

Five Minutes from Dictatorship

When Reuters recently [quoted](#) me saying that Georgia is “five minutes away from a one-party dictatorship,” it captured the political reality of a country that little more than a decade ago was widely seen as a frontrunner of post-Soviet democratization and a committed aspirant to EU and NATO membership, but has now all but degenerated into a state of totalitarian rule by a party belonging to oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Today, almost all principal opposition leaders are in prison, in exile, or under criminal prosecution. The Georgian Dream (GD) is preparing constitutional cases to ban the main opposition parties. Independent media and NGOs are under permanent legal and financial attack. A network of Georgian Dream loyalists controls courts and security institutions, and all supposedly independent bodies are subordinated to the party. The announced university reform, as we have shown in this and [previous](#) issues, aims to centralize control over state universities and strip private universities of funding.

But this is just the beginning. The dictatorship is

not there yet. More homework remains for the oligarch and his party, and the coming months will be dedicated to fulfilling it.

Critical voices toward the Georgian Dream and oligarchic rule will continue to be suppressed. We will likely see new arrests and charges against civil society leaders. The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) has already begun an [inquiry](#) into more than 200 organizations and collected data. While the ACB will be [abolished](#), as the regime has announced, its functions will be transferred to the more capable State Audit Office, run by a former prosecutor general. It is therefore expected that cases will accelerate and charges for violating the Law on Grants and Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) will be pressed. If evidence proves insufficient, the State Security Service will step in with the [already announced accusations](#) of “cooperation with foreign special services” and “sabotage against the state.”

Independent media houses and TV stations are also likely to run out of funds. The Communications Commission’s [latest data](#) underline how skewed Georgia’s media market has become in



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favor of pro-government propaganda channels. In the third quarter of 2025, television stations [earned](#) GEL 29.3 million from commercial advertising, but most of this money went to four pro-government broadcasters—Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, POSTV, and GDS. Imedi alone reportedly attracted GEL 14.4 million in advertising orders, while opposition-leaning TV Pirveli and Formula TV received only about GEL 1.3 million and GEL 0.8 million, respectively. Major corporate and politically connected advertisers such as Meama, Smart Capital (linked to businessman [Vano Chkhartishvili](#)), GD-affiliated Orbi Group, large pharmaceutical companies, fuel retailers, the Regional Development and Infrastructure Ministry, and even the Central Election Commission appear in the top spending brackets (over GEL 500,000 and GEL 100,000–500,000) on government-aligned channels. By contrast, TV Pirveli and Formula TV have no clients in the highest bracket and rely on

a thin pool of mid-range and small contracts. This pattern means propaganda broadcasters enjoy stable, diversified, and often state-linked income streams, while the opposition television survives on marginal advertising and is structurally vulnerable to economic or political pressure.

In addition, there are rumors that the Lelo/Strong Georgia party leaders, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze, have decided to suspend their discreet financial contributions to Formula TV and TV Pirveli. If true, this would make the financial situation of critical TV media nearly insurmountable.

In the coming months, we will also see the ugly, manufactured constitutional court deliberations on the banning of parties, which will almost certainly end in one-party rule. The vibrant multiparty landscape of Georgian politics will be replaced

by a single ruling party and a few tolerated quasi-opposition parties used as decorative garnish in Parliament and in international settings. Arrested political party leaders will likely receive new charges, as already announced by the Prosecutor's Office, for "sabotage against the state." Other dubious charges may follow, as seen in the case of Ahali leader Nika Melia, whose eight-month sentence—due to expire in February—was [topped up](#) with 1.5 years for assaulting a judge (even though he merely splashed water from a paper cup in the judge's direction).

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This is what "five minutes from dictatorship" means. Once these trends come to their logical fruition, Georgia will become a totalitarian state—a one-party dictatorship like many other states in the wider region. Once that transformation is complete and the dictatorship becomes a *fait accompli*, Georgian democracy will no longer be open to resuscitation. Georgian democracy is not Lazarus, to be sprung alive from the dead. Therefore, the crucial question today is how to use these five minutes to prevent the slide from becoming irreversible.

