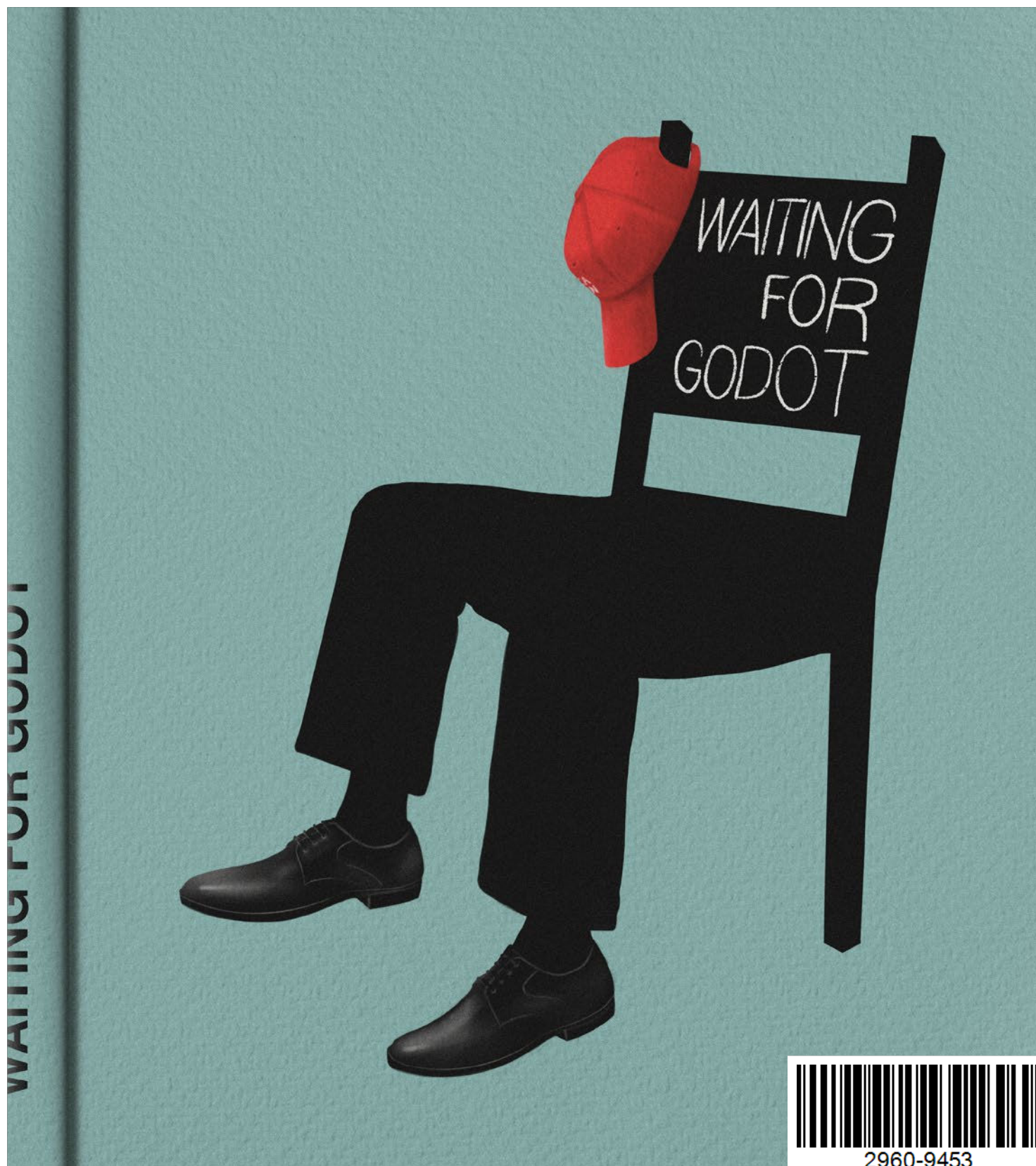


GEO POLITICS

№25 | DECEMBER 2025



GEO POLITICS

Issue №25
December, 2025

Our Mission

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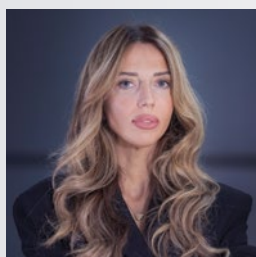
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

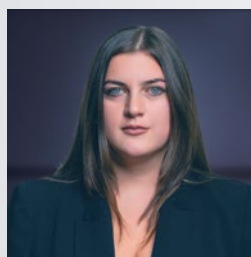
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must advance the dissemination of universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We support these goals through our analytical and intellectual contributions.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with deep knowledge and policy experience who enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, the U.S., and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.



Ana Khurtsidze

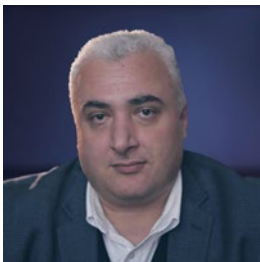
President of Gnomon Wise
and Dean of Law School
of the University of Georgia



Irina Gurgenchashvili

Executive Director of
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Contributors



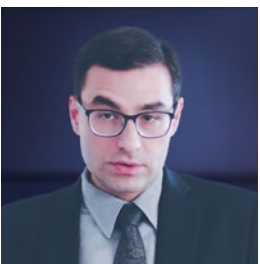
Sergi Kapanadze Editor and Contributor

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.



