

Europe: Trap of Normalization by Default

Everyone has their *moment parisien* – that quiet instant of epiphany when the city's timeless charm captures their heart, soul, and imagination. For Razhden Kuprashvili, head of Georgia's self-styled 'anti-corruption agency,' that moment came on 25 September and he reacted by frantically posting on his agency's social media pages about his Parisian encounters. Kuprashvili, a regime loyalist, a man tasked with persecuting the country's civil society organizations, was visibly jubilant. And he had a reason to be.

Not only did Mr. Kuprashvili – who, by all accounts, should have been subject to Schengen zone restrictions – manage to enter the European Union, he also secured three meetings with French state agencies. He met [his counterpart](#) at the French

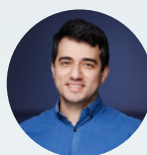
Anti-Corruption Agency, the [Deputy Secretary General](#) of the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life (HATVP), the body responsible for political finance transparency, and, finally, with the [Deputy Ombudsperson](#). Second-rate officials, perhaps, but they still represent an achievement of scale, both for his agency and the Georgian Dream party, which, hungry for legitimacy after the fraudulent 2024 parliamentary elections, has craved even minimal signs of external recognition.

In short, the City of Light did not disappoint Mr. Kuprashvili. But it surely left many dozens of civil society organizations, human rights groups, media outlets, and politically active individuals, who have been systematically [targeted](#) by the so-called 'anti-corruption agency' bewildered.



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.



TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI
Guest Contributor

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher and practitioner with a focus on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the broader Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike Zurabashvili also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, as well as master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.



Drawing on the country's newly adopted repressive laws, the agency has been [soliciting](#) sensitive beneficiary-related information, inspecting and [freezing accounts](#), or [otherwise](#) harassing regime critics. Just as Mr. Kuprashvili's Parisian meetings were underway, back home his colleagues were busy [dispatching](#) inspection requests – a harbinger to further restrictive actions – to 30 more civil society organizations.

The Parisian visit of the cog in the Georgian Dream's repressive machinery can be dismissed as an unfortunate case of excessive diplomatic courtesy. But perhaps there is much more to it: a sign of the European capitals sliding into bureaucratic oblivion, despite the trials and tribulations Georgia's freedom-loving citizens have been going through in recent months. And so, Europe may find itself in a trap of normalization by default – fueled not by malice or ill will but by a lack of focus and lassitude about Georgia sliding ever deeper into authoritarianism.

Je t'aime... moi non plus

It did not have to be this way. For a long time, Georgia was viewed as a reliable partner for Brussels – an enthusiastic reformer with a vocal civil society, a dynamic political landscape, a capable bureaucratic apparatus, and a strongly pro-European public. The country embodied the EU's enduring power of attraction, a reminder of its geopolitical relevance. Hesitantly at first, Brussels and the EU member states responded by offering benefits of closer integration, including a visa-free regime, a free trade agreement, technical and financial assistance, and many more.

As a result, by the late 2010s, a mutually acceptable status quo had taken hold with Tbilisi settling into the role of a well-compensated benchwarmer and Brussels in the role of a generous sponsor. Tbilisi's routine declaration of moving relations to the next stage – eventual EU membership – was politely de-

clined in Brussels, citing challenges in democratic governance, along with geopolitical sensitivities. But Russia's decision to launch an all-out war against Ukraine upset this unpromising equilibrium and created an opening that, officially, Tbilisi was no longer willing to exploit. Likely betting on a quick Russian victory, the ruling Georgian Dream government, led by Russia-linked billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, took an unprecedented gamble, re-orienting the country's political course.

What followed was a dramatic shift in rhetoric, marked by a surge in anti-Western messaging from the authorities, a notable decline in alignment with EU foreign policy, and a quiet resurgence in trade and economic ties with Russia. More importantly, this was accompanied by accelerated democratic backsliding, a process that steadily distanced the country from the path and the values it once enthusiastically embraced. In short, Georgia was now unmistakably off the European path, stung by the toxic combination of domestic illiberalism, external opportunism, and pervasive transactionalism.

Comment te dire adieu?

Brussels was visibly taken aback by this sudden turn of events. Despite a flurry of telegraphed "deep concerns," the EU chose habit over logic and granted Georgia EU candidate status in December 2023. The rationale (somewhat simplistic) was that more rewards, aligned with widespread popular enthusiasm for the EU membership, would incentivize the authorities in Tbilisi to reverse course.

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That optimism, however, was quickly dashed. Not only did the authorities fail to implement the re-

forms requested by the European Commission (EC) in exchange for candidacy, but they doubled down on repression. The so-called “foreign agents law,” ditched a year before, was tabled and [passed](#) in May 2024, putting a stranglehold on CSOs and the media, which have long been considered the backbone of Georgia’s pro-European drive.

The gauntlet was thrown but yet rebounded on Brussels’ empty cobblestones. Lacking consensus (and perhaps also a full understanding of the gravity of the situation) within the Council, Brussels adopted a “wait and see” approach, although the ideas of travel bans and asset freezes were quietly whispered in the corridors of power.

