

# GEO POLITICS

№23 | OCTOBER 2025



# **GEO POLITICS**

Issue №23  
October, 2025

# Our Mission

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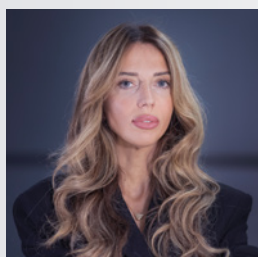
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

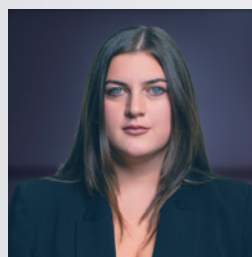
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia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



**Ana Khurtsidze**

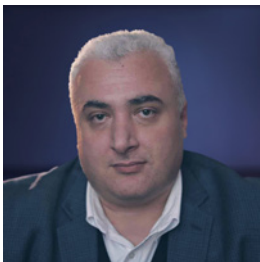
President of Gnomon Wise  
and Dean of Law School  
of the University of Georgia



**Irina Gurgenchashvili**

Executive Director of  
Gnomon Wise

# Contributors



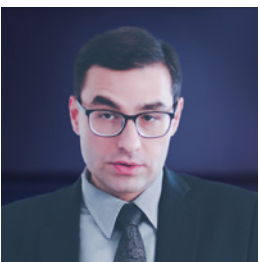
## Sergi Kapanadze Editor and Contributor

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



## Thornike Gordadze Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at 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).



## Shota Gvineria Contributor

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



## Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

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





### **Natalie Sabanadze** Contributor

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



### **Vano Chkhikvadze** Contributor

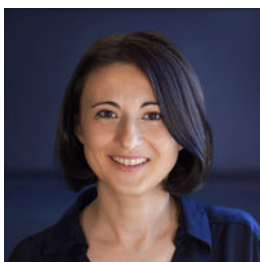
Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the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



### **Jaba Devdariani** Contributor

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

# Guest Contributor



### **Adina Revol** Guest Contributor

Adina Revol, PhD in political science from Sciences Po Paris, is the former spokesperson of the European Commission in France. She is the author of *Breaking with Russia – Europe's Energy Awakening* (Odile Jacob, 2024). A recognized expert on EU affairs, the geopolitics of energy and Russia's hybrid warfare in Europe and Eastern Europe, she teaches at Sciences Po and at ESCP Europe. Drawing on her experience of growing up in communist Romania, she brings unique insight into today's geopolitical challenges. She is a regular guest in the French media.

# The Grand Oligarch Hotel: Checking Out of Democracy, Checking into Authoritarianism

**G**eorgia today resembles *The Grand Oligarch Hotel*, with an elegant façade that still stands, but with the rooms occupied by power and fear held and instilled by a single man – Bidzina Ivanishvili. Elections are held, commissions are created, laws are passed, and foreign policy is implemented, and yet each process now functions as an interior decoration for a system designed to exclude accountability and strengthen the power of one man and one party at the expense of everyone else. This edifice, in essence, is Russian, despite being located in Georgia. In other countries of the region, such as Moldova and Ukraine, Moscow's attempts to recreate this *Grand Oligarch Hotel*, through electoral manipulation, brute force, and a disinformation avalanche, are met with resistance from local governments, resilient civil society actors, and European allies. In Georgia, however, the Russian model is winning, despite the brave resistance of thousands of Georgians who counter it through media, endless protests, and the political process, albeit not always successfully.

This issue of *GEOpolitics* traces how the façade of democracy has become the region's dominant political architecture – polished, stable, but increasingly uninhabitable. Across the articles, a similar pattern emerges: institutions that once mediated power are now used to entrench and consolidate it; elections, meant to renew legitimacy, only reproduce control, and foreign policy,

once aimed at protecting national interests and sovereignty, has turned inward, leading to isolation. The contributors in this issue examine this transformation from different angles: the capture of local governance, the neutralization of the opposition, the subjugation of law, the erosion of civil society, the corrosion of diplomacy, and the fragmentation of the liberal world that once offered protection.

Thornike Gordadze opens this issue with a study of Georgia's experiment in "local self-government," explaining how local elections have long lost relevance for the Georgian public and opposition parties. Through the lens of the recent municipal elections, he demonstrates how the rhetoric of decentralization conceals a counterproductive process: the systematic subordination of municipalities to central authority. The vocabulary of European governance—autonomy, transparency, accountability, and bottom-up self-rule – survives, but only in form. The essence, however, is the centralization of power, which renders local elections a senseless exercise. The outcome is a system that looks democratic from a distance yet reproduces the habits of control and dependency associated with Russia's model of vertical oligarchic one-party power. For Gordadze, this explains why local elections were boycotted, why voter turnout was low, and why the political process and protest have spilled into the streets from the ballot boxes.

Adina Revol provides the contrasting case. Her account of Moldova's September parliamentary elections documents how a small state facing Russia's largest hybrid interference campaign to date managed to preserve the integrity of its vote and save democracy from external intervention from Moscow. The Kremlin's "Kiriienko Plan" combined oligarch-supported candidates, massive vote buying, financial schemes, intimidation, cyberattacks, disinformation, and the mobilization of Transnistrian and other pro-Russian voters. However, Moldovan institutions, backed by EU partners, responded with transparency, public exposure, and legal restraint. Revol's analysis identifies the factors that turned a vulnerable state into a resilient one: consistent political will, a cooperative civil society, and visible international support. The comparison with Georgia is unavoidable: both share similar vulnerabilities, but only one still uses its institutions to defend itself. The other uses Moscow's playbook to monopolize power and fend off democratic resistance.

From this regional contrast, Shota Gvineria brings the focus back to Georgia's elections, where the mechanics of participation have lost political meaning. He describes a landscape in which voting and abstaining served the same result – collective loss for the opposition forces and strengthening of authoritarianism for the Georgian Dream. The 4 October local elections, which had the lowest turnout in the country's modern history, revealed how authoritarian captured state operates when there is no competition remaining. Gvineria traces the consequences – a disoriented opposition, citizens torn between cynicism, nihilism, and anger, and the gradual acceptance that nothing can change through a formal vote or an election boycott. His solution is "more unity," which entails a joint, broader coordinated effort, a better communication strategy, and more targeted and smarter support from the Western world.

Vano Chkhikvadze continues this analysis by examining the collapse of Georgia's independent civic sphere. NGOs, media, and universities, once the essential components of civil society, now face financial blockades, criminal charges, and intimidation. Chkhikvadze links this repression to Europe's hesitant response and increasing sentiments in Brussels that a "human rights first" strategy could be substituted with the "economy first" approach. This pragmatism, while seeming convenient in the short run, could undermine the EU's normative power and its attractiveness for the EU aspirant states and global pro-democracy forces. In the case of Georgia, the EU's reliance on cautious statements and delayed sanctions has, intentionally or not, signaled to the Georgian Dream that its anti-democratic actions carry few and light consequences. Chkhikvadze calls for a coordinated, practical response – a donor conference to keep civil organizations operational and a clear political message that conditionality still matters.

Sergi Kapanadze continues to explore the repressive mechanisms of the Georgian Dream with a focus on the Parliamentary investigative commission chaired by Thea Tsulukiani. The article outlines how procedural instruments once designed for oversight have been inverted into mechanisms of accusation and political revenge. Kapanadze argues that a 450-page-long report is less a document of inquiry than a political weapon designed to criminalize the opposition, smear NGOs and universities as agents of subversion, and legitimize the regime's next step: the formal banning of dissent. The article also overviews why the Commission is unconstitutional, biased, and politically motivated, making a mockery of the parliamentary oversight and investigative powers while imitating the democratic process.

Temuri Yakobashvili examines the collapsing foreign policy of Georgia, analyzing it through the lens of the country's failed appearance at the 80th

session of the UN General Assembly. He describes how the Georgian delegation, led by a figurehead “president” rather than legitimate leadership, arrived in New York without allies, agenda, or purpose — a striking symbol of how isolated the country has become. Yakobashvili argues that this absence of direction reflects a deeper phenomenon he calls neo-isolationism: a self-imposed retreat from international engagement driven by Bidzina Ivanishvili’s personal distrust of the outside world. Once a state that thrived on diplomatic initiative, Georgia now treats foreign policy as a risk to be avoided rather than a tool of influence. The article connects this diplomatic vacuum to domestic authoritarianism, since the Georgian Dream government no longer seeks legitimacy abroad because it no longer derives it from its citizens at home. In Yakobashvili’s view, Georgia’s foreign policy has not simply failed but has been deliberately withdrawn, leaving the country standing alone and isolated in an empty hall it once helped to fill.

Jaba Devdariani concludes this issue with an examination of how the widening rift between the United States and the European Union is reshaping the environment in which smaller democracies, such as Georgia, operate. He argues that what was once a coherent liberal order now shows deep fractures — between Washington’s increasingly populist, power-driven understanding of democracy and Brussels’ procedural, value-based model. This divergence, he notes, leaves Georgia’s pro-Western forces without a clear point of reference, reliable protection, or a coherent narrative. Devdariani traces how the Georgian Dream government exploits these divisions, importing U.S.-style culture wars and using European ambivalence to justify its own authoritarian drift. He warns that Georgian liberals risk mimicking

the West’s internal disputes instead of focusing on shared democratic fundamentals. The article concludes that the real fault line no longer runs between Europe and America but between the principles of freedom and their managed, illiberal imitations. To survive, Georgia must establish its own fixed point of democracy — a coherent set of values that is independent of the West’s contradictions and resilient against Moscow’s influence.

Taken together, the articles in this edition of *GEO-politics* outlines a single regional dynamic. Russia exports not just troops, tanks, and death, but also its governance system and the techniques of control that enable authoritarianism to become stronger and more ruthless, while disguising its actions in democratic language and mimicking democratic processes, such as elections, commissions, or foreign policy implementation. Moldova’s experience, however, shows that resistance is still possible; Georgia’s trajectory demonstrates what happens when resistance stops. Between them lies the question facing Europe: whether to treat Russian style authoritarianism as a tolerable variation or as a direct threat to the continent’s political order. And if the latter is the answer, what else can be done to counter it?

The *Grand Oligarch Hotel* stands as a metaphor for this moment. Its façade remains intact; the guests are well-dressed, and the rules are politely observed. Yet every corridor leads back to the same locked door: power without accountability. For Georgia, and for those watching it, the task is not to admire the building’s architecture but to decide how and when to leave it or change it ■

With Respect,  
Editorial Team



# Content

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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 Illusion of Self-Government: Why Local Elections Don't Empower Citizens in Georgia

Local democracy is often considered the very foundation of democracy because it involves the direct participation of citizens in managing public affairs at the level closest to them: the municipality, the region, or the neighborhood. Local democracy is often seen as the school of democracy, a space for the concrete experimentation of democratic values: participation, responsibility, proximity, and solidarity. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous *Democracy in America*, wrote that “Communal institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science.” For Tocqueville, local democracy (communes, municipalities) educates citizens in freedom and responsibility. It is a training ground for national democracy.

Participation in managing the citizens' immediate living environment is an activity that fosters citizens' autonomy, a fundamental component of

any democratic system. This autonomy is far from perfect, even in countries where democracy is more rooted than in formerly communist states, but “without it, the political system is in ruins,” as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in *The Social Contract*.

## Power Without Elections, Elections Without Power

Two examples illustrate the state of local democracy in Georgia. This illustration applies to most countries with imperfect or embryonic democracies and represents a serious risk, as it contains the seeds that can be exploited by anyone wishing to establish an authoritarian system.

The first example dates to early October 2012, when billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian



**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).







Dream (GD) coalition won the parliamentary elections against Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). Barely had the results been counted and the defeat acknowledged by the president himself, when members of municipal councils and mayors across multiple localities began to leave the defeated ruling party. Some directly joined the new majority party at the national level, while others deemed it modestly valuable to qualify themselves as "independents," thereby allowing the mayoralties to pass into the opposing camp.

In some municipalities, GD activists stormed the offices and seats of local powers, even though local elections were not scheduled until two years later. For these individuals, the UNM was defeated, and power, money, and material benefits associated with elected office should have passed to the new authorities, even though victory was only obtained at the national level. Some municipalities nevertheless kept the old majority, barely, until the elections. In the first post-Saakashvili municipal elections in 2014, GD gained control of all municipalities.

The second example comes from the 2021 municipal elections. GD, having been in power for nine years and controlling 100% of the country's political power, had by then practically completed [the capture of the state](#) institutions and established near-total control over the bureaucratic apparatus in its most minor details. The mastery of the electoral process was already well-honed, with its share of vote-buying, intimidation, and mobilization of administrative resources. But in October 2021, an unexpected event [occurred](#): as the ruling party focused on overturning the first-round loss in all major cities (*Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Zugdidi, and Rustavi*) by invalidating an unprecedented number of pro-opposition votes and organizing absolute mobilization of its voters, GD lost the election in the small municipality of Tsalenjikha (less than 30,000 inhabitants) in western Georgia. Tsalenjikha was the only municipality in the coun-

try where the opposition prevailed: the UNM list, led by Giorgi Kharchilava, a popular local figure, obtained 51.12% of the vote in the second round. Kharchilava's victory was unexpected for the government, which had not foreseen the defeat. Not surprisingly, the then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili publicly described the opposition's victory in one locality as an [anomaly](#) and even a [betrayal](#) by Tsalenjikha inhabitants towards the country, since elsewhere GD had won.

The GD's reaction was revealing of the regime's very particular conception of democracy. Beyond the apparent lack of political culture — the Prime Minister seemed unaware that mayors of *Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, and even Istanbul, Ankara, and Budapest* represented opposition parties — the ruling party employed all kinds of punitive measures against the rebellious municipality, including ignoring the opposition mayor during official visits to the region and meeting only representatives of their own party in Tsalenjikha.

These examples may seem exotic to a European observer or anyone from a country where democracy is a routine. More than symptoms, they are causes of a lack of democratic rooting in these countries: the absence or weakness of local democracy makes it difficult for democracy to exist at the central level, complicates the existence of political parties in the classical (Western) sense, and instead produces parties that are actually groups of individuals serving oligarchic interests or representing conglomerates of local notables who can change political labels according to circumstances.

## A History of Centralism

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'democratic transition,' establishing local democracy was the most challenging task alongside creating an independent judiciary. Although these are two distinct concepts, the analogy is not entirely



absurd because both can limit executive and legislative power at the central level. Accepting that these powers be independent (judiciary) or in the hands of a political opponent (local authorities) is the indispensable foundation of a genuine democratic regime.

***After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'democratic transition,' establishing local democracy was the most challenging task alongside creating an independent judiciary.***

In Georgia, local power never truly existed during the Soviet era. The brief experience of the First Republic, with elections held between 1918 and 1920 for 20 regional councils (called *Eroba*, at the *Mazra* or *Uyezd* level), 26 municipal councils, and over 400 village councils (*Temi* level), was insufficient to establish the tradition. Even though the *Eroba* achieved remarkable things in 2-3 years (opening schools, libraries, building roads, including railways, founding theaters and municipal enterprises).

After the collapse of the ultra-centralized Soviet system organized around the *Gosplan*, the country went through a chaotic 1990s marked by civil wars and wars against the Russian invasion in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region. This instability period did not allow the governments of the first and second presidents, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze, to establish genuine local self-government. Central authorities appointed by the executive governed regions and localities: *Pre-fects* under Gamsakhurdia and *Governors* (at the regional or *Mkhare* level, about ten in total) and *Gamgebelis* (at the smaller *Raioni* level, 74 in total) under Shevardnadze. The national executive also appointed mayors of major cities.

## Decentralization Without Empowerment

The first local elections [took place](#) on November 15, 1998, when local councils (at the city and *Raioni* levels) were elected by direct universal suffrage. Mayors and *Gamgebelis* continued to be appointed but had to report to the elected entities — municipal councils (*Sakrebulo*). It is interesting to recall that, despite the centrally appointed mayorship of Tbilisi, the first direct universal municipal elections in the capital brought victory to opposition parties. In 1998, the *Labour Party* won the presidency of the local council (*Sakrebulo*), while in 2002, the opposition party's leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, was elected as a *Sakrebulo* chief. In subsequent elections, however, ruling parties consistently won, and previous opposition victories can be explained by the relative weakness of the ruling party at the time (Eduard Shevardnadze's *Citizens' Union*), and also by the fact that the appointed mayor retained most of the power, and the role and influence of *Sakrebulos* was not that high.

Over the years, legislation allowed more local democracy, notably introducing the election of mayors, as they began to be elected first by *Sakrebulos* and then (from 2014) by direct universal suffrage. However, this process was not necessarily accompanied by the empowerment of citizens at the local level. On the contrary, one can affirm that the dominant national political force gradually strengthened its grip on local power structures, using elections as a tool.

Georgia's decentralization reforms were often inspired by the process of rapprochement with the EU and European integration. Initially, the Council of Europe and later the EU were key drivers behind these reforms, which the ruling elites accepted in response to the European aspirations of the vast majority of Georgians. For example, the ratification in 2004 of the [European Charter of Local](#)

[Self-Government](#) served as a significant catalyst for reforms, as did the signing of the Association Agreement ([AA](#)) with the EU in 2013.