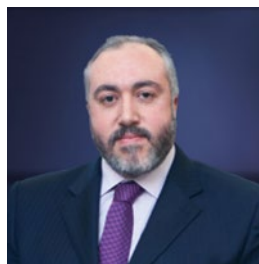
Thornike Gordadze Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at Sciences Po in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris (2005).



Shota Gvineria Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



Natalie Sabanadze Contributor

Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze has been a Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College between 2021-23. Prior to this, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the EU and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. From 2005-13, she worked as a senior official at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, where she held several positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. She holds an MSc in International Relations from London School of Economics and D.Phil in Politics and International Relations from Oxford University. Natalie Sabanadze has published and lectured extensively on post-communist transition, nationalism and ethnic conflict, Russian foreign policy, and the EU in the world.



Vano Chkhikvadze Contributor

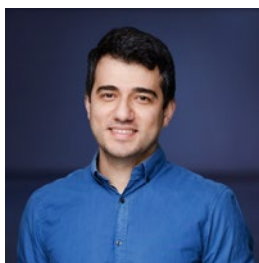
Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



Jaba Devdariani Contributor

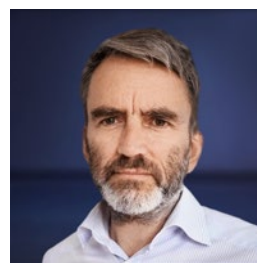
Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.

Guest Contributors



Tornike Zurabashvili Guest Contributor

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher and practitioner with a focus on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the broader Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike Zurabashvili also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, as well as master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.



Hans Gutbrod Guest Contributor

Hans Gutbrod is a Professor at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He has written on politics and ethics and works as a consultant in policy research. He previously was the regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). Hans has been working in the Caucasus region and observing elections in Georgia since 1999 and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics. He served as a Long-Term Observer for the ODHR/OSCE mission in Georgia in 2003.

Waiting for Godot:

A World on the Edge, a Georgia on Hold

In this issue of *GEOPolitics*, we borrow from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play about paralysis, expectation, and the quiet terror of things getting worse while everyone waits for someone else to act. It is a fitting metaphor not only for Georgia, where society stands in the shadow of a consolidating dictatorship hoping for a rescue that never quite arrives, but also for a world suspended between wars, elections, and geopolitical reconfigurations.

Europe waits to see whether it can still defend its own neighborhood; Ukraine waits for a victory or a settlement that remains out of reach; the United States waits for the next move of a president who reshapes global order with every tariff, airstrike or a peace proposal; the South Caucasus waits between new corridors and old empires; and Georgia waits, caught between a captured state and a society that still refuses surrender. Like Beckett's characters, main actors from Tbilisi to Brussels sit on the roadside of history, knowing that time is running out, yet hoping that someone, or something, will intervene before the darkness fully sets in. This issue asks a simple but urgent question: how long can we wait before waiting becomes defeat?

This issue of *GEOPolitics* opens with Shota Gvineiria's article, in which he argues that the increasingly self-destructive actions of the Georgian Dream (GD) government can only be understood through the prism of Russia's strategic effort to

force Georgia past a geopolitical point of no return. Although pro-Russian policies remain deeply unpopular in Georgia and the ruling party cannot openly declare a Moscow-aligned course, a long sequence of decisions shows a consistent pattern of choices that damage the regime's own legitimacy but advance Kremlin interests. These moves are unfolding precisely as Russia's influence collapses across the wider South Caucasus, making Georgia Moscow's last remaining asset in the region and intensifying external pressure on the ruling elite. The result is a system in which the Georgian Dream can no longer make strategic decisions independently of Moscow, even as Georgian society remains overwhelmingly pro-European and remarkably resilient. The article concludes that Georgia is nearing a "point of no return" engineered through legal, institutional, and ideological transformation. Yet, a strategic opportunity still exists: growing friction between Moscow's aims and Bidzina Ivanishvili's personal survival offers a narrow window for decisive Western action, through support for civil society and targeted pressure on Ivanishvili, to pull Georgia back from Russian control before that window closes.

Sergi Kapanadze continues the analysis of Georgia's descent to authoritarianism by arguing that the country is "five minutes away" from a one-party dictatorship already functionally aligned with the Kremlin, but still not a lost cause. This narrow space between near-capture and surviving resil-

ience is exactly where Western leverage must be used. The question of whether or not Ivanishvili is a “Russian agent,” or if the Georgian Dream has become pro-Russian is irrelevant; what matters is that the regime’s actions consistently advance Moscow’s goals: freezing EU integration, rewriting the 2008 war, cancelling Anaklia deep-sea port project, dismantling the South Ossetia administration, and helping erase Georgia from the Western agenda—achievements Russia has long pursued in the Black Sea region. Yet the dictatorship is not yet a *fait accompli*, because of three pillars of internal resistance: embattled but active opposition forces, a still-functioning civil society and independent media, and a population overwhelmingly committed to the EU. Georgia remains deeply West-dependent economically and financially, not Russia-dependent, giving Western actors significant unused leverage. The article calls for moving from passive observation to coordinated high-level pressure by a coalition of willing states, using conditional engagement, credible pre-announced sanctions, and real sticks-and-carrots diplomacy. The core message is that the same “five minutes” that describe Georgia’s closeness to dictatorship are also five minutes for the West to act, if it wishes to prevent Georgia from becoming another irreversible Kremlin outpost on the Black Sea.

