia's sovereignty and establishing its northern border. According to the terms of the treaty, Tbilisi committed to reinstating the Georgian Communist Party, contingent on their acknowledgement of Georgia's legal framework and Tbilisi's authority. However, within a matter of months, the majority of Georgian Bolsheviks were once again forced to flee, resulting in the disruption of their operational cells.

At the onset of the Red Army's offensive in early 1921, no party cell, not even a single member of the Communist Party, had any prior awareness of the attack in Georgia. This is known from a classified report by Philipe Makharadze, the Communist Party chief and a senior executive in occupied Georgia, to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. The report was sent on 6 December 1921. The report was intercepted by Georgian intelligence and subsequently published in

the émigré newspaper, *Free Georgia*. Makharadze stated that the success of Georgian intelligence was detrimental to the interests of the Soviets. He explained that the entry of the Red Army and the declaration of Soviet rule were clearly perceived as an external conquest because Georgian communists did not consider an uprising. A failure to portray the intervention as “liberation” in the early stages led to a loss of crucial legitimacy for the new power.

Primary Vectors of Russian Pressure

Georgia selected Germany as its primary ally while the Volunteer Army aligned more closely with the United Kingdom and the Entente powers. The eventual victory of the Entente powers could have potentially undermined Georgia.

Russia had several ways of exerting pressure on Georgia during the First Republic. Denikin's army did not support the Georgian independence movement and was prepared to use force to suppress it if necessary. For the Volunteer Army HQ, the legal continuity of the Russian Empire after the Bolshevik coup, as well as Georgian statehood and government, was illegitimate. In the early days of the Republic's formation, the global landscape was favorable to Denikin. Georgia selected Germany as its primary ally while the Volunteer Army aligned more closely with the United Kingdom and the Entente powers. The eventual victory of the Entente powers could have potentially undermined Georgia. However, the Bolsheviks were exerting pressure on Denikin's army while the Georgian National Guard and army were taking every opportunity to push the Volunteer Army out of Abkhazia and beyond. In the field of intelligence, Denikin's intelligence HQ attempted to cultivate ties with former Georgian army officers. However, the Social Dem-

ocrats confronted them with the nationalism tinted with anti-imperialism.

The situation with the Bolsheviks proved more complex as they demonstrated a notable resilience and strength. The Bolsheviks were steeped in clandestine action during their illegal activities in the Empire. They were emboldened by the brutality that was not only tolerated but promoted by Lenin and implemented by Leon Trotsky as the head of the Red Army. The Bolsheviks undertook to destabilize and reabsorb all former imperial lands that gained independence—Georgia included. Notably, many of the cadres that the Bolsheviks deployed for subversion were Georgian communists. Veteran Philippe Makharadze, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and Stalin himself held both operational and policy positions and served as “handlers” of their networks.

The Bolshevik propaganda narrative asserted that Tbilisi was under the control of Western imperialist powers—first Germany, then the Entente powers—and that the revolutionary forces had the responsibility to confront this “puppet government.”

The Bolshevik propaganda narrative asserted that Tbilisi was under the control of Western imperialist powers—first Germany, then the Entente powers—and that the revolutionary forces had the responsibility to confront this “puppet government.” This message was disseminated through legal and clandestine newspapers to incite workers against Noe Jordania's Social-Democratic government. However, it had a significant presence among the urban working class and a strong electoral position. The Bolsheviks successfully initiated significant strikes in 1918 and, to a certain extent, in 1919, notably at the Poti port docks. However, the city's strategic decentralization and the strengthening of its trade unions played a crucial role in effectively managing labor discontent. The Bolsheviks'

attempts to exacerbate existing divisions were more successful. Certain groups expressed discontent regarding the nationalization of land by the Social Democrats, particularly the aristocratic circles. Some adhered to an ethno-nationalist ideology, with Communists criticizing Tbilisi for what they saw as an absence of internationalism and “chauvinism.” This criticism was based on Tbilisi’s promotion of the use of the Georgian language in public administration, the reestablishment of the independence of the Georgian Church, and the promotion of Georgian nationalism. The ethnic card proved particularly damaging; even when revolts occurred for economic reasons, Bolshevik outlets presented them as ethnic, notably involving a pauperized population in Shida Kartli, which included many Ossetians but also Georgians, and which was suppressed rather brutally by the National Guard.