***Institutional decentralization, when not accompanied by fiscal and political decentralization, cannot create the necessary conditions for the emergence of local democracy.***

However, institutional decentralization, when not accompanied by fiscal and political decentralization, [cannot create](#) the necessary conditions for the emergence of local democracy. Consequently, this also undermines democracy at the national level.

Although central governments formally adopted decentralization reforms, they were not genuinely prepared to implement them. Instead, they often used these reforms to consolidate and centralize power. Some scholars have [described](#) this phenomenon as “decentralization without empowerment.” Empowerment can only occur when institutional reform is accompanied by two essential processes: fiscal decentralization and the emergence of a local political class, fostered by the development of a local political life with its own politicians, parties, and political groups.

Yet in Georgia, no central government has truly encouraged these processes. For instance, while launching decentralization reforms, the United National Movement [refused](#) to abandon fiscal centralism. The introduction of the flat tax—justified by a particular macroeconomic vision—deprived municipalities of revenue and made them more dependent on central transfers. In 2009, the same UNM created the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development, which, in practice, became the institution that kept the regions in a state of dependency and subordination.

As for the GD government, it initially adopted several reforms, encouraged by the Association Agreement it had signed earlier. These included the direct universal election of mayors and the abolition of the *Gamgebeli* position. However, many other planned reforms were quickly abandoned; for example, the creation of Regional Councils (at the *Mkhare* level) and the election of regional presidents by these councils to replace the centrally appointed *Rtsmunebuli*, who do not have the legal status of a self-governing authority. Some gains were even reversed, such as the removal of self-governing city status for 7 out of 12 cities, which were reintegrated into their respective district (*Raioni*) municipalities.

## No Fiscal Power

GD did nothing to increase fiscal decentralization. The 2019 reform, which allocated 19% of VAT revenues to local budgets, [has been postponed](#). This mechanism was to gradually replace equalization transfers, which had previously been the main form of fiscal transfer. Even when implemented, the system still implied dependency on the center, since VAT is collected at the national level before redistribution. While the overall volume of transfers to local budgets has increased significantly—from approximately GEL 1 billion in 2013 to over GEL 3 billion today—fiscal decentralization remains very limited. Georgia ranks among the countries with the lowest share of locally collected taxes, particularly property tax, contributing less than 5% of total state revenues.

In addition to VAT-related transfers (accounting for nearly 60% of total transfers), capital transfers and targeted transfers make up the remaining third. There are also so-called special transfers, which are volatile and represent the funds most directly linked to political clientelism—statistics show significant spikes in these during election years.

## Local Governance as Clientelism: Where Patronage Replaces Politics

The current state of decentralization in Georgia does not allow for the development of genuine local democracy. Local political life is either virtually non-existent or exists only in a fragmented and limited form. The system does not support the existence of strong opposition political parties in the regions. When the provision of public goods and social services is monopolized by local administrations controlled by the ruling party, and law enforcement is also at the service of the regime, the space for political debate and competition is drastically narrowed.

Two other institutions with a full territorial presence further reduce this space: the Church and the criminal or para-criminal underworld (composed of idle youth - *Kai Bichebi*, claiming to “control the streets” and “uphold a masculinist morality”). These forces are regime allies, albeit in constant negotiation over the terms of the alliance.

Opposition politicians, especially in the regions, often struggle to survive due to a lack of access to public funding. As *Max Weber* once said, a professional politician lives “for and from politics.” Politics is a profession and a career path essential to democracy; it should not be something morally questionable. To engage in politics properly, it must be a politician’s primary—if not exclusive—occupation. This requires specialized skills and knowledge, and must be practiced seriously, unlike amateurs or dilettantes.

If a politician cannot be elected and compensated through an electoral mandate—a process that began in Europe in the late 19th century—then politics becomes the domain of “notables,” thanks to their wealth, capital, and income. Since ruling parties in authoritarian regimes do not want genuine

opposition parties to emerge, they aim to prevent professional political careers by monopolizing both elective offices, their associated compensations, and public sector jobs.

***Since ruling parties in authoritarian regimes do not want genuine opposition parties to emerge, they aim to prevent professional political careers by monopolizing both elective offices, their associated compensations, and public sector jobs.***

This explains why opposition parties struggle to build permanent structures in the regions and why they seek wealthy patrons among oligarchs (for instance, Mamuka Khazaradze’s *Lelo – Strong Georgia*). As GD’s authoritarianism becomes more entrenched, publicly funded political careers have become inaccessible, and the only opposition party maintaining regional structures—the UNM—is now on the verge of being declared illegal and banned.

## The Death of Local Politics: No Life Outside the Ruling Party

As for locally elected officials under the GD label, they are aware that their election directly depends on party loyalty. Once in office, their ability to maintain their political clientele through the provision of public goods (such as road maintenance, schools, medical services, and social assistance) also depends on transfers from the center.

Among these GD local officials is a distinct category of local notables—prominent figures and wealthy businessmen who do not seek to live off political office but rather to protect and grow their business interests. These [regional barons](#) often sit in the national parliament. Before the switch to a fully proportional electoral system, they were

elected in majoritarian constituencies where they financed their own campaigns, delivered votes for GD's national proportional list, and donated funds to the party. Their relationship with GD resembled a franchise contract: in return for public contracts won by their companies, a portion of the profits was donated back to the party.

After the elimination of majoritarian MPs, these millionaire MPs from the provinces joined the party lists through a calculated cost-benefit approach. These local *minigarchs* are deeply entrenched in their regions and often change political affiliations depending on which party rules the country. There are emblematic cases of individuals winning elections under a different party banner each time. On successive election posters, the faces remain the same, only the party changes. This [includes](#) figures like [Anzor Bolkvadze](#) from mountainous Khulo in Adjara, Enzel Mkoyan from Ninotsminda, Javakheti, and Gocha Enukidze from Ambrolauri, Racha, all of whom have been elected at various times under the Citizens' Union, the United National Movement, and Georgian Dream.

***The country's leaders have mastered the optics of reform while maintaining the substance of control. What results is a façade of local self-governance – elections without empowerment, councils without autonomy, and mayors without means.***

This fragmentary form of local democracy, like Tocqueville's failing school of democracy, is at least partly responsible for the shortcomings of Georgian democracy as a whole. In Georgia, local democracy has long remained an unfulfilled promise – often invoked in reform agendas, but rarely pursued with conviction. While legislative changes and international agreements have at times nudged the system toward greater decentralization, the reality on the ground remains one

of entrenched centralism, fiscal dependency, political monopolization, and institutional fragility. The country's leaders have mastered the optics of reform while maintaining the substance of control. What results is a façade of local self-governance – elections without empowerment, councils without autonomy, and mayors without means.

The examples of 2012 and 2021 are not mere political anecdotes. They are the clearest indicators of a system in which power flows not from the people to their representatives, but from the top down – guided by party loyalty, administrative muscle, and economic dependency. The Georgian Dream's grip on local power has not only suffocated democratic competition; it has also distorted the very idea of what politics is and who can participate in it. With local governance reduced to a mechanism of patronage and control, aspiring politicians without access to wealth or proximity to the ruling elite are excluded from public life. In such a system, democracy cannot grow; it is merely managed.

## **Managed Democracy Georgian Style: Do Local Elections Have Any Meaning?**

Now, let's reflect on how relevant the common European advice – “strengthen democracy from the bottom up, participate in local elections” – is in the current context of Georgia. My short answer, which I also explored in greater detail in [another article](#) published in this journal, is that in authoritarian regimes, local elections can be weaponized by the ruling party to consolidate power, rather than to decentralize it or empower citizens. It may sound good in theory, but it ignores the political realities on the ground. Participating in local elections under current conditions does not serve democracy in Georgia – and this well-meaning European advice is misguided, if not counterproductive.



And this is mainly because GD evolved from hybrid to consolidated authoritarianism, and the West, along with some political actors in Georgia, is always one step behind. The Georgian opposition had the illusion that in 2024, despite the sophisticated falsification techniques, the GD would not be able to steal more ballots than usual (as it had in 2018, 2020, or 2021) and that this time it wouldn't suffice, given their significant lead in the polls. In fact, GD went far beyond what was expected in terms of election manipulation, leaving the opposition with no chance. Today, we stand in October 2025, and the situation is way worse than it was a year ago.

***Local elections in Georgia have consistently failed to produce meaningful local autonomy.***

As explained above, authoritarian leaders view elections as a means to increase their legitimacy and control. As for local elections, they see it as a tool of centralized control — not local empowerment. Contrary to democratic theory, local elections in Georgia have consistently failed to produce meaningful local autonomy. Neither under UNM nor under GD were elected local officials given real power or resources. What passed for decentralization was largely cosmetic. In both cases, elected local officials remained fiscally dependent on the central government, and the executive's appointments of regional officials circumvented local self-government entirely. Real decision-making remained centralized, even after reforms.

So when European advisors urge the Georgian opposition to “rebuild trust through local democracy,” they mistake the form for the substance. The form exists (elections), but the substance (autonomy, accountability, fiscal independence) does not. It didn't happen in 30 years of independence and several reforms (1991-2021), and it will not happen now, as the country is increasingly moving towards dictatorship.

## When Participation Becomes a Collaboration

The 2025 local elections are even more flawed than any other “not free and fair elections” ever organized in Georgia. The authorities didn't permit recognized international observers to attend; a handful of marginal, far-right Western conspiracy theorists and Belarusian or Turkmen electoral observers brought in by the regime can't be taken into consideration. Neither local NGO's, apart from several clearly GD proxy GONGOs, had the opportunity to watch them for the first time in recent history. In more than one-third of the municipalities, GD was the only political force to have mayoral candidates, who [garnered](#) 100% of the votes on 4 October. And no free political advertisements were available to the opposition parties due to changes in the law that [deprived](#) parties of free political advertisement time if they boycotted the parliament or relinquished their mandates. Interestingly, GD's de facto “authorized opposition”, *Girchi*, even after failing to clear the 3% threshold in national elections, benefited from the friendly gesture of the government and obtained free political ad time.

***In this environment, opposition participation in local elections no longer even poses symbolic resistance — it merely helps the regime maintain a pluralistic facade.***

The context today is even more dangerous than it was before. Until recently (2024), despite GD centralizing power and misusing local institutions, it still operated within a competitive authoritarian framework. In recent years, the regime has taken the system much closer to a Belarus-style authoritarianism with the suppression of media, prosecution of political opponents, criminalization of civil society, and laws on “foreign agents.” In this en-

vironment, opposition participation in local elections no longer even poses symbolic resistance — it merely helps the regime maintain a pluralistic facade. The playing field is not just tilted; the game is rigged. This mirrors the “managed democracy” model seen in Russia or Belarus, where participation serves the regime more than the opposition.

The participation of some opposition parties creates the illusion of competition, when in fact the outcome is predetermined through the control of media, courts, police, and funding. It divided and weakened the opposition by encouraging infighting over local posts and resources. The co-optation, intimidation, and clientelism draw opposition figures into the regime’s orbit or neutralize them entirely. Far from empowering civil society or decentralizing governance, the participation of some opposition parties in local elections provoked much more severe battles among the opposition forces than against the GD.

## Why Friends Miss This Point?

European institutions often insist that democracy can be rebuilt “from the bottom up.” This advice

assumes that elections automatically empower people, as they do in functioning democracies. However, in Georgia, local elections have historically served as tools to entrench central authority rather than challenge it. Participation has not democratized the country; instead, it has helped governing forces expand their reach, control narratives, and co-opt opposition structures.

### **Participation without empowerment is collaboration, not resistance.**

For the opposition, continuing to play this game without fundamental reforms — especially fiscal and political decentralization — only reinforces their own marginalization. This makes many believe that participation without empowerment is collaboration, not resistance.

The real question is not whether to participate in, or even win local elections, but how to change the rules of the game — and whether that can happen within a system increasingly indistinguishable from full authoritarianism ■

# Ballots as Weapons: Moldova Leaps Over Moscow's Hurdle

On 28 September 2025, Russia launched its most ambitious attempt to influence Moldova's political trajectory, seeking to install a satellite government in Chişinău. After testing similar hybrid strategies in Romania and Georgia, the Kremlin targeted this small state of 2.6 million people at a decisive moment in its European integration process. The so-called "Kiriienko Plan," named after Sergey Kiriienko, Moscow's chief strategist for hybrid operations, [mobilized](#) EUR 350 million and combined multiple tools of interference: vote-buying, disinformation campaigns, religious propaganda, cyberattacks, and the transportation of voters from Transnistria, the eastern region of the Dniester controlled by a pro-Russian separatist administration.

Why target Moldova and why now? Vladimir Putin finds himself in a precarious position, both domestically and on the Ukrainian battlefield. The sovereign fund that once fueled his 'special military operation' is depleted, while Ukrainian strikes have successfully targeted Russia's refin-

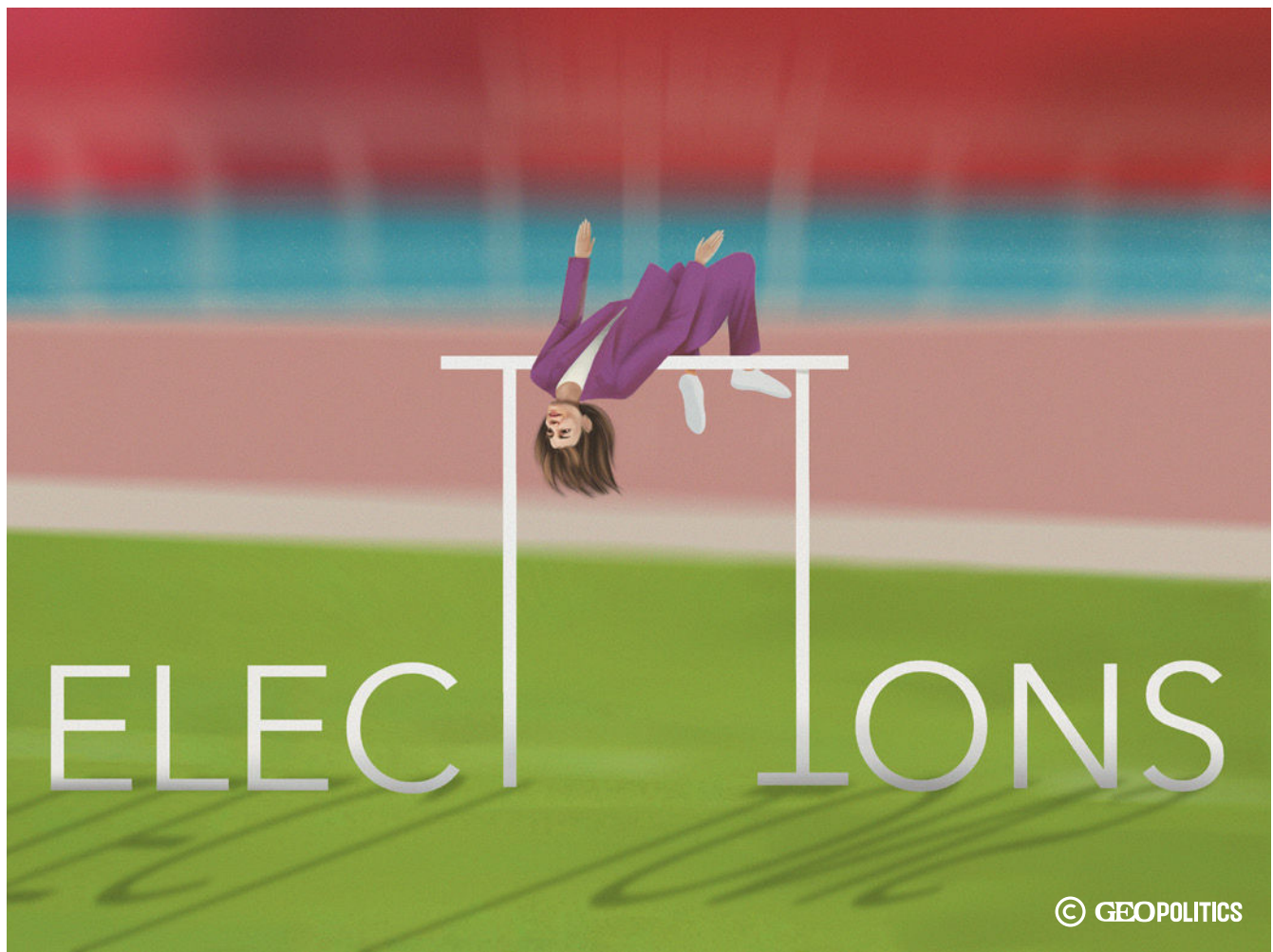
ing capacities. On the ground, the Russian army is unable to advance further. Against this backdrop, Moldova emerges as a strategic locus: wedged between Ukraine and Romania, it plays a crucial role in the security architecture of the EU and NATO's eastern flank. Russian planners reportedly view the establishment of a satellite government in Chişinău as a stepping stone, from where they could potentially pave the way, within 18 months, for operations against Ukraine's Odessa region. At the same time, Moldova's internal vulnerabilities, such as economic hardship, energy dependence, and social as well as linguistic divides, make it an appealing target for Kremlin manipulation.

