

Rewiring the National Idea: GD Attempts Radical Ideological Reengineering

Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream (GD) have [captured](#) the Georgian state, transforming its system of governance from (imperfect) democracy to fully-fledged authoritarianism, first slowly, as they consolidated their power, and then, when conditions were more favorable, considerably faster. But underneath this major political shift, a more fundamental transformation is afoot.

With public institutions firmly under its control, pro-democracy forces weakened to the point of no return, and the West preoccupied with its own problems, GD has launched an offensive against the last remaining barrier to authoritarian consolidation: the Georgian national idea. Through

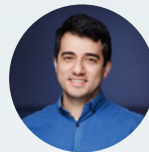
deploying the tactics of blanket propaganda and disorientation, the party has been undermining, rewiring, and transforming the very tenets that define the contemporary Georgian nation-state: the view of Europe as a role model and ally, Russia as an enemy and a negative reference point, and Georgia as a progressive, democratic state.

While their tactics – diluting the truth, confusing the public with competing and often contradictory narratives, and outright blackwashing of their opponents – have been in use for as long as GD has been in power, this time the task appears far more serious. One thing is to take over state institutions or encroach on the CSOs and independent media with endless restrictions, but changing the national



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idea – let alone those that are deeply rooted in the national psyche – will take far longer and far more resources.

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For what it's worth, success is not guaranteed, but GD's spin-doctors also understand that inaction now would be even more costly later. The Georgian national idea has proved remarkably resilient, surviving the worst of the times since it was first incepted in the mid-19th century, and unless decisive action is taken now, GD, with its aging electoral base, may simply find itself losing the battle against time.

Key Pillars of Georgian National Idea

Like many other nations with lengthy literary traditions, ideas about what it means to be Georgian have crystallized over the course of centuries. Georgian philosophers and intellectuals began reflecting on Georgia's role, place, and mission in the world as early as the 10th century, with some returning to the issue periodically in the following centuries. Still, the idea of the modern Georgian nation-state – one based on the sovereignty of the people rather than that of monarchs and nobility – emerged and quickly burgeoned only in the second half of the 19th century. Importantly, as in many other nations of Eastern Europe and parts of the Ottoman Orient, this coming of age occurred in the context of the gradual weakening and eventual dissolution of a multi-national empire (Russia, in Georgia's case).

When the founding fathers of the modern Georgian nation – writers, journalists, civic leaders, and educators – embarked on the national project, the task was anything but simple. Not only did they have to find, amplify, and promote shared narratives for multiple distinct provinces that had little or no contact following the dissolution of the medieval Georgian kingdom in the 15th century, but they also had to tread the political environment very carefully, navigating the whims of imperial viceroys, media censors, secret police, and multiple other factors. Still, the relative freedoms following the abolition of serfdom in 1861, coupled with limited imperial presence and administrative capacity in the Caucasus, allowed these ideas to be conveyed to wider audiences, primarily through Georgian-language newspapers.

By the end of the 19th century, the founding fathers, many of whom had studied in Russian and European universities, had already formulated two key pillars of the Georgian nation idea.

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Firstly, they looked to Europe – more precisely, Western Europe – as a role model and, by extension, a natural ally. For 19th-century Georgian intellectuals, Europe was both a benchmark and a source of inspiration. It was through Europe that they sought to understand their true self, who they were as a nation, and to envision their future, defining who they wanted to become. Importantly, this conviction rested on two beliefs: that Georgia had always been part of the broader European civilization, and that its distancing had been the result of geopolitical circumstances rather than a matter of choice.

The words of Alexander Jambakur-Orbeliani, a prominent member of Georgian nobility, [written](#) in 1861, sum this up neatly: “Europe is the torch that lights the entire world, the enlightener of human mind, the source of learning for students, the source of wisdom of the rulers, and the guardian of virtue for all mankind ... It is clear that, had our forefathers dwelt as neighbors to the Europeans... our land would have blossomed with profound learning, but who could have withstood the [historical] realities?”

Importantly, Georgia's European idea cut across the ideological divides. The liberals looked towards the ideas of enlightenment, liberation (both individual and national), and progress – all associated with Europe – as aspirational values. They also framed the decision of the eastern Georgian nobility to ally with Russia in 1783 as a step towards Europe, a view later belied by the despotic nature of the Russian Empire. The more conservative class, on its part, saw in Europe an alliance rooted in the common past of medieval Christendom. The proponents of this strand accented Georgia's role as an “outpost of Christianity” – a trope that was also used by the Polish, Hungarian, and Serbian westernizing nationalists of that time.

