

# 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

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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.

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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 ■