

GEO POLITICS

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SAVING PRIVATE GEORGIANS



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GEO POLITICS

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Our Mission

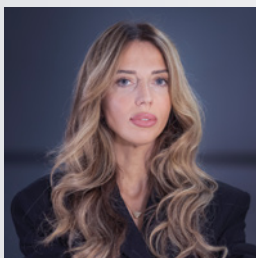
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual 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

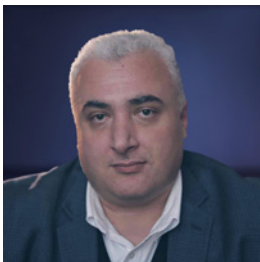
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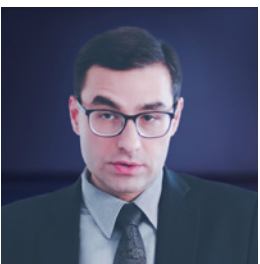
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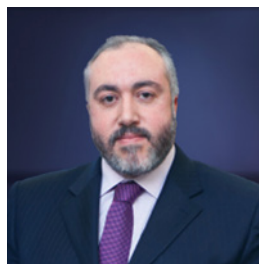
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Jaba Devdariani Contributor

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



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.

Saving Private Georgians Must Return to the Western Agenda

The “private Georgians” have been in the streets for over a year, defending their right to freedom, democracy, and a European future. Their defense may not look like a war, yet it is one as it is fought against the quiet violence from the ruthless authoritarian regime that sows fear, isolation, and forces conformity. “Saving Private Georgians” is not about rescuing a single man or woman, whether a journalist beaten up and jailed, a politician facing years of unjust imprisonment, a CSO activist who is left without a penny and is thinking of relocating, or a professor who is about to lose his job as a result of a politicized education reform. It is about saving a nation’s right to think freely, believe freely, and belong to the European family that shaped its modern identity and, up until today, remains an unachievable goal for generations of Georgians.

This issue follows that fight, across the South Caucasus and within Georgia itself, as the post-Cold War order crumbles and new authoritarian powers attempt to rewrite the security and economic rules of the current era.

Jaba Devdariani and Tornike Zurabashvili open the issue with the concern that the Georgian Dream (GD) regime’s authoritarian turn is being gradually normalized in Europe through habit, fragmentation, and political laziness rather than deliberate malice. The authors show how symbolic gestures of engagement grant the regime the external legitimacy it desperately seeks. They trace how, after granting Georgia candidate status in 2023, the EU failed to respond meaning-

fully to the foreign agents law, rigged 2024 elections, and subsequent repression, limiting itself to suspended assistance, weak statements, and narrowly applied travel bans blocked or diluted by Hungary and Slovakia, while major states like Germany, France, and Italy avoided tougher sanctions. As Georgia moves from democratic backsliding into authoritarian consolidation and a looming one-party dictatorship, Europe is drifting into a “trap of normalization by default,” debating whether or not to accommodate the regime quietly, cut it loose, or finally take a principled stand. The authors argue that the EU has both a legal mandate and strategic interest to act: build a coalition of willing member states, impose real costs on the Georgian Dream elites, and support Georgian society directly. Failure to do so, they warn, will not only betray pro-European Georgians but also poison the credibility of EU conditionality for Ukraine, Moldova, and others.

Vano Chkhikvadze picks up the thread by arguing that Georgia’s break with the EU is not yet a *fait accompli*, but that window is closing fast, and Western hesitation is helping the Georgian Dream consolidate a textbook legislative autocracy. Chkhikvadze shows that Western sanctions have been fragmented and insufficient: a patchwork of travel bans by a handful of EU states, limited but more serious measures from the U.S. and the UK, and a slow, divided EU that has frozen some assistance but disagreed on robust, unified sanctions targeting Bidzina Ivanishvili, key officials, and repressive institutions. Despite this, he stresses that GD has not won societal consent, as over 80% of Georgians remain pro-European. The

article urges the EU, the U.S., and key European powers to form a coordinated contact group, expand individual and institutional sanctions, and link connectivity projects to democratic benchmarks. The core message is that Georgia is still winnable for Europe, but only if the West stops treating its authoritarian turn as inevitable and starts imposing real costs on the dictatorial regime.

Shota Gvineria continues analyzing Georgian politics by explaining how the Georgian Dream engineered a new “security paradigm” that abandons defending the state against Russia and instead turns the entire security apparatus against Georgia’s own pro-Western society. Gvineria shows how Ivanishvili’s regime, rooted in Russian-style oligarchic networks, treats Moscow not as a threat but as its natural habitat, while branding civil society, media, universities, and students as “foreign agents” and “extremists.” Strategic documents are left outdated, NATO cooperation is hollowed out into empty rituals, procurement and oversight increasingly resemble Russian corruption, and even education reform is weaponized to detach the next generation from Western institutions and values. This “broken radar” now identifies allies as enemies and Russia as a partner, leaving Georgia externally exposed and internally repressed. Gvineria concludes that only a coordinated Western strategy, combining political isolation of the regime, tough individual and institutional sanctions, and direct support to Georgian civil society and independent media, can still prevent Georgia’s irreversible capture under Russia’s shadow and salvage Euro-Atlantic credibility in the Black Sea region.

Sergi Kapanadze focuses on the recently presented Georgian Dream’s university reform, viewing it as a systematic project to dismantle university autonomy and rebuild a Soviet-style, state-controlled higher education system, thereby de-Europeanizing the country’s academic sphere.

Kapanadze shows how territorial reorganization (moving key institutions out of Tbilisi), “one city – one faculty” academic profiling, shortened 11-year schooling and 3+1 degrees, rigid staffing rules, centralized research funding and unified textbooks, and a shift from student-based grants to direct “state order” financing all serve to concentrate power in the hands of the executive and make universities financially and politically dependent on the ruling party. He links this to the broader “foreign influence” toolkit used against NGOs, the media, and political parties, arguing that higher education is being folded into the same ecosystem of control, with private and critical universities such as the University of Georgia and Ilia State University singled out through smear campaigns, authorization pressure, and property cases. Drawing parallels with Russia’s use of accreditation, “foreign agent” laws, and targeted attacks on liberal universities, he warns that the ‘reform’ will degrade academic freedom, restrict poor and middle-class access to foreign education, weaken internationalization, and gradually pull Georgia out of genuine alignment with the European Higher Education Area, even as formal Bologna Process rhetoric is retained on paper.

Natalie Sabanadze zooms out of the Georgian context into a wider regional one, dissecting the regional developments and entry of pragmatic transactional politics into the South Caucasus. She argues that the rise of the U.S.-brokered Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) marks the end of post-Cold War multilateralism in the South Caucasus, replacing rules-based diplomacy with interest-based deal-making. The article demonstrates how TRIPP, initially conceived as a commercial corridor but now functioning as a geopolitical settlement, has sidelined the OSCE Minsk Group, rewarded Azerbaijan’s assertiveness, drawn Armenia away from Russia’s orbit, and cemented Türkiye’s regional leverage. In this new order,

peace is built not through principles or institutions but through profit, power, and personal negotiation. The result, she warns, is a region stabilized by deals rather than norms, where Europe's absence and Russia's decline leave the field to transactional actors, and where Georgia risks isolation as the only state still caught between its Western aspirations and its regime's pro-Moscow dependency.

Thornike Gordadze closes the issue with the analysis of the role of religion in the political life of the wider region. He argues that in the post-Soviet Caucasus, both Orthodox churches and "official Islam" have evolved mainly into state-managed, pro-Russian power structures rather than independent moral actors. Drawing on cases in Georgia, Armenia, and Russia's North Caucasus, the article shows how Soviet-era KGB control over clergy, followed by post-1991 alliances between former communist elites and national churches, produced wealthy, politically dependent hierarchies that trade loyalty for privilege and impunity. In Georgia and Armenia, dominant churches consistently side with corrupt, Russia-leaning or illiberal governments and resist pro-Western reforms, while in the North Caucasus, Muftiates and Ramzan Kadyrov's hyper-controlled "traditional Islam" serve as tools of Moscow's colonial rule against alternative, especially Salafi, currents.

The author concludes that faith has not displaced Soviet ideology so much as replaced it: the exact mechanisms of control, patronage, and coercion now operate through religious institutions, which often treat democratization and European integration as threats to their own power.

As we conclude two years of *GEOpolitics*, we look back at a journey that has sought to portray the realities of Georgia and a wider region with honesty and depth. Over these 24 months, we have analyzed the country's domestic politics, foreign policy, relations with the EU, the U.S., and NATO, and the widening influence of Russia, while exploring the dynamics of the South Caucasus, Ukraine's fight for freedom, and Türkiye's growing role in the region. We have discussed domestic politics, rising authoritarianism, propaganda, and church-state relations, among other topics. With contributions from some of the most respected Georgian and international experts, we have aimed to provide clarity amid the noise and truth amid the distortion. Entering our third year in December, at a time when authoritarianism tightens its grip and independent voices are constrained, we remain steadfast ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

Content

Europe: Trap of Normalization by Default 10

JABA DEVDARIANI & TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI

**Time to Fix the Broken Phone: How the Western Response
to GD's Authoritarianism Failed to Achieve Results** 17

VANO CHKHIKVADZE

Georgian Dream's New Security Paradigm 24

SHOTA GVINERIA

**De-Europeanizing the Mind:
How Georgian Dream's "University Reform" Rebuilds the Soviet Model** 32

SERGI KAPANADZE

**From Multilateralism to Transactional Peace:
How TRIPP is Redefining the South Caucasus** 41

NATALIE SABANADZE

**From Atheism to Authoritarian Faith:
State-Managed Orthodoxy and Islam in the Post-Soviet Caucasus** 49

THORNIKE GORDADZE

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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
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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.

Not only did the authorities fail to implement the reforms requested by the European Commission in exchange for candidacy, but they doubled down on repression.

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.

The EU leaders averted their eyes. So far, no senior EU official has sought to intervene or mediate in the ongoing crisis and French President Emmanuel Macron’s one-off phone call with Bidzina Ivanishvili in December 2024 yielded no results.

The EU leaders averted their eyes. So far, no senior EU official has sought to intervene or mediate in the ongoing crisis and French President Emmanuel Macron’s [one-off phone call](#) with Bidzina Ivanishvili in December 2024 yielded no results. Sweden and Poland, countries that have traditionally prided themselves on deeper engagement and

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.

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.

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.

Individual capitals can impose unilateral sanctions and financial tools can be used by those who have not done so.

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” ■

Time to Fix the Broken Phone: How the Western Response to GD's Authoritarianism Failed to Achieve Results

On 28 November 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party made a move that sent shockwaves through the nation: it [aborted](#) Georgia's European Union accession process, postponing the issue until at least 2028. This decision was a direct challenge to the fundamental aspirations of the Georgian people, prompting thousands to take to the streets immediately. This outpouring of dissent was a profound test for society, demonstrating that [support](#) for EU integration — which has historically never dipped below 60% — is genuine and deeply rooted.

For the past year, Georgian society has faced this test daily. Protesters understand that their fight is not merely about saving the EU accession process; it is about defending the very essence of Georgian statehood and democracy. Crucially, protesters in Georgia recognize that this struggle is theirs alone.

No outside power can secure their future. However, they still need decisive support from the democratic world, even if that support has been too little, too late, too fragmented.

Protesters in Georgia recognize that this struggle is theirs alone. No outside power can secure their future. However, they still need decisive support from the democratic world, even if that support has been too little, too late, too fragmented.

The West cannot afford to watch authoritarianism unfold in real time without acting. In less than a year, the Georgian Dream has [established](#) an autocracy at a pace unmatched in other EU neighborhood countries. Georgia has become a textbook case of legislative authoritarianism where the ruling party



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weaponizes the law to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and control independent institutions. The rubber-stamp parliament [has passed](#) draconian laws one after another, leaving the EU largely reactive. The subordinated prosecutor's service and state security agencies press charges almost every week – the last one [coming](#) on November 6 – alleging that nearly all political leaders have been colluding with an unnamed enemy in an attempt to destabilize the state, overthrow the government, and impose sanctions on the Georgian Dream. Yet, Georgia is not a “lost cause” as many claim in Brussels and elsewhere. A critical window still remains to halt this process and prevent another autocratic state from emerging in Europe's immediate vicinity.

The Repressive Instruments In Play

The announcement of GD to deviate from the European trajectory was strategically timed, coming within 24 hours of the ruling party nominating Mikheil Kavelashvili (a former footballer, openly pro-Russian and anti-Western, with no higher education) as its presidential candidate. The timing coincided with the final days of the outgoing European Commission (2019-2024), the end of Hungary's EU presidency, and a European Parliament resolution [questioning](#) the legitimacy of the 26 October 2024 elections while calling for sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili.

From day one of the protests, law enforcement brutally [targeted](#) demonstrators, particularly media representatives. Dozens were severely beaten, and more than 200 were detained in the first 72 hours. The government's move sparked dissent within the state apparatus. Civil servants from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Defense, as well as the National Bank of Georgia, publicly [resigned](#) in protest, distancing themselves from the Georgian Dream's EU turn. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and several ambassadors [followed](#) suit.

The ruling party responded to this dissent by [adopting](#) legislation facilitating the reorganization and dismissal of civil servants. The party amended the Law on Police to allow non-competitive appointments and restricted assembly laws, prohibiting the use of masks, fireworks, and specific devices at protests. Fines for disrupting traffic or damaging public property were dramatically increased and strictly enforced to [suppress](#) dissent.