Despite the massive pressure, the Kremlin's "electoral invasion" ultimately failed. The parliamentary elections delivered a narrow but decisive victory for President Maia Sandu's *Party of Action and Solidarity* (PAS), which secured an absolute majority. This outcome gave the government a renewed mandate to continue reforms aligned with the EU acquis and to accelerate Moldova's integration into the European Union.



**ADINA REVOL**  
Guest Contributor

Adina Revol, PhD in political science from Sciences Po Paris, is the former spokesperson of the European Commission in France. She is the author of *Breaking with Russia – Europe's Energy Awakening* (Odile Jacob, 2024). A recognized expert on EU affairs, the geopolitics of energy and Russia's hybrid warfare in Europe and Eastern Europe, she teaches at Sciences Po and at ESCP Europe. Drawing on her experience of growing up in communist Romania, she brings unique insight into today's geopolitical challenges. She is a regular guest in the French media.



***What happened in Moldova highlights the growing use by Russia of hybrid strategies during the electoral processes as instruments of geopolitical confrontation.***

What happened in Moldova highlights the growing use by Russia of hybrid strategies during the electoral processes as instruments of geopolitical confrontation. It raises two central questions: what explains Moldova's resilience in the face of Moscow's most extensive interference campaign to date, and what does this outcome reveal about the EU's capacity to support its most exposed and vulnerable neighbors?

I argue that Moldovan authorities have developed an effective strategy, combining determination with transparency in exposing Russia's massive

interference tactics. The parliamentary majority obtained by PAS provides a rare political window of three years to anchor the deep reforms required for EU accession. The European Union carries a major responsibility as the path towards membership requires the EU to deliver concrete support and rapid results. Without visible progress, public frustration could fuel disillusionment and open the way for a resurgence of pro-Kremlin forces, which remain a significant and organized presence in Moldova.

## **The Kremlin's Massive Hybrid Warfare Campaign**

Russia has openly thrown its weight behind political factions aligned with its interests in Moldova. A new coalition, called the *Patriotic Electoral Bloc*, brought together openly pro-Russian parties in a rare display of unity, despite longstanding rivalries,



particularly between the Socialist and Communist leaders. Irina Vlah provided the Gagauz endorsement—a rural, Turkish Orthodox electorate overwhelmingly pro-Russian, while Vasile Tarlev added technocratic credibility to the bloc. It campaigned under the slogan ‘We Believe in Moldova,’ positioning itself as the guardian of Moldovan identity and values against what it portrays as the decline of Western values, especially the so-called ‘Gayropa.’ The bloc’s discourse exalted national sovereignty as a tool of internal mobilization, masking an economic, strategic, and ideological dependence on the Kremlin. Indeed, it firmly rejected NATO membership, advocating for the federalization of the country—a move PAS leader Igor Grosu [qualified](#) as “handing Moldova on a silver platter to the Kremlin.”

The Kremlin’s endorsement has been anything but subtle. On July 11, 2025, Socialist leader Igor Dodon, accompanied by Irina Vlah and Vasile Tarlev, [met](#) in Moscow with senior Russian officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak. The delegation openly discussed the restoration of Russian gas supplies and the revival of trade relations, sending clear signals that Moscow is once again using energy as a lever of influence over Moldova. Russian officials hinted that, under a satellite government in Chişinău, gas deliveries would resume at favorable prices.

The rhetoric of pro-Russian actors has increasingly adopted a populist style reminiscent of MAGA, framing citizens against “corrupt elites” and the “pro-European establishment.” This discourse was further reinforced by events such as the fourth edition of the *Make Europe Great Again* Congress, [recently held](#) in Chişinău.

What was new in Moldova was the parallel emergence of a seemingly pro-European alternative: the *Alternative Bloc*, launched in early 2025 under the slogan “Europe at Home.” Its program emphasized infrastructure development, judicial reform,

and social welfare, appealing to urban and moderate voters disillusioned with Maia Sandu’s government. Yet most of its leaders have long-standing ties to pro-Russian parties. Journalist Paula Erişanu [describes](#) the bloc as part of a pro-Russian “fifth column.”

The bloc’s figurehead is Chişinău’s mayor, Ion Ceban, a political shapeshifter who now portrays himself as a pragmatic centrist reformer. Although he promotes European integration and has launched a “Chişinău Pact,” his record includes backing federalization and membership in the Eurasian Customs Union. The strategy of Moscow, therefore, was on the surface – to divide the pro-European electorate, siphon off centrist voters, and slow Moldova’s European path from within. Meanwhile, the *Patriotic Bloc* targeted rural areas, the Gagauz minority, and voters in Transnistria.

In the context of the “Kiriienko plan,” oligarch Ilan Şor [played](#) a significant and multifaceted role. Şor is best known for his involvement in the 2014 “theft of the century” scandal. Self-exiled in Moscow to avoid prosecution, he continues to exert massive influence over Moldovan politics, particularly in rural areas and among the Gagauz community, where he is viewed as a defender of traditional values against Western influence. Şor attempted to launch his own political bloc, *Victory*, in Moscow, led by his Gagauz ally, but the Central Electoral Commission barred its participation. Public policy expert Andrei Curăraru [compared](#) Şor to a chess queen, highlighting his mobility and disruptive power, which allow Moscow to engage in media manipulation, election interference, and the creation of political proxies.

## The Strategic Role of Disinformation

Russia’s sustained disinformation efforts in Moldova aimed to influence voter behavior by creating

fear and polarization, destabilizing the democratic process, and weakening Maia Sandu's party. The Kremlin's strategy was to saturate the information space and reach diverse audiences simultaneously through multiple mass media channels.

Social media manipulation played a central role. Well-known propaganda networks like *Matryoshka* and *Pravda* have been active on Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook, spreading viral content targeting President Maia Sandu and the PAS government. Coordinated inauthentic networks have amplified anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-Sandu narratives, sometimes using mirror or duplicate content across platforms. Among false allegations were claims that Sandu [embezzled](#) USD 24 million and was dependent on "psychotropic drugs." While *Sputnik Moldova* has been officially banned, related websites and Telegram channels maintained influence in the information sphere.

Artificial intelligence was a cornerstone of these operations. Deepfake videos and manipulated images [portrayed](#) PAS leaders in false or compromising situations, including fabricated claims of election rigging and child trafficking. Cloned websites were also used to give disinformation a veneer of credibility.

Local actors amplified these disinformation efforts. Fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor and his NGO Evrazia financed and coordinated disinformation networks, blending propaganda with vote buying, rallies, and political proxies. He publicly offered EUR 3,000 per month to citizens willing to take part in anti-government protests. Domestic media tied to pro-Russian elites rebroadcast content from Moscow-based channels, especially targeting Gagauzia and Transnistria.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church, aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate, has been mobilized to support pro-Russian narratives, particularly in rural areas where the Church retains strong social au-

thority. Initiatives have included pilgrimages to Moscow, pre-paid bank cards, and the creation of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels to shape public opinion. These activities aimed to mobilize rural voters by reinforcing traditionalist messaging.

Beyond local actors, well-known figures seeking to influence European elections were also active on voting day. Among them was Telegram founder Pavel Durov, a Russian-born French national residing in Dubai, but currently stranded in France, who claimed, without evidence, that French and Moldovan intelligence services had pressured him to shut down pro-Kremlin Telegram channels that did not violate the platform's rules. His post was amplified by Elon Musk with a laconic "wow," signaling the alignment between pro-Kremlin networks and the MAGA movement, an alliance also observed during Romania's presidential election. Although French authorities [denied](#) Durov's allegations, their rebuttal had negligible reach compared to the viral impact of Durov's and Musk's interventions. For comparison, Durov's tweet garnered 17 million views, amplified by Elon Musk to 13 million more, while the French Foreign Ministry's official response reached only 15,000.

***The disinformation narratives deliberately sought to sow fear, portraying PAS's victory as a path to war, NATO intervention, or the suppression of protests.***

The disinformation narratives deliberately sought to sow fear, portraying PAS's victory as a path to war, NATO intervention, or the suppression of protests. The war narrative was particularly powerful in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Russia was portrayed as seeking peace, while the European Union was depicted as pursuing war. Like in Romania, this narrative exploited the population's fear of conflict, fostering the belief that aligning with the Kremlin could spare them from the atrocities and destruction of war. Yet, as French jour-

nalist and Russia expert Paul Gogo believes, Moscow would not hesitate to resort to killing, even ethnic Russians in Moldova, if it served its strategic objectives.

Finally, cyberattacks and psychological operations complemented disinformation. Nearly 4,000 websites were disabled before the vote, while hoax bomb threats at diaspora polling stations sought to discourage participation.

The OSCE, which monitored Moldova's elections, [referred](#) to Russian hybrid interference ahead of the vote as "unprecedented." In response, Moscow rejected claims of meddling, framing them as an anti-Russian narrative.

## Determined Response from the Government

Faced with such an unprecedented information war, the Moldovan government chose a strategy of transparency and assertive action.

First of all, this concerned the transparency about the extent of the Russian information war, its networks, and techniques. President Maia Sandu [delivered](#) martial speeches, warning as of July 2025 that Moscow aims to "control" Moldova, using vote-buying, online disinformation campaigns, organization of paid violent protests, cyberattacks, and manipulation of traditional religious institutions, with EUR 100 million allocated for this purpose. She also underlined the Kremlin's strategy of undermining the pro-European moderate electorate by flooding the campaign with 'neutral' candidates.

Days to elections, Moldovan authorities conducted 250 raids, [targeting](#) over 100 individuals, with 74 detained for up to 72 hours. Suspects, aged 19 to 45, reportedly received training in Serbia, according to Victor Furtuna, Chief Prosecutor of the

Office for Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases. Serbian networks have also been implicated in hybrid attacks observed in France.

***Sandu reported that over 300,000 votes were purchased, with 150,000 documented by state institutions.***

Transparency efforts also extended to the vote-buying system. Sandu reported that over 300,000 votes were purchased, with 150,000 documented by state institutions. Such techniques exposed the vulnerability of Moldova's democratic system to both foreign influence and internal criminal networks. Vote-buying was particularly effective in rural and impoverished regions, such as Gagauzia, where cultural proximity, nostalgia for the USSR, and low living standards facilitated manipulation.

The Central Electoral Commission also intervened to prevent certain parties from participating. Days before the election, the Gagauz component of the Patriotic Bloc [was disqualified](#), for illegal campaign financing. Its leader Irina Vlah, is [sanctioned](#) by several EU states for assisting Russian interference. Similarly, the Great Moldova Party, led by Victoria Furtună, [was barred](#) days before the elections. Ilan Șor's bloc had been barred from the outset due to legal and organizational irregularities, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court.

While these measures aimed to safeguard the electoral process, they have simultaneously fueled narratives of political persecution, exploited by disinformation campaigns [to portray](#) the PAS as authoritarian. Pro-Kremlin leaders who have been sanctioned or detained often presented themselves as political prisoners, and part of the population believed this to be true, as journalist Paul Gogo verified on the ground. This strategy of narrative manipulation mirrored tactics observed in Romania, where it has also been used to divide the population.

## **The determined fight against Russian hybrid threats was complemented by reinforcing the pro-European narrative.**

The determined fight against Russian hybrid threats was complemented by reinforcing the pro-European narrative. High-level European visits underscored this message: French President Macron, German Chancellor Merz, and Polish Prime Minister Tusk [attended](#) Moldova's Independence Day celebrations, delivering speeches in Romanian to signal support. A few days later, the Romanian President [visited](#) Chişinău on Romanian Language Day, further demonstrating solidarity. These coordinated actions sent a clear signal to Moldova's pro-European electorate that Europe stands firmly by Moldova's side.

Three days before decisive elections, former oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldova's former power broker, [was extradited](#) from Greece, where he was detained. Images of arrested Plahotniuc, formerly involved in the "theft of the century," along with the popular media series "Plaha," were also instrumental in mobilizing the pro-European electorate.

## **Electoral Results and Geographic Patterns**

The electoral process occurred under a tense climate, marked by cyberattacks and hoax bomb threats against polling stations in the EU states. The government closed several bridges to Transnistria, citing bomb alerts and a reported mine, prompting a diplomatic protest from Transnistria over restricted voter access. The Central Election Committee approved only two voting points for citizens residing in Russia, [highlighting](#) security concerns.

Voter turnout was approximately 52%, remaining moderate given the importance of the election

but higher than in previous parliamentary votes. Participation varied across regions, with urban centers such as Chişinău and Bălţi recording the highest rates, while rural areas exhibited lower turnout.

The *Party of Action and Solidarity* achieved a decisive victory, securing 55 of 101 parliamentary seats, obtaining an absolute majority without the need for coalition partners. This marks the second time the party has won an absolute majority, though with fewer seats than previously. PAS's support was concentrated in urban centers, particularly Chişinău, and among the EU diaspora, whose role remains crucial. As seen in Romania, diaspora mobilization continued to play a decisive role in sustaining Moldova's pro-European trajectory.

Election results showed that attempts to fragment the pro-European vote were unsuccessful. The *Alternative Bloc* obtained only 8%. PAS maintained its lead, including in Chişinău, despite the bloc's leader being the city mayor.

The main opposition, the pro-Russian *Patriotic Bloc*, garnered roughly 24% of the vote, concentrated in the country's second city, Bălţi, rural areas, Gagauzia, and Transnistria. Despite substantial funding and sophisticated electoral manipulation techniques, the final tally showcased the bloc's inability to present a credible alternative. The bloc won 51% in Transnistria, though PAS increasing its vote share. In Gagauzia, the bloc remained strong due to extreme poverty and the lingering influence of Russia; journalist Paul Gogo, who recently visited the region, likened the electorate's profile to that of populations in Donbass in 2014.

While weakened, the bloc maintains a significant base capable of bringing political instability through street demonstrations. Igor Dodon [vigorously contested](#) the election outcome, labeling the



government a “criminal regime” and calling on his supporters to demonstrate in the streets against what he described as electoral fraud. This narrative was reinforced by the Kremlin, with spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [stating](#) that it was “too early” to recognize the results, citing disagreements from “some political forces.”

Among pro-Russian forces, Moldovan allies of pro-Kremlin Romanian sovereigntists made a breakthrough, entering parliament for the first time, after an active campaign on TikTok, supported by their Romanian counterparts. The party [is suspected](#) of illicit TikTok promotion and coordination with foreign actors. The Central Electoral Commission sanctioned the *Democracy at Home* party for repeated electoral code violations, issuing a formal warning while forwarding the validation of the seats obtained to the Constitutional Court.

The election results were [promptly welcomed](#) by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who reassured Moldovan citizens that the European Union remains open to their integration, signaling continued EU support.

## A Race Against Time

Moldovan voters have indeed made their choice, but the country’s political and economic situation remains fragile, and the Kremlin retains significant economic and military tools to exert influence, as well as continues to launch hybrid attacks to nurture instability.

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Concrete and timely EU support is therefore essential to maintain public confidence and sustain Moldova’s trajectory toward European integration. Just days before the elections, Moldova [completed](#) the screening process, an essential milestone in its EU accession path. The next critical step is the opening of negotiations on Chapter 1 of the acquis, the most significant chapter. However, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a Kremlin ally in Europe, has blocked this stage, as Moldova’s candidacy is linked with Ukraine’s, and Orbán opposes it on grounds of what he presents as ‘national interest.’ To circumvent the Hungarian veto, technical discussions on so-called “clusters” – subsections of accession chapters – [may begin](#) at the technical level while awaiting the outcome of the 2026 Hungarian elections. The requirement for unanimity in EU accession negotiations remains a critical constraint, as Russian influence in several EU capitals has the potential to slow Moldova’s accession process. Further political uncertainty could arise if the *National Rally* achieves electoral success in France in 2027, potentially complicating the EU consensus on enlargement.

One concrete deliverable from the EU is to address Moldova’s energy security, a critical factor affecting purchasing power and historically exploited by Moscow to manipulate prices. Following *Gazprom’s* [gas supply cuts](#) in early 2025, the EU has provided substantial financial assistance to enable Moldova to purchase gas from Romania and Ukraine. While this support is crucial in the short term for diversifying energy sources, the next priority is financing the development of internal infrastructure and integration with the European energy grid, the very projects that have been delayed under pro-Kremlin governments. These infrastructure investments are [essential](#) for building energy autonomy based on renewable sources and reducing demand, particularly in Soviet-era buildings.

Another way the EU can continue supporting Moldova is by extending the scope of its Europe-

an Democracy Shield initiative to include candidate countries. The European Democracy Shield, currently [in development](#) by the European Commission, is envisioned as a coordinated European response to the growing threat of foreign interference in democratic processes. It aims to enhance information integrity, strengthen fact-checking networks, counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), bolster civic resilience, and defend electoral systems from hybrid attacks, particularly those originating from Russia.