Hans Gutbrod digs into one area of Georgia’s increasingly authoritarian polity – the newly announced education reform. He argues that Georgian Dream’s assault on higher education is a deliberate project of *nihilistic totalitarianism* – a systematic attempt to destroy one of the last autonomous spheres in Georgian society and remake it in the image of a subjugated, executive-controlled state. The author shows how the government’s plan touches every layer of academia: dismantling universities, subordinat-

ing faculties through the “One City, One Faculty” model, centralizing financing, stripping professors of autonomy, selling university property to cronies, and even shortening school years. The article contrasts this with the globalized essence of modern higher education and calls for a firm international response: support displaced scholars through fellowships and affiliations; create in-exile structures abroad; and explicitly isolate academic collaborators who legitimize repression.

Vano Chkikvadze returns to the analysis of the topic of Georgian migrants, this time focusing on the Georgian Dream’s plan to strip them of their voting rights. He shows how diaspora voting has always been structurally obstructed – few polling stations, distant locations, chaotic registration, and prohibitive costs for migrants working in insecure, often undocumented jobs. And yet, even under those conditions, participation has risen, and the diaspora has consistently voted overwhelmingly against Georgian Dream. In environments where the government cannot weaponize poverty, control media, or intimidate public servants, its support collapses to low double digits, creating a sharp contrast with “victories” manufactured at home. The article also underlines a brutal irony: remittances from those very migrants have doubled over the Georgian Dream years, now making up roughly a tenth of GDP, stabilizing households, shoring up the currency, and indirectly feeding the budget. Migrants are thus indispensable “cash machines” for a regime that tells critics to leave, then denies them any say in their country’s future. The core message is that by disenfranchising migrants while relying on their earnings, Georgian Dream is weaponizing emigration itself – turning political exile and economic dependence into a tool for consolidating one-party rule.

Jaba Devdariani and Tornike Zurabashvili step in with the analysis of how Georgian Dream is re-wiring the Georgian national idea, shifting the country from a modern political nation anchored in Europe toward a hollowed-out, ethno-cultural community resigned to Russian tutelage, and that this ideological offensive now requires a course correction not only in Tbilisi but in Brussels. The Georgian Dream is now trying to elevate a new narrative, which is discarding Europe by portraying it as morally decayed and “replaced,” recasting Russia from enemy to necessary protector, and redefining sovereignty and dignity as the defense of an ethnically coded, Orthodox, patriarchal “Georgianness” against allegedly foreign institutions like NGOs, human rights groups, and the independent media. In doing so, it drains Georgianness of political content, turning the state from a project of self-government into a vessel whose primary purpose is to protect a static culture and the material interests of those loyal to the regime. The authors warn that this is not just about propaganda but about dismantling the very idea of Georgia as a European political nation, making future resistance to both authoritarianism and Russian influence much harder. They conclude that both Georgian pro-democratic forces and the EU must “correct course”: Georgians by re-connecting with their own long tradition of European identity and anti-imperial thought, and the EU by abandoning empty calls for the Georgian Dream to “return to the European path” and instead visibly supporting those in Georgia who still carry that historical, pro-European national project.

Thornike Gordadze then shifts focus to a broader region through the prism of Israel, showing how a quiet security partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan has evolved into a strategic choice for Israel amid a region reshaped by Iran’s ambitions,

Russia’s retreat, and Türkiye’s rising influence. Azerbaijan now serves as Israel’s main foothold in the South Caucasus, supplying a large share of its crude oil and offering a platform near Iran. Georgia plays a minor but sensitive role as a transit and intelligence link, though its drift from the West and growing exposure to Iran raise concerns in Tel Aviv. Armenia, once distant from Israel, is opening new channels through the U.S.-brokered Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), thereby weakening Tehran’s leverage and signaling Yerevan’s gradual move away from Moscow. For Israel, the three cases point in the same direction: the South Caucasus is becoming a strategic hinge rather than a peripheral space. Protecting energy routes, containing Iran, and shaping the regional order now require Israel to move from quiet, transactional cooperation to a broader regional strategy that integrates Georgia’s fragility, Armenia’s opening, and Türkiye’s role.

Temuri Yakobashvili closes the issue with the argument that Trump’s America is not retreating to isolationism, but that the “America First” slogan-driven foreign policy actually implies active, hard-edged intervention: heavy defense spending, frequent airstrikes, aggressive tariffs, and a security strategy that casts China as the main competitor and Russia as a weakening disruptor. Washington expands its reach to the South Caucasus through the TRIPP corridor, new partnerships in Central Asia, and pressure on Russia’s energy and financial networks. Georgia should have been central to this map, yet the Georgian Dream aligns with China, warms to Russia, attacks Western institutions, and imagines an American retreat that never happened. While Armenia, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Türkiye fit into the new U.S. architecture, Georgia offers only confusion and risk. Yakobashvili argues that leaning toward

China and Russia in this environment is a strategic mistake and that the United States still has real leverage through financial tools, sanctions, defense conditions, and direct engagement with Georgian society.