To further quash civil society, the Georgian Dream [introduced](#) amendments requiring foreign donors to obtain prior approval from the government before providing grants to CSOs. Political parties were [banned](#) from receiving in-kind foreign support from the CSOs and others for events like lectures and seminars. The new Foreign Agents Registration Act ([FARA](#)) required CSOs to register as foreign agents. To instill fear, the State Security Service [searched](#) the homes of civil society leaders and the bank accounts of several CSOs and individuals were [frozen](#) under the pretext of a “sabotage” investigation, alleging that funds were used to “equip rally participants who committed violent acts against law enforcement.”

The Georgian Dream also established a parliamentary commission to investigate alleged wrongdoing by the opposition United National Movement (UNM), restricting opposition parties and summoning politicians, with imprisonment as a consequence for non-compliance. As a result, the party leaders of *Ahali*, *Strategy the Builder*, *Droa*, *Girchi-More Freedom* and *Lelo* were sent to jail for up to 8 months. A 470-page commission report adopted in September 2025 [portrayed](#) the 2003 Rose Revolution as “a coup,” condemned UNM rule (2004-2012), and blamed it for human rights abuses and the 2008 war with Russia. The report also accused current opposition parties and NGOs of undermining Georgia's national interests in collaboration with the UNM. In October, the Georgian Dream [applied](#) to the constitutional court to ban major opposition parties. On 4 November, the Prosecution's Office [pressed](#) charges

against the political leaders of all major opposition parties for sabotaging the state, collaborating with foreign actors to trigger sanctions against Georgia, and financing violent groups during the demonstrations.

To silence critical press, the Georgian Dream granted the Communications Commission authority to oversee standards of impartiality, which has [issued](#) fines to the independent media outlets. Several journalists were arrested for a few days, and Mzia Amaghlobeli, the founder of *Netgazeti* and *Batumelebi* online media outlets and a recent [recipient](#) of the Sakharov Prize, was sent to jail for two years.

In October, the Georgian Dream [introduced](#) further draconian laws, making the blocking of roads punishable with a more severe administrative penalty of imprisonment for up to fifteen days and up to one year under the criminal law, if repeated. The previous law, with a fine of GEL 5,000 (approximately EUR 1,600), obviously did not serve the purpose of keeping people off the streets.

In parallel, the Georgian Dream has been relentlessly pushing the propaganda message that the EU is blackmailing Georgia, imposing liberal values, like gay marriage and forced sex change, intervening in domestic affairs, and even financing and supporting extremist groups. The EU and EU member states' ambassadors have been defamed non-stop, the Parliament's speaker leading the charge, backed up by the Georgian Dream's prominent figures and state-sponsored media.

Sanctions and Stalemate

One can argue that the Georgian Dream's slide toward authoritarianism has been met with adequate measures from the West, but this argument does not stand scrutiny. It is true that the Western powers have [issued](#) sporadic sanctions and restrictive measures and have been harsh in assessing Georgia's fast degradation into a one-party dictatorship.

However, once the surface is scratched, it becomes clear that not much has been done to reverse the ruling party's actions or to prevent further democratic decline.

The collective West began applying sanctions to the Georgian Dream at the end of 2024. As of 1 October 2025, more than 230 ruling party officials and affiliated individuals have been sanctioned, including Bidzina Ivanishvili and his family members, 52 high-ranking Georgian Dream officials, 47 judges, 17 prosecutors, and 14 policemen. However, these sanctions have not been EU-wide but instead implemented by select member states with most of them not really hurting the sanctioned persons. The EU member states (except the Czech Republic) have mainly applied travel bans, while the UK and the USA have used a combination of financial, economic sanctions, and travel restrictions. So far, six of the 27 EU member states (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) have applied individual sanctions (travel bans) on Georgian Dream officials. Despite Bidzina Ivanishvili's French citizenship, French authorities have refrained from imposing financial sanctions against him, his family, or ruling party officials. However, President Emmanuel Macron engaged directly to de-escalate the crisis, [issuing](#) a video statement urging the Georgian Dream to return to the EU path and personally calling Ivanishvili to condemn police violence and demand the release of "arbitrarily" arrested pro-EU protesters. But when the Georgian Dream did not budge, the French never followed up.

The UK sanctions have not yet targeted the Georgian Dream enablers with real estate and companies in the UK nor the owners of pro-governmental media promoting anti-European narratives. Neither has the UK sanctioned Ivanishvili or his business empire, arguably the most effective tool it still possesses.

The United States and the United Kingdom were the two states whose sanctions actually had an impact (limited, but still) on the Georgian Dream leadership. The UK [imposed](#) financial sanctions against high officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as well as judges, prosecutors, and investigative bodies involved in human rights abuses and promoting disinformation. However, the UK sanctions have not yet targeted the Georgian Dream enablers with real estate and companies in the UK nor the owners of pro-governmental media promoting anti-European narratives. Neither has the UK sanctioned Ivanishvili or his business empire, arguably the most effective tool it still possesses.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [designated](#) Bidzina Ivanishvili under the Russian Harmful Foreign Activities Sanctions. The designation was explicit, citing that Ivanishvili's actions "have enabled human rights abuses and undermined the democratic and European future of the Georgian people for the benefit of the Russian Federation," thereby formalizing the U.S. view of his alignment with Russian interests. Allegedly, this has caused Ivanishvili to change ownership in many of his companies (mainly by "selling" shares to family members). But no further action followed from the Trump Administration and the U.S. sanctions have also stopped short of making a real impact.

Moreover, the U.S. Congress's failure to pass the [MEGOBARI Act](#) – a bill that would have opened doors for more sanctions and would have created a restrictive framework of relations between Washington and Tbilisi – sent a signal to the Georgian Dream that Washington is not willing to follow up on the strong statements made by Congressmen and Senators. The [suspension](#) of the 2009 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter during the final weeks of the Biden administration marked the exasperation of Washington with the Georgian Dream's repressive policies; however, the failure of the Trump administration to follow up created

hopes among the Georgian Dream's leaders that they could get away without further restrictions from Washington.

Suspension of the direct budgetary support, dubbing Georgia as a "candidate in name only" and criticizing the Georgian Dream's actions, was not enough to press the ruling party into reversing the authoritarian course.

Unlike the U.S. and the UK, and several EU member states, which imposed sanctions (even if insufficiently strong), the EU's response to Georgia's [democratic](#) backsliding has been slow and inefficient. Suspension of the direct budgetary support, dubbing Georgia as a "candidate in name only" and criticizing the Georgian Dream's actions, was not enough to press the ruling party into reversing the authoritarian course. Internal disagreements made the European response non-credible and meek.

Despite Georgia becoming a regular feature on the agenda of the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC)—being discussed six times since the suspension announcement—attempts by the HRVP Kaja Kallas to build consensus for imposing unified EU sanctions on Georgian Dream officials have been successfully challenged by Hungary and Slovakia. This deadlock feeds the growing sentiment in Brussels that the Union's ability to influence developments in Georgia has reached its limit. Furthermore, there is an apparent reluctance to intervene and mediate, given the [failed](#) mediation attempt by former European Council President Charles Michel in 2021.

In January 2025, the EU [adopted](#) a limited measure by suspending visa liberalization for Georgians holding diplomatic and service passports. This was widely viewed as a half-measure that inflicted no significant harm on the architects of Georgia's derailed EU path, who could still travel to the EU with national passports or the Schengen visas issued by Hungary.

To demonstrate its seriousness, the European Commission [sent](#) a letter to the Georgian government, setting a deadline of 31 August 2025 to address shortcomings in democracy and human rights. Failure to comply would result in the possibility of scrapping visa-free travel for all Georgian citizens. The Georgian Dream and its associated media swiftly responded by launching a counter-campaign, dismissing visa-free travel as trivial and prioritizing “peace and stability” while [accusing](#) the “Global War Party” of using the visa threat to open a “second front against Russia in Georgia.” This left the European Commission with no good choice – either temporarily suspend Georgia’s visa-free status to the detriment of the Georgian citizens or do nothing and allow the Georgian Dream’s leaders to gloat over the inability of the EU to really hurt the ruling party.

The European Parliament has been the most vocal EU institution, regularly debating Georgia and adopting critical resolutions. One such resolution, [addressing](#) the deepening political crisis, not only called for individual sanctions on Georgian Dream officials, judges, financial enablers, and pro-governmental media owners but also urged the Commission and the Council to review Georgia’s visa-free status with the explicit possibility of suspension should EU standards on democratic governance be deemed violated. A subsequent resolution in June 2025 further [highlighted](#) the issue of media freedom, particularly citing the case of imprisoned journalist and Sakharov Prize winner Mzia Amaglobeli and reiterated the call for EU institutions to impose targeted sanctions. However, the Georgian Dream has made it clear officially and through its propaganda that they are not concerned with the “unjust” and “politicized” rhetoric of the European Parliament. The MEPs are often demonized as incompetent, irrelevant and powerless. To prove the point, the Georgian delegation even suspended its participation in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly sessions.

A Call to Action: Dictatorship Is Not Yet a Fait Accompli

Despite resisting the Western pressure, cracking down on the protesters, and appearing strong in its domestic propaganda, the Georgian Dream might not be as potent as it wants to portray itself.

Despite resisting the Western pressure, cracking down on the protesters, and appearing strong in its domestic propaganda, the Georgian Dream might not be as potent as it wants to portray itself. The Georgian Dream leadership miscalculated the resilience of Georgian society, assuming that post-election fatigue and the international community’s focus on other crises would suppress domestic mobilization. It underestimated the depth of public commitment to the European trajectory, which continues to enjoy the support of more than 80 percent of the population.

This sustained defiance has thus far prevented the ruling party from completing its consolidation of autocratic power. Any perception of Western indifference at this stage would embolden the regime and further shrink the country’s democratic space. Georgia’s citizens remain distinctly pro-European, even as their government has aligned itself more closely with Moscow’s political and ideological orientation. Supporting these citizens is, therefore, both a moral obligation and a strategic necessity for the European Union as their struggle constitutes a critical test of the EU’s capacity to uphold democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in its immediate neighborhood.

The European Union can still respond to the ongoing political crisis with a coherent and coordinated policy of pressure. In cooperation with France,

Germany, and Poland, Brussels should establish a joint Contact Group with the United Kingdom and the United States to synchronize restrictive measures against the Georgian Dream leadership and affiliated institutions. Such measures should extend beyond visa bans and include targeted sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili and senior officials as well as institutional sanctions against the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Security Service, the judiciary, and the Central Election Commission. Additionally, financial conditionality should be implemented through international financial institutions and EU budgetary mechanisms. If these cannot be done at the EU level, they should be done at the national level by the European powers and the U.S. The EU should also make clear that participation in strategic Black Sea connectivity initiatives, including the electricity and digital cable projects, will be suspended until verifiable progress is made in reversing democratic regression. Only a unified and credible punitive framework can deter further authoritarian consolidation and preserve the EU's remaining leverage in Georgia.

In cooperation with France, Germany, and Poland, Brussels should establish a joint Contact Group with the United Kingdom and the United States to synchronize restrictive measures against the Georgian Dream leadership and affiliated institutions.

The Georgian Dream may have captured the institutions of the state, but it has not secured the consent of the governed. Neither has it secured legitimacy in the eyes of the West. That gap between coercive control and popular legitimacy remains the principal space for democratic renewal. The months ahead will determine whether or not Georgia can reassert its European course or become a cautionary example of Western hesitation in the face of authoritarian entrenchment in the EU candidate state. For Georgia, for Europe, and for the credibility of democratic values, decisive action can no longer be postponed ■

Georgian Dream's New Security Paradigm

In recent years, the Georgian Dream government has, in effect, crafted a new national security doctrine, one that redefines threats to state institutions and national security. Instead of recognizing Russia as the principal source of danger to Georgia's sovereignty, the regime has shifted its focus toward imaginary enemies, the so-called "Deep State," the "Global War Party," and alleged "foreign agents." This reorientation has turned the state's entire security apparatus, the State Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, intelligence, counterintelligence, and anti-corruption agencies, into instruments for policing the "internal front" rather than safeguarding the country from external aggression. Civil society organizations, media, universities, and even students are now routinely labeled "terrorists," "extremists," or "instigators of unrest," as the state machinery concentrates on their "neutralization."

By systematically blurring the boundary between

the state and the ruling party, the Georgian Dream strengthened its grip on power and simultaneously widened the rift between the regime's interests - political survival through alignment with Moscow - and the nation's interests - surviving Russian aggression and remaining anchored in Western institutions. The resulting contradiction corrodes Georgia's democratic fabric, counters declared national interests, and significantly strengthens authoritarian standing in the regional and broader European context.

Russia: A Choice or a Necessity?

Ivanishvili never needed to "turn" toward Russia; it was always his natural habitat.

Many in and outside Georgia continue to debate Bidzina Ivanishvili's true intentions, asking whether or not he was a Russian project from the beginning or if he later chose to change course.



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This question itself demonstrates the lack of understanding of the fundamental nature of Ivanishvili's regime because it assumes the existence of alternatives for the oligarch. In reality, Ivanishvili never needed to "turn" toward Russia; it was always his natural habitat.

His entire political and economic formation took place within the Russian sphere of influence, where wealth and power are built through proximity to the state, informal loyalty networks, and the absence of accountability. When he entered Georgian politics, he brought with him that same mindset, one that views politics not as public service but as an extension of private enterprise. Over time, the Georgian Dream's behavior has only confirmed that Russia is not an accidental partner but the structural pillar of its survival. The Kremlin's model of governance – centralized control, co-opted elites, silenced opposition, and a permanent narrative of external threat – provides exactly what the current regime needs to stay in power.

