

Legitimacy Crisis and the False Dilemma of Western Engagement with Georgia

The recent Washington summit, where Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev [took the spotlight](#), highlighted a sobering reality that Georgia is fully absent from the region's most critical diplomatic conversations.

That silence has resonated with experts and regional observers, raising unsettling questions: Can the Georgian Dream government still repair its fraying ties with Western partners or has the point of no return already been crossed? Can Georgia withstand the gravitational pull of Russia's tightening sphere of influence? And most importantly, how can Western allies best support the Georgian people as they struggle through this mounting crisis?

The sense of unease following the omission of the issue of Georgia from the Washington discussions inflamed more profound anxiety about the country's strategic position, stirring doubts about whether or not Georgia is becoming sidelined by new regional realities or, worse, lost in the ever-shifting game of great power rivalry. These questions are not theoretical; they strike at the heart of not only Georgia's aspirations for democracy and its Euro-Atlantic ambitions but also territorial integrity and sovereignty.

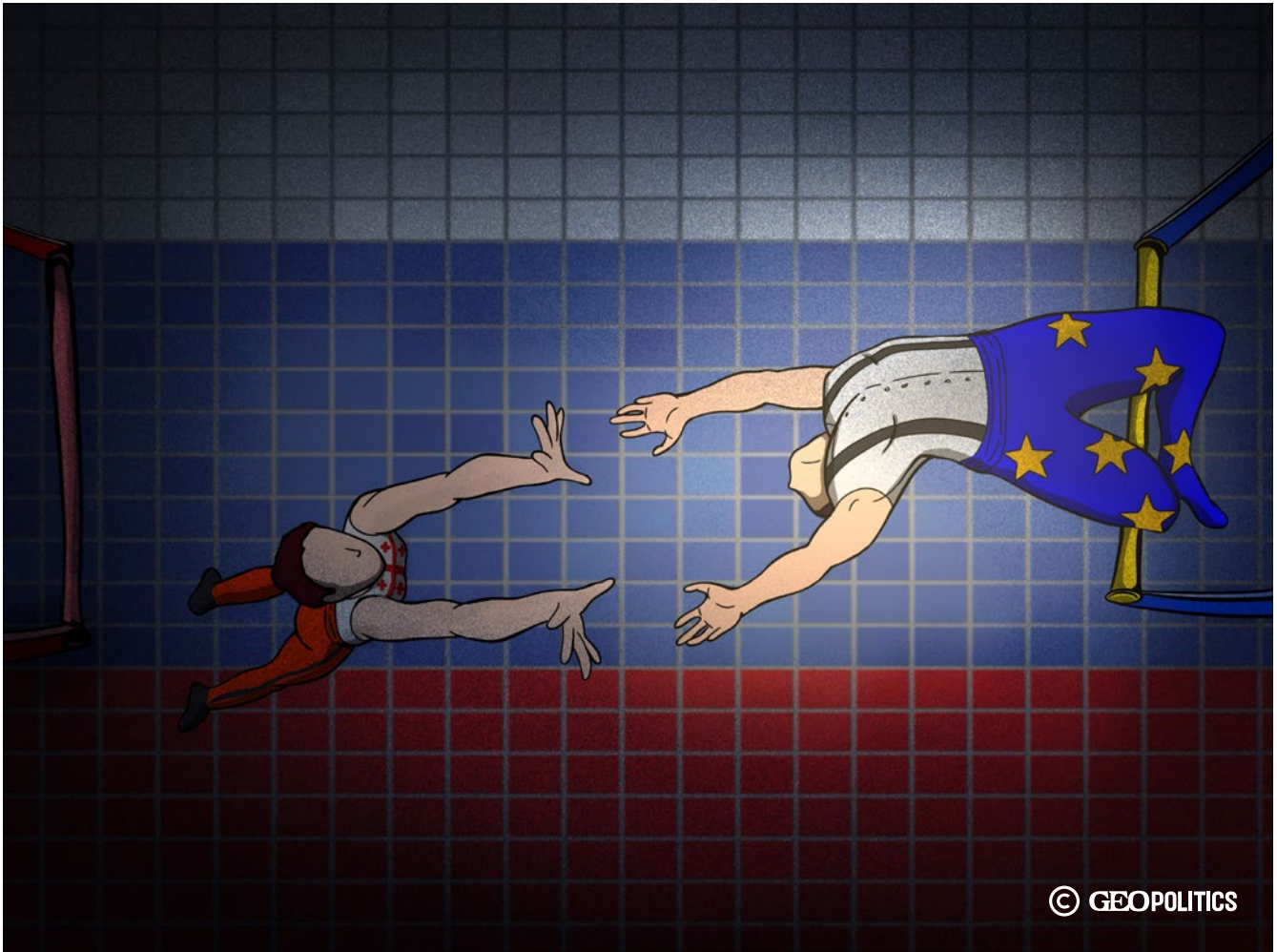
Regional Context: Chess with No Rules

For years, Russian influence in its European neighborhood was steadily growing. Moscow skillfully



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expanded its reach by weaponizing frozen conflicts, energy dependencies, and its historical ties to regional actors, all of which reinforced its leverage across the post-Soviet space. In the South Caucasus, Russia maintained a firm grip by its strategic presence in Armenia, its manipulation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and its persistent occupation of Georgia's territories.