Paradoxically, the fact that the Social Democrats were the political cousins of the Bolsheviks during the Empire contributed to the development of Georgian resilience.

Paradoxically, the fact that the Social Democrats were the political cousins of the Bolsheviks during the Empire contributed to the development of Georgian resilience. Leaders in Tbilisi were well-versed in their former comrades’ conspiratorial tendencies, and they themselves exhibited similar behaviors. In fact, some of their clandestine networks appear to have overlapped. At times, this was used to Georgia’s advantage. For instance, when Denikin’s chief of HQ, Nikolai Baratov, visited Tbilisi in September 1919, he was severely wounded in a bomb attack on his vehicle. Soviet historiography has attributed this attack to a Bolshevik cell, and a street in Tbilisi has long carried the name of the fallen attacker, Elbakidze, a name that is still commonly used today. However, recent findings by Georgian historians suggest that Na-

tional Guard officers may have had contact with the attackers and may have either encouraged or failed to prevent the attack. Baratoff was on a diplomatic mission, but Tbilisi was aware of the efforts of the Volunteer Army to gain a foothold in Batumi, which the occupying British Army was about to leave. One strategy that was employed to gain a tactical advantage was to cripple Baratoff.

Russia Can Be Beaten

The experience of the Georgian Democratic Republic’s intelligence services and political leadership demonstrates that Russia can be defeated even by Georgia when it comes to clandestine operations.

A brief review of Russia’s imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet strategies toward Georgia reveals striking parallels. It is imperative to note that the experience of the Georgian Democratic Republic’s intelligence services and political leadership demonstrates that Russia can be defeated even by Georgia when it comes to clandestine operations.

The first element is national and ideological coherence. The establishment of institutions that facilitate constructive dialogue is a crucial step in ensuring civic peace and thwarting subversive activities. The Bolsheviks, whose credo was to mobilize workers and the proletariat, were unsuccessful in their task. This was due to the fact that the Social Democrats often offered a working social model for these classes that did not include the same level of Communist brutality.

The second element is nationalist mobilization. When dealing with an imperial opponent, it is essential for the nation to unite under its leadership. This approach fosters a sense of motivation to persevere. Tbilisi responded to the “internationalist” rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin by emphasizing Georgian identity, sovereignty, and

the cultural and civilizational choice of Europe. This approach was contrasted with the perceived “Oriental barbarism” and despotism embodied by the Bolsheviks. It appears that sidelining more nationalist elements for ideological reasons may have been an error. This decision may have led to their willing or unwilling collaboration. After the occupation, the Bolsheviks for a short time tolerated the right-wing National Democratic Party and even enrolled former army officers. However, they did not tolerate the Social Democrats or the National Guard, which led the resistance.

Thirdly, familiarity with adversaries cuts both ways: from 1918 to 1921, Georgian intelligence built a formidable network in Russia’s North Caucasus, based on army officers as well as socialist underground members. The Georgian leadership and militia had intimate knowledge of the Bolshevik clandestine tactics, which helped them disarm their cells.

As Georgia becomes increasingly permeable and vulnerable to the Russian worldview, it is essential to keep these lessons in mind ■

Cold Feet, Warm Waters: Russia's Strategic Retreat

When Sir Halford Mackinder devised his Heartland-Rimland theory, the rulers of Russia had long cherished dreams of becoming a hybrid power that would encompass the straits of both the Heartland and Rimland. While Russia is the world's largest country by land area, much of its coastline lies in the Arctic Ocean, which is frozen for most of the year. This geographic constraint has historically limited Russia's ability to maintain a year-round blue-water navy, efficiently export goods through maritime trade, or establish overseas influence through naval projection, thereby hindering its achievement of strategic autonomy. To overcome this, Russia has consistently sought access to warm-water ports, coastal outlets that do not freeze in winter and remain operational year-round. "Access to warm seas" became a long-standing geopolitical goal for any Russian ruler. Now, however, this centuries-old policy is under threat as Russia finds itself increasingly squeezed

out of the warm waters it once sought to dominate.

