

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



SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

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



© GEOPOLITICS

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.

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.

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 ■