What external actors can do, however, is help to maintain a democratic space for political actors, civil society, and the media, just enough to keep resisting authoritarian ascent until change becomes possible.

Before diving into the analysis, one thing must be clear from the outset. Changing a dictatorial regime and democratizing are always internal tasks, functions of domestic political processes. External

developments can only reinforce internal ones. Those in Georgia who argue, or naively believe, that sanctions or pressure from the West will lead to the change of the Georgian Dream are mistaken. No external pressure, by itself, can overthrow the ruling regime. Moreover, any such interpretation will fuel the propaganda machinery, which is arguing that the "deep state" and the "global war party" are attempting coups with the hands of local forces. What external actors can do, however, is help to maintain a democratic space for political actors, civil society, and the media, just enough to keep resisting authoritarian ascent until change becomes possible.

Functionally Aligned With Russia

One argument against more active Western engagement, often seen in conservative media in the U.S. and heard in some EU capitals, is that Georgia is already too pro-Russian, too controlled from the Kremlin for any outside intervention to be effective. Many in Tbilisi also hope that if Russia loses the war, Ivanishvili's regime will collapse. These views are erroneous. Even if Moscow were to fail tomorrow—whatever that might mean—the entrenched regime in Tbilisi will not automatically give up power. It will likely become even more totalitarian, fending off real and imaginary enemies that challenge Ivanishvili's authority.

Another [common argument](#) is that Georgia is simply a small state caught between Russia and the West, trying to avoid impossible choices, and that this supposedly justifies its authoritarian decline. This narrative is also inaccurate. Georgia does not suffer from excessive balancing; it suffers from a regime that has decided that losing power is unacceptable and that democratic pluralism therefore represents a threat. If Ivanishvili is balancing, he is doing so only in the sense captured by the illustration for this article: not between Russia and the West, but in lockstep with Vladimir Putin.

Georgia's political debate often circles a tired question: Is the Georgian Dream "pro-Russian"? Are its leaders controlled by Moscow? Are they Russian agents or cynical pragmatists? Is Ivanishvili an FSB asset? This language has lost its value. It invites denial, hairsplitting, and propaganda games. And as long as there is no credible intelligence about how Putin instructs Ivanishvili, the discussion is senseless and misleading.

The reality is simpler and more dangerous. The ruling Georgian Dream party has brought Georgia to a point where its internal political model, foreign policy posture, and information environment are functionally aligned with Russia's interests. The accurate description is no longer "pro-Russian," but "functionally aligned with the Kremlin." This should be the starting point for any serious policy discussion in Europe and the United States.

As argued [previously](#) and in this journal, Georgia today is not drifting toward Russia by accident; it is aligned with Russia's strategic objectives. Every significant political, legal, and foreign policy move by the Georgian Dream government over the past several years has either advanced or protected Moscow's interests—from dismantling NATO interoperability structures, halting EU integration reforms, and criminalizing civil society, to importing Kremlin-style legislation, weaponizing propaganda, and preparing the ground for historical revisionism.

Per Russia's interests, the Georgian Dream has frozen substantive work on EU accession. It has [launched](#) a parliamentary commission revisiting the 2008 war narrative in a way that shifts responsibility away from Russia and toward internal "provocateurs." It has [abolished](#) the 18-year-old temporary administration for South Ossetia—a structure designed to portray the conflict as an interstate one between Georgia and Russia. This was a long-standing Russian demand.

Similarly, government rhetoric and pro-government propaganda outlets increasingly portray the EU and the United States as actors allegedly seeking to drag Georgia into war, undermine its traditions, and control its politics through NGOs and media—another long-standing Russian goal. Georgian Dream also [stopped](#) the strategic Anaklia deep-sea port project (again on hold as of now, despite a Chinese company winning the bid earlier in 2025), refusing American investments and influence in the Black Sea. As former Anaklia investor Mamuka Khazaradze [recalls](#), Ivanishvili argued that there was no place for Americans in the Black Sea. And no matter how much Russia tries to frame the current Trump administration as aligned with its interests, it is no secret that pushing the West out of the Black Sea is a strategic Russian goal.