With this issue, *GEOPOLITICS* enters its third year, one marked by new tests for the country, its democracy, this publication, and its authors, who continue their work despite the risks that come with honest analysis. We remain committed to covering the region with depth and clarity, wid-

ening our scope while keeping Georgia at the center of our attention. This year, we also begin a new tradition on our covers. After a first cycle inspired by games and a second shaped by cinema, we now turn to classic books. It feels appropriate in a time when Georgia and the world are waiting for decisive action, and as history often repeats itself and bites. Also, because, as a famous saying goes, *“A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say”* ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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GEOpolitics offers space for a wide range of perspectives, fostering independent thinking and open discussion. The journal articles reflect contributors' views and may not represent the editorial team's position.

Explaining the Self-Harming Policies of the Georgian Dream through the Russian Prism

Georgia is facing the most dangerous political moment since regaining independence. Russia appears to have set a strategic objective that goes far beyond influencing Georgian policies. Russia has moved from trying to meddle in Georgian politics to trying to control the long-term direction of the Georgian state in a way that cannot be reversed.

The memory of Soviet rule, the conflicts of the 1990s, and the 2008 August war continue to act as a psychological barrier that prevents Georgians from trusting the Kremlin.

Pro-Russian policies remain largely [unpopular](#) among Georgians. Even those who support the

Georgian Dream (GD) have little interest in an openly pro-Russian course. Years of Russian [pro-paganda](#) have created doubts about Western partners, but they have not produced genuine sympathy toward Russia. The memory of Soviet rule, the conflicts of the 1990s, and the 2008 August war continue to act as a psychological barrier that prevents Georgians from trusting the Kremlin.

This is why the Georgian Dream does not publicly declare a pro-Russian agenda. Instead, it relies on mixed and contradictory messaging. It attacks Western institutions, particularly European ones, and civic and political actors, while simultaneously claiming that European integration remains a national priority. Despite tightening its authoritarian grip and applying pressure on pro-Western critics, the ruling party has not been able to create a



SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.

Georgian Dream Hotline

If you want Russian laws
rebranded, history rewritten, and
Europe taken off your future
- call us.

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Russia-oriented majority. One year of [sustained](#) protest shows that Georgian society rejects a Russia-centered political future.

Russia must be interpreting this resistance as a structural weakness. If the Georgian Dream loses power, Georgia will likely return to its Western trajectory very quickly. Preventing this scenario ought to be a central strategic goal for the Kremlin.

As a result, pressure on the Georgian Dream has intensified, suggesting a deeper level of external influence. A key indicator of this shift is the pattern of decisions made by the Georgian Dream that offer no political benefit to the ruling party and, in many cases, even damage its reputation. These choices are hard to explain through domestic political logic. They alienate much of the population, mobilize the opposition, harm the party's international legitimacy, and reduce its room for maneuver. Yet, the government continues to take them. The only way these decisions make sense is to view them as actions that serve Russia's strategic interests rather than Georgia's or even the regime's own.

The full scope of this process is difficult to document through direct evidence because it most probably [unfolds](#) through informal channels, [co-ordinated messaging](#), tightly timed policy shifts, and the alignment of domestic decisions with Russia's objectives. The most revealing way to understand this process is to examine the timeline of the self-harming choices made by the Georgian Dream. When viewed together, these steps form a coherent sequence that strengthens Russia's leverage while steadily damaging Georgia's relationship with the European Union and the United States. Each such move by the ruling party, from the revival of the foreign agents law to the [announcement](#) by Irakli Kobakhidze that Georgia was halting its European path, has pushed Georgia further away from its Western partners and deeper into political isolation.

Regional Context

Russia's influence across the South Caucasus is weakening rapidly. Armenia is distancing itself from Moscow after the failure of Russian security guarantees, seeking stronger ties with Western partners and openly questioning its reliance on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Azerbaijan continues to deepen its strategic partnership with Türkiye while also signaling independence from Moscow through public support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Türkiye's growing role in the region and President Donald Trump's new initiative to [mediate](#) lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while promoting long-term regional economic prospects under the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity ([TRIPP](#)), create an increasingly multipolar environment that limits Russia's ability to [shape](#) outcomes.

Türkiye's growing role in the region and President Donald Trump's new initiative to mediate lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while promoting long-term regional economic prospects under the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), create an increasingly multipolar environment that limits Russia's ability to shape outcomes.

Within this shifting landscape, maintaining control over Georgia is Russia's last opportunity to retain a meaningful presence in the Caucasus. If Georgia reaffirms its Euro-Atlantic direction, Russia risks losing strategic influence across the entire region. Recent [research](#) from the Royal United Services Institute and regional security analysts notes that Russia views developments in Georgia as central to its remaining position in the South Caucasus. Understanding this broader environment is essen-

tial for interpreting the otherwise irrational and self-damaging decisions taken by the Georgian Dream, which serve to preserve Russian strategic influence at a time when it is eroding everywhere else in the region.

Self-Harming Moscow Serving Decisions

The Russian factor has produced a long sequence of decisions that make little sense within Georgia's domestic political environment but align closely with Moscow's strategic aims. These steps consistently damage the ruling party's popularity, the country's economy, social cohesion, and the integrity of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Yet, each move serves a clear purpose for the Kremlin by eroding trust in Western partners, normalizing Russian narratives, and gradually pushing Georgia toward irreversible isolation from the West.