Secondly, the founding fathers painted Russia as a colonizer and oppressor, as well as a negative mirror image and reference point for the future. While Europe was a standard to emulate in terms of social, economic, and political transformation, Russia was often portrayed as a backwards, underdeveloped country. To contrast with Europe, they also often painted Russia as an oriental tyranny, thus purposefully invoking the classical Aristotelian dichotomy between a Hellenic Democracy and Persian Tyranny. Interestingly, Social Democrats, who happened to become independent Georgia's first government in 1918, promptly adopted that rhetorical device, with their leader, Noe Jordania, [often speaking](#) of Russia as the reincarnation of the obscurantist Asiatic tyranny, contrasting it with the “light” from the West.

Words of then-Speaker of the Parliament Zurab Zhvania, spoken at Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1999: “I am Georgian, therefore I am European,” mended the long-broken narrative line, binding the 19th-century visionaries and the architects of the First Republic to the new generation of pro-European Georgians.

In modern times, as Georgia gained its independence in 1918 and lost it to the Bolshevik Russian invasion in 1921, and then regained it in 1991, these two core pillars were further reinforced with additional narrative layers. The first – Europe as a role model and ally – took on new meaning with the emergence of the European Union at Georgia's doorstep. For the first time in modern history, Georgia could interact directly with Europe, and importantly, not in an abstract sense, but with a political entity that bore Europe in its very name. Calls to “(re)join the European family” or to “return to Europe” followed as early as 1990, only to be intensified in the following years. Words of then-Speaker of the Parliament Zurab Zhvania, spoken at Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1999: “I am Georgian, therefore I am European,” mended the long-broken narrative line, binding the 19th-century visionaries and the architects of the First Republic to the new generation of pro-European Georgians. From the mid-2000s onward, Europeanness ceased to be a merely aspirational, instinctive category. Democratic reforms – many of which served the purpose of European integration – permeated the domestic order, leaving a profound mark on Georgia's political and social fabric.

The second pillar found new life as well. The view of Russia as a negative role model remained, primarily expressed in the context of political regime type, where Georgia was depicted as a democracy in contrast to autocratic, repressive Russia. Ad-

ditionally, driven by its role in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Russia came to be seen as an entity repeatedly attempting to violate Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including by pitting various groups, both ethnic and political, against it. This was (and still is) considered the primary way through which Russia seeks to abolish Georgian statehood – a reality to which it has never reconciled itself.

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Another element of self-identification that emerged with the regaining of independence is Georgia's status as a progressive, democratic country in the region (the Caucasus and the Black Sea in general, and the South Caucasus in particular). This desire to be a regionally exceptional nation could be read between the lines in the works of 19th- and early 20th-century intellectuals, but at the time it was never fully articulated as a coherent political idea. In recent decades, however, it was [expressed](#) more clearly: over the past decades, Georgia has been consistently portrayed as a conduit of Westernizing civilizational tendencies, an actor that embraces liberal political affinities, human rights, and institutions that are recognizably democratic and “modern.”

The Counternarrative

Even though the two core narratives – that of Europe as a role model and ally, and that of Russia as an enemy and a negative reference point – have emerged as the most dominant and consistent national ideas from the beginning of 20th century and even survived the 70 years of Soviet occupation, there has always been an important counter-stream, that of loyalty and accommodation to the imperial power.

The original carriers of that counter-narrative in modern times were parts of the Georgian aristocracy who engineered the country's passage to the Russian Empire and benefited from it, gaining access to the Imperial court and associated privileges. By allying with Russia, they saw the Georgian nation – ethnically defined – arriving at the safe haven, finally being in a position to exact revenge against its medieval oriental oppressors in the name of Christendom. Despite some initial reservations from the more patriotic flank in the first decades of the 19th century, many soon found themselves recruited as officers of the Imperial army. Others reached the rank of general, some even facilitating Russia's bloody conquest of the North Caucasus, and distinguishing themselves in various campaigns against the Ottoman Empire.

Another part was the clergy. Even though many Georgian hierarchs of the early 19th century bristled at Russia for abolishing the Georgian Orthodox Church, the new generation got educated under the influence of the particularly virulent anti-Western, anti-liberal, spiritualist tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church. And although this element was previously uncharacteristic for the Georgian religious tradition, which has maintained strong spiritual and philosophic links with the Latin Churches, it soon [gained](#) a foothold.

Paradoxically, many, if not most, among these loyalist noblemen and churchmen resented those few fellow Georgians who had assimilated with Russians or lost cultural affinity to their homeland. In their verses and sermons, many of them also often lamented the lost glory of pre-annexation Georgia, painting its past in a highly romanticized manner. Still, they saw Russia as an imperial, at times oppressive, but still the best possible master in the complicated regional context, which only brought death and destruction to previous generations of Georgians. Accommodating the new master, while retaining individual markers of identity – features like language, religion, if possible, and cultural mores – became their primary creed.