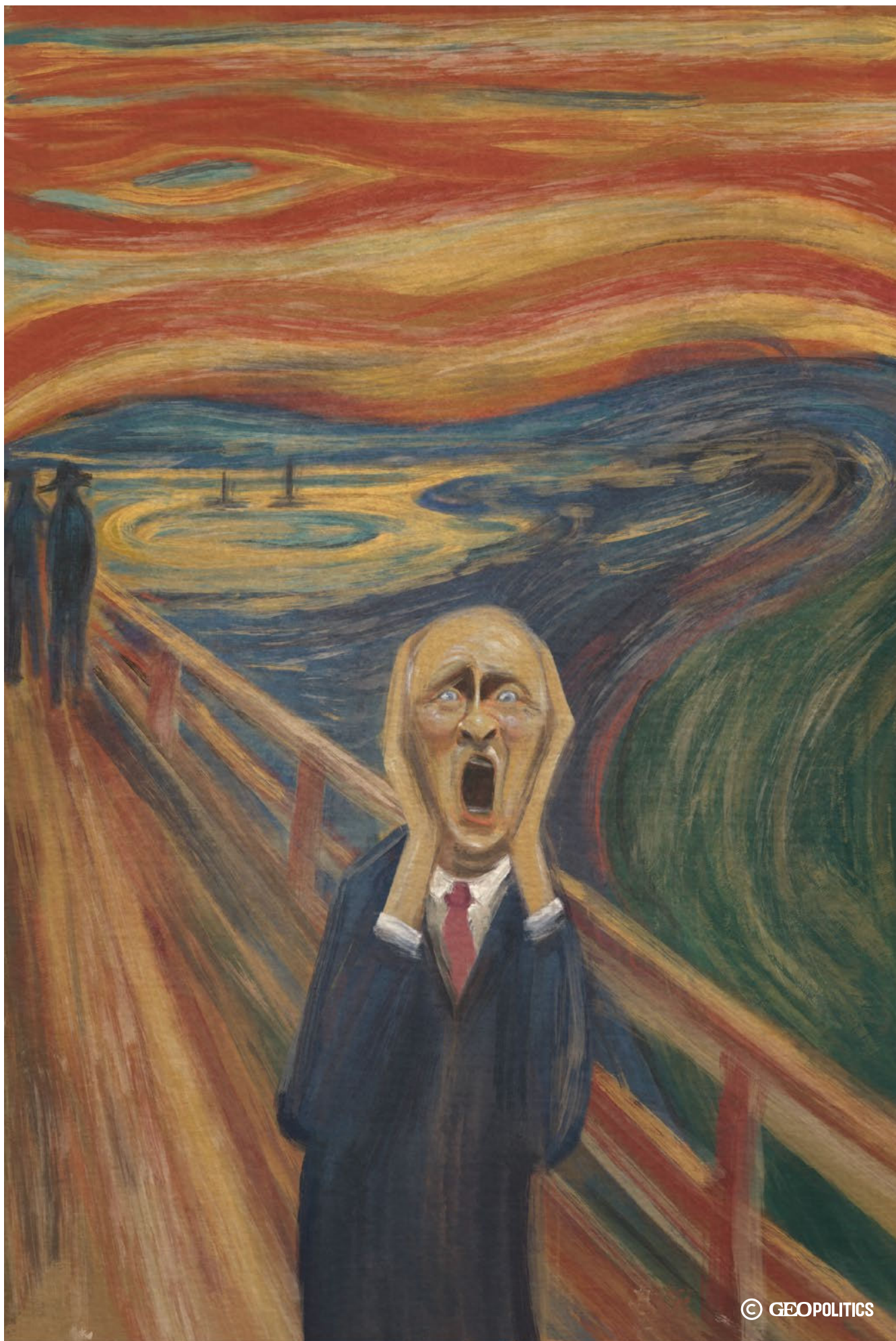
Peter the Great sought access to the Baltic Sea to modernize Russia and open it to Europe. He founded St. Petersburg as a "window to the West." Catherine the Great expanded southward to gain access to the Black Sea via wars against the Ottoman Empire. She annexed Crimea in 1783, incorporating the warm-water port of Sevastopol. During the Great Game of the 19th century, Russian expansion into Central Asia aimed to reach the Persian Gulf or the Indian Ocean, bringing it into conflict with British interests in South Asia.