The deeper connection between the Georgian Dream and Moscow lies in shared values and the survival instinct. Most of the current regime's key enablers were shaped by Soviet or post-Soviet Georgia, where democracy, the rule of law, and civic accountability were distant and abstract concepts. They learned to operate in systems where personal loyalty outweighed competence and where institutions existed to protect power rather than to regulate it. In this environment, corruption is a method of governance and clientelism is a measure of success. These are the conditions under which Ivanishvili's wealth multiplied and through which his closest circle rose to influence. It is no coincidence, therefore, that most of his closest allies come from his business empire – Cartu Group, JSC Cartu Bank, and affiliated entities. Ivanishvili's power networks thrive in opacity and dependence instead of competition and transparency. The West, with its emphasis on rules, disclosure, and equal opportunity, represents a terrain where

Ivanishvili and his associates cannot compete or maintain a grip on power, something which is also a reason why the opportunity for European integration and the push for reforms was viewed as a danger by Ivanishvili.

Moscow, in contrast, offers familiarity, leverage, and impunity. It is a place where wealth secures protection and influence without moral scrutiny, where loyalty is valued above legality, and where politics serves as an instrument of private enrichment. The recent corruption scandals [surrounding](#) Ivanishvili's former personal assistant and twice Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, and his cabinet members demonstrate exactly that – tapping into the state budget, receiving millions in cashbacks, and simply stealing money from state contracts was (and probably still is) the rule of the game. In this sense, Russia is both a deliberate choice and a fundamental necessity for the Georgian Dream.

Russia's priority is to make the country's reorientation permanent, to embed structures and narratives so deeply that even a change of leadership would not restore the Euro-Atlantic course.

The strategic [logic](#) of the Georgian Dream is that the West's insistence on democratic norms threatens the regime's survival while closer affinity with Moscow secures patronage, impunity, and a geopolitical shelter. It also provides money. Moscow understands its position is fragile because Georgian public opinion remains pro-Western and because Western-educated youth form the backbone of domestic resistance. That is why Russia's priority is to make the country's reorientation permanent, to embed structures and narratives so deeply that even a change of leadership would not restore the Euro-Atlantic course. Obviously, this threat is totally ignored by the Georgian Dream.

It is, therefore, no surprise that Russian high offi-

cials often praise the Georgian Dream for resisting Western pressure and “acting sovereign.” Just recently, Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu [praised](#) the Georgian authorities’ ability to withstand destructive external pressure. Before that, Russian propagandists and politicians [expressed](#) content with how Georgia was “changing behavior” and standing up to the West.

Broken Radar

The clearest way to trace the transformation of Georgia’s defense and security policy under the Georgian Dream is through the measurable indicators that define a democratic security system: strategic documents, alliances, training and deployment patterns, procurement, and institutional behavior. These indicators reveal a deliberate realignment with Russia’s model of governance and security logic. In democracies, national security strategies and threat assessments are regularly renewed to reassess risks and guide defense planning. In Georgia, the National Security Concept has not been [updated](#) since 2011 and the last publicly [available](#) National Threat Assessment was adopted in 2010. This long silence is political. The Georgian Dream avoids revisiting these documents because any honest revision would again identify Russia as the principal threat to Georgia’s sovereignty and reaffirm that closer integration with NATO and the EU is the only viable path to mitigate that threat.

The government has inverted the very logic of security: the machinery designed to defend the nation has been turned against its citizens, leaving the country exposed externally and repressed internally.

More importantly, it is impossible to organize an effective national defense and security without those cornerstone documents, meaning that Georgia’s defenses are currently effectively dis-

abled. The institutions responsible for protecting the state are left without strategic guidance and have been redirected to fight democratic stakeholders who are portrayed as internal “threats” to the Georgian Dream regime. In doing so, the government has inverted the very logic of security: the machinery designed to defend the nation has been turned against its citizens, leaving the country exposed externally and repressed internally. The radar of threats is broken – showing enemies as friends and allies as enemies.

Institutional stagnation contrasts sharply with the country’s record of active and transparent cooperation. During the early 2000s, Georgia’s defense sector [underwent](#) systematic reform, aligning its planning cycles with NATO’s Planning and Review Process and the Annual National Program, and conducting regular Strategic Defense Reviews to improve interoperability and readiness. These processes have now slowed or lost substance, turning into bureaucratic rituals rather than strategic exercises. Exercises such as Noble Partner have been [postponed](#) or reduced in scope and bilateral defense programs with the United States and the United Kingdom are managed with visible caution. The same institutions that once opened Georgia’s defense establishment to Western scrutiny are now used to close it off from criticism, reproducing Moscow’s pattern of control through secrecy and selective loyalty.

Although formal cooperation frameworks between Georgia and NATO technically remain in place, the reality on the ground tells a very different story. Despite the fact that practical cooperation is effectively stalled and many of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) projects are suspended or paused, the official NATO website continues to [portray](#) a delusional image of uninterrupted progress and successful partnership. The page describing NATO-Georgia relations still lists ongoing reforms, joint exercises, and defense capacity-building efforts as if the political and insti-

tutional relationship were functioning normally.

In reality, the partnership has been [reduced](#) to a hollow formality. The majority of cooperation mechanisms have lost operational significance due to the Georgian government's open hostility toward NATO members, its anti-Western [rhetoric](#), and the political sanctions now [imposed](#) on Georgia's leadership by several NATO states. This disconnect between NATO's public communications and the deteriorating political reality in Georgia confuses international audiences and plays directly into the Georgian Dream's narrative of false legitimacy, allowing the regime to claim that Euro-Atlantic integration remains an option. At the same time, in practice, it systematically dismantles every institutional link to it.

A striking sign of this reversal is found in the moral geography of Georgia's current security posture. The country that once [ranked](#) as the largest per capita contributor to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan now [tolerates](#) Russia's open recruitment of Georgians to fight against Ukraine. Moscow's official platform for foreign enlistees includes a page specifically targeting Georgian citizens, inviting them to join the Russian armed forces. This grotesque reality is met with complete silence from Tbilisi. Moreover, Georgian Dream has been hostile to and has been [creating](#) a variety of problems for Georgians fighting on Ukraine's side. The Georgian government, which [accuses](#) the West of trying to drag Georgia into war, shows no reaction to a hostile power recruiting its citizens to fight in an aggressive war against a democratic neighbor.

Georgia's ruling party has successfully turned the disinformation narratives about the "Global War Party" and the "Deep State" into strategic reference points for a security policy that treats Western influence as an existential threat. The 2024 State Security Service report explicitly [links](#) civil society and independent media with alleged foreign malign influence. It claims that these actors

seek to drag Georgia into war or to overthrow the government. The report of the Parliamentary Investigative Commission, chaired by MP and former Justice Minister Thea Tsulukiani, [argues](#) the same.

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This securitized framing is matched by practice. The institutions that should be countering hostile foreign action and foreign information manipulation interference instead focus on monitoring and marginalizing domestic democratic actors. The State Security Service regularly spearheads investigations and legal cases against the opposition and NGOs.

The rest of the indicators follow the same direction. Military education and procurement have become increasingly opaque with less oversight and fewer Western-linked programs. Transparency International and defense observers have [noted](#) a regression in public accountability within the Ministry of Defence and a growing concentration of decision-making under political appointees rather than professional officers. Procurement processes are [handled](#) in secrecy, resembling the informal practices and corruption of Russia's own defense sector. The arrest of the former Minister of Defence for misappropriating large sums from the ministry's procurement is a testament to this problem. Parliamentary oversight of security agencies has weakened, especially since there is no opposition in the Parliament and the Parliamentary Trust Group to oversee the defense spending. The intelligence community operates with diminished independence, focused largely on domestic surveillance. The former head of the State Security

Service, who was appointed by the Parliament for six years, [resigned](#) in a few months, thanking the party and accepting a low-profile position of advisor to the Prime Minister. The annual reporting of security institutions has not included meaningful discussion of Russian hybrid threats for years, even as occupation lines in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia quietly advance.

Across all measurable indicators: strategic documents, alliances, training and deployment patterns, procurement, and institutional behavior, the pattern is consistent. Georgia's defense and security system no longer behaves as part of the Euro-Atlantic community. It retains the appearance of cooperation through symbolic participation in select exercises and declarations but its content has been hollowed out. The metrics that once defined progress now record decay.

Isolation Under the Russian Shadow

The gradual redirection of Georgia away from its Western orientation is not limited to the military or security domains; it is most illustrative in the sphere of education, where the Georgian Dream government seeks to reshape the worldview of the next generation. The recently [announced](#) higher education reform concept presents itself as a modernization initiative, yet its content reveals the agenda aimed at narrowing the country's educational and cultural connection with the West. Behind the bureaucratic language of "optimization," "deconcentration," and "alignment with national priorities," the reform blueprint redefines the mission of higher education in ways that mirror post-Soviet authoritarian governance. The document does not envision universities as spaces of critical inquiry or international cooperation but as instruments of state planning and control. It introduces a "one city – one faculty" principle, limits foreign student enrollment, and eliminates com-

petitive grant-based funding in favor of a state order model where resources are allocated according to "national needs." These changes collectively transfer the decision-making power from academic institutions to the central government, allowing political elites to determine what is taught, where, and by whom.

Perhaps the most revealing feature of the reform is its attempt to shorten the general education cycle from 12 to 11 years. This seemingly technical change has enormous implications for Georgia's place in the global education landscape. By breaking compatibility with the European Higher Education Area, it will make Georgian graduates ineligible for direct admission to Western bachelor's programs, effectively severing a key pathway that has enabled thousands of young Georgians to study abroad. The reform's defenders claim that this adjustment is designed to "adapt education to national realities" but its real purpose is to detach Georgian youth from international mobility and intellectual exchange. When asked about the issue, Irakli Kobakhidze mockingly [suggested](#) that those who wish to study in the West could simply complete an extra twelfth-grade year abroad. The practical outcome of the reform will be the closure of the most accessible bridge between Georgia and Western education.

By limiting exposure to Western institutions and ideas, the regime can gradually reorient national identity toward a closed, state-dependent, and hierarchically structured worldview.

This shift cannot be understood apart from the regime's political logic. The most persistent opposition to the Georgian Dream's authoritarian consolidation comes from the Western-educated youth, individuals who have studied in Europe or North America, who think in terms of rights, transparency, and merit, and who recognize Rus-

sia as an existential threat. For both the Georgian Dream and the Kremlin, such a generation represents a strategic danger. In the Russian model of influence, control over education is a key mechanism of long-term domination. By limiting exposure to Western institutions and ideas, the regime can gradually reorient national identity toward a closed, state-dependent, and hierarchically structured worldview. The reform's emphasis on state-managed financing, reduced academic autonomy, and limiting compatibility with the Western education system further blurs the line between education, ideology, and political loyalty. These choices replicate the structure of Russia's educational system, where the Ministry of Education dictates both content and ideology, producing compliance rather than creativity.

From Observation to Action: A Strategic Roadmap for the West

Western response to Georgia's slide into one-party dictatorship has been muted or reactive rather than decisive. The EU has failed to establish a meaningful sanction mechanism other than suspending the visa-free regime for diplomatic and service passport holders. The United States and the United Kingdom have [imposed](#) limited targeted sanctions on several Georgian officials for human rights abuses and repression, signaling concern but [not yet](#) applying the complete set of levers needed to reverse a process that is already institutionalized. These measures have failed to prevent the Georgian Dream from changing its anti-democratic course.

Continuing to treat democratic backsliding as Georgia's domestic problem or responding only with rhetorical condemnation will cede strategic ground to Moscow in the wider region, undermining the security interests of the West.

The policy consequence of the ruling party's new security paradigm will be stark for the collective West which views Georgia and the South Caucasus as an important transit corridor, especially now once the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been solved and Western interests increase toward the middle corridor. Continuing to treat democratic backsliding as Georgia's domestic problem or responding only with rhetorical condemnation will cede strategic ground to Moscow in the wider region, undermining the security interests of the West. While the West waits, Russia is moving to institutionalize leverage over Georgian society through multiple avenues from expanded recruitment policies that [allow](#) foreigners to serve in the Russian armed forces to pragmatic steps such as [extended](#) visa regimes and economic ties that deepen dependence. Russian black money and the influx of Russian citizens and businesses have been [instrumental](#) in Georgia's recent economic growth. These levers will be very hard to undo as time passes.

Now is the time for the West [to act](#) with calibrated, consequential measures that raise the costs of authoritarian consolidation for the Georgian Dream. The window to prevent irreversible capture of Georgia's institutions is closing. If the West chooses to stand aside while Ivanishvili secures a pro-Russian legacy, it will have chosen the side that advances Moscow's strategic goal of cutting Georgia out of the European and Euro-Atlantic space.

The collective West must move from declarative concern to a coordinated strategy of pressure, deterrence, and protection. This strategy should rest on three mutually reinforcing pillars: political, economic, and informational leverage.

First, Western institutions should treat Georgia's democratic backsliding not as a domestic issue but as a direct geopolitical challenge orchestrated to serve Moscow's interests. The United States, the European Union, and NATO should coordinate a unified message that future cooperation, assistance,

and accession processes are suspended until verifiable progress on democratic reforms is made. The Georgian Dream regime must be clearly warned at the highest level what sticks the West can use and what carrots could be offered if Ivanishvili chooses to reverse the anti-democratic path. Meanwhile, high-level political dialogue must be redirected from government channels to direct engagement with civil society and the independent media as these organizations still represent the democratic majority. This “dual-track” diplomacy of engaging society while isolating the regime would ensure that Western support strengthens Georgia’s democracy rather than legitimizing its capture.