This “accommodationist” narrative grew only stronger during the years of Soviet domination. In line with the 19th-century loyalist tradition, the “great Russian people” came to be portrayed as the saviors of Georgians and the drivers of their unification as a consolidated nation. Additionally, the 1918-1921 experiment with independence was painted by state propaganda as an externally imposed, Western-inspired extravagance that had brought nothing but war and needless suffering upon Georgians.

By the 1960s, as the independence generation faded into Gulags, exile, or political alienation, the new cultural elite had made a new pact with the empire. They would remain content with preserving (and cultivating) the individual markers of the ethno-cultural nation (language, literature, arts, music, folklore, and the like), while the political markers, or the ideas about statehood, citizenship, political institutions, and external allegiances, would be fully relegated to their imperial overlords.

The new consensus persisted for the next few decades. Still, the European idea was never fully relinquished in Soviet Georgia. Writers set their stories in European countries; historians drew parallels between Georgian and Western European feudal systems; research institutes published volumes on the travels of Westerners to Georgia; poets bemoaned Europe’s ambivalence to the trials of medieval Georgia; and politicians spoke about Russia as a bridge to a higher cultural framework, the European civilization.

Reengineering the Identity: Farewell to a Political Nation

Collective identities are typically constellations of overlapping, often conflicting narratives and ideas, shaped by complex historical interactions. Naturally, Georgia is no exception. Its nation-

al identity blends elements of Europeanism with pan-Caucasian, nativist, and orientalist traditions. Georgian identity is also no stranger to portrayals of the country as a cultural meeting point for various civilizations.

Nonetheless, Georgia’s mainstream politics since it restored statehood in 1991 has been based on the broader framework of the “Westernizing progressive” narrative. The counter-narratives existed, but in a marginalized form, sometimes surging as a post-Soviet nostalgia and sometimes as isolationist ethno-nationalism, but they never fully recovered from the ruins of the Soviet Union. After the miserable and corrupt first decade of independence, often described as near-state failure, by 2003, institutionalization and state-building became a dominant public demand that the new post-Rose Revolution administration responded to. And this process was very strongly influenced by the urge to “catch up” with the West.

For a nation that had lost 70 years to Soviet occupation, catching up required an accelerated – and also symbolic – effort. European flags were raised in front of public institutions, Western teachers were brought into schools, ministers were recruited fresh from European and American universities, and Georgian troops were deployed to far-away countries to participate in the West’s wars. European countries, especially those aligned with the new administration’s economic liberalization agenda, were held up as models to emulate. The 3rd President, Mikheil Saakashvili, himself increasingly invoked an East-West dichotomy, more than any of his predecessors, cementing the idea that Georgia was culturally and politically closest to Europe.

But catching up also meant implementing painful reforms. The strong anti-corruption drive, the crackdown on crime, and rapid economic liberalization left many people sidelined. Others – especially the Soviet-era cultural intelligentsia – felt

that their long-standing privileges were being eroded.

The Georgian Dream capitalized on the popular frustration with this “rapid modernization.” Even though it was a wide-ranging coalition that included strongly pro-reform parties, the core ideology of Bidzina Ivanishvili promised stability, material benefits, and – importantly – no pressure to change one’s social habits or comportment. While Saakashvili offered a more horizontal and merit-based vision of citizenship, one in which success had to be earned rather than granted, Ivanishvili’s worldview was rooted in the traditions of political tribalism, favoring informal ties, kinship, and personal loyalty. In foreign relations, the post-independence consensus largely persisted, but accommodationist narratives slowly gained traction – first at the fringes, among some junior partners in the ruling coalition and the various pro-Kremlin groups that had mushroomed with GD coming to power, and later more decisively as Ivanishvili consolidated his grip.

The modern declension of that underlying ideology has morphed into something more sinister: an ideology of political breakup from the West and the “deinstitutionalization” of the state – ultimately a surrender of the nation’s collective agency.

The first pillar of the national idea – Europe as a role model and ally – is being abandoned rhetorically and ideologically. The narrative of “common Christendom” remains pro-forma, but is tempered by the assertion of Europe sleepwalking into “great replacement” by the barbarian hordes from Asia and Africa. “This is no longer Europe, at least not the Europe we were striving for,” is the message GD talking heads repeatedly [promote](#). Usual to authorities of their sort, the ongoing shift is also characterized by extreme hypocrisy; “There are catastrophic tendencies in Europe, you see what migration did to it – the top-ranked name for newborns in Berlin was Mohamed last year,

and so it is for England,” GD prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze [said](#) in October 2025, just days before personally [announcing](#) a six-billion real-estate investment scheme by an Emirati company, incidentally founded and ran by a man named Mohamed Alabbar.