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full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved so costly and overreaching that it drained Moscow's resources, exposed its strategic weaknesses, and shattered the illusion of regional dominance. The result was not merely a decline in influence but the collapse of long-standing leverages. Nowhere was this collapse more evident than in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Russia's grip was broken and its ability to dictate outcomes for Armenia and Azerbaijan came to a decisive end.

The recent U.S.-brokered agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan mark a turning point for the South Caucasus and the wider region. The new peace deal ended Russia's monopoly on security and connectivity issues, dismantled its role in conflict resolution through making the OSCE Minsk format obsolete, and paved the way for genuine reconciliation.

The TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace

and Prosperity) [project](#), linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenia under U.S. security guarantees, could cause a significant realignment of transit and energy routes in the South Caucasus. By breaking Moscow's stranglehold on logistics and moving past the endless "corridor" debates, Washington has stepped in as the key architect of a new regional framework that ties the Caucasus directly to Europe. This intervention extends beyond infrastructure and suggests that Washington may finally adopt a strategic approach to the South Caucasus.

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Georgia's Internal Context: A Legitimacy Crisis

The central question for Georgia in the context of ongoing geopolitical realignments remains: why is securing a place in the Western world not just a strategic goal but a matter of survival for Georgia?

The answer to this not-so-simple question has always been clear: the post-Cold War international order, built on rules and institutions designed to safeguard state sovereignty and democracy, is the only obstacle that could (not necessarily will, but could) prevent Russia from realizing its [declared](#) aim of reestablishing exclusive spheres of influence, starting with Georgia. If Georgia turns its back on the guarantors of international law and the West's protective frameworks, the durability of its sovereignty stands on perilously shaky ground – Moscow's goodwill. Rejecting the West means exclusion from the civilized world with all of the bitter consequences: exposed defense and security system, opaque investments, technological stagnation, exclusion from quality education, and economic hardship resembling that of Belarus or Venezuela. In places where rules break down, survival demands either overwhelming strength or powerful allies; Georgia's current policy undermines both.

Paradoxically, Georgia has [become](#) Russia's sphere of exclusive influence, importing many elements of Moscow's governance model. Power has concentrated overwhelmingly in the hands of one man, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who effectively controls the state's apparatus and decision-making. The ruling party openly [vowed](#) before elections to crush civil society and opposition and that pledge is now being ruthlessly [fulfilled](#). The government speaks only to its voters while branding dissenters as traitors, threatening them openly, and responding to months of sustained protests with rapid-fire repressive legislation, heavy fines, and arrests without credible evidence. Politicized police, operating with anonymity and impunity, indiscriminately detain citizens, subjecting many to verbal and physical abuse.

The judiciary barely functions independently, approving almost all of the prosecution demands mainly based on the executives' will, condemning hundreds of students, activists, and political lead-

ers. Nearly all politically sensitive court cases favor the state, incarcerating dozens of politicians and civil society representatives. This pattern unmistakably mirrors a Russian-style authoritarianism where law serves as a tool to preserve power rather than justice – rule by law instead of the rule of law.

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What differentiates Georgia from other Russian-style authoritarian systems, however, is the widespread popular resistance. The majority of its citizens reject this regime's capitulation to Russia and continue fighting for a European future. This legitimacy crisis is central: the Georgian Dream's problem is not simply electoral [fraud](#); it is their brazen betrayal of constitutionally enshrined national interests and the will of the majority. By employing authoritarian tactics to confuse the population and selling capitulation to Russia as pragmatism, the government cheats on the social contract. It uses the fog of war and global uncertainty around Ukraine to terrify citizens with war [narratives](#) and make decisions that subjugate Georgia to Moscow behind the public's back.

The high polarization of Georgian society is a direct product of the Georgian Dream's propaganda machine, modeled after standard authoritarian playbooks that sow confusion, weaken coherent resistance, and disorient citizens. Media fragmentation and political manipulation serve to paralyze collective action and obscure the fundamental choices confronting the nation.