One of the earliest examples is the 2019 Gavrillov [incident](#). A Russian State Duma's communist member who had participated in the armed conflict in Abkhazia in the 1990s was allowed to preside over a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy from the Georgian parliamentary speaker's chair. This [triggered](#) mass protests that left more than 200 [injured](#) and forced the then-Speaker of the Parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, to [resign](#). For the Georgian Dream, this episode was politically disastrous. It inflamed anti-government and anti-Russian sentiment, eroded public trust, and destabilized the pre-election environment, forcing Bidzina Ivanishvili to acquiesce to proportional elections (which he later [renege](#)d on). For Russia, however, the incident served to test public tolerance for pro-Russian policies and gauge the limits of Georgian society's active resistance. [International](#) and [domestic](#) reports from the period show that this event established a pattern of measuring societal resistance that Moscow would exploit in the years ahead.

The cancellation of the [Anaklia deep-sea port](#) project in 2019–2020 followed the same logic. The project, backed by American partners, had the potential to increase Georgia's GDP, create new connectivity and economic opportunities, and reduce Russian dominance in the Black Sea transit corridor. The Georgian Dream terminated the consortium, [accused](#) it of financial misconduct, and left the project dormant until a Chinese company secured involvement in 2024. This decision undermined Georgian Dream's credibility domestically and internationally, making it harder to mask its pro-Russian stance. As a result, the Kremlin preserved its maritime advantage, blocked a competing port, and steered the region's logistics environment from Washington toward Beijing – Russia's situational partner in the region.

For Moscow, the gain is significant, as it recasts Georgia as responsible for the conflict, reduces the legitimacy of Georgia's claims over occupied territories, weakens international support for de-occupation, and paves the way for the restoration of formal relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, giving the Kremlin more direct levers of pressure.

Rewriting the history of the 2008 war is another politically costly step for the Georgian Dream. Mr. Kobakhidze and other high-ranking ruling party officials publicly [blamed](#) the 3rd President Mikheil Saakashvili and echoed narratives that Western powers had orchestrated the conflict. This reopened national trauma, deepened political polarization, and put the Georgian Dream further at odds with a public that consistently shows around 70–80% [support](#) for EU and NATO integration, giving the opposition a nationalist and pro-Western rallying point. For Moscow, the gain is significant, as it recasts Georgia as responsible for the conflict, reduces the legitimacy of Georgia's claims

over occupied territories, weakens international support for de-occupation, and paves the way for the restoration of formal relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, giving the Kremlin more direct levers of pressure.

The adoption of the “foreign agents law” in 2024 further demonstrated the pattern of self-harming alignment with Russian strategies. The [law](#), modeled on legislation used by the Kremlin to suppress civil society, forced organizations receiving foreign support to register as agents serving foreign interests. It was pushed through despite [protests](#) involving more than 100,000 participants and despite warnings from the European Union and the United States that it would halt integration processes. Approval ratings for the government dropped sharply, and political unrest intensified right before the milestone parliamentary elections. Russia, however, benefited from the replication of its preferred legal tool that has also appeared in Kyrgyzstan and Slovakia. The law targeted precisely those sectors that anchor Georgia’s Western identity, weakening the civic infrastructure that opposes Russian influence.

Prime Minister Kobakhidze’s announcement in late 2024 that Georgia would pause its European Union integration until 2028 also fits in this pattern. The policy shift alienated the population, unified opposition parties, triggered mass demonstrations, and risked the wrath of hundreds of thousands of Georgian citizens who consistently expressed strong support for the European Union membership. The only obvious winner was Moscow, which secured a visible rupture between Georgia and its Western partners and put Georgia on a path of international isolation.

The [abolition](#) of the South Ossetia Provisional Administration in 2025 is the latest episode in this series of pro-Russian moves. The administration was established in 2007 to create a legitimate, state-mandated governance structure represent-

ing Ossetian communities willing to engage with the Georgian government, after the parallel “alternative elections” demonstrated that part of the local population rejected the Russia-backed *de facto* authorities. The existence of this structure was an institutional proof that the conflict was not with the Ossetians, but with the Kremlin. It also served practical goals - coordinating humanitarian and rehabilitation projects, building confidence between communities, and ensuring access to Georgian state services for residents of the region. Russia and the Tskhinvali regime loathed the temporary administration and often requested that they be dropped from the Geneva talks. Ending the administration risked angering nationalist voters, deepened the perception of Georgian Dream’s lack of policy on the occupied regions, and removed an important symbol of territorial integrity. Russia, however, benefited from advancing *de facto* recognition of the division, erasing institutional structures that resisted its control, and paving the way to the next steps toward legitimizing the current status quo regarding occupied territories.

Taken together, these episodes reveal a pattern in which the Georgian Dream repeatedly undermines its own legitimacy and strategic interests, in ways that align precisely with Russia’s objectives. Each decision imposes domestic political costs, yet collectively they advance a methodical process of entrenching Russian influence.

Georgian Dream is being reshaped into a compact, obedient structure capable of executing Russia’s strategic agenda without internal friction or competing loyalties.