During the Soviet Period, Russia's goal looked almost achieved. However, most of its access in practice was maintained through proxies or basing agreements in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Nevertheless, through such arrangements, Moscow secured access to strategic maritime chokepoints.



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When a nation pursues a particular objective over generations, that goal inevitably becomes ingrained in its national identity and is reflected in its foreign policy. This is why Vladimir Putin's revisionist agenda, centered on territorial expansion, should come as no surprise.

When a nation pursues a particular objective over generations, that goal inevitably becomes ingrained in its national identity and is reflected in its foreign policy. This is why Vladimir Putin's revisionist agenda, centered on territorial expansion, should come as no surprise. His statement that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century is not just rhetoric; it reflects a deeply held worldview that, regrettably, the West has failed to interpret as a serious threat. From the wars against the Ottomans to interventions in Crimea and Syria, Moscow has consistently followed a strategic pattern that still shapes the Kremlin's geopolitical mindset today.

Evolution of Expansionist Russia

It all began in 2008 with Georgia. While Estonia had earlier [endured](#) the first state-sponsored cyberattack, that confrontation remained virtual - no casualties, no physical destruction. Russia's invasion of Georgia marked a new and dangerous precedent. By openly occupying two of Georgia's regions, Moscow deployed a familiar yet archaic narrative: the need to protect Russian speakers from genocide or ethnic cleansing. This echoed imperial justifications dating back to Catherine the Great, who waged war in Crimea under the pretext of defending Christian populations.

With this act, Russia effectively shattered the post-Cold War world order, the so-called *Pax Americana*. Yet, the response from the self-proclaimed guard-

ians of that order bore no resemblance to the global outcry over Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Instead of decisive action, the West offered half-measures: weak sanctions, tough talk, and little else to alter Putin's course.

In September of 2015, when Russia officially intervened in the Syrian civil war on the side of Bashar Al Assad, it [became obvious](#) that Russian plans far exceeded its immediate neighborhood or the "Near Abroad" as the Russians call the post-Soviet space. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a war in Donbas were still in Russia's backyard; however, Syria was a different region and on a different scale. Such intervention resulted in the re-emergence of the Russian naval base in the Mediterranean port of Tartus and the airbase in Latakia. Lack of a proper response further emboldened Russia and its soldiers, disguised as "private military contractors," who emerged in other parts of the world, mainly in Africa. By 2020, [according to](#) the German daily newspaper *Bild*, citing a leaked secret German Foreign Ministry report, Russia was building military bases in six African countries, with a primary focus on Sudan, as it sits on the strategic Red Sea waterway.

Due to the invasion of Georgia, Ukraine, and military expansion in the Middle East and Africa, Russia significantly extended its projection of power on the Black and Mediterranean Seas as well as on other maritime routes in the south.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. After fierce resistance, the port city of Mariupol, almost completely ruined and devastated due to continuous and indiscriminate bombardments, fell into the hands of invaders. Russia was quick to declare the annexation of "new territories," indicating that the historically "normal" practice of territorial expansion was back on the agenda. Due to the invasion of Georgia, Ukraine, and military expansion in the

Middle East and Africa, Russia significantly extended its projection of power on the Black and Mediterranean Seas as well as on other maritime routes in the south. In parallel, Russia [exposed its ambitions](#) in the area of growing importance – the Arctic.

These military advancements were complemented by Russia's growing role in various newly established regional and global institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. All aimed to undermine the West's dominance in international affairs.

All seems to be working well for Russia and its expansionist ambitions, until just recently.

Beginning of the End

Russia's prolonged war against Ukraine—marked by limited or costly gains and mounting Western sanctions—pushed Moscow to seek new partners, a kind of “coalition of the willing” as a means to defy sanctions and provide lifelines. In reality, countries like China, India, Iran, the UAE, Türkiye, and North Korea saw not an alliance, but an opportunity to exploit Russia's vulnerability. Russian exports were snapped up at deep discounts while sanctioned imports arrived at inflated prices.