***Another way the EU can continue supporting Moldova is by extending the scope of its European Democracy Shield initiative to include candidate countries.***

For Moldova, such an extension would offer a medium-term strategic defense against the Kremlin's destabilization tactics, which include disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, energy blackmail, and electoral interference. By integrating Moldova into the EU's democratic defense architecture, Brussels would send a powerful signal: that Moldova's security is treated as a part of a shared European democratic space. The European Democracy Shield would not only help Moldovan authorities anticipate, detect, and respond to hybrid threats more effectively; it would also raise the reputational and operational costs for Moscow ■

# To Vote or Not to Vote: Lost Between the Ballot and Boycott

**H**ow did Georgia arrive at the point where elections have turned into a hollow exercise, stripped of real choice and reduced to mere formality? Georgian citizens face a dilemma, relevant for any future elections in 2028 or before. Should they participate in a process that no longer brings meaningful change, or should they abstain, as many did this October, signaling their refusal to legitimize an empty ritual? Political parties face a similar conundrum. On one hand, parties cannot survive without a functioning political process, and competing in elections is the very purpose of their existence, also determining their financing and political venues for confronting the ruling party. On the other hand, when there is no genuine possibility of voting the ruling party out due to its total control of state institutions and manipulation of information, participation becomes meaningless.

## To Vote, or Not to Vote?

What made the October 4 elections different is not only that the outcome was widely seen as predetermined, but also that both participation and abstention carried heavy symbolic and practical consequences. Participation risked legitimizing an electoral ritual that no longer functioned as a mechanism of accountability, yet abstention risked accelerating the disappearance of politics altogether. In previous parliamentary elections, voting at least offered a sense of engagement and a chance, however slim, to influence outcomes.

***Participation risked legitimizing an electoral ritual that no longer functioned as a mechanism of accountability, yet abstention risked accelerating the disappearance of politics altogether.***



**SHOTA GVINERIA**  
Contributor

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







These elections highlighted the fractured choices confronting both citizens and political actors. The two largest opposition parties (*Coalition for Change* and the *United National Movement*), as well as a string of smaller opposition parties loosely united around the fifth President, Salome Zourabichvili, have chosen to boycott, arguing that competing in a predetermined contest only legitimized authoritarian rule. Others, such as Mamuka Khazaradze's *Lelo - Strong Georgia* and Giorgi Gakharia's *For Georgia*, joined the race, reasoning that elections remained the only viable pathway to political change.

Ordinary voters, meanwhile, were caught in an equally difficult position. Many were fed up, confused, and angry, uncertain of whom to support, even if they were convinced that they must vote against the ruling regime. Moreover, many citizens also faced a difficult choice: whether to travel to their home regions to invest their vote in the lost battle or to stay in Tbilisi and join the protest rallies organized on election day.

Participation in the 4 October local elections thus became a choice between validating the *status quo* or expressing protest, with little to no expectation of change. Abstention, while often framed as an act of protest, created its own perils. The ruling regime weaponized low turnout to argue that the opposition lacked public support, while the GD received almost the same number of votes as in 2024. In fact, *Lelo - Strong Georgia*'s votes were halved compared to 2024, and *For Georgia* received only a third of its 2024 tally.

Obviously, a joint and coordinated boycott could have been a better option as a unified decision of the entire opposition spectrum. The second-best option could have been a joint decision to participate. However, any decision that lacked unity was poised to result in a cycle of mutual distrust: citizens now feel abandoned by the opposition, citizen mobilization is no longer linked to political parties,

and various opposition groups have lost whatever trust they had in one another.

This paradox makes the 2025 local elections a turning point. The main question that the opposition parties will have to answer as of 5 October is, "Will they take part in the next elections, if nothing changes?" A negative answer to this question will be very difficult to justify and, in the absence of alternative mechanisms of the political struggle, will be equivalent to a political suicide. A positive answer, however, will require a lot of explanations for those who are disillusioned with the elections and believe in the total isolation of the regime at home or abroad. If unsuccessful, this process will lead to further entrenchment of the ruling regime and a more straightforward pathway to authoritarian consolidation.

## Distorted Battlefield of 2025

The reasons behind the dilemmas of participation and abstention become clearer when placed against the backdrop of Georgia's current pre-election environment. Local observer groups [described](#) the OSCE/ODIHR's final [assessment](#) of the October 2024 parliamentary elections as extremely critical, citing it as grounds for new elections. OSCE pointed to rushed and frequent changes to election law that appeared politically instrumental, a degraded method of composing election commissions that weakened independence, the persistent blurring of party and state through the extensive use of administrative resources, and widespread intimidation and pressure on voters, especially public employees and vulnerable groups. The key to the GD's success, it turns out, was the secrecy-of-the-vote violation, reified through leaked ballots, crowding and tensions at polling stations, and the filming of voters by representatives of the ruling party. These concerns are not confined to the past. They are just as relevant today and for any future elections.

[The European Parliament](#) and the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly ([PACE](#)) also shared these assessments and expressed their position at various times that only genuinely free and fair elections could de-escalate the political crisis in Georgia.

***Georgia has undergone a clear regime reclassification, moving from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy.***

According to the V-Dem [Democracy Report](#) 2025, Georgia has undergone a clear regime reclassification, moving from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy. The report identified systematic manipulation of media, repression of civil society, and the erosion of election guarantees as defining features of the country's political transformation. These findings confirmed that the very taxonomy of Georgia's electoral system has changed. As a result, the logic that once guided opposition parties, voters, and international partners, assuming that participation could still serve as a vehicle for democratic correction, no longer applies. This shift means that elections in Georgia no longer meet the minimal standards of competitiveness, fairness, and institutional independence that define electoral democracy.

The 2025 pre-election [assessment](#) by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) presented a significantly more dire picture of deterioration. It highlighted a deepening political crisis, democratic backsliding, and human rights concerns as the broader context for the vote. It detailed fundamental changes to the local electoral system, as well as amendments adopted only months before the vote, and the planned use of electronic voting in many precincts, despite unresolved concerns from 2024 about ballot secrecy.

Most importantly, in the run-up to the local elec-

tions, almost all opposition party leaders ended up in [prison](#) or were under investigation. The opposition party's finances have been depleted, as they were stripped of budgetary support, and the media environment has further deteriorated, including the [closure](#) of one of the country's major television channels, TV Mtavari, and the [arrest](#) of the Editor-in-Chief of online media outlets *Netgazeti* and *Batumelebi*. These developments collectively show that the playing field has tilted even more heavily in favor of the ruling party. And for many, this was a sufficient ground to boycott the elections.

On top of an already grave political context, the pre-election [legal](#) environment for Georgia's 2025 municipal elections has significantly worsened in terms of legislation and administration. Recent amendments have removed the 40 percent threshold that previously checked the dominance of any single party in local majoritarian contests and altered seat allocation rules to favor higher-performing parties, reducing proportionality and making the system less fair. Laws restricting the rights of observers and tightening regulations on civil society and foreign financing have further constrained oversight.

The composition of the Central Election Commission has become more unbalanced following this year's changes; electoral commissions can now be selected with weaker safeguards for neutrality and institutional independence. Accelerated legislative changes made oversight by courts and dispute resolution mechanisms less effective.

But perhaps most alarming is the deterioration in election observation. Traditional, credible observer missions, including the [OSCE/ODIHR](#), stated that they could not monitor the vote after Georgian Dream's last-minute invitation less than a month before polling day. ISFED did not deploy long-term or short-term observers at polling stations for the local elections, refusing even the parallel vote tabulation it had conducted in previous

cycles, citing that fundamental rights, the stability of electoral law, and procedural guarantees had not been met. Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) and Transparency International Georgia also [refused](#) to deploy observation missions, breaking with decades-long practice. Each cited a repressive political environment and the absence of conditions necessary for free and fair elections. In their absence, the roster of local monitoring groups was dominated by government-aligned organizations, several of which have been accused of manipulating observation processes to benefit the ruling Georgian Dream party in the 2024 elections. Journalist [investigations](#) also revealed that individuals affiliated with the ruling party and local authorities were accredited as “observers” and were seen accompanying voters to polling booths.

## Predetermined Outcomes

Nothing about the October 4 local elections came as a surprise. From the start, the process followed a familiar script, rehearsed in Georgia's previous election cycles and perfected under Georgian Dream's consolidated control of the electoral system. Polling stations opened on time. Turnout was low, predictably so. The [official figure](#)—40.93% nationwide—was the lowest in the country's post-independence history, reflecting the public's deep-seated conviction that their vote would have no impact. In Tbilisi, only 31.08% of registered voters participated in the election. These numbers make it clear that most Georgians perceived the outcome as already predetermined and stayed home.

The results also confirmed what everyone already knew. Georgian Dream swept the country, winning all 64 municipalities and dominating local councils with over 80% of the vote. In Tbilisi, the incumbent mayor was declared victor with 71.7% of the vote—on paper. In reality, this amounted to the support of just over a quarter of the city's eligible voters. But this is not the number that mattered.

The only number the GD cared about was to show that its support remained steady. GD received over 210,000 votes in Tbilisi in 2025, up from around 193,000 in 2021, 205,000 in 2017, and 151,000 in 2014.

Even the election day protest and its outcome were anticipated. That at least 50,000 people would take to the streets after the elections was no surprise. Nor was it unexpected that certain political leaders, who had been calling for a “peaceful revolution” in the days leading up to 4 October, would step forward, call for disobedience, and urge demonstrators to occupy government buildings. That they would fail was also obvious. That the authorities would respond with swift detentions of the organizers was entirely predictable.

Government figures, including the GD Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, immediately [branded](#) the 4 October rally an attempted coup, blaming it on foreign-backed radicals. The accusations were prepackaged. The placards hadn't even been lifted before the narrative was ready to be deployed. And what will follow now is just as foreseeable: a broader crackdown, more arrests, legal cases, outlawing of opposition parties, and suffocation of NGOs and independent media.

***The 4 October election was therefore never about choosing mayors or councils. It was about sending a clear message: that Georgian Dream controls the entire political and security apparatus, and that any attempt to challenge its grip will be met with force.***

The 4 October election was therefore never about choosing mayors or councils. It was about sending a clear message: that Georgian Dream controls the entire political and security apparatus, and that any attempt to challenge its grip will be met with force. Still, for many opposition-minded citizens,

4 October was also a test of endurance, a demonstration that resistance persists. And in that sense, they succeeded. Daily protests continued after the election, proving that while the system is rigged, the defiance is not yet extinguished.

## Lessons Learnt – Losers Everywhere

The 4 October elections and a protest rally showcased several lessons, but whether Georgia's political spectrum or public will learn from them is anyone's guess.

Those who chose to participate appeared as losers because the outcome was predetermined. The votes they received were considerably less than in 2024. From this perspective, their argument – that if the entire opposition had participated, GD would have lost – lacks credibility.

Those who chose to boycott the elections also suffered a loss. Their moral stance did not translate into mass mobilization or substantial pressure, which would have made the Georgian Dream retreat. Furthermore, the failure of the ill-coordinated and under-resourced “[peaceful revolution](#)” further undermined the notion that street protests can lead to change.

Other pro-democracy and pro-European forces also lost. The looming crackdown of the GD on political activists, demonstrators, civil society organizations, media, and universities, wrapped in the narrative of preventing and punishing participants of the “foreign-backed subversion,” will cripple the protests further and will give the law enforcement machinery a new pretext to intensify repression of pro-democracy actors with greater confidence.

Opposition political parties will now become the primary target. The GD has already announced that it will outlaw the opposition parties – the

“collective UNM.” On 6 October, GD's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [clarified](#) who these parties were – the four parties that cleared the threshold in the October 2024 parliamentary elections (Coalition for Change, United National Movement, Coalition Strong Georgia, and For Georgia), plus smaller parties that are “offshoots of the UNM.” In short, everyone on the pro-European opposition front.

***The principal lesson of these elections is what the lack of unity can lead to. In reality, the dilemma was not between participation and boycott, but between boycotting or participating together versus doing both in a fragmented way.***

The principal lesson of these elections is what the lack of unity can lead to. In reality, the dilemma was not between participation and boycott, but between boycotting or participating together versus doing both in a fragmented way. On this front, the opposition parties failed spectacularly.

The pre-election period showed that this ever-increasing fragmentation between participating and boycotting parties, between civic groups and political parties, and between domestic actors and their Western partners has consistently served the interests of the ruling regime. Georgian Dream thrives on divisions and capitalizes on the indecisiveness of Western partners, who limit themselves to cautious statements while the government applies violence and coercion with impunity.

## Strength in Unity

The message engraved on Georgia's coat of arms, “Strength is in Unity,” now reads less as a historical motto and more as a political imperative. The only sustainable path forward for Georgia's democracy lies in restoring unity among its fragmented pro-democracy forces and between them



and their civil society colleagues and international partners. Only a unified strategy, built on coordination, courage, and consistency, can halt Georgia's slide toward authoritarianism and reclaim the democratic European future that its citizens still believe is possible.

***The only sustainable path forward for Georgia's democracy lies in restoring unity among its fragmented pro-democracy forces and between them and their civil society colleagues and international partners.***

These elections demonstrated that neither participation nor abstention can bring about democratic change at the current stage of authoritarian consolidation. What might alter the trajectory, though, is a coordinated and realistic strategy built on joint effort, shared objectives, pooled resources, and a clear communication strategy. Speaking with a single voice to international allies would not hurt either.

It is a fact that Georgia's democratic opposition

has consistently lacked a coherent plan or effective communication strategy. Each tactical or strategic decision, whether joining the race or withdrawing from it, going to prison, or protesting symbolically, was poorly explained, was often reactive, and rarely connected to a broader vision that voters could understand or rally behind. Moreover, each position was juxtaposed with the positions of other opposition colleagues, which further sowed discord among the anti-GD pro-European electorate. Most importantly, these actions were entirely detached from the larger program of improving the lives of ordinary Georgians.

This inconsistency eroded public trust, allowing government propaganda to portray the opposition as opportunistic and disorganized. Until opposition parties focus on their actions rather than their words, and until the political process shifts from television talk shows to the villages, town halls, and cities of Georgia, where routine day-to-day discussions with regular Georgians occur, the TV addresses alone will not translate into meaningful political outcomes. Neither will the ongoing protest on Rustaveli Avenue, even if maintaining it is crucial, for both symbolic and practical reasons ■

# Rowing Nowhere Will Surely Sink Georgian Democracy

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's [2024 Democracy Index](#), 39% of the global population lives under authoritarian regimes. Sixty countries are now classified as authoritarian, up from 52 in 2014. Similarly, the [2025 Annual Report](#) of the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, which analyzes 179 countries using seven key principles of democracy (electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian), shows alarming trends. In Eastern Europe, approximately 65% of the population resides in electoral autocracies, including Hungary, Russia, and Serbia. Georgia joined this list in 2024, having fallen from the status of an electoral democracy.

These reports highlight a global decline in democracy, particularly in fragile states where democracy requires strong support. Georgia is one such case. The ruling Georgian Dream party has systematically dismantled nascent democratic institutions, captured state structures, and consolidated author-

itarian [rule](#). Whether by design or by circumstance, the Georgian Dream has found conditions favorable for stifling political opposition, the media, and civil society in real time, all of which were regarded as vibrant beacons of progress in the region.

Georgia's civil society has long depended on foreign funding: according to an Asian Development Bank [overview](#), 95% of CSO funding came from international donors. However, alongside the Georgian Dream's adoption of draconian [legislation](#), international support has dwindled. USAID, once the main donor for investigative media, withdrew, leaving a critical gap. Investigative journalism, the only real check on elite corruption, is now severely weakened, even as the ruling party itself has acknowledged systemic corruption by prosecuting former officials for embezzlement and abuse of power. Fact-checkers and fighters against disinformation face severe pressure from the government through legal means, intimidation, and a crackdown on resources.



**VANO CHKHIKVADZE**  
Contributor

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



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In parallel, it can be observed that the European Union appears to be shifting from its traditional role as a promoter of European values toward a more realpolitik-driven agenda. For years, the EU was recognized for its principled defense of democracy and human rights. Today, symbolic gestures such as the visits of EU officials, public statements, and even their handshakes with authoritarian leaders suggest a different reality. The European Commission's [proposal](#) for the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) reinforces this perception. Increasingly, flagship projects such as Global Gateway and the pursuit of critical raw materials are taking precedence — overshadowing the human rights agenda that once defined the EU's global standing.

## Georgia's Civil Society's Cry for Help

Since May 2024, the Georgian Dream has waged an aggressive campaign against civil society orga-

nizations. In less than 18 months, far faster than comparable crackdowns in Azerbaijan, Belarus, or Russia, CSOs have been nearly paralyzed. The bank accounts of leading organizations [have been frozen](#), leaders have been summoned to court, criminal investigations have been launched, and many activists have been forced into exile or are preparing to leave. Some organizations are shutting down due to the inability to cover basic expenses. Others are working on the savings, which are to expire very soon.

Despite years of investment from the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom in Georgia's democratic development, international responses have so far been minimal — characterized by delayed statements, weak measures, and little tangible support. At this stage, it seems that the U.S., the EU, and the UK lack an effective strategy to prevent the Georgian Dream from derailing the country's democratic path and silencing critical voices. Neither has a credible remedy been put forward to safeguard Georgia's civil society.