Interestingly, even the recent internal shakeup within Georgian Dream can be explained not by the alleged anti-corruption campaign but rather by Moscow-style consolidation of a dependent proxy. The [sidelining](#) of former security chief Grigol Lilu-

ashvili, the [ostracizing](#) of the former Prime Minister Gharibashvili, the [pressure](#) on former business allies, and the consolidation around a smaller political core fit this logic. Georgian Dream is being reshaped into a compact, obedient structure capable of executing Russia's strategic agenda without internal friction or competing loyalties.

Beyond the No Return Point

The political [developments](#) in today's Georgia (arrests of opposition leaders, bans on parties, introduction of restrictive laws, attacks on civil society and the media, fierce anti-Western propaganda) often precede constitutional or referendum-based attempts to formalize a geopolitical realignment and full capture of the state institutions. Georgia fits this pattern with alarming precision. The emerging strategy appears to involve holding a referendum (with recently [announced amendments](#) to the national law on referendum) on adopting a neutral status, removing the constitutional clause defining Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation, and formally withdrawing the EU membership application submitted to the EU. These measures would lock in a geopolitical shift that future governments would struggle to reverse. A deeper analysis of Georgia's internal discourse suggests several indicators and red flags that indicate this strategy is well underway.

One of the most revealing indicators of the effort to recalibrate the country's geopolitical orientation is the sweeping education reforms targeting [schools](#) and [universities](#). These reforms introduce a centralized and politically controlled governance structure that places curriculum, administration, and content under direct state supervision. This architecture mirrors the Russian and post-Soviet educational model, which relies on ideological conformity, centralized control, and the suppression of critical thought. Such a system is fundamentally incompatible with European standards.

Policies can be reversed, governments can change, but transforming the identity-forming institutions of a nation creates long-term structural effects.

The significance of this shift cannot be overstated. Policies can be reversed, governments can change, but transforming the identity-forming institutions of a nation creates long-term structural effects. Steering schools and universities toward a Russian-style system that cannot interoperate with the Western educational space is intended to ensure that the country's cultural and intellectual fabric aligns with Moscow, making any future return to European integration far more difficult. This move illustrates how deeply the project of pushing Georgia past the point of no return extends into the state's social foundations.

However, if the plan of gradual subjugation fails, a coercive alternative remains available for the Kremlin, as always. According to the [model](#) described by Yuri Bezmenov, the destabilization phase is already well advanced in Georgia. Institutions that once ensured national resilience have been weakened from within as laws are rewritten, freedoms restricted, and corruption and economic entanglements expand in ways that favor those aligned with the subverting force, steadily preparing the ground for an engineered crisis. In an environment defined by rising temperatures, deepening polarization, and unprecedented societal tension, a premeditated precipitating event would be sufficient to ignite unrest. Should such a crisis occur, Georgia may be forced to confront the true purpose of the large number of physically fit Russian nationals who [settled in](#) Georgia in 2022 as part of the migration influx.

Combat Power Assessment

According to the established [pattern](#) of influence operations, malign foreign interference targets

two principal dimensions: policy and administrative structures, and public sentiment within broader society. In Georgia, the Georgian Dream has already fallen into what analysts define as an exclusive sphere of influence. It has relinquished the ability to make domestic or foreign policy decisions that contradict Kremlin interests and shows limited capacity to safeguard Georgia's long-term strategic goals. One entire dimension of national resilience is, therefore, under complete Russian control.

Despite a full-scale authoritarian crackdown, it remains active and mobilized after a full year of continuous protest. This resilience limits Russia's ability to consolidate political control as it did in Belarus, under earlier administrations in Armenia, or in Central Asian partner states.

The second dimension presents a serious challenge for Moscow. Georgia's civil society has proven remarkably resilient. Despite a full-scale authoritarian crackdown, it remains active and mobilized after a full year of continuous protest. This resilience limits Russia's ability to consolidate political control as it did in Belarus, under earlier administrations in Armenia, or in Central Asian partner states. In addition, broader support for the European future remains very high among Georgia's citizens.

Two other stakeholders shape the balance of forces. The first is an all-but-decimated pro-Western political opposition that has been largely neutralized through legal pressure, fragmentation, and repression. It is currently unable to provide a credible political alternative or translate public sentiment into institutional change. The second is the democratic international community and Western institutions, which have attempted to

support democratic processes in Georgia but have largely failed to develop an actionable or unified strategy. In addition, some long-time pro-Russian satellites are riding the momentum and [consolidating](#) into political parties to help push Georgian Dream's agenda, notably by supporting the idea of neutrality.

Western partners express normative commitment to Georgian democracy but lack a coherent strategy to reinforce it.

Like any political confrontation, the struggle ultimately revolves around legitimacy. On one side stands a deeply entrenched yet vulnerable Georgian Dream regime aligned with Moscow and lacking internal or external legitimacy. Opposing it is a strong and determined civil society that continues to defend policy alternatives, legitimate national interests, and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The political opposition remains structurally weak and unable to channel public demands into a viable political process. Meanwhile, Western partners express normative commitment to Georgian democracy but lack a coherent strategy to reinforce it.