Facing heavy battlefield losses and outdated weaponry, Russia turned to Iran and North Korea for drones, ammunition, and military hardware. It [leaned](#) heavily upon China for electronics and other goods while [selling](#) oil and gas to China and India at bargain rates, offset only by the soaring costs of maintaining its sanction-evading shadow fleet.

Domestically, unpopular conscription laws triggered a wave of emigration among young professionals and skilled workers, deepening the country's brain drain. The Russian economy shifted increasingly toward wartime production, with defense spending ballooning to historic levels. As the Ukrainian front stagnates and the illusion of Rus-

sian military and economic supremacy wanes, Moscow finds itself trapped in a vortex that is not only draining its resources but also steadily eroding its global role and influence.

The October 7 attack by Hamas on the Israeli state unleashed a chain reaction, causing tectonic changes in the Middle East and globally, leaving Russia on the side of the losers. The war against Hamas resulted in a quick war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and its demise as a formidable military force triggered a dramatic fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Losing its important proxies, Iran became the next target, and a 12-day war left it without top military leadership, top nuclear scientists, and viable nuclear enrichment capabilities. The widely advertised strategic partnership with Russia did very little (if anything at all) for regimes in Syria and Iran once all hell broke loose. Notorious Russian air defense systems were [quickly neutralized](#), leaving the skies exposed for Israeli and American warplanes. Any form of potential re-arrangement of the Middle East basically leaves no room for Russia to play.

Russia's declaratory “friend” – Türkiye, on the other hand, drastically increased its posture in the Middle East, becoming one of the major powerbrokers, often filling the void left by Russia.

The bad news did not end for Russia in the greater Middle East. Disenchanted Armenia, long seen as Russia's major partner in the Caucasus, saw no value in a strategic partnership with Moscow during the war with Azerbaijan in 2023 over Nagorno-Karabakh and quickly and effectively turned toward the West. More than that, putting aside historic grievances toward the Ottoman Empire and its successor, Türkiye, a previously unthinkable rapprochement between the two countries became a reality. Nikol Pashinyan's [recent visit](#) to Ankara is a testament to this. As a “cherry on the top,” [rumors](#) are circulating that Azerbaijan and Türkiye have all but decided to build a military airbase on Azerbaijani soil, crossing Russia's theoretical red lines of having new NATO bases at its borders.

Azerbaijan-Russia relations reached a historic nadir in late 2024 and early 2025. On 25 December 2024, Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243, a civilian Embraer jet from Baku to Grozny, was [downed](#) by a Russian Pantsir-S surface-to-air missile, killing 38 people, according to multiple investigations and intercepted military communications. President Ilham Aliyev publicly [accused](#) Russia of a cover-up and demanded transparency and accountability. Although Putin issued a limited apology, the damage was done, triggering Azerbaijan to suspend cultural exchanges, cancel diplomatic visits, and withdraw accredited Russian journalists.

The spat escalated further when, in June 2025, Russian authorities detained several ethnic Azerbaijanis in cities like Yekaterinburg, with at least two reportedly dying in custody under suspicious circumstances. Allegations of abuse and ethnically motivated persecution prompted Baku to launch a formal criminal investigation. In a clear act of retaliation, Azerbaijani authorities arrested multiple Russian nationals on charges ranging from cybercrime to drug trafficking, signaling that these were not ordinary law enforcement actions but a direct response to Moscow's conduct. What began as a tragic military incident had now devolved into a full-blown diplomatic rift marked by tit-for-tat arrests, mutual recriminations, and the sharpest deterioration in Azerbaijan-Russia relations in decades.

The eastern frontier has also become a strategic quagmire for Moscow. China has overtaken Russia as the dominant economic player in Central Asia.