The only form of opposition which the Georgian Dream has been unable to suppress so far is the ongoing street protests — the longest in Georgia's history. Yet, even these protests have their limits, and without stronger international backing, they cannot counter the regime's authoritarian consolidation on their own. This is especially true after the 4 October events, when the Georgian Dream [arrested](#) the organizers of the rally who were allegedly planning to take over the government buildings and stage a “peaceful revolution.” The ruling party's leaders have declared that basically anyone who continues protesting and closing Rustaveli Avenue is subscribing to the idea of a *coup d'état* and should therefore be punished.

Georgian NGOs and free media have repeatedly requested practical assistance from donors to continue their operations inside Georgia or from abroad, including legal funding mechanisms, relocation support, visa and residence permit services, and banking access. Yet, promises have not materialized. For instance, former EU High Representative Josep Borrell [pledged](#) to redirect EUR 100 million earmarked for the Georgian authorities toward civil society, but this did not happen. Nor has the EU updated its crucial roadmap for civil society engagement (2018–2024). As of today, the struggling civil society organizations have not received any tangible support.

### ***The European Union lacks a tailor-made response to the crisis in Georgia.***

By now, it is clear that the European Union lacks a tailor-made response to the crisis in Georgia. This gap has grown even more evident in parallel with USAID's withdrawal as the EU itself turns increasingly inward and hesitant to engage decisively.

## **More Words Than Deeds**

The European Union has struggled to articulate a unified and effective response to democratic back-

sliding in Georgia. This hesitancy has contributed to a perception of inertia and inconsistency in Brussels' approach, weakening its ability to act as a credible defender of democratic values. Moreover, this weak response, including the inability to agree on the sanctions in Brussels, has further fed the Georgian Dream propaganda machinery, using the weakness to show their strength. After 4 October, the Prime Minister and other ruling party leaders [blamed](#) the EU ambassador and the “deep state” hidden in the EU for assisting the “radical forces” with a *coup d'état* and for failing to take responsibility for the failed attempts to overthrow the government. The Georgian Dream claims this happened five times, and EU bureaucracy and leadership have been behind it through political support, finances, and overt pressure on the ruling party. This line was well articulated and defended by PM Irakli Kobakhidze on 6 October during a prime-time [show](#) on Rustavi 2.

In January 2025, the EU [imposed](#) travel restrictions on holders of Georgian diplomatic and service passports. While this was a step, the measure was largely symbolic. It can be easily circumvented because Georgian officials continue to travel to the EU freely under the visa-free regime for ordinary passport holders. Thus, the sanctions failed to create meaningful political pressure on the Georgian leadership. Moreover, countries such as Hungary are more than willing to assist Georgian Dream leaders with visas if need be. Furthermore, the efforts to adopt a broader sanctions package against Georgian Dream officials have repeatedly faltered. On 15 July 2025, another critical attempt to impose new sanctions, collapsed due to opposition from several EU member states friendly to the ruling party. Instead of a unified EU response, individual states such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland imposed their own targeted measures, including travel bans and financial restrictions. While these are important, the lack of collective action dilutes their impact and sends a mixed signal to the Georgian leadership.



This inconsistency is compounded by continued normal diplomatic and economic engagement with Georgian Dream leaders. For instance, in June 2025, the ruling party's Secretary General and Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze [received](#) a warm welcome during his visit to Milan, Italy. Meanwhile, ruling party elites continue to own property and conduct business in major European states such as France and the UK. This continued access to Western markets and assets weakens the potential deterrent effect of any targeted sanctions. The Prime Minister is regularly invited to attend the European Political Community summits. The GD propaganda uses this as an opportunity to demonstrate that GD and its leaders are welcomed at the European level.

In the United States, the [MEGOBARI Act](#) — designed to impose sanctions on Georgian Dream officials responsible for undermining democracy and human rights — has [remained stalled](#) in Congress for almost a year since its introduction. Moreover, the EU and the U.S., which before had a common position on Georgian affairs, making the Western stance stronger, are now out of sync.

### ***The absence of meaningful accountability emboldens the Georgian Dream.***

The absence of meaningful accountability emboldens the Georgian Dream. Its strategy appears clear: to exhaust the patience of the EU and other Western partners until “Georgia fatigue” sets in — a situation where street protests fade and Brussels accepts authoritarian consolidation as a fait accompli. The Georgian Dream has begun preparing to “tick boxes” for legitimacy, announcing plans to launch a human rights dialogue with the EU after the October 2025 local elections. This is not motivated by genuine concern for human rights but rather by a desire to gain legitimacy from the international community and secure political concessions. Political prisoners and selective dialogues may be used as bargaining chips to weaken the West's resolve.

Kobakhidze [made it clear](#) on 6 October by insisting that the EU must drop its approach — treating the Georgian government as either an agent or an enemy. This was a euphemism for proposing a ‘reset,’ which for Georgian Dream leaders means forgetting the autocratic rise and embracing Ivanishvili and his cronies as legitimate business partners. After all, if the EU is pragmatic towards other dictatorships and non-democracies in the region, how is Georgia different?

### ***The Union's gradual move from a “human rights first” approach toward an “economy first” agenda is music to the ears of the ruling party and its patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili.***

The fading visibility of Georgia on the EU and Western agenda, coupled with a growing sentiment in Brussels and some capitals that “Georgia should be left alone,” gives the Georgian Dream a sense of impunity. This shift is particularly worrisome given the EU's own changing priorities. The Union's gradual move from a “human rights first” approach toward an “economy first” agenda is music to the ears of the ruling party and its patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Recent developments illustrate this shift. The EU-Central Asia strategic partnership, launched after the latest summit, prioritizes connectivity and trade over human rights concerns. High-level visits to Baku by HRVP Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos focused heavily on connectivity and economic cooperation rather than democratic reform. The draft [EU financial framework](#) for 2028–2034 also signals diminished support for democracy and civil society. These changes create a favorable environment for the Georgian Dream's consolidation of power with fewer risks of pushback from Brussels.

Civil society organizations in Georgia have repeatedly called for a stronger EU response. They em-

phasize the need to clearly enshrine within the EU's Global Europe regulation pre-allocated and predictable funding for human rights and democracy priorities, thereby safeguarding them from competing budgetary and political pressures. Without such guarantees, the democratic space in Georgia will continue to shrink. CSOs also voice concern over the EU's decision to limit its funding for lobbying, a move that constrains their ability to advocate for systemic change.

On a positive note, there are signals that Brussels may step up. Observers are awaiting the launch of the [European Democracy Shield](#), as well as the [Media Resilience Programme](#), announced by the European Commission, designed to counter foreign information manipulation, disinformation, and electoral interference. In parallel, the EU is preparing a [Civil Society Strategy](#) for 2026-2030, which could address key concerns if implemented ambitiously and adequately resourced.

However, these initiatives remain in development. Without immediate, decisive measures to support Georgian civil society, they risk arriving too late to halt the erosion of democratic space in Georgia.

## An Idea: Donors' Conference for Georgian Civil Society

***The notion that the “Georgian Dream should be left alone” or that “Georgia is already gone” plays directly into the ruling party’s hands and betrays those risking their freedom and safety to uphold European values on the ground.***

Georgian civil society continues its daily struggle to halt the country's slide into authoritarianism. These organizations remain on the frontlines – enduring harassment, legal persecution, and threats to their very existence. Brussels must understand

that Georgia is far from a lost cause. The notion that the “Georgian Dream should be left alone” or that “Georgia is already gone” plays directly into the ruling party's hands and betrays those risking their freedom and safety to uphold European values on the ground.

This fatalistic logic also fails from a strategic standpoint. If the EU is genuinely committed to countering Russia's malign influence in its neighborhood, as it claims to be in Ukraine and Moldova, it must also recognize that the same geopolitical contest is underway in Georgia. The key difference is that in Kyiv and Chişinău, pro-European governments resist Russian pressure, while in Tbilisi, a pro-Russian government amplifies it from within. To “leave the Georgian Dream alone” would be tantamount to saying, “let us see if Russia can conquer Moldova with billionaires, disinformation, energy extortion, and economic sabotage.”

Georgian civil society and independent media today face immediate and long-term challenges. On one hand, there is the urgent battle for day-to-day survival. Many organizations are forced to operate under increasingly hostile conditions – their bank accounts frozen, their leaders facing legal threats or harassment, and their access to vital funding streams rapidly disappearing. Simply staying afloat has become a daunting task.

An equally serious challenge looms on the horizon: adaptation to a future where traditional donor support may no longer be reliable or sufficient. The infrastructure that once sustained civil society, from investigative journalism to grassroots activism, is beginning to erode. For the Georgian Dream, cutting foreign funds has become a major priority. Unless new strategies are developed and new lifelines secured, the very foundation of Georgia's democratic resilience risks collapse.

While the European Union cannot fully replace the aid once provided by the United States, it can play

a decisive role in securing the immediate survival of Georgian CSOs. This would require concrete and coordinated action, including:

- Establishing an effective communication platform between Georgian CSOs, the EU, and willing private donors to ensure a coordinated response;
- Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment to identify urgent priorities, operational challenges, and practical tools for survival;
- Overcoming bureaucratic barriers to provide emergency funding to civil society and human rights organizations under threat.

At the same time, Georgian CSOs must move beyond denial, clearly define their needs, and present realistic requests to donors. This process requires open dialogue, strategic planning, and a willingness to adapt to the realities of operating in a shrinking civic space. This, however, means challenging the current legal regime, which will inevitably result in many NGO leaders and activists being imprisoned or forced to leave the country. This is the path that political leaders have already taken.

For the donor community, the task is equally urgent. Donors must clarify what they can provide, how their resources can best be aligned with CSO priorities, and how to ensure that their support is sustainable. This is not merely a matter of funding – it is about ensuring that civil society remains a credible, capable, and resilient pillar of democratic life in Georgia.

A structured and regular channel of communication between CSOs and donors is essential. Without such coordination, the risk is that support will be piecemeal, reactive, and ineffective. This would not only waste valuable resources but also erode trust between civil society and its supporters.

It is, therefore, time to convene a **Donors' Conference for Georgian Civil Society** – a platform to coordinate support, match needs with resources, and ensure that civil society actors have the tools they need to survive and adapt. Such a conference should not be a one-off event but part of a sustained commitment to defending democracy in Georgia. It should bring together international donors, EU institutions, private philanthropists, and civil society representatives to agree on a strategic plan that is responsive to evolving challenges.

***A donor conference would also provide an opportunity to address broader structural issues. It should explore mechanisms to diversify funding streams, reduce dependence on a few donors, and create flexible support structures that can withstand political pressures.***

A donor conference would also provide an opportunity to address broader structural issues. It should explore mechanisms to diversify funding streams, reduce dependence on a few donors, and create flexible support structures that can withstand political pressures. Above all, it should recognize that saving Georgian civil society is not charity – it is an investment in democracy, stability, and the rule of law in the region.

This, however, will mean continuing the confrontation with the Georgian Dream, which will now seek to reestablish contacts with the EU and start the relations from a clean slate. And this is where the opportunity might lie. If the EU maintains a strong non-negotiable stance that the ruling party should allow civil society, media, and political opposition to exist, then the Georgian Dream might reconsider its draconian approach. Yes, it could mean that the EU might have to drop the idea of pressing for new

elections and political dialogue; however, the truth is that it never consistently pushed for these at the highest level, unlike the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

## The Stakes for Democracy

The case of Georgia is emblematic of a more profound crisis facing democracy in the 21st century. The rapid erosion of democratic institutions, the weakening of civil society, and the retreat of international support have revealed that democracy is fragile, even in countries that have previously been considered success stories.

For the European Union, Georgia is a test case. How Brussels responds will shape its credibility as a defender of democratic values and human rights. If the EU allows Georgia to slip quietly into authoritarianism, it will set a dangerous precedent for other states in its neighborhood and beyond.

***The EU must move beyond symbolic measures and develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach to support civil society, defend human rights, and counter authoritarianism.***

This requires a strategic shift from rhetoric to action. The EU must move beyond symbolic measures and develop a comprehensive and coordinated

approach to support civil society, defend human rights, and counter authoritarianism. This includes concrete funding mechanisms, tailored strategies for crisis response, and sustained political engagement. The sporadic, uncoordinated sanctions have allowed the Georgian Dream to adapt. A creation of a “Big Stick, Some Carrots” package that can be proposed and negotiated at the highest level by some EU member state leaders could be one way to tackle the Georgian problem one last time.

Furthermore, the EU must recognize that the broader Georgian civil society, comprising NGOs, activists, public intellectuals, academia, and the media, cannot win this fight for a democratic future alone. Their survival depends on meaningful solidarity from the EU, international donors, and the wider democratic community. The time to act is now, especially after the 4 October events, which have all but given the Georgian Dream *carte blanche* for further crackdown. Without sustained and coordinated support, the gains of decades of democratic development in Georgia risk being lost for a long period.

The coming months will be decisive. The international community must decide whether it will uphold its values or allow Georgia’s democratic trajectory to be determined by inaction. A donors’ conference should not just be a meeting but a litmus test of that commitment. The future of Georgian democracy and the credibility of the EU as a normative power are at stake ■



# Unconstitutional Revenge Commission - a Stepping Stone Towards One-Party Dictatorship

**A**s Georgia moves into the autumn of 2025, a new phase of political repression is taking shape. Arrests, prosecutions, and public trials of those accused of organizing the so-called “peaceful revolution” of October 4 are imminent. Court proceedings against non-governmental organizations are also underway, with the clear prospect of closures and criminal charges against their leaders. Yet these measures, severe as they are, may soon be overshadowed by what now appears to be the government’s next objective: the formal prohibition of opposition political parties. Initially [announced](#) by Irakli Kobakhidze in November 2024 and reiterated by other Georgian Dream (GD) officials, this initiative represents a critical escalation in the erosion of political pluralism, signaling a deliberate move toward a one-party political order. This could even lead to Georgia’s expulsion from

the Council of Europe. As the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [noted](#) in its resolution 2624, “banning of the democratic opposition would effectively establish a one-party dictatorship in Georgia, which would be incompatible with Council of Europe membership.”

To construct a semblance of legal justification for the establishment of this one-man, one-party dictatorship strategy, the ruling party [created](#) a parliamentary commission to investigate and study “the Activities of the Regime in Power in 2003–2012, its Political Officials, and Current and Former Officeholders, and Affiliated Political Parties from 2003 to the Present” (hereinafter – the Tsulukiani Commission).

This commission was initially tasked with reviewing alleged abuses committed by the United Na-



**SERGI KAPANADZE**  
Editor and Contributor

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



tional Movement (UNM) between 2003 and 2012. In practice, however, its scope was quickly [widened](#) to include developments up to 2024 and to scrutinize what it labelled the activities of the “destructive opposition.” All major opposition factions (except for Giorgi Gakharia - *For Georgia* party) refused to participate in this politically motivated theatrics, citing the illegitimacy of the commission and Parliament, which were convened after the flawed Parliamentary elections of October 2024. The proceedings of the investigative commission, nonetheless, continued for six months, resulting in a [450-page report](#) now positioned as the principal basis for banning political parties and criminalizing dissent.

The commission also achieved another corollary goal – current and former political leaders who refused to participate in the hearings were [sentenced](#) and are serving time in jail until early 2026. Arrested leaders include Nika Melia and Nika Gvaramia, leaders of the *Akhali* party, part of the *Coalition for Change*; Zurab Japaridze, the leader of the *Girchi-More Freedom* party, also a member of the *Coalition for Change*; Giorgi Vashadze, leader of the *Strategy the Builder* political party; Givi Targamadze, former chairman of the defense and security committee; Irakli Okruashvili, former defense minister. Two other leaders, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze, the leaders of *Lelo – Strong Georgia*, were sentenced but have been [pardoned](#) by the Georgian Dream in exchange for their participation in local elections.

Parliamentary investigative commissions, when constituted in accordance with democratic norms, are legitimate oversight instruments. They are designed to illuminate matters that the executive might otherwise conceal and to strengthen institutional accountability. Their credibility depends on balance, inclusion, and adherence to factual inquiry rather than political convenience. The Tsulukiani Commission met none of these criteria. It was conceived as an instrument of political retali-

ation, aimed at delegitimizing the post-Rose Revolution era and preparing the legal foundation for the suppression of the government’s opponents. The body was partisan in composition, unconstitutional in procedure, and uninterested in the substantive verification of evidence.

The commission’s creation followed soon after Bidzina Ivanishvili’s April 2024 public [declaration of intent](#) to bring the “collective UNM” to justice. The commission’s work, rather than focusing on specific cases, expanded into an attempt to reinterpret two decades of Georgia’s political history as a continuous criminal conspiracy. The breadth of its mandate was excessive: in six months, it purported to review more than sixty thematic areas and over two hundred incidents, spanning from the early 2000s to the present. The exercise could not possibly meet even the most minimal standards of investigative thoroughness.