From Friction to Strategic Opportunity

The outcome of this legitimacy contest will determine whether or not Georgia reclaims its democratic trajectory or remains anchored within Russia's sphere of influence. There should be no illusions about changing Ivanishvili's behavior without decisive and clear pressure on his financial security. His political survival depends on maintaining a system rooted in dependency, informal control, and alignment with Moscow's strategic goals. If symbolic sanctions continue, while he may offer cosmetic concessions, his Russian management style will never allow genuine political com-

petition. As in the [earlier cases](#), he will promise what is needed to appease, yet stop short of allowing free and fair elections that he might lose. If not challenged by severe sanctions, there might only be a space for cosmetic reforms and staged gestures at best. Still, the core architecture of shadow governance will remain intact unless external pressure shifts the cost structure it faces.

The Kremlin seeks to push Georgia beyond the point of no return, even when this involves inflicting severe political costs on the regime.

Yet this picture contains a critical, underappreciated vulnerability. There is now a growing friction between Moscow's objectives and the interests of the Georgian Dream leadership. The Kremlin seeks to push Georgia beyond the point of no return, even when this involves inflicting severe political costs on the regime. Ivanishvili, however, is focused on the long-term survival of his system, which he sees as the sole guarantee of his personal safety and financial security. This divergence is a strategic opening. It creates an opportunity to pressure the regime at the exact point where its interests no longer fully align with Moscow's and where internal loyalty strains are already visible.

A viable strategy, therefore, requires two parallel tracks. The first track is sustained engagement with Georgia's civil society and other pro-democracy forces as the legitimate frontline defenders of the nation's Euro-Atlantic future. Western partners must move beyond standard bureaucratic responses that have failed to yield tangible results and find ways to work directly with genuine pro-democracy forces in Georgia without allowing anticipated criticism or attacks from Georgian Dream to deter engagement, since such attacks are inevitable and now serve primarily as a self-imposed barrier to Western action.

The second component of a viable strategy is direct engagement with Ivanishvili himself, built on the recognition that the friction between Moscow's goals and his own long-term interests creates a narrow but real strategic opportunity. For Ivanishvili to factor Western interests into his calculations, he must first feel the genuine cost of ignoring them. This requires sanctions, asset freezes, and financial disruption, applied with sufficient force to alter his risk assessment. Only under such pressure will he consider recalibrating his position. Yet, pressure alone is insufficient. It must be paired with a credible, clearly articulated off-ramp that guarantees his personal security and financial protection in exchange for his withdrawal from Georgian politics. The experience of Moldova under Vladimir Plahotniuc shows that decisive sanctions combined with a structured exit plan can unlock change even in entrenched systems. But the regional context today is different, and Georgia's political environment is far more volatile. The approach must, therefore, be adapted with nuance and sustained engagement from key Western actors.

This is the most challenging part of the strategy, as there is limited diplomatic stamina to prioritize Georgia amid global crises. Yet, the alternative is far worse for the entire region. Failure to act would allow Russia to complete its subjugation of Georgia.

The window of opportunity is getting narrower by the day, and the authoritarian crackdown eliminates the pockets of freedom in Georgia's fabric very quickly.

The friction between Moscow's strategic ambitions and Ivanishvili's instinct for self-preservation creates an exploitable weakness. If the West acts with clarity, coordination, and resolve, it can transform

this strategic vulnerability into an opportunity to restore Georgia's democratic path. The window of opportunity is getting narrower by the day, and the authoritarian crackdown eliminates the pockets of freedom in Georgia's fabric very quickly. The

coming months will determine whether this window is seized or lost, and whether Georgia crosses the point of no return or starts reclaiming its place within the Euro-Atlantic community ■

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



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.



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).

Once that transformation is complete and the dictatorship becomes a fait accompli, Georgian democracy will no longer be open to resuscitation.

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.

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.

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?

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.

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.

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.

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 ■

The Assault on Higher Education and the Nihilistic Totalitarianism of the Georgian Dream

Higher education in Georgia is under attack. The outlines of this aggressive assault are well understood by now. A [previous article](#) by Sergi Kapanadze in *GEOpolitics* has described the contours of the planned subjugation in more detail. As Kapanadze points out, the proposed changes move Georgia “towards a system where higher education becomes a branch of the executive” and “away from the model of university autonomy developed after accession to the Bologna Process.”

What should we make of what the Georgian Dream (GD) is doing? The plan matters for its destructive scale – but it also tells us a lot about the Georgian Dream and reveals that nihilistic totalitarianism is its key characteristic.

A Repressive Assault Dressed up as Reform

The Georgian Dream regime is at this point seeking to destroy higher education in Georgia as it previously existed. If this wording can at first seem like hyperbole, the scale of the total assault on higher education has few precedents in its scale other than perhaps in the Bolshevik Revolution.

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HANS GUTBROD
Guest Contributor

Hans Gutbrod is a Professor at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He has written on politics and ethics and works as a consultant in policy research. He previously was the regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). Hans has been working in the Caucasus region and observing elections in Georgia since 1999 and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics. He served as a Long-Term Observer for the ODIHR/OSCE mission in Georgia in 2003.



hyperbole, the scale of the total assault on higher education has few precedents in its scale other than perhaps in the Bolshevik Revolution. Practically no aspect of higher education will be left untouched by the plans that have been laid out.