The eastern frontier has also become a strategic quagmire for Moscow. China has overtaken Russia as the dominant economic player in Central Asia, finalizing massive infrastructure and trade agreements, such as the long-delayed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan [railway](#) and [expanding](#) dry ports at Khorgos, that bypass Russian territory altogether. Simultaneously, Türkiye and Azerbaijan are [advanc-](#)

[ing](#) the Zangezur Corridor, a seamless land bridge between the Turkic republics that sidelines Russia from regional transit and erodes its geopolitical relevance. Once culturally anchored to Moscow, Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are now [dismantling](#) Russian linguistic and media influence, forging stronger ties with China, the Gulf, and Western powers. Russia, meanwhile, finds itself reduced to selling oil and gas at heavily discounted rates and failing to secure key deals such as the [Power of Siberia 2](#) pipeline. Even its once-dominant security role is fading as troop drawdowns and China's [increased](#) military assistance to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan shrink the Kremlin's strategic footprint. In effect, Russia is being squeezed out, economically, politically, and militarily, from a region it once considered its uncontested sphere of influence.

New Realities for Russia

The Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, which were once seen as pivotal points in Russia's regional power projection, are now showing signs of Moscow's retrenchment. Moscow's declining role is not a temporary reallocation of resources but a structural setback with long-term consequences for Russia's global position.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has left fewer resources available for overseas operations. Western sanctions have limited Russia's ability to project power. Export controls on semiconductors, avionics, and energy technologies have hampered the maintenance and modernization of military equipment. Russia's arms exports—once a key tool of influence—have declined sharply due to both capacity constraints and reputational damage.

Russia's traditional partners are increasingly hedging or drifting away. In the Middle East, countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even Syria are diversifying their foreign relations. The Abraham Accords, Israeli-Gulf rapprochement, and China's role in normalization talks between Arab states and Iran

have reduced the need for a Russian balancer. Türkiye's assertive policy and China's economic diplomacy have also reduced Russia's role.

Russia's image as a protector of allies has been severely damaged. This loss of credibility extends beyond allies. Neutral and even formerly aligned states are increasingly cautious about Russia's capacity to deliver on promises, forcing them to seek alternative patrons or pursue greater self-reliance.

Russia's relationship with Israel has also deteriorated. Although the two had previously coordinated closely in Syria, Russia's growing ties with Iran and its [criticism](#) of Israeli policies in Gaza have created tensions. After a 12-day war between Israel and Iran, and Russia's pro-Iranian [position](#), there is very little appetite in Israel to take Russia seriously.

Meanwhile, countries like Egypt and the UAE, which had significant defense cooperation with Russia, are pivoting toward Western partners or enhancing self-sufficiency in response to uncertainty about Russian reliability.

As a result, Russia is gradually shifting from a position of decisive influence to a more reactive and defensive stance. In diplomatic terms, it is no longer commanding the spotlight but increasingly relegated to the margins. Although some analysts once framed Russia's resurgence as a sign of an emerging multipolar world, its current retreat exposes just how fragile that narrative was. What is taking shape instead is a fragmented global landscape where regional powers pursue their own agendas with little coordination or collective vision. Russia's diminishing role is also weakening the cohesion of alternative alliances like BRICS and the CSTO, which now struggle to project unity or strategic relevance.

Russia's loss of influence in these regions reduces its ability to bargain in broader geopolitical contexts. Its marginalization in Syria or the Caucasus limits its relevance in energy diplomacy, counter-

terrorism, or refugee policy. Moreover, Western countries now have a freer hand to engage these regions without navigating Russian veto power. President Trump's initial suggestion to restart talks with Russia about all geopolitical issues is now history, with Russian propagandists openly attacking Trump for yielding to the "deep state."

Over the last several decades, NATO and the EU have become more assertive in the West than ever before. The enlargement of both organizations, expedited by the Russian invasion, is yet another inevitable consequence that Russia sought to prevent. With Finland and Sweden in NATO and European unity over Ukrainian defense assistance, the Russian dream of a disunited and detached Europe is far from materializing, even with the unpredictable policy of the new Washington administration.

Bottom line – Russia's attempt to reassert its global posture and secure access to warm waters is rapidly unraveling, threatening the viability of the entire expansionist project, if not the integrity of Russia itself.