Second, targeted sanctions are the most immediate and effective tool. They should focus on Bidzina Ivanishvili and his close circle of political, business, and media enablers. Asset freezes, travel bans, and restrictions on financial transactions should apply not only to individuals but to affiliated companies, shell entities, propaganda media, and foundations that facilitate state capture. These sanctions could also cover the Georgian ministries and state institutions responsible for human rights violations – the Ministry of the Interior, the Prosecutor’s Office, the Anti-Corruption Bureau, and the State Security Service. Western governments and financial institutions should initiate forensic audits to trace flows of Russian-linked capital within Georgia’s banking and real estate sectors. These steps would signal that state capture in Georgia carries a personal and institutional cost for those who sustain it. At the same time, EU and U.S. development funding should not be suspended, but redirected from government-administered projects to independent institutions and educational programs that promote civic resilience, protect human rights, and counter disinformation. With the clear political will, these are still possible even with the Georgian Dream’s draconian legislation imposed on the inflow of foreign funding.

Western governments should openly expose hybrid activities that violate Georgia’s sovereignty and the Georgian Dream regime’s authoritarian consolidation.

Third, Western governments should openly expose hybrid activities that violate Georgia’s sovereignty and the Georgian Dream regime’s authoritarian consolidation, ensuring that silence does not become complicity. A coordinated public information campaign supported by EU StratCom and the independent Georgian media should document how disinformation about the “Global War Party” and the “Deep State” serves Moscow’s interests and undermines Georgia’s national security.

These measures must be applied simultaneously rather than sequentially. The Georgian Dream government has proven skilled at exploiting gradualism and rhetorical ambiguity. The West must, therefore, act on a compressed timeline: a joint announcement of targeted sanctions coupled with conditional suspension of institutional cooperation and an immediate increase in direct civil-society funding, reinforced with a strong strategic communication campaign explaining to Georgians and the world why all this is happening.

At stake is not only Georgia’s sovereignty but also the credibility of Western commitment to its own declared values and interests in the Black Sea region. Allowing Ivanishvili to consolidate power under Russian patronage would embolden similar hybrid models across Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Acting decisively now would send the opposite signal: that democratic regression and strategic capture have tangible consequences ■

De-Europeanizing the Mind: How Georgian Dream's "University Reform" Rebuilds the Soviet Model

In October 2025, the Georgian government [presented](#) a document entitled the National Concept for Reforming the Higher Education System. The proposal is [framed](#) as a response to seven systemic challenges, including geographical concentration of universities, uneven quality, fragmented human resource policy, weak links between teaching and research, misalignment with labor market needs, an imperfect funding model and inadequate infrastructure.

The instruments chosen to address these issues have consequences that extend far beyond sectoral modernization. They centralize key decisions about where universities operate, which academic programs they may deliver, how long degrees last, who teaches, how research is funded, and how institutions are financed. The proposed changes move Georgia away from the model of university autonomy developed after accession to the Bolo-

gna Process and towards a system where higher education becomes a branch of the executive. The proposed 'reform' is a logical component of the Georgian Dream's broader strategy of consolidating control over key institutions and constraining actors capable of organized resistance. Having already tightened the space for political parties, civil society organizations, and independent media, the government is now extending this approach to the academic sphere. The extent to which this intervention succeeds will significantly shape the capacity of pro-democracy forces to resist the ongoing authoritarian turn.

The Political Logic of the 2025 'Reform'

The proposed education 'reform' package [operates](#) through several major policy levers that aim



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to restructure the governance of higher education around centralized state power.

Removing university centers from Tbilisi deprives the capital of a large student body, which is always at the center of anti-government protests.

The first is territorial reorganization. The concept identifies the concentration of universities in Tbilisi as a core problem and proposes a system of two main hubs in addition to Tbilisi – Rustavi and Kutaisi, combined with specialized regional institutions. The relocation of universities from their existing campuses in the capital to new infrastructure in Rustavi and Kutaisi would accompany the sale or repurposing of the property of state universities (read Ilia State University) located in the prestigious Vake district of Tbilisi. In practical terms, this places decisions about the physical

location and long-term assets of public universities under direct governmental control, which is a direct violation of the principle of university autonomy. Universities that have built their identity in specific urban and social environments will lose the ability to decide where their teaching and research will be anchored. Furthermore, removing university centers from Tbilisi deprives the capital of a large student body, which is always at the center of anti-government protests.

The second lever is academic profiling. The principle presented as “one city – one faculty” restricts each discipline to a single public provider within a city, based on government-assigned profiles. This will end competition in key fields and give the Ministry of Education effective authority to decide which institution will concentrate, for example, on legal education or political science. In this model, Georgian state universities that evolved as comprehensive and interdisciplinary entities, such as

Ilia State University (ISU), risk being reduced to narrow functions or merged into larger conglomerates.

The third instrument concerns the degree structure. The shift to a three-year bachelor's and one-year master's degree, as a general rule, combined with an 11-year school education cycle, compresses the total length of formal education to 15 years. Most European Higher Education Area (EHEA) systems converge on a minimum of 300 ECTS credits in higher education, usually delivered through a three-plus-two or four-plus-one structure, preceded by 12 years of schooling. Shorter Georgian degrees will fall below the volume and depth that underpin automatic recognition across the EHEA. Students will face additional hurdles in accessing doctoral programs and regulated professions abroad, and recognition will increasingly depend on bilateral ad hoc assessments. The 'reform' thereby undermines the very objective that guided earlier alignment with Bologna Process standards. This proposal will also limit the ability of Georgian school graduates to directly continue their BA studies outside the country, as most Western-based universities require 12 years of high school education before enrolling students in BA programs. As Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Dream's Prime Minister, [quipped](#), those who want to study abroad directly after school can spend a year outside the country and prepare for entry. For a country like Georgia, which is struggling economically, this will limit the ability to study abroad at the undergraduate level to only well-off families, depriving regular Georgian citizens of the same opportunity.

When the state defines the structure and conditions of academic careers, it acquires an additional channel through which dissenting voices can be marginalized and loyal personnel rewarded.

The fourth component is human resources policy. The concept envisions a standardized academic staffing model, featuring fixed ratios of full, associate, and assistant professors, with a strong emphasis on full-time employment. Salaries for senior positions are to be significantly increased, with appointment and promotion managed within a centrally designed framework. This weakens the ability of universities to design their own recruitment strategies, offer diverse contractual arrangements, maintain flexible links with practitioners and international scholars, and protect internal pluralism among staff. When the state defines the structure and conditions of academic careers, it acquires an additional channel through which dissenting voices can be marginalized and loyal personnel rewarded. This component should be viewed in conjunction with the October decree of the Prime Minister and the earlier changes to the law on civil service, which allow state university employees to [hold](#) other paid jobs only upon the explicit consent of their direct supervisor and only for one year. This change has already prompted widespread discontent among the academic community, as it deprives the universities of the ability to recruit professionals, such as judges, civil servants, and diplomats, to university teaching jobs. Moreover, it also gives an additional political lever to the party. If a judge or civil servant wants to earn extra income through academic work, they must behave well; otherwise, their educational career is in the hands of the party boss.

Once the state and the ruling party start rewriting textbooks, they also rewrite history.

The fifth area encompasses research and curriculum. The 'reform' proposes a new system of centrally managed research funding and the preparation of unified textbooks and basic teaching materials by government-paid staff in all major subjects. Although quality assurance and nation-

al standards are legitimate public interests, the combination of centralized funding allocation, prescribed research priorities, and standardized teaching content significantly narrows the space for independent research agendas, critical perspectives, and methodological diversity. Social sciences and humanities are particularly exposed to this form of control. As we have seen in other authoritarian states, once the state and the ruling party start rewriting textbooks, they also rewrite history.

The sixth lever concerns funding and the financial model. The existing student-centered grant or voucher system, which allows students to receive public support to both public and private institutions, is to be replaced by direct state financing based on “state order.” When funding flows from the budget to universities without passing through student choice, the relationship among students, institutions, and states changes. The state becomes the dominant client. The risk of politically selective allocation increases, and institutions perceived as critical or insufficiently loyal become vulnerable to financial restrictions.

According to recent GEOSTAT data, the education sector grew by 28.9% year-over-year in 2025. Limiting the numbers makes universities structurally more dependent on domestic public funding and diminishes their links to global academic networks, thus making them more vulnerable to political pressure.

Restrictions on the enrollment of international students at public universities, combined with tighter state control over admission quotas in various disciplines, further reduce the financial and strategic autonomy of higher education institutions. International students have become a significant source of revenue and a driving force for internationalization in Georgian higher education.

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Financial Centralization and the Extension of the “Foreign Influence” Template

One of the most consequential aspects of higher education ‘reform’ is the redesign of the funding model. Moving from student-based grants to direct state financing on the basis of “state order” in specific fields substantially changes incentives for both public and private institutions.

Under the current system, grants awarded through national examinations follow students to the university of their choice. This creates at least a minimal competitive environment and links financial flows to student preferences and performance. The proposed model makes institutional budgets more dependent on negotiations with the ministry, on compliance with state-defined priorities and on placement within the approved map of disciplines.

For private universities, which do not receive core public funding, the disappearance of grants that students can bring to them will reduce demand from less affluent applicants and narrow the social base of their student populations. Combined with potential limitations on international student enrolments and narratives that portray private providers as structurally inferior or politically suspect, the ‘reform’ risks marginalizing this segment of the sector.

This trajectory resembles the use of financial and legal tools in other parts of Georgian public life.

The [Law](#) on Transparency of Foreign Influence of 2024 and the Foreign Agents Registration Act ([FARA](#)) of 2025 impose extensive reporting obligations and stigmatizing labelling on NGOs and other organizations receiving foreign funding. In the media sphere, allocation of state advertising, regulatory decisions, and access to broadcasting infrastructure have all been used to influence the environment in which critical outlets operate. In party politics, changed campaign finance rules and allocation of state budget resources, as well as oppression of the party funders, have left the political parties without money and meaningful resources to compete.

Higher education now enters this landscape. By cutting off or constraining independent revenue streams, limiting the number of international students, increasing dependence on state budget lines, and questioning the legitimacy of foreign support, the 'reform' places universities in a position similar to that of NGOs and political parties. Institutions that host critical scholars or students can be pressured through financial channels without overtly repressive measures.

Moreover, once the think tanks and CSOs are suffocated, the obvious next stop for those democracy defenders is to resume their activities through the universities. Placing universities under state pressure gives the party the necessary leverage to prevent the reincarnation of critical, independent institutions under the aegis of higher education institutions.

The proposed 'reform' is primarily motivated by a desire to reconfigure the financial ecology of higher education, so that institutions that function as autonomous centers of expertise and debate are brought into a framework where access to resources is contingent upon political acceptability.

This suggests that the proposed 'reform' is primarily motivated by a desire to reconfigure the financial ecology of higher education, so that institutions that function as autonomous centers of expertise and debate are brought into a framework where access to resources is contingent upon political acceptability.

Earlier Interventions: From Free University of Tbilisi and Agricultural University to the Present

The current 'reform' concept has precedents. Shortly after the 2012 political change, the newly crowned Georgian Dream initiated actions that signaled a readiness to use authorization and property issues as tools in the university sector. In March 2013, the Authorization Council [revoked](#) the license of the Agricultural University of Georgia, a private institution associated with the same group as the Free University of Tbilisi. Alleged violations of the education law formally justified the decision and were later reversed following public controversy, widespread outcry, and legal challenge. The goal at that time was to oppress Kakha Bendukidze, Saakashvili's minister and philanthropist, who invested heavily in higher education and was considered an ideologue of the economic reforms and a main financial backer of the United National Movement (UNM).

In parallel, around the same time, senior officials referred in parliament and the media to supposed "corrupt schemes" in which state property had allegedly been transferred for a symbolic amount to the University of Georgia (UG), connected to the family of former President Mikheil Saakashvili. Fact-checking by independent platforms [later showed](#) that institutions such as the University of Georgia and the International Black Sea University had purchased property at auction under standard

conditions, paying market prices rather than receiving land for GEL 1, as government propaganda claimed. The narrative of privileged access to state assets nevertheless remained part of the political discourse around these universities and framed them as beneficiaries of past “elite corruption.” In 2013, the prosecution initiated an inquiry into the property ownership of the University of Georgia, but no further action was taken, as everything appeared to be in order.

Those earlier episodes showed that suffocating the universities with the use of authorization procedures and property cases was not as easy as Ivanishvili might have wanted. Moreover, at various times, even Tbilisi State University (TSU), the largest state higher education institution, has become the center of anti-government protests. In 2016, the rector of TSU had to resign after a week of protests by students aimed at removing the state surveillance system from the university and reforming the university administration’s election system.

Bidzina Ivanishvili opened his own university, the Kutaisi International University (KIU), in 2020, allegedly investing up to 1 billion euros. However, the grandiose plans for the KIU, which were presented as the savior of the Georgian education system and a revolutionary development, never materialized. Its authorization was given not through the legal procedure, envisaged by law, but by passing the law allowing its approval. And the number of students it received did not exceed a few hundred. In 2020, it [received](#) only 246 students in the first cohort. In Georgia, where the annual enrollment of first-year students surpasses 30,000, this number is inconsequential. Now, however, after the proposed ‘reform’ is adopted and in operation, one can easily infer that the primary beneficiary of the proposed changes could be KIU, especially since its status from the founding day is a legal entity of public law, i.e. state university.

