

Saving Georgia's Democracy Helps Contain Russia

The sources of the ongoing Georgian political crisis are both domestic and international. It is the product of an incomplete process of democratization, carried out under arguably [inadequate Western tutelage](#). This process failed to deliver resilient institutions capable of withstanding populist authoritarian challenges, yet it created a sufficiently widespread popular demand for democratic governance to spark civil resistance. At the same time, the Georgian crisis is also a byproduct of shifting international circumstances. It is both a symptom and a result of the ongoing unravelling of the rules-based international order under pressure from revisionist powers such as Russia. A corollary of this is the local version of the global culture wars: a politically engineered struggle between traditional conservatism, presented as part of national identity, and progressive liberalism, portrayed as an external imposition.

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While the current issue has examined domestic aspects of the Georgian crisis, this article focuses on its international dimension. It argues that Georgia's dramatic turn towards authoritarianism should be seen as part and parcel of the current international context, defined by power-political competition between global authoritarian powers and the West. Consequently, it should be addressed in those terms—as a front in Russia's revisionist campaign, carried out by opportunistic local proxies, with direct consequences for the future of European security.



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The long-held assumptions about the resilience of Western democracies as global standard-setters—and the unquestioned superiority of democracy over other systems of governance—can no longer be taken for granted. The liberal international order that once facilitated the diffusion of democratic norms is giving way to a fragmented, multipolar, post-Cold War landscape—one more tolerant of authoritarianism and less inclined to scrutinize domestic abuses. This has enabled Georgia's ruling elite to make choices and pursue policies that previously would have been too costly, both politically and materially.

In such an environment, strategies for defending democracy should be viewed as part of the security agenda and must be recalibrated to remain effective amid these harsher global realities. Domestic actors resisting Russian-style authoritarianism need to move beyond the post-Cold War paradigm and lower their expectations of external support. Western actors, in turn, should make Georgia part of their Russia containment policy and revise their current “wait and see” stance, taking advantage of domestic sources of resistance and resilience before they are harmed beyond repair.

Local Drivers of Global Authoritarianism

Georgia [has taken](#) a dramatic turn toward authoritarianism. As this issue goes to press, seven leading civil society organizations have had their bank [accounts frozen](#) and a [growing number](#) of democracy activists languish in prison. The ruling Georgian Dream party is compensating for its crisis of legitimacy by putting opponents on trial, rewriting recent history, punishing dissent, and engaging in witch-hunts and character assassinations. Paradoxically, however, in their betrayal, Georgia's rulers may also have sown the seeds of renewal. Their power grab has provoked not only the most sustained collective resistance from a broad seg-

ment of Georgian society but also the emergence of a new kind of national hero.

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Georgia's new generation of democracy [warriors](#) is not made up of soldiers on the battlefield or revolutionaries with manifestos; they are ordinary women and men who chose defiance over silence and sacrifice over submission. They are driven not by ideology or political ambition but by the love of their country, the value of democracy, and the belief in freedom as a greater common good. They walk into prison cells undefeated, their dignity intact, and in doing so, they are giving a verdict of history to Georgia's ruling regime.

I have often argued that one of the reasons behind Georgia's incomplete democratic transition, which left the country oscillating between democratic breakthroughs and authoritarian retrenchment, is that we never had our own Václav Havel. We never had a leader who would build solid foundations of democracy and leave them intact without clinging to power or bending the system to their will. The lack of homegrown traditions of democracy has led many commentators to [conclude](#) that democracy was never truly internalized in Georgia. While this may be true at the level of political elites, the resistance unfolding in the country's streets has shown that at the societal level, Georgia's democracy is more [resilient](#) than often acknowledged. Thanks to [heroes](#) like jailed journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, poet Zviad Ratiani, actor Andro Chichinadze, and many more who emerged from a popular, diffuse, and non-hierarchical resistance movement, Georgia can claim ownership of democracy. No one can

say that it is alien to our soil or a gift imposed from abroad.

At the same time, Georgian democracy is confronting its most formidable challenge yet. Whereas democratic forces once relied on external backing, today it is the local autocrats who enjoy international support from like-minded regimes, armed with populist ideology and a well-rehearsed playbook of modern neo-authoritarianism. Under these circumstances, it is tempting to downplay the role of local agency—but that would be a mistake. Just as the sources of Georgia's democratic resistance are largely local, so too is its autocratic adversary.

There is no doubt that Russia benefits from the policies pursued by the Georgian Dream and actively encourages them. But placing too much emphasis on Moscow's role not only absolves Georgia's rulers of responsibility—a burden that is theirs to bear—it also misplaces the target of the struggle. Outsourcing agency to an external actor, however powerful and malign, makes it harder to defeat. It is both easier and more expedient to confront the Georgian Dream in order to contain Russia than the other way around.