The second pillar is hacked, too. For GD, Russia is no longer the enemy; it is culturally the most proximate major power for Georgia, one that will be either our adversary (if we “betray” it) or our protector (if we show just enough loyalty). GD chooses the latter path and presents it as an expedient tactic to avoid war. Several ramifications follow. Key symbols of resistance to Russia are reinterpreted; events like the 1921 invasion and the 1924 uprising are pushed to the margins of public memory; those who engineered and justified the passage of the Georgian principalities to Russia are brought to the forefront; heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice are dishonored, either by questioning the logic of their actions or – more ingenuously – by co-opting their family members into the ranks of the ruling party. GD’s ultimate goal is clear: to erode the societal resolve of Georgians, and with it, their willpower to resist – both to the ongoing authoritarian takeover and the creeping (pro-) Russian capture of Georgia.

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In this new narrative line, the concepts of “[sovereignty](#)” and “[dignity](#)” are invoked as protections against altering the essence of Georgianness – i.e., its imagined ethno-cultural identity markers such as the Orthodox religion, folk-based culture, and gender mores (e.g., rejection of feminism, homophobia, machismo). Institutions that are seen

as subverting *Georgianness* (civil society and human rights groups, media) are attacked as “foreign agents,” external to the Georgian body politic that must [conform](#) or be expelled from it. In this new Georgia, material interests should always outweigh political ones: those who oppose the repressive authorities on moral and legal grounds, whether inside or outside the country, are labeled irrational, while those who demonstrate loyalty are generously [rewarded](#).

Need to Course-correct

GD's ideological offensive may well be a smoke-screen deployed to cover the extent of state capture or to secure the GD's government a veneer of popular legitimacy. At the same time, it falls short of the institutional one, but this is just one aspect. For those who are resisting the authoritarian consolidation and want to see Georgia's democracy reborn, it is crucial to understand that a paradigmatic change is underway.

On the one hand, by undercutting the widespread popular support to Georgia's European affinity, GD is removing the strongest political anchor the modern Georgian nation has ever had – of a role model for social, economic, and political transformation. But it goes far beyond that. By undermining Georgians' political agency to decide their own future, GD questions the very necessity and viability of Georgia's independent nation-state. If *Georgianness* is emptied of political meaning and reduced to ethno-cultural markers that are transcendental and independent of political institutions, Georgia may as well have limited or no state sovereignty. A nation without clearly defined ideational boundaries, even if it retains cultural autonomy, will become easy prey for bigger, hostile powers.

In other words, Georgia's current resistance is not only to authoritarianism or the ruling party's ill-willed geopolitical choices, but also to the ideol-

ogy that would ultimately sacrifice its nationhood in the name of “peace.” And while the decision is for the Georgians to make, its allies and partners must perhaps drop the calls on Tbilisi “to return to the path of democracy.” That bridge is long crossed and burned.

This should have implications for the EU. Few EU members genuinely hope that GD will course-correct, but boilerplate references to “return to the European path” obscure the absence of an alternative policy. Not only Brussels, but also the European capitals should realize that the prestige of Europe in the eyes of the Georgian citizens is at stake. The EU NEIGHBOURS east 2025 [report](#) states that the share of Georgians with a positive image of the Union has [plummeted](#) from 60% to 43% between 2024 and 2025, with those with “neutral” views of Europe outnumbering those with a positive view for the first time in the survey's history. And while 74% still want Georgia to become an EU member, GD propaganda is clearly succeeding in denting the EU's reputation. Europe must be seen as tangibly helping (and talking to) those Georgians who believe in it; otherwise, disappointment will further fertilize the ground for GD's altered national idea.

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It is, thus, in fact, the European Union that must correct its own course, for the costs of inaction or misplaced expectations now fall not only on Georgia, but on Europe's credibility and strategic posture in its own neighbourhood.

Those who resist the repressive regime should take note and correct the course as well. They must first come to terms with the fact that they are not the first – nor, perhaps, the last – to confront the imperial tentacles, and they should also seek answers, language, and inspiration from those who held the torch of an independent, democratic Georgia before them. Generations of respected Georgian writers, scholars, and political leaders of all ideologies – from royalists to national

democrats to socialists – have advanced the idea of Georgia's European identity. Remembering this heritage, debating it, recognizing the existence of the alternative narratives, and fitting these old debates to the new context can return the pro-European Georgia a sense of historical truth and authenticity, and eventually neutralize the ideological interference that aims to divide and subdue Georgia's embattled pro-European, pro-democracy political class ■