Georgia, the Misfitting Piece

Against the backdrop of seismic geopolitical shifts that alienate Russia from its surrounding regions, Georgia stands out, not as a rising regional partner, but as a state deliberately detaching itself from its future and embracing Moscow. Once the pride of the post-Soviet democratic wave, Georgia has regressed into an unrecognizable shell, led by a government that seems hostile to its own people's aspirations and dangerously indifferent to its strategic surroundings. The ruling Georgian Dream party has not only turned its back on the country's Euro-Atlantic path, it has also begun actively mocking it, pushing conspiracy theories about the West as a "deep state" and accusing Europe and the U.S. of plotting wars on Georgian soil. What was once a nation that inspired the region now parades through

its towns with banners of Ayatollah Khamenei and praises for Trump, bizarrely stitched together in anti-Western rallies that defy ideological coherence. Ask “What is wrong with Georgia?” and the answer today is devastatingly simple: everything.

Ivanishvili is not just a silent partner—he is, today, Russia’s only true ally on the Black Sea. And he holds that position not by force or blackmail, but by choice.

This turn is not happening in a vacuum. While Russia is being systematically edged out of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Black Sea, hemmed in by Turkish infrastructure, Chinese investment, and Western rebalancing, it has found one oddly loyal outpost: the regime of Bidzina Ivanishvili. As Moscow’s ships are denied access to Mediterranean ports and its leverage in the South Caucasus withers, Georgia offers a rare strategic win for the Kremlin: a government that voluntarily echoes Russian propaganda, blocks EU integration, adopts Russian laws, and persecutes civil society with Soviet-style tactics. Ivanishvili is not just a silent partner—he is, today, Russia’s only true ally on the Black Sea. And he holds that position not by force or blackmail, but by choice.

Meanwhile, the region around Georgia is undergoing rapid transformation. Armenia has broken decisively with Moscow, aligning itself with the West and seeking reconciliation with Türkiye. Azerbaijan and Türkiye are building a strategic corridor that links the Caspian to Europe, bypassing Russia entirely. Central Asia is being pulled into China’s orbit

with trade, infrastructure, and even military cooperation flowing eastward. In this shifting landscape, Georgia should have been the West’s anchor in the region—politically stable, economically open, strategically located. Instead, it is morphing into a pariah state, out of sync with both its neighbors and its citizens.

Georgia today resembles an awkward, ill-shaped puzzle piece—one that no longer fits into the Western-led picture of regional security, prosperity, and cooperation. The Georgian people have not changed: their overwhelming support for EU membership, their protests against authoritarian drift, and their defiance in the face of repression prove this.

Georgia today resembles an awkward, ill-shaped puzzle piece—one that no longer fits into the Western-led picture of regional security, prosperity, and cooperation. The Georgian people have not changed: their overwhelming support for EU membership, their protests against authoritarian drift, and their defiance in the face of repression prove this. What has changed is the positioning of the ruling regime, which views loyalty to Russia as a survival strategy. But the geopolitical puzzle will be completed—with or without Georgia. The only question is when (and whether) the Georgian people and the West will finally act, with clarity and courage, to ensure that Georgia is shaped by its own democratic will, rather than by the influence of others. That window is still open, but not for long ■