***The Tsulukiani Commission never investigated wrongdoing; it might have revisited the case, in which some, or many, former UNM leaders did wrong, but those cases had either already been investigated or were long forgotten. What the Tsulukiani Commission managed, however, was to manufacture a narrative of collective guilt.***

The result was a [political document](#) presented as a report of parliamentary oversight. In substance, it functions as a manifesto for the ruling party’s campaign to consolidate power and eliminate remaining pockets of opposition. It is a sort of “Mein Kampf” for Bidzina Ivanishvili. The Tsulukiani Commission never investigated wrongdoing; it might have revisited the case, in which some, or many, former UNM leaders did wrong, but those cases had either already been investigated or were long forgotten. What the Tsulukiani Commission

managed, however, was to manufacture a narrative of collective guilt.

## J'accuse — de tout!

Unlike Émile Zola, who accused the French government of conspiracy over the Dreyfus Affair in 4,500 words, Tsulukiani produced a 450-page indictment that accused the United National Movement of virtually every conceivable political, criminal, and moral offense. The report is sweeping in scope, denouncing the UNM, its years in power from 2004 to 2012, and its allies in civil society, media, and opposition parties since 2012. It presents the former ruling party as the architect of a violent and corrupt system, responsible for state-sponsored torture, political repression, and the monopolization of information and business. It claims that under UNM governance, systemic torture and inhumane treatment became state policy as part of the “zero tolerance” campaign, implicating senior officials, including President Mikheil Saakashvili. The report further alleges that the UNM operated a vast surveillance network, collecting compromising material on public figures to intimidate and control dissent, and that its leadership engaged in widespread racketeering, coercing business owners, and transferring assets for personal enrichment.

Particular attention is devoted to the media sector, which the commission depicts as having been transformed into a propaganda instrument fully subordinate to the executive. In this narrative, the once diverse and competitive Georgian media landscape is recast as a state-controlled system of manipulation, used to silence criticism and amplify official narratives. The report also revisits the 2008 war, contending that the UNM government provoked the conflict with Russia through reckless decisions and politically motivated military operations, resulting in defeat and territorial loss. The portrayal is designed to shift responsibility for the war's outcome from Moscow to Tbilisi and to asso-

ciate the former government with national humiliation and failure.

Beyond the UNM's period in power, the commission extended its accusations into the following decade, asserting that the UNM-led opposition, its successor parties, and civil society organizations have continued to act as instruments of subversion. It portrayed these groups as part of a coordinated effort, allegedly supported by foreign actors, to destabilize the country and obstruct its progress. NGOs and universities received particular attention, accused of serving as operational centers for Western-funded conspiracies, later also augmented by propaganda outlets, like *Imedi* and *POSTV*. Higher Education Institutions such as the University of Georgia (UG), Ilia State University, International Black Sea University, Free University of Tbilisi/Agricultural University of Georgia, and Caucasus University were described in the reports as shelters for former officials and sites of ideological indoctrination.

***The resulting document thus functions less as an investigation than as a political manifesto: a comprehensive attempt to criminalize the legacy of Georgia's democratic period and to legitimize the ruling party's campaign against opposition, independent institutions, and the memory of political pluralism itself.***

The report culminates in the claim that the United National Movement and its affiliated structures constitute an ongoing threat to Georgia's sovereignty and security and are an impediment to the normal development of the country. On this basis, Georgian Dream proposes that the Constitutional Court consider banning the party and its related organizations from participating in politics altogether. The resulting document thus functions less as an investigation than as a political mani-



festos: a comprehensive attempt to criminalize the legacy of Georgia's democratic period and to legitimize the ruling party's campaign against opposition, independent institutions, and the memory of political pluralism itself.

For Hitler, "*Mein Kampf*" was used to demonize Jews and blame them for all wrongdoings. For Ivanishvili, that force, which is responsible for all historic and current problems in Georgia, is a collective United National Movement, or "*natsebi*". The similarity is quite telling.

## An Unconstitutional Commission

Responding substantively to every accusation contained in the Tsulukiani Commission report would be impossible, given both its sheer volume and its lack of methodological rigor. It is also not the task of this journal to respond to such documents, which should be left to the political parties "implicated" in the report. What we can and must address, however, are the fundamental procedural violations and constitutional breaches that defined the commission's formation and work. These structural flaws alone render its findings politically and legally void.

Article 42 of the Georgian Constitution stipulates that "the representation of opposition factions in temporary commissions shall not be less than half of the total number of commission members." The purpose of this provision is clear: to guarantee political balance, preserve independence, and prevent investigative bodies from becoming partisan instruments. The Tsulukiani Commission ignored this requirement entirely. Georgian Dream [appointed](#) eight of its ten members, including three drawn from nominally opposition factions—*People's Power* and the *European Socialists*—whose representatives were elected from the ruling party's list and have consistently voted with the ma-

jority. The remaining two seats, allocated to Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party, were left vacant due to that party's boycott. As a result, the commission operated without a single genuine opposition member, making any claim to pluralism or impartiality unsustainable.

Equally telling was the appointment of Thea Tsulukiani as chairperson. By established parliamentary practice, investigative commissions are typically chaired by opposition members to signal independence and credibility. In this case, leadership was given to one of the most partisan figures in Georgian politics, a long-time loyalist of Bidzina Ivanishvili known for confrontational rhetoric and overt hostility toward opposition parties, independent media, and civil society organizations. Her presence as chairperson predetermined the tone, focus, and conclusions of the inquiry.

The structure of the commission thus violated not only constitutional provisions but also the fundamental logic of parliamentary oversight. The opposition quota exists precisely to prevent the governing party from investigating itself or weaponizing such mechanisms against its rivals. By filling opposition-designated seats with loyalists, Georgian Dream eliminated the procedural safeguards that define legitimate inquiry. The result was a body that mirrored the ruling party's political objectives, used parliamentary formality to simulate legality, and produced findings devoid of institutional credibility.

## The Commission for Rewriting the History of the Russian Invasion

The Tsulukiani Commission report reiterated one of Georgian Dream's most persistent narratives: that Georgia [initiated](#) the August 2008 war, allegedly driven by the political ambitions of the United National Movement and influenced by ex-

ternal actors. This framing mirrors Russia's own justification for its aggression and occupation, while disregarding the established body of evidence demonstrating that the war was planned and provoked by Moscow. The commission provides no new intelligence, documentation, or corroborated material to substantiate its claims. It directly contradicts the findings of the parliamentary temporary commission established shortly after the conflict, which examined the causes and consequences of the war in detail and produced a comprehensive [report](#) showing that Russia had long prepared and executed its invasion of Georgia. Tsulukiani attempted to escape by inviting a former chair of the commission, but the interview failed to corroborate her claims, nor could it refute the findings of the 2008 report.

The methods used by the Tsulukiani Commission further undermine its credibility. Testimonies from former military officials, including Generals Zaza Gogava and Mamuka Kurashvili, were quoted selectively and taken out of context, sometimes contradicting the witnesses' own statements made during the hearings. References to international court decisions and documents were similarly distorted, stripped of their original meaning, and presented as confirmation of conclusions that those same institutions never reached. Evidence pointing to Russian premeditation and escalation, much of which had already been submitted by Georgia to international courts, was ignored or not mentioned. The commission's questioning of witnesses openly pursued one goal: to extract statements that would suggest Georgia's leaders, and hence Georgia, started the war.

In her rhetoric during the commission sessions and media, Thea Tsulukiani personally [restated](#) the ruling party's position that, since 2004, the Saakashvili government had taken "damaging steps" against Georgia's territorial integrity through "militaristic" policies in the Tskhinvali region and Kodori gorge. She argued on the record that by August 2008, the Georgian army had been

led into war by politicians "distant from military affairs," who, expecting foreign support and disregarding commanders' advice, had "attacked the city of Tskhinvali," resulting, as she put it, in a "three-day war, defeat, occupation, and heavy losses." It is not incidental that in the last few years, Russian history textbooks also switched from a narrative of a five-day war to a three-day war in August 2008. The Tsulukiani Commission also accused the UNM government of ignoring warnings of escalation in late July 2008 and failing to evacuate civilians, citing the PACE Resolution 1633 as supposed proof that Georgia had "admitted to shelling Tskhinvali" and "accused its own army of war crimes."

This interpretation of Resolution 1633 is both [inaccurate and politically motivated](#). Adopted by PACE in October 2008, the [resolution](#) does not assign blame to Georgia for starting the war. On the contrary, it calls for an independent international investigation into the conflict's origins and recognizes that both sides offered conflicting accounts of its outbreak. More importantly, the resolution explicitly identifies Russia as the aggressor and occupying power, condemns its recognition of the so-called independence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and denounces the ethnic cleansing of Georgians from occupied territories. It emphasizes that while hostilities formally began on 7 August 2008, they were preceded by Russian provocations, military build-up, and the failure of Russian "peacekeepers" to prevent violence. Fourteen of fifteen Russian delegates voted against the resolution, underscoring Moscow's hostility to its content.

**By transforming this milestone into a domestic propaganda tool, this time through the Tsulukiani Commission report, the ruling party not only distorts historical reality but also erodes the legitimacy of Georgia's case before the international community.**

Georgian Dream's repeated claim that the UNM government "admitted" to starting the war by supporting Resolution 1633 is therefore false and damaging. It undermines Georgia's diplomatic and legal position in international forums and weakens the credibility of the country's long-standing argument that it was a victim of Russian aggression. The resolution remains one of the first international legal documents to acknowledge Russia's occupation and ethnic cleansing in Georgia. By transforming this milestone into a domestic propaganda tool, this time through the Tsulukiani Commission report, the ruling party not only distorts historical reality but also erodes the legitimacy of Georgia's case before the international community.

## The Commission of Bias

The Tsulukiani Commission's report is saturated with one-sided narratives and selective interpretation of facts. Its treatment of the *Rustavi 2* case is emblematic. The document briefly mentions the 2004 sale of the television company to businessman Kibar Khalvashi, an affiliate of the Georgian Dream, but omits the politically charged circumstances surrounding that transaction. There is no mention of how *Rustavi 2* was sold by the founders—Erosi Kintsmarishvili, David Dvali, and Jarji Akimidze—nor reference to the public disputes that followed Kintsmarishvili's still-unexplained questionable suicide. However, the commission then delves into exhaustive detail, recounting how Khalvashi was stripped of *Rustavi 2* and how he managed to regain control of it. Obviously, the commission completely omits the political implications and the role of Khalvashi's lawyer and first post-takeover director, the current Justice Minister, Paata Salia, who, incidentally, was also a member of the Tsulukiani Commission before assuming the top executive job. This pattern of omission and biased emphasis exposes the commission's intent: to reconstruct the history of independent media through the prism of Georgian Dream's political interests.

Over fifty pages of the report are devoted to the topic of media freedom. Yet the section reads as a re-statement of government talking points rather than an investigation. It discusses outlets such as *Imedi*, *Iberia*, *TV 202*, *Mze*, *Objektiv 2*, *Evrika*, *Presa.ge*, and *ITV.ge* but excludes any engagement with their representatives or editors, or those who attempted or succeeded in silencing them. The commission relies almost entirely on newspaper clippings, partisan commentary, and secondary sources instead of conducting primary research. The main sources of the findings are the Ombudsman's reports from 2003 to 2012, authored at the time by Sozar Subari—himself a current member of the commission—and are quoted extensively, allowing him to authenticate his own political claims from a decade earlier.

The section on the judiciary reveals a similar double standard. The report condemns the UNM era for undermining judicial independence, citing as evidence that only 51 criminal acquittals were issued in 2006. While such a statistic indeed reflects a serious imbalance, the analysis stops there. It offers no discussion of judicial corruption or political interference after 2012 and omits any mention of figures such as Levan Murusidze and Mikheil Chinchaladze—judges whose names have become synonymous with the compromised judiciary now serving the Georgian Dream. The only reference to judges appears in the final pages, where the report lists those sanctioned by the international community in 2024–2025, presenting these sanctions as attacks on Georgia's sovereignty and judiciary independence, rather than as reflections of systemic dysfunction dating back to the UNM times.

The contradictions between the commission's claims and reality are starkly illustrated by the [recently published](#) video recording of the former Supreme Court judge Besarion Alavidze, now in exile. In a testimony recorded in 2022 and released in October 2025, Alavidze described the inner workings of judicial capture during the first ten years of GD rule, naming Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Murusidze—

Chinchaladze network as direct sources of pressure on judges. He recounted episodes of coercion, bribery attempts, and threats of prosecution, including being locked in his chambers, forced into a hospital under the pretext of surgery, and driven to consider suicide as an act of protest. His testimony connected political interference to key cases, including the Rustavi 2 ownership dispute and litigation involving the Badri Patarkatsishvili family, who own the *Imedi* TV. He also named judges Valeri Tsertsvadze, Vasil Roinishvili, and Mzia Todua (a long-time employee and manager at Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank) as enforcers of political directives, recounting how Todua personally intervened to transfer the Rustavi 2 case to the Grand Chamber "if we all want to survive." Even former court chair Nino Gvenetadze, initially resistant, was eventually compelled to comply and then played a crucial role in advancing the political interests of the Georgian Dream leadership.

The Tsulukiani Commission report devotes significant attention to the banking sector, targeting TBC Bank and its former executives, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze, as well as the Bank of Georgia, accusing them of corruption and political collusion, which often resulted in the takeover of certain businesses by individuals aligned with the UNM. None of the individuals or institutions implicated were invited to testify, except for Khazaradze and Japaridze, who were political targets in 2025. No other lower-ranking or management representatives of these banks were asked to provide their account of the story. The same pattern recurs in the case of internet provider Caucasus Online, whose representatives testified about a state-orchestrated hostile takeover by Silknet, while key actors such as Silknet owner Giorgi Ramishvili (now in cahoots with the Georgian Dream) were never called to answer to these allegations. The absence of counter-arguments or verification reflects the commission's flawed method - collecting evidence that supports a predetermined narrative and ignoring what contradicts it. Also, not bothering to invite those who are now close to the Georgian Dream.

The report's section on education is particularly revealing. It reads as a blacklist of universities and academics accused of political disloyalty. The University of Georgia is described as an institution created by the mother of Mikheil Saakashvili through a fraudulent purchase of the Georgian Technical University (GTU) building. This allegation, though never substantiated, is based entirely on the narrative of the current rector of the GTU. Nobody from the University of Georgia was summoned or asked the question, and the publicly available [information](#) about the baselessness of this claim was never cited in the report. Moreover, this attack on UG was [further amplified](#) by propaganda media, which alleged that UG was serving as the base for "terrorists" and "revolutionary cadres," allegedly laundering Western funds—a claim reinforced by State Security Chief Mamuka Mdinardze, who [asserted](#), without evidence, that U.S. grants were being funneled through a Thai bank. The U.S. State Department [publicly refuted](#) this accusation on October 8.

***Selective approach by the commission shows that it never intended to investigate wrongdoings but wanted to revive old cases and controversies, many of which had already been adjudicated in the courts.***

Similar allegations were leveled against the Free University of Tbilisi and Agricultural University of Georgia, which were presented as improperly "gifted" to Kakha Bendukidze, a former minister in the UNM cabinet; however, no administrators or faculty members were heard. Even the Caucasus University was targeted, its president accused of financial misconduct without an opportunity for a response. This selective approach by the commission shows that it never intended to investigate wrongdoings but wanted to revive old cases and controversies, many of which had already been adjudicated in the courts. Some individuals had served their sentences, while others had been acquitted; yet, their



names were reintroduced into the public sphere to evoke anger and reinforce the ruling party's narrative. Cases such as the Sandro Girgvliani and Buta Robakidze murders were selectively revisited, not to uncover new evidence but to weaponize memory.

The choice of witnesses further exposes the commission's intent. None of the senior UNM figures now abroad or inactive were called. In the meantime, attention focused on current opposition leaders such as Zurab Japaridze and Giorgi Vashadze, who were summoned despite having no relevant role during the UNM period. Japaridze never held public office under the Saakashvili government, and Vashadze's portfolio as Minister of Justice was limited to the civil registry and public service halls—institutions that Georgian Dream itself later celebrated. Their inclusion, followed by selective prosecution for noncompliance, reveals the true purpose of the commission: not to establish facts, but to silence today's political opponents.

## The Commission of Russian Conspiracy Theories

***The Tsulukiani Commission's report also sought to reinterpret Georgia's post-Soviet transformation, and notably the 2003 Rose Revolution, as a Western-orchestrated "state coup" rather than a domestic democratic uprising.***

The Tsulukiani Commission's report also sought to reinterpret Georgia's post-Soviet transformation, and notably the 2003 Rose Revolution, as a Western-orchestrated "state coup" rather than a domestic democratic uprising. Framed as a "retrospective preface" to understanding the United National Movement and its allies, the narrative positioned the peaceful revolution as part of a broader geopol-

itical conspiracy by "foreign powers" to create an anti-Russian bloc across the post-Soviet space.

The report draws heavily on the Kremlin's rhetorical playbook. It describes color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as premeditated operations following a "pre-established template" imposed by external actors during election periods. According to this account, the revolutions' architects used Western-funded NGOs and independent media to fabricate expectations of electoral fraud, mobilize public unrest, and ultimately engineer regime change. In the Georgian case, the 2003 Rose Revolution is presented as a textbook example of this foreign-designed "technology of revolution."