Most importantly, and dangerously for Georgia's national security, Georgia has disappeared from the Western political and diplomatic agenda, as Moscow always intended. European institutions now [describe](#) Georgia's candidate status as "in name only." It is becoming commonplace to say "Georgia is a lost cause." This phrase, also known as "Georgia fatigue," symbolizes Western inaction toward the Georgian Dream. It suggests Georgia is fully captured by Russia and that nothing can be done, especially at a time when Ukraine dominates the agenda, and Europe and America are consumed by domestic crises. For decades, Russia has sought to erase Georgia from Western political conversation, and the Georgian Dream has helped it succeed.

Not a Lost Cause

I strongly disagree that Georgia is a lost cause. First of all, Georgia staying as a democracy is in the interest of the EU and the U.S. Dictatorship in Georgia would undermine the credibility of Western resolve in the region at a time when new transit opportunities are emerging. Secondly, if Europe (not necessarily Washington) views its stand-off

against Russia in Ukraine and Moldova as strategically important, the same stand-off is happening in Georgia. Success in Moldova in countering Russian influence should also extend to attempts to counter it in Georgia.

But the main reasons why Georgia is not a lost cause are that internally, the dictatorship is not yet a *fait accompli*, and the resistance continues. Three factors still distinguish it from fully consolidated authoritarian systems.

Political parties and leaders continue to resist, even under severe pressure and from behind bars.

First, political parties and leaders continue to resist, even under severe pressure and from behind bars. Yet they still organize, represent citizens in protests, write social media posts, and appeal to European and American partners. They have not accepted authoritarianism as normal and irreversible. Many are realigning and finding new ways to remain politically active. Some are generating new programs and ideas. Internal debates increasingly take place on YouTube. Even if banned and legally prevented from participating in elections, as long as they are not destroyed or kicked out of the country, there is no reason to assume opposition politics will disappear. Some politicians will become radicalized, as seen with Lelo/Strong Georgia party leader Aleko Elisashvili's [attempted arson](#) of a city court, but such incidents will remain isolated. The political core of Georgia's opposition is accustomed to underground, long-term, resolute struggle. The short-term populists who once promised instant regime collapse have been proven wrong, and the appetite for such illusions has diminished.

The second reason the "five minutes" have not yet expired is the persistence of the independent media and civil society. Despite demonization, legal

harassment, financial pressure, and the threat of closure or prosecution, they continue to function. Many operate under risk of fines, raids, and physical assaults; some leaders have been pushed into temporary exile. Yet investigative reporting continues, corruption is exposed, disinformation is analyzed, politicians' statements are fact-checked, and the idea of a European Georgia remains alive in the public sphere. Independent outlets still reach audiences through television, online platforms, and social media. Civil society organizations still operate inside the country.

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This institutional and civic resilience is reinforced by new youth movements that have emerged in the past year. They protest regularly on Rustaveli Avenue (for over a year now), show little fear of punitive laws, and display striking creativity, endurance, and refusal to be silenced. Their determination has unsettled even elements within the ruling party and raised a question: are these groups simply resilient, or have they become politically indestructible?

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Thirdly, and most importantly, the Georgian population still remains strongly oriented toward the European Union. Streets filled with EU and U.S. flags under tear gas are not a PR show; they reflect social consensus about the country's direction. Protesters have stayed on Rustaveli Avenue for months, with large mobilizations recurring whenever a new red line is crossed. Polls [show](#) support for EU membership remains overwhelmingly high.

These elements explain why the regime still invests in narratives imitating Western conservative language and claims to represent “real” Georgian and Western values. If society had already turned away from Europe, such efforts would be unnecessary.

This is also why a renewed push from the West is necessary to prevent Georgia's slide into an irreversible one-party dictatorship.

Engaging with Leverage

However, there is currently no appetite for such intervention. Washington is detached from Georgia, Europe is divided, and there is a broader vacuum of leadership.

Across the EU, reactions to Georgia's authoritarian turn no longer align with familiar geographic or ideological patterns. Instead, they [fall](#) into two emerging camps whose approaches diverge on how to deal with a government that has suspended its EU integration process and consolidated power through repression.