As the EU institutions were bidding for time, Tbilisi was eating it up. The parliamentary elections in October 2024 were brazenly tampered with, yet the Council still struggled to adopt a definitive stance, divided between those advocating for non-recognition of results and others pushing for renewed engagement with the self-declared victors. With EU members hesitant, the Commission stalled.

Things got worse. By November 2024, when Georgian Dream high-ups [announced](#) that they would be halting the EU integration process, they brutally [suppressed](#) the demonstrations that followed the infamous decision.

Ne me quitte pas

Only then did Brussels seem to have grasped the full magnitude of change in Tbilisi. Yet, what followed was typical of the EU’s external action of recent years: the Council moved to [restrict](#) all high-level contacts with Georgian authorities while the European Commission [froze](#) remaining sums of direct financial assistance to the government. The High Representative and the Enlargement Commissioner also made critical [statements](#). Nothing beyond the obligatory salvo of discontent.

Stronger measures, such as asset freezes and travel bans on Georgian Dream leaders, were blocked by the Visegrád duo, Hungary and Slovakia.

As the collective EU action failed, some member states took matters into their own hands. In December 2024, at the height of the crisis, several countries, including Estonia, Germany, Latvia, and Lithuania, [imposed](#) travel bans on Georgian officials. By the end of January, the Council also finally cobbled a fragile consensus, [introducing](#) a ([rather symbolic](#)) temporary visa requirement for holders of Georgian diplomatic passports.

After that, the EU’s response lost traction. Only the Czech Republic and Poland joined the sanctions effort, imposing travel restrictions on several Georgian officials implicated in human rights violations. The Baltic States also expanded their measures, blacklisting dozens of officials and Georgian Dream enablers. Notably, however, no EU member state has yet gone beyond travel bans; so far, only the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#) have introduced asset freezes on some ruling party officials. The continued inaction of France and Italy, countries that reportedly host substantial assets of Georgian officials, remains particularly puzzling.

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leadership in the Eastern Neighborhood, have remained conspicuously silent.

We Can't Go On Together with Suspicious Minds

By mid-2025, what had once appeared as isolated contours of authoritarian transition had evolved into a well-oiled machine accelerating Georgia's transition into authoritarian consolidation. Speeches and laws have reached levels of Orwellian absurdity. Naked violence subsided, but pervasive repression became the norm.

Attempts by the European Commission and a handful of member states, particularly from the Baltics, to bring tangible measures to the table came to no avail, with Hungary and Slovakia repeatedly blocking these motions. In June 2025, the Commission's proposal to impose travel bans on several Georgian judges, in response to their sentencing of key opposition leaders, was [rejected](#) by the Council. The EC proposal to review the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, potentially leading to the suspension of some trade provisions, would require only a qualified majority in the Council – unlike human rights sanctions or a full suspension of the Agreement – but it was ultimately judged ineffective given the [limited volume](#) of Georgia's EU-bound trade. The suspension of the visa-free regime, in place since 2017, found even fewer supporters. Tightening mobility rules is unpopular among some member states, which argue that such a move would unfairly punish ordinary citizens rather than those in power. Others regard it as a “technical” matter best left to the migration domain.

A year after the Georgian Dream announced its breakup with the EU, relations between Tbilisi and Brussels are at an impasse – but the kind that benefits the ruling party. Georgia retains its candidate status. High-level political engagement is absent; apart from occasional informal encounters on the sidelines of international forums, both Brussels and

the member states have largely stood by their decision to disengage. Direct government assistance remains suspended but support for environmental and infrastructure projects continues indirectly alongside funding channeled through international financial institutions.

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The consolidation of authoritarianism in Georgia, and the floundering of the political opposition – imprisoned, ridiculed, without access to finances and limited media exposure – dashes hopes of quick recovery. The murmurs in the corridors of European power now consider it prudent to restore some normalcy in relations, to change the tone.

Europe's response to Georgia's authoritarian consolidation – both at the EU level and among individual member states – started as fragmented and ineffective. And as the country continues to spin deeper into the authoritarian spiral, it risks acknowledging that development is a sad inevitability. It does not have to be this way.

'Tain't What You Do (It's the Way That You Do It)

There are three ways that things can go from here. One is the default road of least resistance – relegating Georgia to the pool of authoritarian outsiders with or without taking away the candidacy. This requires no elaboration. The second would see the EU taking a principled stance, which is virtuous and also self-interested, but also the least likely. The third way is that of accommodation, which may sound pragmatic but likely entails a destruction of Georgia's pro-Western societal consensus.

The Principled Way

The European Union holds a clear mandate to respond to Georgia's authoritarian drift.