Russia as a Reference Model

Developments in Russian higher education over the past decade provide an instructive comparative context. A series of measures by regulatory bodies and through legislation have progressively curtailed institutional autonomy and targeted institutions and scholars considered insufficiently loyal.

The Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science, *Rosobrnadzor*, played a central role in this process. The European University at Saint Petersburg, a small research-intensive institution with strong international ties, had its educational license [suspended](#) and then revoked between 2016 and 2017, formally for building code violations and alleged shortcomings in compliance with state standards. The university was forced to suspend teaching and operate temporarily as a research-only institution. Many observers viewed these actions as politically motivated, linked to the university’s liberal public image and its work on sensitive topics, such as electoral analysis.

In 2018, *Rosobrnadzor* [revoked](#) the accreditation of the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (often known as *Shaninka*), an institution specializing in social science and liberal arts programs in partnership with Western universities. Although *Shaninka* retained its educational license, the loss of accreditation meant it could not issue state-recognized diplomas, and the move was widely interpreted as part of a broader effort to discipline independent intellectual centers.

These high-profile cases occurred against a broader background of legal changes. Russia’s “foreign agent” legislation, initially applied to NGOs, gradually expanded to cover media and individuals, including academics and research organizations. Reports on academic freedom in Russia document how this regime has been used to stigmatize and

restrict scholars and institutions with foreign funding or international partnerships. Individuals and entities designated as “foreign agents” face enhanced reporting obligations, reputational damage, barriers to public communication, and, following a 2022 “umbrella law,” [broader grounds for inclusion](#). One provision [introduced](#) in 2022 prohibits persons labelled as “foreign agents” from engaging in educational activities with minors or teaching in state and municipal educational institutions. This directly affects university staff and researchers, creating strong incentives for self-censorship and withdrawal from public engagement.

The Georgian ‘reform’ may differ in legal form and scope, yet there are clear parallels, and the spirit is certainly similar. In Georgia, this ‘reform’ is also happening against the backdrop of civil society oppression and restrictive legislation on foreign agents. The ‘reform’ also introduces similar concepts of centralizing financing, questioning the legitimacy of foreign-funded activities, and limiting international student flows. Moreover, in both settings, control over authorization and accreditation has been used to pressure universities that host critical scholars and students. In both settings, rhetoric about “foreign influence” and “color revolutions” has accompanied regulatory actions. The Russian case suggests that once such instruments are in place, they are likely to be used to remove professors and administrators perceived as politically inconvenient.

Two Main Culprits: University of Georgia and Ilia State University

The University of Georgia, a leading private university, has in recent months been at the center of an intensive defamation campaign. Government-aligned media and senior political figures [have accused](#) the institution, its affiliated research institute Gnomon Wise, and its educational plat-

form High School of Georgia of indoctrination, involvement in a “revolutionary scenario,” and even of “promoting terrorism.”

The narrative advanced in these propaganda attacks alleges that UG, in cooperation with Western partners and domestic opposition actors, recruits young people, including minors, and trains them for a violent coup d’état modelled on foreign movements such as Serbia’s Otpor or the Irish Republican Army. The university is portrayed as a channel for illicit foreign funding and as a key element in a supposed “Deep State” conspiracy. High-ranking officials, including the Prime Minister, the Mayor of Tbilisi, and members of parliament, have reiterated these claims. At the same time, the largest pro-government television channel *Imedi TV* has broadcast segments in which UG, Gnomon Wise, and their staff are visually labelled as “encouragers of terrorism,” with individual researchers singled out by name and photograph.

On October 17, 2025, Davit Gurgенidze, Rector of the Georgian Technical University (GTU), [appealed](#) to the Prosecutor’s Office to seize property belonging to the private University of Georgia. Gurgенidze alleged that the property had been “illegally transferred” under the previous administration to Giuli Alasania, the mother of the 3rd President Mikheil Saakashvili, and demanded that it be returned to GTU. Irakli Kobakhidze endorsed these allegations at a press briefing the same day, [calling](#) the property transfer “an act of outright insolence” and implying that legal proceedings were forthcoming. The accusations were also reflected in a 470-page [report](#) issued by the ruling party’s parliamentary investigative body, the Tsulukiani Commission, which asserts that Saakashvili and Alasania built a “large business in the education sector” through preferential access to state assets. The law enforcement machinery followed suit promptly, and on 27 October, the prosecution started the investigation on “the embezzlement and misappropriation of property belonging to the

Technical University” through the abuse of official authority.

UG’s rector Konstantine Topuria has clarified that the Technical University never used the disputed property for educational or research purposes and that the land and buildings in question were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economy. Public records [show](#) that UG acquired the premises through open auctions, paying nearly four million USD, financed through a bank loan—contradicting claims of a symbolic one-GEL transfer. It is also noteworthy that OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation, U.S.) [invested](#) millions of dollars in developing the university’s infrastructure.

Ilia State University has also faced sustained pressure, including negative campaigns in government-aligned media targeting the rector and university leadership, often in connection with the institution’s perceived pro-European stance and refusal to condemn student protests against the law on foreign influence.

In 2024, the State Authorization Council of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) [granted](#) Ilia State University only conditional authorization, despite the institution receiving the highest evaluation from an international expert panel. The downgrade was imposed without a clear academic justification, placing the university under additional monitoring. Following domestic and international criticism and an appeal, the decision [was reversed](#) and full authorization restored.

The episode had two policy implications. First, it demonstrated that the authorization mechanism could be used to exert pressure on a particular university, with significant reputational and operational consequences. Second, it prompted the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

to [question](#) the independence of Georgia’s quality agency, partly because members of the authorization body held governmental posts and because political criteria appeared to influence decisions.

With the proposed ‘reform,’ Ilia State University will be a primary victim. First of all, it is the main “competitor” to the Tbilisi State University, which is considered to be already tamed by the GD, especially after the [appointment](#) of a politically loyal rector in 2022. Another competitor is the Georgian Technical University (GTU), which is also fully aligned with the Georgian Dream, especially after the [appointment](#) of a former GD MP as its chancellor in 2020. This means that once the faculties are rearranged per the „one faculty – one city“ principle, it is highly likely that the distribution will happen to the benefit of the TSU and GTU.

Secondly, the property of Ilia State University in the center of Tbilisi is likely to be sold, with the revenue used to build campuses outside of Tbilisi. Because of the historical importance of the TSU buildings, it is unlikely that the GD will touch TSU’s property, while Iliauni’s property is less political and symbolic.

The reason why the University of Georgia and the Ilia State University are targeted is quite apparent. Both universities have been vocally critical of the Georgian Dream’s detour from the European path. Neither university is subordinated to the party and subject to political control.

The reason why the University of Georgia and the Ilia State University are targeted is quite apparent. Both universities have been vocally critical of the Georgian Dream’s detour from the European path. Neither university is subordinated to the party and subject to political control.

European Norms and the Risk of De-alignment

But in addition to concrete universities, which could fall prey to the GD's new 'reform,' the biggest loss may come as a result of de-Europeanizing the Georgian higher education system.

Georgia's higher education reforms since 2005 were explicitly oriented towards integration into the European Higher Education Area. Accession to the Bologna Process entailed commitments to three-cycle degree structures, the ECTS credit system, independent quality assurance based on European Standards and Guidelines, and enhanced mobility for students and staff. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement includes provisions to align education systems, improve quality, facilitate recognition, and promote international cooperation.

The 2025 'reform' does not formally abolish ECTS or the three-cycle system, yet it introduces structures and practices that undermine core elements of the Bologna Process principles. Degree volumes fall below widely recognized thresholds. University autonomy is restricted in relation to both internal governance and program design. The diversity of providers is weakened when profiling and funding mechanisms favor a small number of state-controlled institutions. Internationalization is constrained through restrictions on foreign students, through potential application of "foreign influence" rules, and through erosion of trust in the independence of quality assurance bodies.

The European Higher Education Area has already faced the question of how to respond when member systems adopt policies that conflict with its values. Russia and Belarus had their participation [suspended](#) after the invasion of Ukraine, with reference to violations of fundamental principles such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the free circulation of knowledge. While Georgia remains formally committed to European integration, the current 'reform' direction generates tension between domestic policy and international commitments.

If the new model is fully implemented, Georgian students and universities will find it more difficult to participate in schemes that assume compatible structures and governance norms. This would impact Erasmus+ mobility, joint degree development, research cooperation, and international rankings.

If the new model is fully implemented, Georgian students and universities will find it more difficult to participate in schemes that assume compatible structures and governance norms. This would impact Erasmus+ mobility, joint degree development, research cooperation, and international rankings. The risk is that higher education becomes another domain in which nominal alignment coexists with gradual substantive divergence ■

From Multilateralism to Transactional Peace: How TRIPP is Redefining the South Caucasus

Two interconnected events took place in the South Caucasus at the end of the summer. One was the U.S.-brokered agreement establishing the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), and the other was the official [dissolution](#) of the OSCE Minsk Group. The first received considerable attention while the second went largely unnoticed. That contrast is revealing.

The Minsk Group, in place since 1992, had come to symbolize the failures of post-Cold War multilateral peacebuilding. Few mourned its demise. TRIPP, by contrast, appears to signal a new era of transactional deal-making: rapid, interest-driven interventions led by the most powerful actor and designed to deliver quick results. The recent re-

lease of hostages and the ceasefire in Gaza offer another example of such fast-paced, personalized diplomacy achieving a breakthrough after years of drawn-out negotiations repeatedly derailed by violence.

The two conflicts are very different, yet they share one characteristic: both have become part of their regions' political landscapes – entrenched, cyclical, and seemingly insoluble. Time will tell whether or not these new peace initiatives will endure. What is certain is that the traditional approaches to conflict resolution have reached their limits. The question now is what this shift means for legacy multilateralism in the South Caucasus and how it will shape the region's emerging order.



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The Rise and Fall of the OSCE Minsk Group

On 1 September, the OSCE's 57 participating states unanimously voted to dissolve the organization's longest-running conflict-resolution mechanism. [The Minsk Group](#), established in 1992 to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, had three rotating co-chairs — Russia, France, and the United States — alongside several participating states, including Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Türkiye. Its mandate was threefold: to end hostilities, negotiate a lasting political settlement, and sustain peace through an OSCE presence on the ground.

Over the course of more than three decades, none of these objectives has been achieved. From the outset, the Minsk process was marred by mistrust, allegations of bias, and an absence of meaningful progress. By the time the second Karabakh war broke out in 2020, the group had been completely sidelined as Russia unilaterally brokered a ceasefire with Türkiye's involvement, marking Ankara's entry as a regional actor with growing ambitions. Its formal dissolution merely confirmed what had long been apparent — that the process had lost both relevance and credibility. More strikingly, it epitomized what Laurence Broers [called](#) “sweeping aside of multilateral diplomacy represented by the Minsk Group by multipolar power dynamics.”

Azerbaijan had long [accused](#) all three co-chairs of favoring Armenia, citing the influence of Armenian diasporas in France and the United States, as well as Russia's role as Armenia's main security guarantor. Baku also believed that the Minsk process rewarded Armenia's intransigence and tacitly accepted the long-standing violation of its territorial integrity. It was, therefore, unsurprising that Baku made its participation in peace talks conditional on the Minsk Group's termination. Armenia, too, had expressed growing frustration. Prime Minister

Nikol Pashinyan [called](#) the OSCE mechanism one that had “never done anything useful” and only deepened the conflict instead of resolving it. In a rare moment of alignment, the two leaders jointly urged the OSCE to wind down the group. The organization is now finalizing the process, expected to conclude by year-end — a quiet end to what was once envisioned as a model of consensus-based multilateral peacebuilding and a reminder of how far global conflict mediation has shifted toward more ad hoc, power-driven diplomacy.

There were many reasons for the Minsk process's failure. Its institutional design, built on the principle of consensus, allowed the parties to block progress at every stage. More consequentially, it enabled Russia to instrumentalize the process — positioning itself as a “legitimate” mediator while ensuring that no lasting settlement emerged. In doing so, the OSCE inadvertently helped Moscow pursue its long-standing policy of using unresolved conflicts as tools of leverage and control under the cover of international legitimacy and deniability.

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While the Minsk Group consistently upheld international norms, it ultimately entrenched normative ambiguity, oscillating between the principles of territorial integrity and national self-determination rather than devising a framework to reconcile them. As tangible results proved elusive, the process drifted into a cycle of performative rather than substantive diplomacy — meetings, communiqués, and missions that sustained the appearance of engagement but not its substance.

Ultimately, the OSCE Minsk Group was a product of its time. It reflected the optimism of the post-Cold War moment — the belief that rules-based, consensual engagement could manage conflicts without producing winners or losers. The consensus principle meant that the organization could only be as effective and strong as its participating states wanted and allowed it to be. Moreover, the Minsk Group's approach mirrored the broader purpose of the OSCE itself: to build bridges with Russia and integrate it into a shared European security architecture. Underpinning this was the assumption that Moscow could act as a stabilizing force in its neighborhood.

For the newly independent states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, this framework offered both opportunities and constraints. Weakened by internal turmoil and dependent on international support, they became participants in, but rarely shapers of, the multilateral order imposed upon them. The Minsk Group thus captured both the promise and the illusion of the post-Cold War settlement — cooperation with Russia as the foundation of stability and a process that froze the conflict without delivering a lasting peace.