The first camp includes member states opting for active engagement with the Georgian Dream, showing little inclination to condition political contact on democratic standards. Hungary, Slovakia, and Italy fall squarely into this group. Budapest [has positioned itself](#) as Georgian Dream's main advocate, hosting high-level visits and shielding Tbilisi from institutional scrutiny. Rome [has in-](#)

[tensified](#) bilateral diplomacy even as the EU warns of democratic breakdown. Slovakia's foreign minister [met](#) his Georgian counterpart during the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva, signaling that Bratislava sees engagement as pragmatic. These governments do not contest Georgia's political trajectory and appear comfortable working with an increasingly illiberal partner. Many also pursue their own economic agendas, especially around the EU Global Gateway's Black Sea digital and electricity infrastructure [projects](#).

The second camp takes the opposite approach: refusing to legitimize authoritarian consolidation through high-level contacts. The Baltic states, the Nordics, and several Eastern Europeans have adopted a “no-handshake” policy, declining political visits, and limiting communication to technical channels. Denmark [pointedly excluded](#) Georgian Dream officials from an informal EU meeting in Copenhagen, citing Tbilisi's halt of EU integration. Finland's Foreign Minister, Elina Valtonen, [visited](#) Georgia but refused a meeting with the prime minister. Lithuania [publicly criticized](#) Italy's overtures. Estonian officials [frequently denounce](#) Georgian Dream's anti-democratic steps. This camp believes that political normalization with the Georgian Dream weakens Europe's credibility and eliminates leverage over a government dismantling democracy.

Between these poles sits a third group: member states that have not articulated a coherent position but increasingly recognize that the EU's institutional mechanisms will not produce a unified response. Some, including France and Austria, maintain [routine diplomatic exchanges](#) without attaching political weight to them. Others rely on low-visibility contacts that neither endorse nor confront Georgian Dream. They are monitoring the situation but have not yet decided which camp to join.

This fragmentation creates space for a coalition of

willing states to exert meaningful pressure outside the EU's formal decision-making structures. Countries from the Baltic–Nordic–Eastern flank possess political will, but not always sufficient diplomatic mass. Western and Central European states, alarmed by Georgia's authoritarian trajectory yet constrained by EU consensus, could form an informal coalition acting through coordinated bilateral measures—joint diplomacy, strategic communication, conditional financial support, and cooperation with the U.S. and UK. This is the only grouping capable of applying sustained pressure when the Georgian government openly challenges EU norms while benefiting from divisions inside the Union. Contours of such an approach [were suggested](#) by ECFR a few months ago, but fell on deaf ears.

Unfortunately, the EU will not reach a consensus on Georgia. Hungary and Italy can indefinitely block meaningful action. Waiting for unanimity is no longer viable. The response, therefore, must be organized outside the EU framework, through coordinated bilateral pressure by a coalition of willing states. Only this approach offers Georgia's society meaningful support at a moment when its government is five minutes away from institutionalizing autocracy.

Did Sanctions Work?

No, sanctions against the Georgian Dream have not worked—thus far. This must be acknowledged both by domestic actors who rightly called for them and by Western partners who imposed travel and financial restrictions. Sanctions failed not because they were unnecessary, but because they did not prevent the Georgian Dream's next anti-democratic steps. Treating sanctions as a panacea for Georgia's looming dictatorship is a dangerous illusion.

What the West must now do is not merely impose small post-facto sanctions on specific officials,

but fundamentally recalibrate the available sticks and restrictive measures. It must apply high-level pressure backed by credible threats that can damage the Georgian Dream's financial and economic stability. What the West has not tried so far is the strategic use of threats of sanctions—rather than their automatic application—and coordinated high-level pressure backed by both sticks and carrots.

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If someone counters that a similar engagement by Charles Michel in 2021 failed, I would disagree. Michel's diplomacy succeeded in bringing opposition parties into Parliament and in securing Georgian Dream's signature on the agreement. Where it failed was in follow-up. Neither Michel nor the EU was prepared for a treacherous partner in Tbilisi who would tear up the agreement within months. That is why credible enforcement measures must back any new high-level engagement.