The European Union holds a clear mandate to respond to Georgia's authoritarian drift. This is enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon, which establishes democracy as a guiding principle for all externally relevant policies, and this is also explicitly stipulated in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, which states that violations of democratic principles by any party grant the other one the right to implement restrictive measures. Respect for fundamental rights is also vital to the EU's visa liberalization benchmarks. Caring for and acting in support of democracy in Georgia is, therefore, not an abstract, normative duty but a concrete mandate firmly rooted in the EU's founding documents and bilateral treaties.

As long as Georgia retains the privileges of association with the European Union, the line between what is considered a domestic matter and what is not is blurred, granting the EU and its member states broader freedom to, yes, intervene. These benefits were extended to Georgia because, at the time, it was recognized for its reform efforts and democratic progress. It was never an entitlement. So, Brussels and national capitals have every right to push back against authoritarian drift.

The objective is clear: the EU must continue to cut the regime's financial lifelines and impose costs on those responsible for the authoritarian consolidation. The conditions for lifting these measures should be explicit: the conduct of new, free, and fair elections; the repeal of repressive legislation, and the release of all political prisoners.

Yet, this cannot be (only) the Commission's job. Keeping the issue at a technical level has harmed

the process. On one side stands an authoritarian political force equipped with a repressive state apparatus and vast financial resources; on the other, a fragmented response limited to one-off warnings and no real consequences. This is a losing battle. Future efforts must be elevated to the level of member states and must involve stronger European actors capable of exerting meaningful influence.

The Weimar Triangle, comprising Germany, France, and Poland, together with the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, could form a coalition of the willing and try to alter the situation on the ground and keep it on the EU agenda. This coalition could also include the UK, which has shown a strong interest in Georgia, and Switzerland, which has a proven track record of cooperation with EU counterparts on financial sanctions. U.S. participation would also be welcome but given the recent absence of U.S. policy on Georgia, this seems unlikely at this stage.

Georgia's future as a European state and Europe's credibility as a regional actor are at stake and while Georgians are still protesting, politicians are still fighting, and civil society is not entirely extinguished or exiled, this battle can still be won.

The EU's unsuccessful high-level mediation of the 2021 political crisis in Georgia, led by the European Council President Charles Michel, should not cast a shadow over future European engagement either. The situation now is qualitatively different. Georgia's future as a European state and Europe's credibility as a regional actor are at stake and while Georgians are still protesting, politicians are still fighting, and civil society is not entirely extinguished or exiled, this battle can still be won. Stronger, united, and more decisive action from the EU and its member states will send a clear signal in Georgia and beyond.

Contrary to some arguments, pressing Georgia to honor its obligations will not push it further into the orbit of Russia or China. On the contrary, the inaction would send a signal to the authorities in Tbilisi (and perhaps elsewhere in the region) that geopolitical opportunism at Europe's expense is cost-free. If Georgia continues to enjoy the benefits of association without carrying the corresponding responsibilities, it will poison the process of accession in general and may give populists in Moldova, Ukraine, and elsewhere an argument – why make painful reforms when Georgia can have the cake and eat it, too?

Bland Accommodation

Taking a principled stance requires investing political capital and devoting attention to Tbilisi when the continent is burning both literally (in war and climate) and figuratively (economic crunch, relations with the U.S., rearmament). The Council and the Commission are already seen cutting corners and dropping references to common values in the Eastern and Southern neighborhood, culling green transition, environmental, and other sacred cows.

There are noises that the Georgian government has requested, and the Commission accepted, holding the Human Rights Dialogue. Holding this without preconditions or concessions would signal the trivialization of the extent of repression that the Georgian Dream has been unleashing on pro-European citizens. While the EC will certainly voice stern criticism, it is one step towards establishing the regime of grudging accommodation and recognition.

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This “pragmatic” path now seems likely to prevail.

Still, there are things the EU can do as a part of it. One is expanding the civil society support initiatives through new or existing instruments. Another is resisting the pressure to silence the EU Delegation and keeping it as a pole of attraction and support towards pro-democratic forces. The ability of the Delegation to analyze and report on the developing situation in the country should also be reinforced and the urge to downgrade or restrict diplomatic representation (something that Germany has already done) should be resisted. Individual capitals can impose unilateral sanctions and financial tools can be used by those who have not done so. These will keep the EU as a player in Georgia, hoping for better times.

Even so, the relations with pro-European Georgians will be damaged, perhaps beyond immediate repair. The Georgian Dream's propaganda will start to ring true to even those who are now braving jail terms for waving the blue banner. The loss of naiveté, perhaps, but also the one that is likely to transform Georgia's political thought and landscape fundamentally.

Way Ahead: Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

Reversing Georgia's growing authoritarian drift may seem difficult, if not impossible. Time and again, the Georgian Dream has shown little to no respect for EU conditionality. It is drawing on its patron's financial resources, shadowy ties with Russia, and solidarity from the illiberal international. Brussels runs the risk of normalizing relations without even trying to influence the situation. If the status quo prevails, to reprise the famed quote from the BBC series *Yes, Prime Minister*, sooner than later, Europe may find itself at the “fourth stage” of diplomatic reaction: “perhaps there was something we could have done, but it is too late now” ■