

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

**O**n 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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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 ■