The critical cleavage lies not in rival personali-

ties or parties but in whether Georgia, as a nation, chooses survival through alignment with the West, grounded in shared values and national interests, or allows itself to be pulled back into Russia's orbit, thus choosing survival of the regime over the survival of the nation. This is the clearest and starkest choice facing the country, which should be underpinning all political debates. Instead, aiming at a divided society that is easier to rule, the Georgian Dream deliberately blurs this fundamental choice and tries to replace it with various false dilemmas.

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A False Dilemma: Engaging with Georgia, Not Its Regime

Against the backdrop of realigning geopolitical vectors and changing power symmetries in the South Caucasus and Europe, several fundamental questions arise: Is Georgia slipping beyond the Western radar a logical consequence of broader shifts or merely a reflection of its diminishing strategic importance? Could it be part of a larger great-power bargain or is Georgia simply too

small to warrant attention? Few could have imagined that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would meet the U.S. president in Washington to discuss American interests in the Caucasus while Georgia, once the only true strategic partner in the region, was conspicuously sidelined. It is in this uncertain context that Georgia's future is quietly being determined.

Yet, some in the West still maintain the illusion that the Georgian Dream can return to a pro-Western path. This is a misplaced [illusion](#) and a very dangerous one, too. The European Union has continuously urged the ruling party to undertake democratic reforms and so has the United States. These calls show that some bureaucrats and indecisive politicians in the West still entertain ungrounded hope that the Georgian Dream can reverse the course, undo the repressive legislation, and bring back the all-but-dead political process. Such an approach also risks abandoning the Georgian people who continue to resist authoritarian backsliding.

At this point of escalation, The West's primary objective must be to prevent Russia from taking over Georgia. This goal is achievable through a proper policy and an effective strategy that still remains to be developed. Instead, a dangerous false dilemma has been creeping into policy circles in Brussels and Washington: Does Georgia need to be democratic to be a reliable ally? After all, there are a number of non-democratic states that are allies or, if not allies, then on good terms with the West.

Such a dilemma is the biggest gift for the Georgian Dream. They, together with the lobbyists, have been promoting transactional engagement with the West, irrelevantly comparing Georgia to countries like Azerbaijan, Central Asian states, or Gulf monarchies. This reasoning, at its core, reflects Russian hybrid tactics - an insidious "kill chain" strategy designed to impose a new status quo which no one dares to challenge. The new

strategic narrative, 'The Georgian Dream is here whether you like it or not and we will stay,' now demands acceptance of a Kremlin-aligned reality. The recent [letter](#) of the Georgian Dream President Mikheil Kavelashvili to President Trump is a testament to such an approach. "Let us reset the relations and start from a clean slate" - is a main message to Washington and, by extension, Brussels.

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But the West must recognize that an undemocratic Georgia will inevitably sink deeper into Russia's orbit, eliminating any true possibility of being a reliable partner to the West. The hybrid war Georgia faces is binary: it is either democratic and pro-Western or autocratic and beholden to Moscow. There is no middle ground. If the ruling power depends on Kremlin approval, there can be no truly transactional ties with the U.S. or Europe. Russian interests aim precisely to squeeze Western influence out of the region.

Democratic Resistance is the Best Bet for Georgia's Independence

The goal for Georgia's allies must be twofold. It is not enough to condemn the consolidation of authoritarianism, which is already firmly in place, as extensively documented in the previous issues of this journal. Equally important is the recognition that resistance still endures: in the streets, in prisons, and in courtrooms, Georgians continue to fight. At the peak of protests, as many as 300,000

people took to the streets daily. While disjointed and inconsistent policies from political forces and international partners have since contributed to a gradual decline in active public demonstrations, the number of those dissatisfied with the Georgian Dream's governance and aware of the country's grim trajectory continues to grow.

Due to the growing repressions and violence, the mood and spirit are noticeably depressing even in the ranks of the traditional supporters of the Georgian Dream. This dynamic is the very foundation of the Georgian Dream's legitimacy crisis and undeniable proof that the regime has crossed a point of no return: it can no longer effectively govern the country without using force and the more it relies on repression and force to cling to power, the sooner its hold will collapse.

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Consequently, it is imperative that a clear coherent strategy exists both inside Georgia and internationally, with a vision on how to support those who legitimately, lawfully, and justly fight for the country's fundamental interests. There can be no compromise on defending Georgia from being surrendered to Russia's control. The resistance movement deserves unequivocal backing because it embodies the hopes for sovereignty and freedom that the current regime undermines.

The future of Georgia hinges on the combination of the continued courage of its people and the steadfast commitment of its allies to stand with them, not with the authoritarian status quo. Only this path offers a chance for the free Western world to restore its leverage in Georgia and the wider region, not resuming talks with the regime that misplaced the agency of representing the interests of society and lost the ability to resist pressure from the Kremlin ■