TRIPP – A New Model of Conflict Settlement?

After years of military build-up and deepening frustration with the stagnant Minsk process, Azerbaijan launched a decisive military offensive in 2023, reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh by force. The operation marked a turning point — a move towards the forcible rather than negotiated “resolution” of conflicts in Russia's near abroad. Moscow, absorbed by its war in Ukraine and increasingly dependent on regional actors such as Türkiye, chose not to intervene. Armenia, left isolated, accepted defeat but grew alarmed that its territorial integrity could be next in question as Baku pressed for a land corridor linking Azerbaijan to its Nakh-

chivan exclave through Armenia's Syunik province.

TRIPP bypassed years of diplomatic stalemate by reframing the conflict as an investment opportunity rather than a sovereignty dispute. The approach it embodies is transactional, personality-driven, and anchored in American economic power rather than multilateral consensus.

The so-called Zangezur corridor has become the main obstacle to peace and the broader normalization between Armenia and Türkiye. Yerevan refused to accept an extraterritorial route outside its sovereign control, yet feared that Azerbaijan might again resort to force. It was amid this deadlock that President Donald Trump unexpectedly intervened, proposing the Trump Route for Peace and Prosperity — a commercial passage managed by a U.S. company under a 99-year lease. [Described as](#) “Washington's biggest forays in the post-Soviet space,” TRIPP bypassed years of diplomatic stalemate by reframing the conflict as an investment opportunity rather than a sovereignty dispute. The approach it embodies is transactional, personality-driven, and anchored in American economic power rather than multilateral consensus.

TRIPP [offered](#) sufficient political rewards to all sides to satisfy core interests and encourage a retreat from maximalist positions, paving the way to the peace agreement with the potential to reshape the region. For Azerbaijan, the deal delivered both strategic and diplomatic gains: access to the Nakhchivan exclave, guaranteed transit rights, and reduced dependence on Iran, previously its only land link. President Ilham Aliyev emerged as one of the principal beneficiaries — securing a direct line to President Trump and reinforcing Baku's position as the dominant regional power in the South

Caucasus and an increasingly relevant actor in the Middle East. Reports [suggest](#) that Azerbaijan may take part in the proposed stabilization force in Gaza, building on its earlier role in facilitating dialogue between various regional actors, including Türkiye and Israel. Moreover, absent from the discussion has been any reference to Azerbaijan's abysmal human rights record or conditions tied to the release of political prisoners. Aliyev's rule thus remains not only unchallenged but legitimized internationally by his military and diplomatic success.

Armenia, negotiating from a position of weakness, also secured significant political, economic, and security assurances. The TRIPP agreement offered an explicit endorsement of Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, prompting Baku to recognize Armenia's current borders and renounce the threat of force. For Yerevan, the provisions on mutual security and confidence-building measures, as well as the physical presence of a U.S. commercial entity on Armenian territory, function as a quasi-security guarantee. The deal also ends Armenia's long-standing isolation from regional trade and connectivity initiatives, opening access to routes and markets that had long been closed. Equally important, it reduces Armenia's strategic dependence on Russia and creates the conditions for normalizing relations with Türkiye. This step could bring substantial economic dividends and signal a broader realignment of the region's geopolitical balance.

Türkiye was among the tacit supporters of the TRIPP agreement and [stands to gain](#) considerably from it, both in consolidating its regional influence and advancing its broader geopolitical agenda. Ankara has been interested in normalizing relations with Yerevan but recognized that only the weight of U.S. backing — and President Trump's political capital — could bring Armenia and Azerbaijan to a mutually beneficial agreement. At the same time, the success of the deal depends heavily on

Türkiye's cooperation, drawing Washington and Ankara into closer alignment, at least in the South Caucasus. Indirectly, TRIPP and the prospect of Armenian-Turkish normalization could also ease tensions between Ankara and Paris. Commercially, Türkiye stands to benefit from the diversification of transit routes across the South Caucasus as demand for the Middle Corridor grows. The arrangement also sidelines Iran, diminishing Tehran's leverage over Azerbaijan and giving Türkiye a clear advantage in their long-running competition for regional influence.

The TRIPP agreement stands as perhaps the most striking sign of Russia's waning hegemony in its former sphere of influence. Unlike the Minsk process, Moscow is entirely absent from the arrangement — no mention of its "special interests," no residual mediating role, and no diplomatic courtesy acknowledging its authority in the region. For decades, such exclusion seemed unthinkable. That both Armenia and Azerbaijan endorsed it — and that Washington provided the platform for them to act upon it — marks a profound geopolitical shift. As Thomas de Waal [observed](#): "If you are going to break pledges you made to President Vladimir Putin, the Oval Office is a good place to do it."

Russia's exclusion from the South Caucasus' most consequential peace initiative in decades symbolizes the erosion of its regional authority — a loss of influence that now arguably extends beyond the Caucasus.

This leaves Russia with two options: it can either act as a spoiler, using its economic leverage in Armenia and mobilizing domestic opposition to destabilize Prime Minister Pashinyan, or it can attempt to profit indirectly from TRIPP through its control of Armenian railways and other strategic assets. Its muted response, especially compared with Iran's vocal criticism, suggests that Moscow

is biding its time — weighing how developments in Ukraine and its relationship with Washington may shape its next move. Yet, whatever course it takes, Russia's exclusion from the South Caucasus' most consequential peace initiative in decades symbolizes the erosion of its regional authority — a loss of influence that now arguably extends beyond the Caucasus.

Georgia's ruling elite is shifting from passively refusing to join sanctions to becoming both a strategic facilitator and a beneficiary of Russia's sanctions-evasion network.

The only country that defies this trend is Georgia. In contrast to its neighbors, which have distanced themselves from Russia, Georgia has pursued a policy of political rapprochement and has deepened its economic dependence on Moscow. This strategic alignment goes beyond rhetorical convergence. Tbilisi is not merely echoing Kremlin talking points about the 'global war party' and a 'decadent Europe' allegedly plotting regime change in Georgia to drag it into war; it has reportedly become one of the key links in the so-called 'roundabout trade,' allowing Russia to circumvent sanctions and sustain its war effort. As the EU and the U.S. have been tightening sanctions against Russian oil and gas producers, Rosneft has just [supplied](#) its first oil cargo to the newly built Kulevi refinery on Georgia's Black Sea coast. According to TASS, the trade turnover between Russia and Georgia [reached](#) nearly USD 3.1 billion in the first six months of 2025. This is a 7% increase as compared to the same period last year. Benefiting from the influx of Russian capital and loopholes in the sanctions regime, Georgia's ruling elite is shifting from passively refusing to join sanctions to becoming both a strategic facilitator and a beneficiary of Russia's sanctions-evasion network.

There is a risk that TRIPP will further contribute

to Georgia's growing isolation by depriving it of its monopolistic position over regional transit routes. Georgia's transit advantage has long depended on Armenia's isolation and the continued hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Removing that condition erodes Georgia's unique role and may limit its potential as a transit and connectivity hub. The country could benefit from broader regional stabilization if Tbilisi were involved in these new processes rather than remaining an increasingly isolated bystander. Russia is likely to capitalize on this dynamic, [offering](#) deeper trade and economic ties to ensure that the ruling Georgian Dream party remains in power. From Moscow's perspective, the Georgian Dream must retain control as Georgia provides Russia with its last foothold in the region — one that could yet serve as a platform for a future comeback.

TRIPP vs Minsk: Twilight of Legacy Multilateralism

The contrast between the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group and the emergence of TRIPP captures a profound shift in how conflicts may be managed and transformed. Instead of pursuing peace through protracted negotiations within a multilateral framework, transactional arrangements such as TRIPP engage the interests of key players to deliver immediate political gains. The main innovation of TRIPP is that it turned a geopolitical impasse into a commercial project. The Minsk Group once symbolized the belief that peace could be built through norms, institutions and compromise; TRIPP embodies a new logic of power and reward.

Whether or not this model can deliver lasting stability or merely entrench new dependencies remains to be seen. The absence of institutional backing and the lack of defined enforcement mechanisms could become major obstacles to the implementation of the agreement. As Rich-

ard Gowan of the International Crisis Group has [observed](#): “Peace agreements are not self-executing.” This was one of the key advantages of involving international organizations such as the OSCE, which provided not only mechanisms for oversight but also the capacity to support fragile transitions through on-the-ground presence and diplomatic backing from headquarters.

Multilateral engagement also offered a degree of protection for the rights of populations in conflict-affected areas, reducing the risk of ethnic cleansing and retaliatory violence. One of the main concerns surrounding TRIPP is that its breakthrough has come at the expense of human rights. There is, as yet, no plan for the dignified return of Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, prompting criticism that the agreement enforces a form of “victor’s justice.”

Another concern lies in the highly personalistic nature of TRIPP. Its success depends on the sustained engagement of President Trump and the broader commitment of the United States. With Washington’s agenda already crowded by competing priorities, it remains unclear how much political and financial capital will be invested in ensuring the deal’s durability. Moreover, since commercial incentives underpin the initiative, its longevity may depend as much on profitability as on diplomacy — raising the question of whether or not the political will to sustain it will persist if economic returns prove lower than expected.

Deinstitutionalization, personalized unilateralism, and the commercialization of peacebuilding highlight the risks associated with the decline of post-Cold War multilateralism. Closely linked to this trend is the de-prioritization of democracy and human rights as essential conditions for a just and lasting settlement. In parallel, alternative multi- and mini-lateral frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the 3+3 platform, are gaining traction in the

South Caucasus. Their appeal lies precisely in their loose, interest-driven, and non-committal nature. These groupings profess no shared values beyond non-interference in domestic affairs and respect for all forms of governance.

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have sought to join the SCO but were blocked by India and Pakistan, respectively — at least for now. Yet, the platform’s growing importance is evident: it was at an SCO meeting in Tianjin that Pakistan formally recognized Armenia. Azerbaijan and Türkiye have each expressed interest in BRICS, not for the organization’s immediate utility but as a way of diversifying their strategic options. Armenia, too weak economically to be a serious BRICS contender, has nevertheless adopted a similar logic in foreign and security policy — seeking to diversify dependencies as a means of preserving the maximum autonomy possible.

One of the most notable absences in this evolving landscape is Europe and, more specifically, the European Union.

One of the most notable absences in this evolving landscape is Europe and, more specifically, the European Union. Armenia maintains close ties with France, its leading political and military partner in Europe. Paris effectively represented the EU within the OSCE Minsk Group, much to Baku’s discontent. In recent years, Armenia has also deepened cooperation with Brussels, pursuing visa liberalization and closer integration. Many observers now argue that Armenia has, in effect, traded places with Georgia as the EU’s closest partner in the Caucasus despite Georgia’s formal candidate status.

Yet, Armenia cannot fully substitute Georgia as the main conduit of European influence in the region. Yerevan does not follow an “EU-first” foreign policy as Tbilisi once did; instead, it seeks diver-

sification and multi-alignment — or, as one analyst put it, policy that is “[balanced and balancing](#).” Azerbaijan remains interested primarily in limited trade and energy ties, leveraging Europe’s need for diversification rather than aspiring to deeper integration. Türkiye, still formally an EU candidate but with increasingly strained relations with Brussels, is more focused on enhancing its own regional role than advancing that of the Union. With none of the regional actors actively seeking EU membership — and with the decline of the multilateral frameworks where Brussels once had influence — the EU’s clout in the South Caucasus is visibly waning.

The transformation unfolding in the South Caucasus mirrors the broader unravelling of the post-Cold War order. Institutions that once underpinned regional stability have faded, replaced by transactional bargains that privilege access and influence over principles and process. TRIPP may well stabilize the region in the short term, but it also exposes the fragility of peace built on personality, profit, and power rather than shared institutions or rules. The absence of Europe — and of any multilateral anchor — underscores a shift from consensus to competition where leverage takes precedence over legitimacy.

The story of the South Caucasus is, therefore, not only about the redrawing of geopolitical lines but also about the erosion of the very idea that peace should be institutional, accountable, and rooted in common norms.

The story of the South Caucasus is, therefore, not only about the redrawing of geopolitical lines but also about the erosion of the very idea that peace should be institutional, accountable, and rooted in common norms. This would have consequences for Georgia’s unresolved conflicts, which are still being dealt with, albeit unsuccessfully, within the multilateral framework of the Geneva International Discussions. TRIPP’s example highlights the efficiency of unilateral deal-making but also its costs: a diminished concern for rights, transparency, and sustainability. As Russia retreats, the United States intervenes, and Europe watches from the sidelines, a new order is emerging. This order is poised to be defined less by principles than by pragmatism and less by cooperation than by the transactional logic of opportunity ■

From Atheism to Authoritarian Faith: State-Managed Orthodoxy and Islam in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

During my recent visit to Armenia, when I asked what the biggest challenge was for the country's democracy and European future, a senior political official answered that, without a doubt, it was the Church. I also regularly hear Georgian democrats and liberals lament that between 2003 and 2012, under a pro-Western government, the opportunity was missed, despite the early attempts, to place the Church in the position it should have held in a secular state. "Maybe we could have avoided what we have now," is a sentiment often expressed in liberal circles. In contrast, the successive prime ministers of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Gharibashvili and Irakli Kobakhidze, faced with mass protests following the first attempt to pass the so-called "foreign agents law" in March 2023, [dubbed](#) the protesters "anti-state and anti-Church." Gharibashvili often presented

himself as the greatest defender of the Christian faith, [staging](#) pitiful scenes in front of cameras of people greeting him during his regional visits with the cries of "Thank you for Orthodoxy!"

