

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



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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.

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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.

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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 ■