External constraints often shape domestic policy choices, particularly in smaller and less powerful states. Georgia is no exception. Its rulers frequently insist that their overriding priority is the preservation of peace and stability amid mounting security threats and geopolitical volatility. Yet, it is far from clear how dismantling democratic institutions and consolidating power serve that purpose. How does purging the civil service of qualified professionals strengthen stability? How does concentrating decision-making in the hands of a narrow circle of loyalists—and ultimately one unaccountable ruler—equip Georgia to navigate a turbulent regional environment? The ruling party bears responsibility for the choices it has made and it must be held accountable for the consequences.

Even if Russia applied pressure, Georgia's rulers had options. They could have followed [the Serbian model](#): preserving a hybrid system, keeping channels open with the EU and Western partners, while maintaining cordial relations with Russia and expanding ties with non-Western actors such as China. At first, they drew inspiration from [the Hungarian model](#) and could have remained within its bounds. Instead, they went far beyond it—jailing opponents, manipulating elections, and teetering on the verge of becoming a fully blown autocracy. It was the Georgian Dream that chose to go as far as it did, placing Georgia squarely in the anti-Western camp and [using](#) popular fear of war as a convenient cover and a propaganda instrument.

Meanwhile, other states in the region have [sought to capitalize](#) on Russia's distraction with Ukraine by diversifying their partnerships, aiming to reduce dependence on Moscow. For the first time, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not aligning with Russia against one another but are instead pursuing their interests independently—and often in defiance of Russian preferences. A potential [U.S. role](#) in managing the so-called Zangezur corridor, along with the prospect of normalized relations between Armenia and Türkiye, would further erode Russia's influence. In Central Asia, too, states are emerging as increasingly autonomous actors, fostering levels of intra-regional cooperation that have hitherto not been seen. Collectively, these shifts weaken Moscow's ability to manipulate local conflicts as tools of pressure and power projection.

Georgia bucks this trend. Rather than seizing the moment to deepen its European integration and seek stronger security guarantees from Western partners, the ruling elite has chosen to edge closer to Russia, mimicking Russian propaganda that depicts Europe as a source of evil, liberal decadence, and the threat of war. Their goal, aligned with Russia's strategic objectives, is not only to weaken support for European integration among Georgians but also to undermine their sense of

belonging to Europe and their self-identification as Europeans. As a result, Georgia has lost its traditional Western partners and allies without gaining new ones, making it an easy target of Russia's expansionist ambitions. Instead of diversifying its foreign policy and strengthening Georgia's regional and international standing, the government has all but [abandoned](#) foreign policy altogether. This outcome stems from deliberate policy choices, not from geopolitical inevitability. Yet, those choices were made possible by a shifting international environment—one that enabled Georgia's turn toward anti-Western authoritarianism at relatively little cost.

Georgia as a Symptom of a Multipolar Global Order

The changing international environment has enabled Georgia's autocratic drift, exposing the limits of Western—especially European—leverage over neo-authoritarian regimes such as the Georgian Dream in the context of emerging multipolarity. Georgia's case is symptomatic of a fracturing global order, defined by intensifying competition among rival centers of power and the replacement of value-based multilateralism with transactional bilateralism. While the exact contours of this reordering are not yet clear, several features can already be identified. The Georgian Dream proved itself to be well-adapted at exploiting these features in order to strengthen its hand and push back against popular resistance.

The first is the rise of global authoritarian powers, notably Russia and China, which have long sought to challenge the liberal international order established under U.S. hegemony. What unites them is the ambition to reshape that order in ways that serve their interests: privileging non-intervention in domestic affairs, redefining sovereignty as an absolute right rather than a responsibility, and asserting claims to spheres of influence. In their

vision, major states carve out regional hegemonies and international stability rests not on universal norms but on a balance of power and mutual recognition of strategic interests.

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While this may resemble a reprise of the 19th-century Concert of Europe, one significant difference stands out: the rise of so-called middle powers, increasingly assertive and determined to safeguard “strategic autonomy” in both domestic and foreign policy. States such as India, Türkiye, Brazil, and Indonesia, among others, are not interested in taking sides or forming value-based alignments. They, too, favor transactional, interest-driven policies designed to maximize benefits in a context of multipolar competition. They, too, seek to limit external scrutiny of their domestic affairs and show little concern for universal human rights or governance models abroad. The consequence is not a strengthening of democratic norms but the normalization of autocratic deviations. Moreover, a growing number of states now view the Chinese model of authoritarian development as an increasingly attractive alternative to Western liberal democracy.

The second and most consequential characteristic of the current international environment is the shift in U.S. posture under the second Trump administration. The greatest challenge to the liberal international order now comes from the very country that created it. Trump has argued that the system built by and for the United States has ultimately undermined American interests, drained resources, and distracted Washington from the arenas of most critical competition. His administration, too, has [embraced](#) multipolarity—seeing in it a way to scale back U.S. global commitments,

consolidate power, and position America more effectively for strategic rivalry. As Julian Gewirtz [observed](#) in *Foreign Affairs*, the result is that ‘key U.S. partners are less aligned with Washington, autocracy faces less pushback, and China—along with its strategic partner Russia—has far greater freedom of action and global influence.’