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Whether in Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, or Ukraine, the Churches are, for the most part, opposed to breaking ties with Russia and European integration. They are close to communist or post-communist governments and harbor hostility toward reformist, democratic, and liberal ones. It is paradoxical but the official clergy rehabilitate Stalin and other communist leaders while condemning those who seek a break from Russia and the



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communist past. Official Islam in the post-Soviet North Caucasus and Azerbaijan is equally loyal to the state and relies on it to eliminate competing Islamic communities. Why is this the case?

Why is the Church So Pro-Russian?

As I wrote [earlier](#), the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) maintain strong connections with the Moscow Patriarchate. These links were particularly powerful at the highest level of the hierarchy as the Georgian Patriarch [was educated](#) in Russia and had established contacts and held official meetings with the Kremlin whereas the Armenian Patriarch's brother [served](#) as the Archbishop of the Armenian Diocese of Russia.

This de facto allegiance of the two Christian

churches to the Moscow Patriarchate is all the more singular that the GOC is institutionally entirely independent from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (autocephaly) and the AAC is not even considered as an Eastern Orthodox Church at all. Just for comparison, approximately 80% of Moldova's Orthodox believers [are under](#) the canonical hierarchy of the Metropolis of Chisinau and all Moldova (Under the Moscow Patriarchate) and the remaining 20% (Metropolis of Bessarabia) fall under the authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

In Ukraine, the picture is even more diversified: among the three Orthodox Churches, one (with approximately 30% of Ukraine's Orthodox believers) belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate, while the other two - formerly the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (together representing about 50-60% of believers) -

merged in 2018 and formed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which has no canonical relations with Moscow. But unlike Moldova and Ukraine, the GOC and the AAC have a strict monopoly on Eastern Christian believers in their countries and have a very rigid, centralized organization.

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Remarkably, the Russian Orthodox Church is more effective in spreading its influence in countries where the religious field is unified (Georgia, Armenia) than in places where multiple religious authorities coexist (Ukraine, Moldova). Canonical dependence is important but tempered by a pluralistic Orthodox environment. The very fact of canonical dependence, as in the case of Moldova's most numerous Orthodox Church, can sometimes paradoxically help the emergence within the group of some local autochthonous sub-groups trying to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow. In the case of Georgia, where the Church has always been formally independent (except from 1810 to 1917 under the tsarist regime), anti-Moscow feelings are less pronounced. This is an example of how "hegemony" can be more effective than "domination" as noted by Antonio Gramsci.

The Moscow Patriarchate respects, at least on the surface, the autocephaly of the GOC and the AAC but provides the latter with a comprehensive set of ideological directions. A telling illustration of this is that Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 did not significantly alter the GOC's Russophilia; on the contrary, its most pro-Russian factions explained in an editorial letter published in the Church's journal that the war rationale was God's punish-

ment for Georgia's pro-Western policies. Later, several instances of [hanging](#) a Russian Federation flag in Georgian churches were [reported](#).

As paradoxical as it may seem, these ties between the "Russian Deep State" and the Churches were forged during the Soviet Union, a state that was officially atheist. The declared atheism did not prevent the State Security Committee (KGB) from controlling religious institutions, overseeing the selection of the clergy, and managing their careers and promotions.

The Model of Church-State Relations: A Limited Secularism

With the fall of the USSR and the restoration of the independence of the former Soviet republics, the Churches — now bathed in the aura of supposed martyrdom under Soviet repression — became the central ideological and spiritual reference points for populations in the quest for meaning. De facto, religion replaced communist doctrine and adherence to religious dogma and allegiance to the organization (the Church) became the new social norm.

Orthodoxy has become the final stage of communism.

The political elites themselves, often former Communist Party *apparatchiks*, lacking other ideological reference points after the discrediting of communism, saw an alliance with the Church and the manipulation of religious symbols and practices as the most effective tool for legitimization. All former communist and Komsomol bosses, official atheists, turned, often in caricatured and grotesque ways, into ardent believers. Today, it has even become a distinctive sign in politics: if a politician ostentatiously projects his Christian faith in public, there is no doubt that he is a former communist or Komsomol member. Witnessing this, one

can hardly resist paraphrasing Lenin's famous dictum on capitalism: "Imperialism is the final stage of capitalism." In our case, however, it seems more fitting to say that Orthodoxy has become the final stage of communism.

As for the Church institutions, their internal sociological transformation was not significantly different from that of the political elite: the same individuals remained in leadership positions with the same ties to state services and recruitment practices, but now with vastly increased financial resources and a rapidly growing number of followers. The Church became immensely wealthier and more powerful and its booming membership attracted all kinds of individuals motivated by social advancement, personal enrichment, and local prestige.

Careers within the Church became lucrative. Nepotism, corruption, legal and illegal business ventures, the trade in "modern indulgences," and a near-total guarantee of impunity [became](#) the rule rather than the exception. Many individuals with dubious pasts — including convicted criminals or those with extensive criminal records — have risen to positions of authority.

The constitutions of the post-Soviet states formally guarantee the independence of their Churches from political authority. In most cases, this autonomy is genuine. The notable exception is Russia, where the Byzantine legacy of Caesaropapism endures, transforming the Church and the Patriarch into instruments of the ruler's will — pillars of domestic legitimacy and vehicles of imperial soft power abroad.

The Georgian and the Armenian Churches have more room for maneuver vis-à-vis their countries' political leaderships than in Russia even though they receive public funds, enjoy tax exemptions,

and benefit from other forms of support to finance educational projects, maintain historic monuments, or reward military chaplains. To this should be added the substantial in-kind contributions, particularly buildings, forests, and arable land, which the state [transfers](#) to the Church. This practice is especially prevalent during election years.

Although officially secular, these constitutions grant the national Churches a "special role" or "privileged place" in the country's history (e.g., the 2002 Concordat in Georgia or the 2007 Law on the Relationship Between the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church and the State in Armenia).

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These financial sums, in-kind privileges, and tax gifts, along with de facto impunity, are often the price paid for the Church's loyalty to the ruling elite. It is difficult to discern exactly where the line lies between dependence and blackmail — especially since the state and its intelligence services often possess compromising files documenting the illegal activities of many Church representatives. These files are frequently selectively [leaked](#) to the media to make the Church more pliable during negotiations with political power.

Typically, these tensions arise from negotiations over the terms of the alliance and they almost always result in agreements and renewed mutual support. For instance, a major leak campaign of compromising files targeting Church representatives was organized in Georgia in 2021-2022 but it did not lead to a break between the Church and the ruling party.

Better the Sultan's Turban Than the Pope's Miter: Georgian and Armenian Versions

The phrase is commonly attributed to Loukas Notaras, the last Megas doux—the highest-ranking official and chief advisor to the Byzantine emperor—during the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It captured the sentiment of many Orthodox Byzantines who preferred Ottoman domination to a union with the Roman Catholic Church. In a striking post-communist parallel, many post-Soviet Churches today appear far more comfortable with corrupt, illiberal, and Russia-leaning regimes than with governments that seek to curb corruption, advance democratic reforms, and pursue Western integration— even when the latter are, by all accounts, more faithful Christian believers than the former.

In Georgia, the Church was ambiguous about the pro-independence movement at the end of Soviet rule even though some individual clerics actively supported and participated in it. The first president of Georgia, an anti-Moscow nationalist, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a deeply religious person, faced opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church and its patriarch, Ilia II, who ultimately [tacitly supported](#) the coup against him in January 1992.

On the other hand, the GOC had a totally harmonious relationship with the government of Eduard Shevardnadze who, unlike Gamsakhurdia, was a former communist and atheist. Shevardnadze publicly [converted](#) to Orthodoxy in November 1992 (at the age of 65) and enjoyed the support of the Church hierarchy until the end of his political career.

The relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government of Mikheil Saakashvili, which came to power after the Rose Revolution of November 2003, was frequently uneasy and at

times openly confrontational. Following several years of sweeping liberal reforms—particularly in education—Saakashvili encountered strong opposition from the Church and ultimately chose to avoid a direct confrontation with the clergy. He made concessions on numerous issues, especially financial and economic ones, inadvertently contributing to the Church's growing wealth and influence. Yet his Western-oriented, anti-Kremlin, reformist, and secular agenda often stood in stark contrast to the traditionalist and conservative worldview of the Georgian Patriarchate. As a result, in the decisive October 2012 parliamentary elections, many clerics openly called for the ousting of Saakashvili, with some even staging a politically inflamed mass demonstration on the very Sunday of the elections.

After its electoral victory in 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream government sought to build a strategic alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Like its predecessors, the Georgian Dream continued the practice of transferring land and other state assets to the Church but it went further by openly backing the GOC in its property disputes with other religious communities—most notably the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic Churches—and by systematically delaying the construction of mosques and Muslim prayer houses. From the outset of its rule, as early as May 2013, the government effectively granted *carte blanche* to radical, Church-affiliated groups to attack LGBTQ demonstrations, electronic music festivals, and anti-homophobia rallies. Several of these assaults resulted in numerous injuries and, in July 2021, the [death](#) of a journalist. The then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili justified the violence by [declaring](#) that “the rights of the majority must also be protected,” implying that most Georgians opposed public demonstrations by sexual minorities.

As the Georgian Dream gradually [shifted](#) from social populism to far-right populism, its positions

increasingly converged with those of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Their shared populist crusade against the LGBTQ community culminated in the government's decision to [institute](#) "Family Purity Day," celebrated each year on 17 May — pointedly the same date as the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia.

The Georgian Dream even [introduced](#) a constitutional amendment to Article 30, explicitly and exclusively [defining](#) marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In an unsurprising legislative move, the Georgian Dream [passed](#) a 2019 bill officially declaring the state under the protection of the Virgin Mary.

After the reversal of the European integration track in November 2024 and the acceleration of the slide into consolidated authoritarianism and now even toward the one-party dictatorship, the Georgian Dream's religious populism has entered a new phase. It is now increasingly difficult to discern if the Church or the state represents the greater force of 'conservatism.'

The Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors, [adopted](#) in September 2024, not only banned same-sex marriage but also prohibited the inclusion of any literary or artistic works that depict homosexual relationships in school and university curricula. It also limited freedom of expression and association related to the display of the rainbow flag and the LGBTQ theme. The law gratified the Church while effectively closing the door on Georgia's European integration.

For the Church, this marks an ideological triumph. The defense of the traditional, patriarchal family has long been central to its mission. For the government, however, the motives are political. Rather than responding to any real public demand to protect Georgians from a supposed "homosexual invasion," it is manufacturing fears that do not exist while deliberately undermining the coun-

try's EU candidacy. This strategy aligns with Bidzina Ivanishvili's broader geopolitical orientation, whether voluntary or coerced, toward Russia.

Despite their shared agenda, the Georgian Dream and the Georgian Orthodox Church are not fully aligned. They agree in denouncing Western "decadence," demonizing pro-European opposition parties, vilifying civil society, and nurturing cordial ties with Orthodox Russia. Yet, the Church often positions itself as an autonomous actor, not a government appendage.

Despite their shared agenda, the Georgian Dream and the Georgian Orthodox Church are not fully aligned. They agree in denouncing Western "decadence," demonizing pro-European opposition parties, vilifying civil society, and nurturing cordial ties with Orthodox Russia. Yet, the Church often positions itself as an autonomous actor, not a government appendage. It uses this space to negotiate with the regime, securing financial privileges and political concessions in exchange for its cooperation.

In 2024, the Georgian Dream [proposed](#) amending the Constitution to recognize Orthodox Christianity as the state religion and enshrine it as a pillar of Georgian identity. The Patriarchate initially objected but later agreed to enter consultations, emphasizing that any constitutional change must uphold the Church's institutional independence under the 2002 Concordat. The quiet use of kompromat to curb clerical ambitions reveals the unspoken rivalry between Ivanishvili's political project and the Church's quest for autonomy.

The GOC also maintains a direct channel of communication with Moscow through the Russian Orthodox Church, operating in parallel to the polit-

ical connection managed by the Georgian Dream. For the Kremlin, this dual-track approach is convenient: rather than relying on a single intermediary, it preserves multiple levers of influence that can be activated as circumstances require.

The same fluctuating pattern in state-Church relations can be observed in Armenia between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The relationship between Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of independent Armenia from 1991 to 1998, and the AAC was generally distant, cautious, and at times tense. A historian and philologist by training, Ter-Petrosyan was known for his secular and modernist approach to politics. He was not personally religious and did not regard the Church as a central pillar of national identity or state-building. His political philosophy emphasized rational governance, Western-style secularism, and a decisive break from Soviet dogma, including the religious institutions shaped by it.

Ter-Petrosyan upheld the secular character of the Armenian state and refrained from symbolic gestures of piety or formal alliances with the clergy. He resisted attempts to integrate the Church into the spheres of education, government, or the military, something later leaders would prove far more willing to do. Many in Armenian society, particularly in conservative and nationalist circles, including segments of the diaspora, viewed his cool attitude toward the Church as alienating or even unpatriotic. Yet, Ter-Petrosyan neither sought the Church's endorsement nor used it as an instrument of political legitimacy, maintaining a clear distinction between religious and state affairs. His decision not to constitutionally enshrine a special role for the Church reflected this conviction.