To construct this argument, the report selectively cites both Western and Russian scholars—such as John Mearsheimer, Richard Sakwa, and Mark Beissinger—out of context, using their analyses of Western influence and geopolitical competition as "proof" of foreign orchestration. It references the 2008 publication *The Role of Civil Society in the Rose Revolution* as an authoritative source, claiming that NGOs like ISFED, GYLA, and the Liberty Institute, alongside USAID, NDI, IRI, the Soros Foundation, and Cordaid, were not merely donors or civic actors but direct organizers and financiers of regime change. The youth movement Kmara is portrayed as the local executor of a Serbian-inspired revolutionary model, allegedly trained and funded through George Soros's Open Society Institute and coordinated with Western embassies.

The commission merged factual events, such as U.S. diplomatic engagement, NGO activity, and *Rustavi 2's* political reporting, into a conspiratorial narrative. It argues that the media, particularly *Rustavi 2*, played a central role in "radicalizing public opinion" and preparing the psychological environment for revolution by promoting Mikheil Saakashvili as a youthful national savior while discrediting the aging Shevardnadze government. According to this view, NGOs and media did not serve as accountabil-

ity mechanisms but as instruments of manipulation and subversion. This is exactly what Kremlin propaganda claims.

The report's chronology of events from late 2003 to early 2004 reconstructs the Rose Revolution as a scripted foreign operation. It suggests that "exit polls," parallel vote tabulations, and Western criticism of electoral irregularities were part of a coordinated effort between Georgian civil society, U.S. officials, and Western media to delegitimize Shevardnadze's victory and provoke unrest. Even diplomatic visits by senior American officials are framed as evidence of interference rather than engagement.

In its concluding sections, the report explicitly rebrands the Rose Revolution as a coup d'état and Saakashvili's presidency as the product of foreign manipulation. It extends the narrative to later years, arguing that the same "revolutionary networks," composed of former UNM officials, NGOs, and academics, continue to pursue Western interests in Georgia and abroad, including in Ukraine. By listing individual names and professional affiliations in Georgian universities and think tanks, the report effectively constructs a blacklist of supposed agents of "foreign-controlled subversion."

Throughout the document, the vocabulary of sovereignty is twisted into a tool of isolation. "National independence" is equated with protection from Western influence, while "foreign coordination" becomes the universal explanation for all criticism, protest, and dissent. The logic of this narrative mirrors Russian state propaganda in its structure and intent. It divides the world into two camps: the "sovereign" state defending its culture and the "foreign agents" undermining it from within. By transferring this framework into Georgian political discourse, the ruling party has effectively imported Russia's language of siege and self-victimization.

## The Commission of Ultimate Revenge

The likely trajectory of events from now on runs through a familiar sequence: the ruling party will treat the commission's findings as the evidentiary basis for a constitutional appeal; the appeal will be lodged with the Constitutional Court; the Court's opinion will then be used to reclassify the political forces named in the report. Once a high court endorses the narrative that certain parties, movements, or individuals have acted "against the constitutional order," the legal framework for banning the political parties will be created. That will be the decisive pivot, the transformation of contested political judgments into a formal legal bar on participation in Georgia's political affairs.

What follows from such a pivot is not only the rhetorical delegitimization of opponents but the construction of administrative instruments to operationalize that delegitimization. The anticipated sequence of implementation would include judicial declarations or administrative determinations that the named organizations are extremist or unconstitutional; formal outlawing of those parties; withdrawal of their rights to register and to appear on ballots; and a cascade of secondary measures intended to disable the social and professional platforms of their leaders and cadres. Outlawing a political association is one thing; preventing the people associated with it from political life is another, and it requires systems of blacklists, internal sanctions, and criminal or administrative prohibitions that reach into everyday functions.

Practical implementation, therefore, implies the creation and publication of extremist registers, the imposition of travel bans and asset freezes, the denial of eligibility for public office, the suspension of funding, and legislative or executive measures that criminalize organized support or media coverage

for outlawed groups. Beyond those conventional instruments, implementation could seek to marginalize individuals more broadly: restrictions on employment in state institutions and public-facing professions, limitations on participation in educational activities, curbs on media work and public speech, and formal prohibitions on organizing or training. These measures would not merely prevent parties from contesting elections; they would seek to remove entire networks of people from the civic sphere, interrupt the transmission of organizational memory, and make political reconstitution both legally and practically costly. And let's not forget - these restrictions will concern several thousand, if not more, persons.

The legal mechanics are only half of the story. Administrative practice will matter: who compiles the lists, by what evidentiary standard, with what appeals process, and which institutions are empowered to enforce the prohibitions. Enforcement

inevitably requires coercive backstops, including criminal investigations, policing of assemblies, selective prosecutions, administrative controls over registration and employment, and monitoring and surveillance of the activities of such individuals. The translation of a court ruling into everyday reality depends on bureaucratic instruments, on loyal officials willing to execute politically charged orders, and on judiciaries and enforcement agencies prepared to treat political exclusion as a public-order necessity. That combination of judicial imprimatur and administrative reach is what converts a legal label into social isolation.

This is when the analogy to a Russian playbook becomes undeniable. The pattern of delegitimizing an entire political current through a mix of legal labeling, administrative exclusion, and societal marginalization tracks closely with tactics used by the Kremlin ■

# UN-Enchanted

## Georgian Version of Neo-Isolationism

**T**he body of modern international affairs encompasses key events that are vital to the global diplomatic landscape, and active participation in such events enables smaller players within the international system to advance their agendas. The annual United Nations General Assembly high-level session, held in September, is undoubtedly one of these events. Every UN member state considers the platform a means to forge new or strengthen existing partnerships, interact on multilateral or bilateral levels with both like-minded and challenging partners, and present the country's vision from the highest podium of the international stage.

Since its inception in 1945, the UNGA has served as the main venue for foreign policy leaders and practitioners as a significant tool in global diplomacy. Accordingly, high-level delegations arrive with pre-planned agendas, polished messages, and readiness for ad hoc meetings. Every member of the UN - whether welcomed or unwelcome by the

U.S. administration (Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, etc.) - leverages this event for its own benefit and finds it useful for advancing foreign policy objectives.

The key prerequisite for doing so is to actually have a foreign policy objective. The absence of such objectives renders any trip to the UNGA little more than a masquerade of statehood, a mockery of diplomacy, and a stroll through Central Park or the traffic-heavy avenues of the Big Apple. The recently concluded 80th jubilee session of the UN General Assembly had one such participant — and unfortunately, it was Georgia.

### Who Runs the Foreign Policy of Georgia

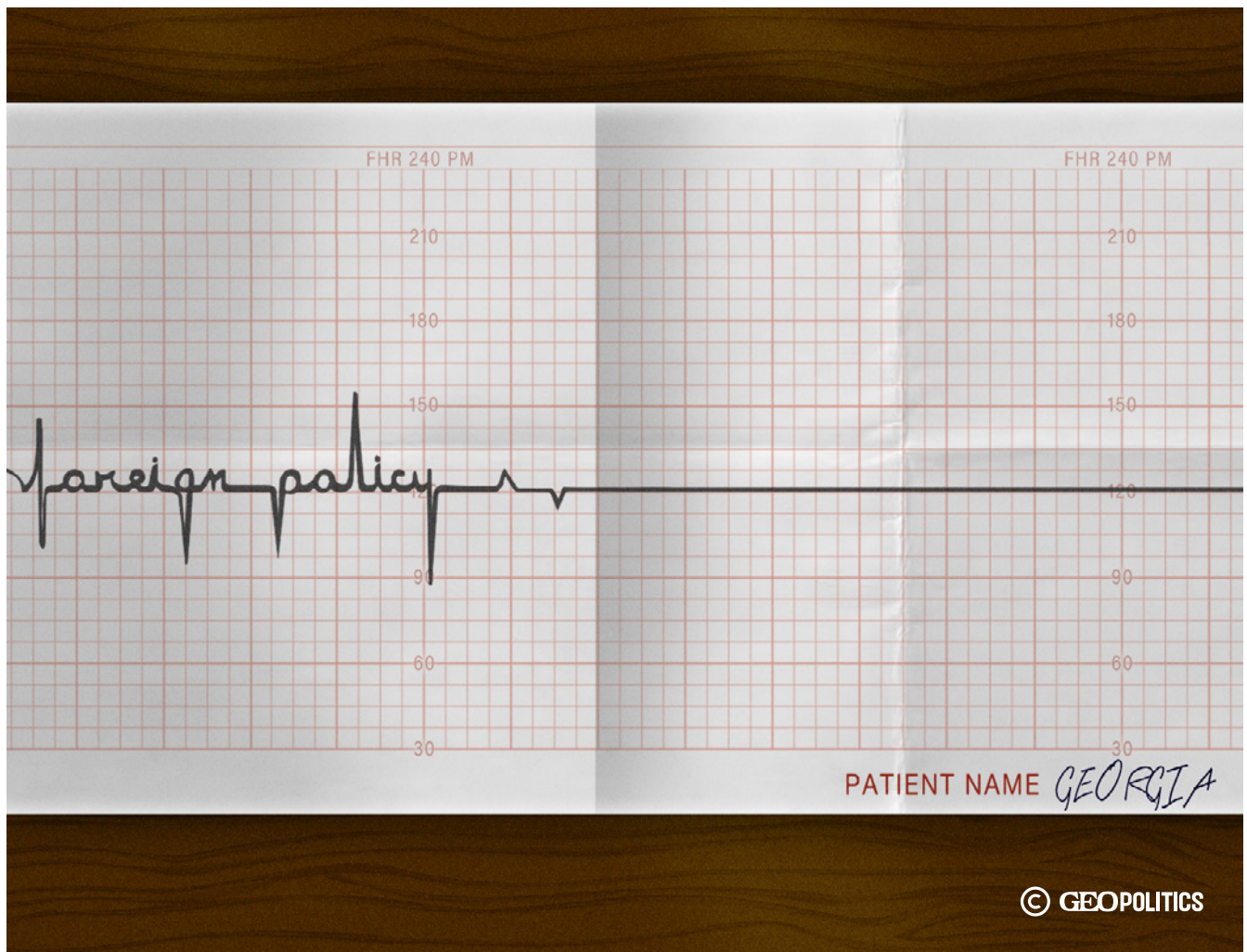
It was odd from the outset that the Georgian delegation to the UNGA was headed by former footballer Mr. Mikheil Kavelashvili—a “President” whose legitimacy is contested by most of the opposition



**TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI**  
Contributor

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





spectrum in Georgia and many Western powers. Legitimacy aside, in June 2022, the Government of Georgia filed a lawsuit in the Constitutional Court, claiming (and unsurprisingly winning) the supremacy of the Prime Minister over the President on matters of international affairs. If that is the case, then logically the delegation should have been led by the Prime Minister.

***The Georgian government suffers not only from a profound legitimacy crisis but also from an acute problem of trustworthiness and growing isolation.***

However, the reality is that the Georgian government suffers not only from a profound legitimacy crisis but also from an acute problem of trustworthiness and growing isolation. Its anti-Western rhetoric – amplified by loud and consistent state-

ments from senior officials about “the West’s attempts to drag Georgia into war” and “the deep state fighting Georgian identity” – has turned the government into a pariah in the eyes of any credible Western leader.

The proclaimed “[pivot to the East](#)” has also failed: China is uninterested, Iran is preoccupied with its own problems, Türkiye treats Georgia like a vassal, and even the Central Asian states, as well as neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan, see little value in closer ties with the current Georgian regime. Meanwhile, during the regional visit of UAE President H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in September 2025, Bidzina Ivanishvili was visibly the central figure [greeting](#) the guest, overshadowing all government officials. This served as a clear signal to everyone regarding who truly calls the shots in today’s Georgia – including in matters of foreign affairs.

It is also notable that Ivanishvili has refused to extend the same courtesy to any senior U.S. or European visitors. Since Ivanishvili holds no official position, and his minions merely perform the roles of “Prime Minister,” “President,” or “Foreign Minister,” it is unsurprising that Georgia’s chances for significant high-level meetings at the UNGA were minimal. A voyage by the actual Prime Minister would have only exposed how isolated Georgia has become in international affairs and how far it has fallen from the radar of serious foreign policymakers.

## Message in a Bottle

Sending Mr. Kavelashvili was merely an exercise in optics - a symbolic attempt to “show the flag” or signal that “we are not completely gone yet.” His [speech](#) was even more telling: it completely avoided mentioning Russia, contained aimless calls for peace and prosperity, and, most importantly, conveyed a message of “my way or the highway.” A short summary would be: “Accept us as we are, or we won’t play with you.” He was essentially parroting the paranoia of the isolated and sanctioned Ivanishvili, who perceives foreign affairs as a profound danger for him rather than an opportunity for the country.

Georgia was notably [uninvited](#) to the transatlantic dinner hosted by Secretary Marco Rubio—an event attended by European leaders, as well as representatives from Azerbaijan and Armenia. A protocol meeting with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, courtesy photo-ops with the Presidents of Slovakia and Serbia, and a dinner interaction with U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick - all underscored Georgia’s isolation, as there was no substantive common agenda with any of them.

Similarly, Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili’s [meetings](#) with her counterparts from Vietnam, Hungary, Serbia, and Croatia were further evidence of the absence of any real foreign policy

direction. In short, the Georgian delegation had no meaningful bilateral meetings, was not invited to any regional discussions, and Kavelashvili’s Georgian-language speech - featuring the mythical call to “start relations from a blank page” - was little more than a message in a bottle, cast into the ocean in hope that someone, someday, might find it and treat it as a call to action.

## Home Alone

Isolation works in mysterious ways. For Russia, according to Vladimir Putin, it resembles a cornered rat that attacks out of desperation. The current Georgian regime often borrows from the Russian playbook but cannot afford even the rat’s desperation. It feels more comfortable in the posture of a frightened ostrich — burying its head in the sand and ignoring the world. Just as the ostrich position is a myth, so too is the dreamlike belief of the Georgian Dream that reality can be ignored.

***At the same time, with no “adult supervision,” Georgian Dream is waging war against any “foreign influence” by cracking down on pro-Western opposition parties, civil society organizations, independent media, and journalists, and now even the universities.***

Annoyed by persistent and growing challenges from various organized and unorganized domestic forces opposing Ivanishvili’s isolationism, the regime tries to convince the population that the world outside Georgia’s borders is a dangerous place filled with hostile intruders — much like in the movie *Home Alone*. At the same time, with no “adult supervision,” Georgian Dream is waging war against any “foreign influence” by cracking down on pro-Western opposition parties, civil society organizations, independent media, and journalists, and now even the universities. Many of them have already been imprisoned on bogus charges. Intim-

idation, physical assaults, and violent crackdowns on any form of dissent have become routine.

This hostility extends even to accredited diplomats, especially those from Western countries, who face verbal attacks almost daily from senior figures of the Georgian Dream regime. Deportations or entry denials for foreign journalists and experts have become the new normal. Pro-regime media channels amplify xenophobic narratives, portraying the West as a malicious force “trying to erode Georgian identity.”

Such behavior is hardly surprising: in one of his interviews, Bidzina Ivanishvili openly [stated](#) that traveling abroad is dangerous for Georgians because “they will see a good life, and it will enhance their sorrow.” While Ivanishvili portrays himself as a “hero” defending the nation against foreign “intruders” - like Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone* - Ivanishvili’s message of “starting from a blank page” appears to be a hope that one day he might, like in the movie, meet President Donald Trump and ask him for directions. Just like in a movie, they met briefly for a protocol photo, but there was no time for questions or meaningful interaction.

## Neo-Isolationism or National Asceticism

Classically defined, neo-isolationism is a foreign policy approach that advocates for reducing a nation’s political and military commitments abroad without complete withdrawal from the global community. It is a modern variation of traditional isolationism, favoring a less interventionist and more restrained international role. While major powers like the United States can, at least theoretically, afford such a policy, for smaller states it inevitably leads to models like those of North Korea, Turkmenistan, or, until recently, Uzbekistan. The latter two possess substantial hydrocarbon and natural resources, providing them with enough income to sustain a sense of affluence among their

populations. North Korea’s constant famine and misery are well-documented, and even with a “father figure” like China, it cannot achieve proper sustenance or development.

Georgia’s form of neo-isolationism looks different. Its ruling elite wants free access to the Western world — but without being questioned. It is as if saying: “We want to join the non-smokers club because you have clean air, but please take us with our cigars.”

***Dragging Georgia into international isolation is either a deliberate choice or the consequence of Ivanishvili’s worldview; in either case, it is lethal not only for Georgia’s foreign policy but also for its statehood.***

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely where this attitude originates. Still, it likely stems from Ivanishvili’s early years of enrichment, when large sums of money were welcomed almost everywhere without much inquiry into their origin. Since then, the world — including the financial world — has undergone significant changes, but Ivanishvili’s mindset remains unchanged. Dragging Georgia into international isolation is either a deliberate choice or the consequence of Ivanishvili’s worldview; in either case, it is lethal not only for Georgia’s foreign policy but also for its statehood.