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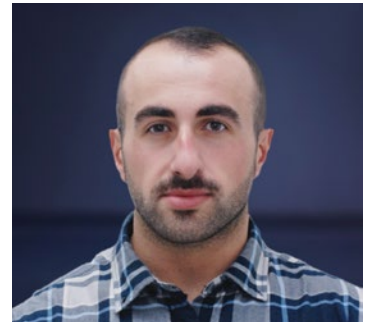
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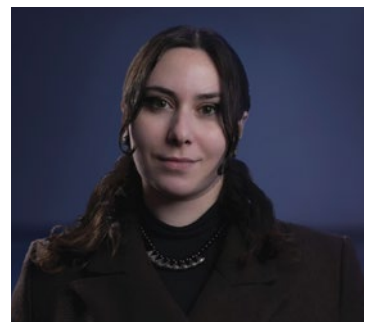
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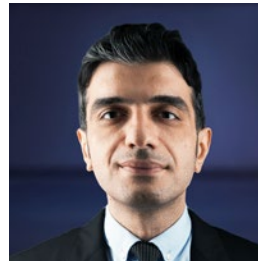
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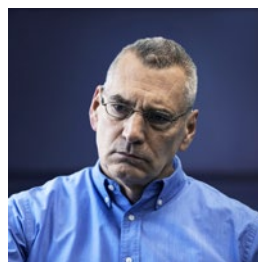
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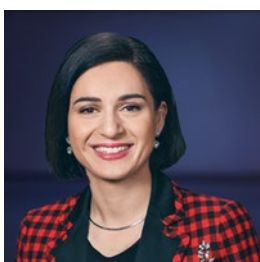
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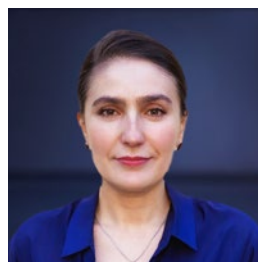
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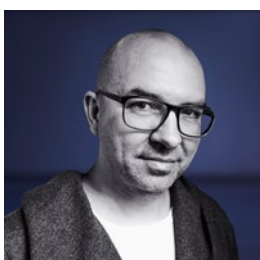
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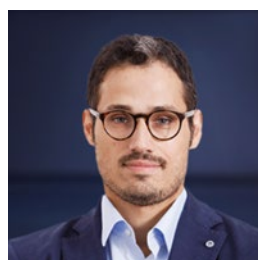
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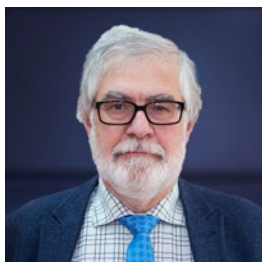
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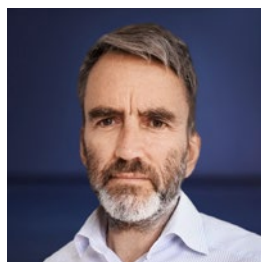
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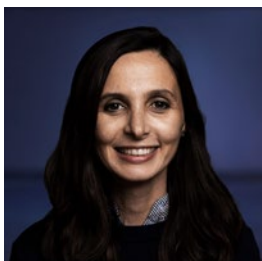
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Hans Gutbrod is Professor at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, and former regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers. He has observed elections in Georgia since 1999 and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics.



Tefta Kelmendi

Tefta Kelmendi is Deputy Director for the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her research focuses on EU policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, particularly EU enlargement and democracy promotion.



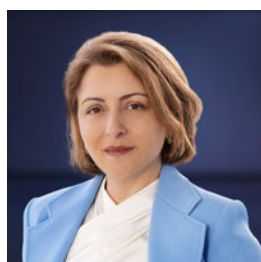
Tamara Kovziridze

Tamara Kovziridze held senior positions in the Government of Georgia (2004-2012), including Deputy Minister of Economy. As a partner at Reformatics consulting firm, she has advised governments across Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on regulatory reforms.



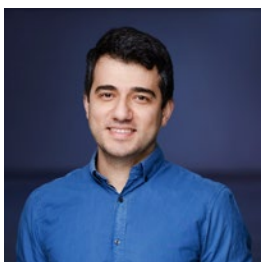
Grigol Mgaloblishvili

Ambassador Grigol Mgaloblishvili is a career diplomat with twenty years in Georgian Foreign Service. He has served as Prime Minister of Georgia, Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador to Türkiye, and faculty member at the U.S. National Defence University.



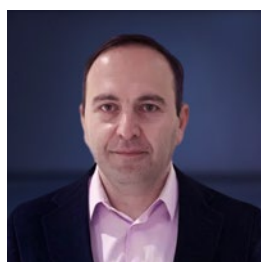
Eka Tkeshelashvili

Eka Tkeshelashvili is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. Former Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Georgia, she led key Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reform initiatives.



Tornike Zurabashvili

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher focusing on political and security affairs in Georgia and the Black Sea region. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University and extensive experience in development program management across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.



Miro Popkhadze

Miro Popkhadze is a Senior Fellow at the Delphi Global Research Center and a Non-Resident Fellow at FPRI. A former Representative of the Georgian Ministry of Defense to the UN, his work focuses on Russian foreign policy and Eurasian security. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech.

GEO POLITICS

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