One of the Trump administration’s earliest moves was the wholesale [closure](#) of USAID missions and a sharp reduction in U.S. democracy promotion programs worldwide, including those backed by the National Endowment for Democracy. This decision signaled—and accelerated—what appears to be the third defining feature of the new era: the decline of international NGOs. Rising in the aftermath of the Cold War, these organizations expanded globally, promoting human rights and democracy with generous backing from Western governments and philanthropies. As their influence grew, they faced legitimate criticism for at times resembling businesses—profit-generating machines not entirely free from corruption or partisan bias. Yet, for all their flaws, they achieved a great deal of good.

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The very existence of Georgia’s vibrant civil society—acting as a thorn in the side of the authoritarian state and exerting pressure for democratization—is itself the product of years of external democracy support, which became steadily internalized. Unsurprisingly, many governments have pushed back, viewing both domestic and international civil society organizations as threats to regime stability and control. Georgia’s “foreign agents” law is only one example of a much broad-

er trend. As Sarah Bush and Jennifer Hadden [note](#), more than 130 countries have adopted restrictions on international and foreign-funded NGOs. With the loss of U.S. backing, civil society organizations face mounting pressure and, in many non-democracies, the prospect of disappearing altogether.

For regimes like the Georgian Dream, this shift is a gift from heaven. It vindicates their disdain for civil society and insulates them from external pressure. Ruling party officials [openly celebrated](#) the closure of USAID, branding it an agent of the “Deep State” in a bid to court the Trump administration and secure U.S. backing for their policies. The spread of conspiratorial political discourse—demonizing opponents and deepening social polarization—has long become a defining feature of Georgia’s political life, echoing global trends. The “Deep State” narrative has replaced earlier theories of a [“Global War Party”](#) and now dominates the Georgian Dream’s rhetoric. Anyone who dissents—from local democracy activists to European officials and diplomats—is smeared as an agent of the “Deep State,” allegedly plotting to drag Georgia into war with Russia and impose “woke” ideology on traditional Georgian society. The irony, of course, is that there is no “Deep State” in Georgia apart from the Georgian Dream with its shadow governance and [captured state](#). No military, no bureaucracy, no institutions stand independent of the ruling party’s control. And if there is one political force that has made Georgia more vulnerable to Russia’s aggression, it is the Georgian Dream itself.

Containing Russia by Saving Georgian Democracy

As the post-Cold War order unravels, the old certainties are disappearing with it. Established democracies no longer appear immune to the pressures of populist authoritarianism, while extreme polarization has become a national security chal-

lenge both east and west. Today, the staunchest defenders of democracy are found in places like Georgia and Serbia, where the simple boons of democratic life could never be taken for granted. At the same time, Russia's strategic ambitions have pushed well beyond its so-called "near abroad," reaching into the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. The war in Ukraine is only the most visible, conventional theatre of Russia's wider global campaign of subversion and disruption—and its principal target is Europe.

The Georgian case demonstrates, however, that the two are inseparable. Saving Georgia's democracy is the best way to push back against Russia's regional interests and disruptive global ambitions.

As the old belief in transforming Russia through trade and political engagement wanes, a new approach is urgently needed to defend Europe and its neighborhood. There is a risk, however, that the long-overdue emphasis on security and defense will come at the expense of democracy and human rights. The Georgian case demonstrates, however, that the two are inseparable. Saving Georgia's democracy is the best way to push back against Russia's regional interests and disruptive global ambitions.

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Emmanuel Macron has [described](#) Russia as a predator at Europe's door—an "ogre" that devours its neighbors in order to sustain itself and has no interest in peace. After years of engagement and accommodation, Europe has finally recognized Russia as a threat that must be contained. This requires Western allies to devise a new policy of containment, deciding not only how but also where Russia must be denied the ability to endanger Europe. Ukraine is the obvious priority. Less obvious, but no less essential, is saving Georgia's democracy. The fight is ultimately for Georgians to win, yet it is becoming an increasingly lonely battle. Crusading for human rights may belong to a bygone era, but reducing threats on Europe's doorstep remains urgent. Georgia's slide into an anti-Western authoritarian state would be Russia's gain, a tool to be weaponized in its future confrontations with Europe. Conversely, preserving Georgia's democracy should be recognized as a vital pillar of any credible Russia containment strategy.

However, if Western allies, weary of Georgia's perpetual crisis, convince themselves the country is already a lost cause, they will hand Georgian Dream its greatest prize yet. This resignation, the infamous "Georgia Fatigue," would become the next big meal for the ruling party, like the insatiable Snake on an old Nokia screen, fattening itself on every morsel of Western indifference ■