One might also recall the December 2024 [phone conversation](#) between French President Emmanuel Macron and Bidzina Ivanishvili. That interaction did not persuade Ivanishvili to step back from his authoritarian course. The reason was simple: there was no sticks-and-carrots follow-up plan, and thus the cost of ignoring Macron was minimal.

Does Georgia Still Need the West?

Yes. Georgia remains deeply dependent on the West through investments, finances, and remittances, and this dependence creates leverage that

can still be used to protect Georgia's democracy. According to [GEOSTAT](#) 2024, of the USD 1.569 billion invested in Georgia, Russian investments accounted for only USD 71.4 million (4%), while EU, U.S., UK, and Swiss investments accounted for more than 62% (USD 980.7 million).

In the first two quarters of 2025, USD 763.8 million in FDI [entered](#) Georgia. Russian investments accounted for USD 22.1 million (2.9%), while EU, U.S., UK, and Swiss investments accounted for USD 506.7 million (66.3%).

The same pattern holds for remittances. In October 2025, [remittances](#) from the EU, U.S. and UK, accounted for 65% of all transfers—vastly surpassing Russia (12.96%) and Türkiye (3.36%). The trend is consistent across months.

Financially, Georgia's dependence on Western markets, loans, credits, and grants is substantial. According to October 2025 foreign debt [statistics](#), Georgia's external public debt stood at USD 9.2 billion. European-related financial institutions provided USD 394 million, and bilateral European and American loans amounted to USD 1.450 billion, together nearly 20%.

The 2026 draft state budget [shows](#) Georgia still expects large loans, credits, and grants from the West. Western and EU-linked financial institutions (EBRD, EU, EIB) are expected to finance USD 1.6 billion (23%) of all external debt. Bilateral Western donors (France, Germany, U.S.) are expected to provide USD 2.9 billion in credit, representing 92% of all bilateral lending Georgia anticipates by the end of 2026. Additionally, the Ministry of Finance plans to issue Eurobonds in 2026 to refinance USD 500 million maturing in April.

These numbers demonstrate that the West still has significant leverage over the Georgian Dream—and that, no matter how hard the ruling party tries to distance itself from the West, Georgia remains

deeply integrated into the Western financial and economic system.

Five Minutes to Act, Not to Observe

Georgia has not yet crossed the threshold into irreversible dictatorship. The “five minutes” that remain are not a metaphor for despair, but urgency. The regime is accelerating its consolidation of power, but the core pillars of resistance endure: political actors who refuse to vanish, independent media and civil society that continue to document and expose abuses, and a population that remains overwhelmingly anchored in its European choice. These forces have prevented Georgian Dream from fully extinguishing democratic life, and they remain the country's strongest defense against the collapse of its statehood into a Kremlin-aligned autocracy.

Georgia's survival as a democratic state depends on whether external partners are willing to engage with clarity, strategy, and resolve.

But internal resilience alone is no longer sufficient. Georgia's survival as a democratic state depends on whether external partners are willing to engage with clarity, strategy, and resolve. Western hesitation has created a vacuum that Georgian Dream and Moscow have exploited. Sanctions without strategy, engagement without conditionality, and diplomacy without enforcement have allowed authoritarianism to advance unchecked into a looming dictatorship. Yet Western leverage remains vast: economically, politically, and symbolically. Georgia is not (yet) Russia-dependent. It is West-dependent. This is the West's strongest and as yet unused instrument for protecting a society that has not abandoned its democratic aspirations.

The response must therefore shift from passive observation to coordinated action. A coalition of willing states should jointly apply high-level pressure, condition political engagement, and support Georgia's remaining democratic spaces. High-level conditionalities must be credible, targeted, and backed by enforcement, but first of all communicated in advance, thus abandoning the policy of post facto sanctions. If the Georgian refuses to

play by the rules and once again reneges on the commitments, the sanctions should be unleashed only after that. The months ahead will determine whether Georgia becomes the next authoritarian outpost in the Black Sea region or whether the West finally steps forward to help a society fighting for its future. Five minutes remain. They must be used ■