The situation changed dramatically under the two successive presidents, Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018). During their tenure, the Armenian Apostolic Church forged significantly closer ties with the state,

gaining material privileges, symbolic influence, and political weight. This relationship was mutually beneficial, serving both as a tool of legitimization in times of electoral controversy, oligarchic rule, and widening social inequality. [Kocharyan](#) and [Sargsyan](#), who had both held positions in the Komsomol and Communist Party structures of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, embraced the Church as a core institution of national identity and political authority once they rose to the presidency. They frequently attended religious ceremonies, [appeared publicly](#) alongside Catholicos Karekin II, and provided the Church with substantial material support. In turn, the Church implicitly [endorsed](#) their leadership, particularly during disputed elections and political crises.

Under their administrations, the state began transferring land and property to the Church, including buildings and agricultural land. In 2007, the Law on the Relationship Between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Republic of Armenia was [adopted](#), granting the Church privileged legal status, generous funding, tax exemptions, and access to schools and military chaplaincies. Oligarchs close to the ruling elite also made lavish [donations](#) to the Church, often motivated as much by political loyalty as by faith.

A significant rupture [occurred](#) under Nikol Pashinyan. The Velvet Revolution was widely perceived as a popular revolt against the corrupt, oligarchic system intertwined with the Church. The AAC, particularly under Catholicos Karekin II, had come to be viewed as aligned with the former Republican Party leadership of Kocharyan and Sargsyan. Pashinyan's rise to power, therefore, marked both a symbolic and practical distancing from the Church. While he has publicly acknowledged its cultural and historical importance, he does not treat it as a political or moral authority. Unlike his predecessors, Pashinyan rarely attends Church-led national ceremonies or religious events.

Relations between Pashinyan and Catholicos Karekin II have been notably cold. Karekin II [criticized](#) the Velvet Revolution from its early stages and warned against the erosion of “traditional values.” Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, he and other senior clerics sharply denounced the government’s conduct and the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Some clerics openly called for Pashinyan’s resignation and joined opposition rallies. The Church also became one of the most vocal opponents of Pashinyan’s peace initiatives with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, [accusing](#) him of betraying Armenia’s national interests. Although the Catholicos himself was less overtly political, statements by several high-ranking clerics created the impression that the Church was evolving into a quasi-political actor with some even suggesting Karekin II as a potential interim Prime Minister in the event of Pashinyan’s departure.

In the run-up to the 2026 elections, tensions [escalated](#) further. The ruling party launched a coordinated offensive against the AAC, demanding the resignation of the Patriarch, whom the Prime Minister accused of violating his vow of celibacy. Two senior clergy members were arrested on charges of plotting a coup against the government, marking an unprecedented confrontation between the Armenian state and its ancient Church.

The Russian North Caucasus Model: Official Islam Versus Salafism

The Soviet legacy of intertwining political authority with religious institutions extended beyond Christianity; it equally affected Islam, although in even more repressive ways. Soviet distrust and hostility toward Islam were profound, rooted in both geopolitical and ideological anxieties. Unlike Orthodoxy—whose adherents were contained mainly within the borders of the Russian-Soviet realm, with the exception of the Greek and Byz-

antine churches—the Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam, encompassing territories where Muslims formed the majority) largely lay beyond Moscow’s direct control. The Caucasus, Central Asia, and the remnants of the Golden Horde along the Volga constituted peripheral zones of the Islamic world whose spiritual and cultural centers remained outside the empire’s reach and thus appeared inherently subversive to Soviet power.

Aware of Islam’s lower level of secularization and its enduring potential to mobilize populations against what was viewed as an impious regime, the Soviet authorities treated it with particular suspicion and severity. Soviet Islam was isolated from almost all external contacts, denounced as backward and incompatible with socialist progress, and subjected to relentless persecution. Mosques and madrasas were destroyed on a massive scale, far exceeding the repression directed at Christian institutions. By the mid-20th century, only about 300 to 350 mosques [remained](#) operational across the entire Soviet Union—around 40 in the North Caucasus, half of them in Dagestan, and fewer than ten in Azerbaijan.

Imams were extremely few and their level of education and knowledge of Islam was minimal in the overwhelming majority of cases. Popular Islam, however, survived despite state pressure, especially in regions where Sufi brotherhoods endured—such as in Chechnya, for example. There also existed an official Islam, just as there were official Christian Churches, whose leaders and hierarchies (for instance, the Muftis and the Sheikh ul-Islam of Transcaucasia) were loyal servants of the state, the Communist Party, and the KGB.

With the collapse of the USSR and the opening of borders, post-Soviet Islam (in the Caucasus and Central Asia) was strongly destabilized by the influx of information, teachings, and propaganda from abroad. Preachers from the Middle East, the Gulf countries, Türkiye, Pakistan, and Iran (particularly in Shiite Azerbaijan), as well as young people

from former Soviet republics who went to study Islam in places where it had not been restricted, all played a role. This phenomenon was unknown in the Orthodox post-Soviet countries, where the religious revival did not threaten the established religious institutions.

These new Islamic propagators quickly gained influence, to the point of seriously challenging—and in many cases surpassing—the “traditional” imams who, unlike the newcomers, had few scholarly arguments to debate and most of whom could not even read or speak Arabic. The new arrivals, or returnees, attracted believers—especially the youth—because they came from the “real” Islamic countries, and not from atheist ones, appeared more rigorous in their observance of Islamic norms and rituals, and were able to respond to the questions of ordinary believers, even when their answers were completely fanciful or unscientific.

This Islamic revival soon became problematic for the authorities and rapidly turned into a major channel of opposition. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s in the North Caucasus, the central conflict within society was the confrontation between so-called traditional Islam and radical, purist Islam (Salafism)—mistakenly and purposefully labeled Wahhabism by the Russian authorities (to underline their ties with Saudi Arabia, an American ally in the Muslim world).

In the North Caucasus, the official Islamic religious authorities are organized under Muftiates, also known as DUMs (*Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musliman*) – Spiritual Administrations of Muslims. These are not state bodies but they are officially recognized religious organizations that oversee the Islamic clergy, mosques, and Islamic education in their respective republic. Although the Muftiates are formally independent religious bodies, in reality, they maintain very close, often subordinate relationships with the republican governments and, indirectly, with Moscow.

Official Islam acts as a moral pillar of regime legitimacy in republics like Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, and Dagestan. It provides an “Islamic face” for state control and social stability. It also helps Moscow claim that Russia supports “traditional Islam” while fighting “terrorism.”

The regional governments treat them as partners and instruments of policy and their relationship is often described as one of “state-managed Islam” or “official Islam.” These Muftiates promote what both the Kremlin and the regional elites call “traditional Islam” – generally Sufi, loyal to the state, apolitical, and opposed to Salafism or “non-traditional” movements. In return, they receive material support, security protection, control over mosques, and public prominence. Independent or oppositional clerics are marginalized, pressured, and often prosecuted as extremists. Official Islam acts as a moral pillar of regime legitimacy in republics like Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, and Dagestan. It provides an “Islamic face” for state control and social stability. It also helps Moscow claim that Russia supports “traditional Islam” while fighting “terrorism.”

The struggle against this “official Islam” was the goal of various dissident groups, most of them affiliated with Salafism, a puritan movement seeking to return to the practices of the Prophet and early Muslims. They denounced the official clergy for their corruption and their ties to the state and government which by definition are considered impious and represent the Kremlin’s interests in the North Caucasus. The state, if it does not rule by Sharia, is viewed as illegitimate and infidel and all clergy that allies with it is called Munafiq or hypocrite, as it practices Islam in appearance but hides its unbelief.

The conflict is not only theological but also social, political, and generational – tied to ques-

tions of legitimacy, authority, and power in a region where Islam has long been central to identity. In Dagestan, these tensions turned violent in the late 1990s and the two Chechen wars (1994-2009) radicalized many Muslims across the region. By the mid-2000s, armed underground movements spread from Chechnya into Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The state responded with a massive counterinsurgency — assassinations, disappearances, and “counter-terrorist operations” (KTOs). By the mid-2010s, the insurgency was crushed, its leaders killed or defected to ISIS. Inside the Caucasus, “radical” communities were heavily policed; many Salafis were imprisoned, tortured, forced to recant, or fled. Today, the conflict is mostly ideological and social, not military. Salafism still exists — often quietly — in parts of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, but state Islam dominates public life, even if the divide persists beneath the surface.

The theological debates between Sufis and Salafis, between moderates and radicals, hold no real interest for Moscow. What matters is loyalty to the center, whether it be to a political or religious leader, the content is secondary.

Russia, as a neo-colonial empire, manages the Islamic question and the entire Caucasus region as in the 19th century, by relying on colonial proxies. These are the leaders of the North Caucasian republics as well as the religious leaders of official Islam. The pretext of the fight against extremism is not valid. In reality, what matters to the Russian state is the loyalty of its leaders and religious figures. The theological debates between Sufis and Salafis, between moderates and radicals, hold no real interest for Moscow. What matters is loyalty to the center, whether it be to a political or religious leader, the content is secondary.

When analyzing the situation in Chechnya in this

regard, what stands out is that Ramzan Kadyrov has established a regime that uses extremist Islam, often in a colorful and extravagant manner, to consolidate his power. At the same time, he is considered to be the pillar of Russian domination in the entire North Caucasus region and even beyond. In an odd manner, Kadyrov [managed](#) to organize the world's biggest rally after the shootings of Charlie Hebdo in France, against the newspaper and indirectly in support of terrorists, in a country that officially fights against Islamic terrorism (Russia). The same Kadyrov organized almost state-sponsored [funerals](#) of the Chechen youth who decapitated a high school professor in a French town in 2020.

Kadyrov has sought to centralize control over religious institutions in Chechnya, ensuring that all religious activities are aligned with the state and its policies. He has appointed religious leaders who are loyal to him and has exerted influence over mosques, religious schools (madrasas), and other Islamic institutions. This control extends to Islamic education and religious practices, with Kadyrov's government funding and overseeing religious activities to ensure they comply with his vision of Islam.

Kadyrov is promoting traditional, conservative Islamic practices in public life. This includes supporting gender segregation, the wearing of the hijab by women, and discouraging Western-style behavior such as the consumption of alcohol and the promotion of LGBTQ rights, for which he [established](#) special detention camps. Chechnya now [boasts](#) some of the largest mosques in Russia, such as the Akhmat Mosque in Grozny, named after his father, who was killed in a bomb explosion. Compulsory pilgrimages to the tombs of Akhmat Kadyrov or some Sufi sheikhs for all state employees are widely practiced.

Kadyrov has used his position as a Muslim leader to reinforce his political legitimacy. By presenting

himself as the guardian of Islam in Chechnya, he consolidates power and stifles dissent. His authority is often justified through religious terms, portraying any opposition to his rule as not just political rebellion but a violation of religious principles.

Ideology Before Faith

Three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Churches and official religious structures that emerged from its ruins have largely inherited—not rejected—the authoritarian DNA of the system that once repressed them.

Three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Churches and official religious structures that emerged from its ruins have largely inherited—not rejected—the authoritarian DNA of the system that once repressed them. Their apparent piety masks

an institutional culture shaped by state patronage, secrecy, and hierarchy.

In the post-Soviet world, faith did not replace ideology; it became ideology's successor. The same mechanisms of control, co-optation, and surveillance that once defined the Communist Party now sustain the political role of national Churches and "official Islam." Their allegiance to Moscow or to local strongmen is less a matter of theology than of shared interest: protection, privilege, and impunity in exchange for loyalty.

This symbiosis of the sacred and the secular explains why so many religious hierarchies view democratization, liberal reform, and European integration not as spiritual opportunities but as existential threats. The paradox is tragic: the institutions that survived 70 years of militant atheism have emerged not as defenders of freedom, but as guardians of submission ■

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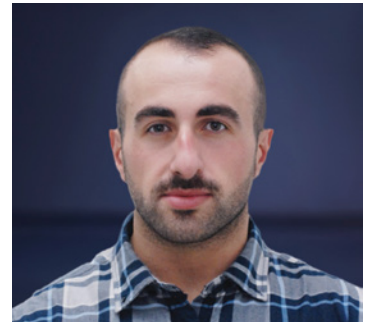
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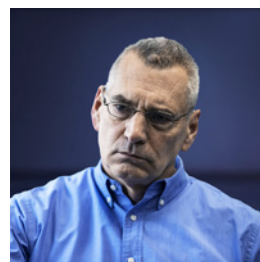
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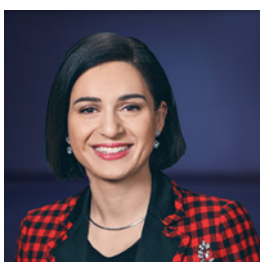
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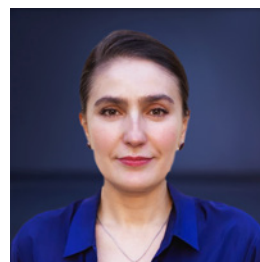
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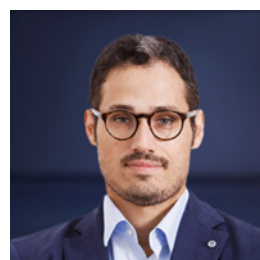
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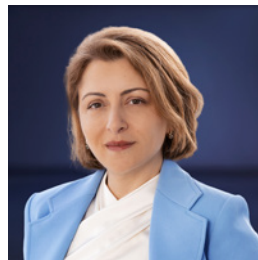
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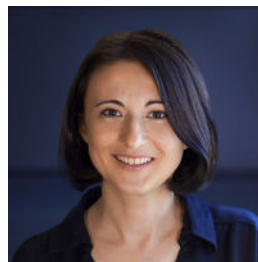
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