Businessmen entering politics is not new, but Ivanishvili’s total control is unprecedented outside fully autocratic regimes — and even there, autocrats at least hold official titles (e.g., President, King, Chairman) and bear responsibility for their actions. In Georgia’s case, Ivanishvili hides behind his subordinates, and this masquerade of statehood serves only his personal interests and phobias. These phobias appear profound: despite his immense wealth, he has not left Georgian territory for nearly a decade.

This declared and practiced “national asceticism” has become the defining feature of Georgia’s foreign policy — and from this angle, Kavelashvili’s voyage and messaging at the UNGA appear logical. Of course, this asceticism does not extend to his subordinates, who continue to enjoy trips to Europe and America — even if only for luxury shopping or fashionable haircuts.

This hypocrisy presents an opportunity for those who still see value in a democratic and prosperous Georgia. The soon-to-be adopted EU Visa Suspension Mechanism could become an effective instrument if properly applied. Ivanishvili’s regime relies not only on loyalty among his top lieutenants but also among mid- and lower-level judges, policemen, propagandists, and other executors of his anti-freedom agenda.

***Revoking visa privileges for the entire Georgian population would amount to collective punishment — a form of “carpet bombing.” Instead, selective but extensive targeting of violators (and making their names public) could create a critical mass of “wrong-order enforcement deniers.”***

Revoking visa privileges for the entire Georgian population would amount to collective punishment — a form of “carpet bombing.” Instead, selective but extensive targeting of violators (and making their names public) could create a critical mass of “wrong-order enforcement deniers.” Eventually, this could empower freedom-loving, anti-isolationist Georgians to rid themselves of the oppressive regime and bring Georgia back into the family of democratic nations. But before that, Georgia’s foreign policy rests in peace ■



# Seeking the Fixed Point of Democracy

Vice President of the U.S., JD Vance launching into a [scalding diatribe](#) against Europe at the Munich Security Conference in February, for misinterpreting free speech and immigration, was just the opening salvo of what seems like a widening gap of misunderstanding across the Atlantic when it comes to what a functioning democracy should be.

Divisions between the United States and the European Union are not very new, nor are they merely rhetorical. The differences towards democracy, international law, freedom of speech, social protection, global warming, and artificial intelligence are fundamental, and with the resurgent MAGA movement capturing one of the U.S.'s main political parties, they are likely to persist.

And the more loudly and visibly the two erstwhile poles of the “Western World” diverge, the more the fault-line between them is perilous for states like Georgia, where the western-minded citizens are

trying to put the country back on the democratic track. The internal political conundrum compels Georgian liberals to agree on fundamentals, even as the U.S. and EU squabble.

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## External Locus of Legitimacy

In the past, Georgia's pro-democratic forces have often looked to the U.S. for inspiration and, one may say without exaggeration, a nod of approval. There are at least two reasons for that.

One is systemic. European republics harken back



**JABA DEVDARIANI**  
Contributor

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



to the individual states' heritage, some reaching towards the Middle Ages. They are marked by the continental upheavals, such as the two world wars that shaped their internal politics, as much as inter-state relations. Europe-wide, the multi-party parliaments with their messy coalition politics are the rule; democratic deliberations are often messy and hard to understand. Quartered by the regional powers and then swallowed up by Russia, Georgia missed out on most of these European affairs and forgot the rest under Soviet yoke.

The U.S. interpretation of the republic – or at least its projection abroad – is more straightforward: the federal government is skewed towards the executive; the two-party parliament looks efficient and expedient. It is more distant geographically from Georgia, perhaps, but still easier to grasp conceptually. The “checks-and-balances” idea is intuitively appealing, power projection abroad (soft or hard) is considered normal, and the “Amer-

ican dream” of the widespread possibility of success is seductive.

The second reason is almost accidental. Many more Georgians have travelled to and studied in the United States at the dawn of regained independence in the 1990s and early 2000s than to Europe. Generous funding schemes “From the American People” helped make top-notch U.S. university education free for those who could show merit, while only very few could fight their way through the onerous visa obstacles and non-existent financial support that most European states imposed. Thus, the experience of democracy that most Georgian liberal politicians and educators now have is the U.S. experience.

This shapes worldviews and discourse. Launching a strategic partnership with the U.S. in 2009 was [hailed](#) as “the clearest response to the aggression against Georgia,” a qualitative leap in security.

Georgians, painfully mindful of power politics due to their exposure to outside threats, traditionally considered the ties with a more “hard power” oriented U.S., more useful than the “values-driven” pull of Brussels.

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U.S. President George W. Bush's [description](#) of Georgia as “a beacon of liberty for this region and the world” during his visit to Tbilisi in 2005 was seen as a stamp of Western approval for the country's democratic trajectory.

## The Unraveling

But what now? Georgia, hamstrung by oligarchy, is spiraling into authoritarianism, just as the democracy in the United States seems to be cracking at its seams. What if the U.S., as a democracy, is disfigured beyond recognition?

Shall the Georgian liberals, beset on all sides by authoritarian menace, stay on “forever-U.S.” course, believe that the American Republic will promptly redress itself and re-emerge as the key ally? Or shall they earnestly reorient themselves towards the European Union? What once seemed like hair-splitting on minimal differences now looms large.

The executive overreach of the current U.S. administration, its denigration of critics, including the media and opposition, its readiness to push the boundaries of legality when using force, and its antithetical stance to the foundational principles of the European Union, are all antithetical to its

daily practice of political compromise. Worryingly for Georgian liberals, the executive power grab is exactly what they are fighting against at home. How shall they respond, rant against U.S. exceptionalism, the benefit of the doubt, keep faith, or break ranks with the erstwhile ally? This is not an easy question to answer in front of the crowds.

Muscular attitude to curbing migration in the U.S., often ethnically or racially tainted, splits the European political class rather sharply across the spectrum. In Georgia, too, that kind of rhetoric has been viewed askance by the politicians and human rights leaders who seek to build Georgia as an inclusive republic. By contrast, populists and the current administration manipulate and encourage ethnic prejudice, which is seen, sadly, as a vote-winner. The same applies to other minorities: The Georgian Dream (GD) has implemented restrictive policies toward the LGBTQ+ community, positioning patriarchally defined ‘family values’ as both an electoral strategy and a rhetorical tool against what it portrays as the “woke” agenda of the EU. The Georgian Dream [purged](#) Georgian laws from the use of “gender” terminology, just as President Donald Trump [vowed](#) to curb the “Gender Ideology Extremism.” A degree of ideological confluence between MAGA, the European ultra-right, and the Kremlin makes more left-leaning Georgian liberals queasy and tempts some right-leaning ones to exploit the apparent popularity of these agendas.

Interpretation of the freedom of speech and media, including especially social media, artificial intelligence, and the internet, is another fundamental disagreement between the U.S. Administration and the EU. While the U.S. and American tech firms resent Europe's inclination to regulate, President Trump has threatened retaliation if Europe does not relax its regulatory framework, a move that Brussels has so far resisted. While the EU law [criminalizes](#) hate speech in relation to a limited

set of characteristics, the scope of that prohibition varies among individual member states. The current U.S. administration apparently [considers](#) some of these to be protected speech under the First Amendment. Many libertarian Georgians tend to agree.

The list where the EU and U.S. diverge on policy is long: the extent to which the state should provide social protection and to whom, how the education system should be organized, policy towards the Palestine-Israeli conflict, how to tackle global warming (and whether it exists), to name the burning four. One could say that witnessing this debate is a good thing for a nascent democracy like Georgia, which could consider and compare the arguments to find its own way. Except...

## Firehose Wars

Georgian Dream has tried to import the U.S. “culture wars” to Georgia. This is often done mechanically, through transposition of terms and imitation policies. Trump’s reference to “gender extremism” or qualification of the Antifa movement as “terrorists” is sometimes thrown at the opponents of the Georgian Dream and youths protesting on the streets of Tbilisi, the very same day they are uttered in Washington D.C., from the firehose of propaganda television channels. Yes, such manipulation is crude and transparent, but it does not make it less harmful. The GD has literally translated the U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) into Georgian law to restrict the freedom of the media and civil society.

To rally the public opinion and regain the ideological high ground, Georgian liberals may have to rein in the instinct to launch a fratricidal conflict within their ranks to mimic the U.S.-EU divide. The denigration and vilification of the liberals as “neo-cons” and of the social democrats as “communists” is already common currency on social media. It is our duty to keep a cooler head and look deeper.

An opportunistic ideological breakaway from Europe that the Georgian Dream has been operating actively for at least the last three years, planting the idea of democracy and human rights as dangers for Georgian identity, has left its mark. These ideas will likely persist even if that party were to vanish from the political scene tomorrow.

***An opportunistic ideological breakaway from Europe that the Georgian Dream has been operating actively for at least the last three years, planting the idea of democracy and human rights as dangers for Georgian identity, has left its mark. These ideas will likely persist even if that party were to vanish from the political scene tomorrow.***

To win back the support of the majority, Georgian liberals have to combat the aftertaste of “anti-Europeanism” tinted with “anti-Wokeism” as presented by the MAGA and parroted by the Kremlin and replicated by GD. Taken together, these three operate a formidable propaganda influence machinery at the international, regional, and local levels. It is an uphill battle that would require organizing pro-democratic constituencies beyond existing political identities, promoting other, new kinds of identities that would become more important.

This fight, Georgians cannot conduct or win alone. And the EU cannot win it with endless equivocation, bureaucratic language, and promises of economic benefits down the road either.

## For Liberty

The idea of liberty, the inherent value of human life (any human life), and the benefit of debate as a way of solving common problems have once held sway in the hearts and minds of multitudes. It is a powerful idea, the one that moves people. For



too long, the centrality of that idea was taken for granted in the Western world, and the debate centered around the specific ways to achieve better results. That time has now revolved, and the idea is now challenged by its usual enemy – tyranny at home and abroad.

For Georgia not to fall into the cracks of the U.S.–EU divide, it must build on the understanding that there is no chasm between the political entities,

but a division between the ideologies of freedom and equality on the one side, and non-freedom and oppression on the other. The rest is just a buzz.

From that fixed point of democracy, to quote Archimedes, we could start turning the world around ■

# Editorial Team



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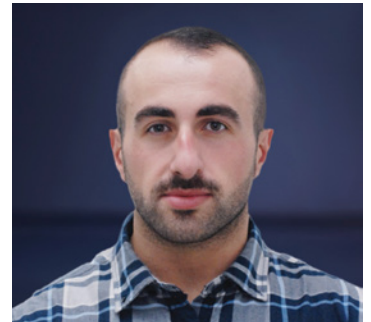
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Illustrator

# Pool of Our Experts



## Olena Halushka

Olena Halushka is co-founder of the International Center for Ukrainian Victory and board member at Ukraine's Anti-corruption Action Center. She previously served as chief of international advocacy at the Reanimation Package of Reforms coalition and as a Kyiv City Council member.



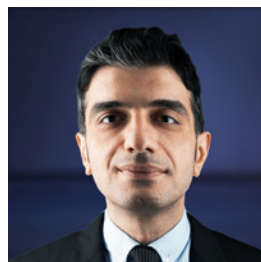
## Hugues Mingarelli

Hugues Mingarelli served as EU Ambassador to Ukraine (2016-2019) and previously led Middle East and North Africa affairs at the European External Action Service. He negotiated the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement and established the European Agency for Reconstruction of the Balkans.



## Mitat Çelikpala

Dr. Mitat Çelikpala is Professor of International Relations and Vice-Rector at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. He specializes in Eurasian security, energy policy, and Turkish foreign relations, serving as academic advisor to NATO's Center of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism.



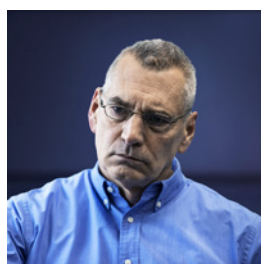
## Zaur Shiriyev

Zaur Shiriyev is an independent scholar with fifteen years of expertise in South Caucasus security and conflict resolution. He previously worked as an analyst at the International Crisis Group and Academy Associate at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme.



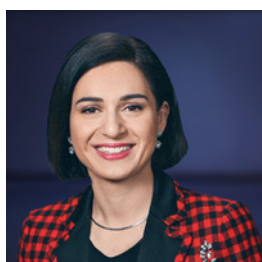
## Mustafa Aydın

Mustafa Aydın is Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University and President of the International Relations Council of Türkiye. Former university rector, he has held research positions at Harvard, Michigan, and the EU Institute for Security Studies.



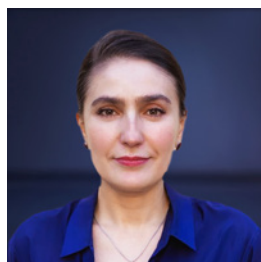
## Richard Giragosian

Richard Giragosian is Founding Director of the Regional Studies Center in Armenia and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe. He serves as consultant for international organizations including the Asian Development Bank, EU, OSCE, and U.S. Departments of Defense and State.



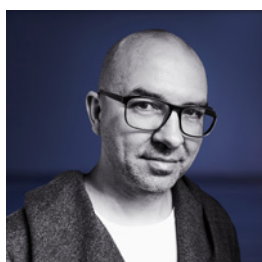
## Khatia Kikalishvili

Dr. Khatia Kikalishvili is Programme Director for Eastern Partnership at the Centre for Liberal Modernity. She previously advised on Foreign and European policy in the German Bundestag and holds a Ph.D. in European Law from the University of Saarland.



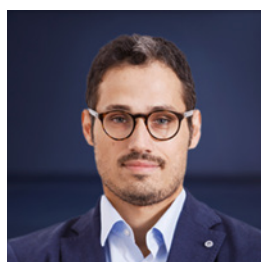
## Teona Giuashvili

Teona Giuashvili is a former Georgian diplomat with eleven years of experience, currently researching European and regional security at the European University Institute. She specializes in multilateral diplomacy, conflict resolution, and Georgia's European integration.



## Volodymyr Yermolenko

Dr. Volodymyr Yermolenko is President of PEN Ukraine and Analytics Director at Internews Ukraine. A philosopher, journalist, and writer, he is Chief Editor of UkraineWorld.org and associate professor at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, with publications in major international media outlets.



## Denis Cenusa

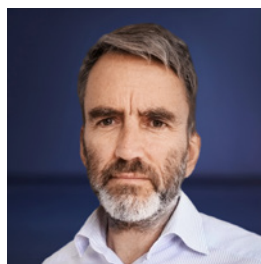
Denis Cenusa is associate expert at the Centre for Eastern European Studies and Expert-Group think tank. Based in Germany conducting doctoral research, he specializes in democratization, geopolitics, and security in the post-Soviet and Eurasian space.



## Ghia Nodia

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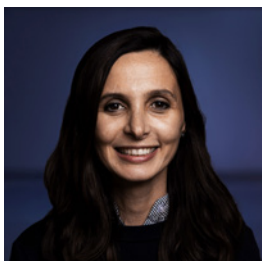
Ghia Nodia is Professor of Politics at Ilia State University and founder of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development. He served as Georgia's Minister of Education and Science and has published extensively on democracy and Caucasus politics.



## Hans Gutbrod

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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

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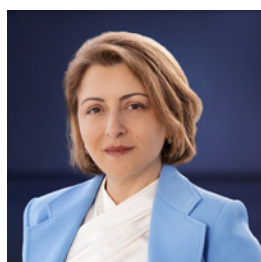
Tamara Kovziridze held senior positions in the Government of Georgia (2004-2012), including Deputy Minister of Economy. As a partner at Reformatics consulting firm, she has advised governments across Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on regulatory reforms.



## Grigol Mgaloblishvili

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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

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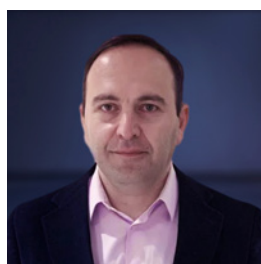
Eka Tkeshelashvili is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. Former Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Georgia, she led key Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reform initiatives.



## Tornike Zurabashvili

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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

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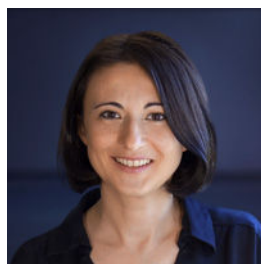
Miro Popkhadze is a Senior Fellow at the Delphi Global Research Center and a Non-Resident Fellow at FPRI. A former Representative of the Georgian Ministry of Defense to the UN, his work focuses on Russian foreign policy and Eurasian security. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech.



## Galip Dalay

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Galip Dalay is a senior fellow at Chatham House and a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on Türkiye, the Middle East, Russian foreign policy, and relations with the West. His work has been published in outlets like Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy.



## Adina Revol

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Adina Revol, PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris, is a former spokesperson of the European Commission in France and author of *Breaking with Russia – Europe's Energy Awakening* (Odile Jacob, 2024). An expert on EU affairs, energy geopolitics, and Russia's hybrid warfare, she teaches at Sciences Po and ESCP Europe and frequently appears in French media.



# **GEO POLITICS**

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