The assault [targets](#) the higher education institutions, which (except for the regime-aligned state universities) are likely to be cut back or destroyed entirely. It [interferes](#) with teaching in faculties on the most fundamental level, subjugating it to the regime's whims, via a "One City, One Faculty" model in which specializations will be ordered into specific locations. If the regime were to decide that sociology can only be studied at the remote Akhalkalaki branch of Samtskhe-Javakheti University, a small town that at 1,707 meters is higher than many mountain resorts and with sub-zero average temperatures for four months of the year, there is nothing to stop them. The financing will now be determined top down from the ministry, putting the state universities in a situation where they are forced into submission. Professors will have to ask permission if they want to retain other sources of income and younger teaching staff will be subordinated to a chair and expected to work full-time, creating a system of indenture rather than tenure.

To make a rollback of these reforms difficult, if not impossible, the regime plans to sell off key buildings of existing institutions to real estate developers – likely a small coterie of cronies who, anyway, constitute the only meaningful allies of the Georgian Dream regime. The reforms will also be made more complicated to roll back by reducing the school years by one year, thus bringing even less mature people into institutions that will be even overloaded, teaching rudimentary tasks. In Germany, several Länder decided to return to 13 years of schooling after a multi-year experiment with 12 years showed that shortening the time brought few positive outcomes, although it seems to have affected the health and well-being of pupils negatively.

A characteristic of the regime's assault on higher education is that it is unconstitutional, violating Article 27, which [guarantees](#) the autonomy of the sector ("Academic freedom and the autonomy of higher educational institutions shall be guaranteed"). It is also typical that the Constitutional Court is so subjugated that it is unlikely to hear an appeal.

Sensible reforms rely on at least some consultation, but no meaningful debate preceded this [assault](#). Several of its implications are not understood. At this point, no financial planning for the changes seems to have been put forward.

In a thoughtful [analysis](#) for Gnomon Wise, Tinatin Nikoleishvili has shown, piece by piece, that the proposed rationale for what is falsely described as a reform does not hold up. For each problem this initiative is supposed to solve, it will create many more.

While Ilia State University has [spoken up](#) in criticism, some other university leaders, including leaders of private universities, appear to be intimidated. One university leader [commented](#) in an interview that "will the education reform be good or bad, we do not know," omitting to say that if you do not know if a massive disruption of a broadly functional system will be good, it is something terrible. Sensible policy does not tear down institutions without certainty that something better will arise.

Final Clarification: Nihilistic Totalitarianism

While the Georgian Dream was potentially encouraged to assault higher education by what other governments have done, such as Hungary's Fidesz government targeting the Central European University, the scale of what is planned in Georgia is far greater than what we have seen abroad. The [confrontation](#) of the Trump administration with

American universities is also with reference to a narrower set of issues and based mostly on withholding extensive federal research funding, rather than seeking to massively subjugate the entire sector. It is an established practice of the Georgian Dream to claim that their actions are based on international precedent when, in fact, the regime's actions are much more sinister.

Although directed at higher education, the assault tells us a lot about where the Georgian Dream stands now. As mentioned above, it displays strong features of what we can call nihilistic totalitarianism.

This is totalitarian to the extent that it reaches far into private lives through its impact on the educational opportunities of tens of thousands of people. It is nihilistic because there is next to no positive content. Under its current Robespierrean Prime Minister, the regime seems committed to destroying alternatives to its dominance, subjugating any autonomous professionalism, eliminating alternatives, and, in the end, shredding the hope that Georgia could be a better or at least somewhat normal country.

The Speaker of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, is a prime example of this approach. Foreign observers sometimes imagine that he might be engaged in actually running the parliament and that they only see the worst lines that actually get cited. Instead, Papuashvili is in a mode of constant assault. Papuashvili is smart enough to realize in his better moments that what he is doing is terrible, but likely feels that there is no way back since all bridges have been burned anyway.

The attack on higher education thus underscores the Robespierrean quality of Irakli Kobakhidze — an inability to disengage from the cycle of aggression he himself unleashed, regardless of what originally prompted it. This nihilistic drive sets him apart from the broader family of authoritarian populists.

Most populist movements, for all their destructive tendencies, still anchor themselves in real societal anxieties — immigration being a genuine pressure point, however much the liberals may prefer otherwise. Kobakhidze's animus, by contrast, is not rooted in grievance but in a self-propelling logic of ideological hostility.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin can connect to an imperial tradition that is intelligible to people. Viktor Orbán responds to the truncation of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon much as Türkiye's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan draws on the Treaty of Sèvres as a national humiliation. The Georgian Dream, by contrast, has to create its enemies out of thin air — there is [no reason](#) for Georgians to resent Europeans when over the centuries other neighbors have been much more dangerous to Georgia's survival.

The Georgian Dream, in that sense, is totalitarian rather than authoritarian, as authoritarians primarily seek to consolidate power rather than remake a society.

The Georgian Dream, in that sense, is totalitarian rather than authoritarian, as authoritarians primarily seek to consolidate power rather than remake a society. By contrast, under Irakli Kobakhidze, there is an active attempt to destroy others, reaching deep into spaces that many authoritarian regimes would allow as areas of retreat for those who just want to get on with their lives.

This aggressive assault perpetuates itself as regime followers understand they will be sidelined — or worse — if they do not demonstrate loyalty proactively, in cases probably seeking to outdo Bidzina Ivanishvili's expectations. As I [wrote](#) elsewhere, Irakli Kobakhidze likely has concluded that the only way he can stay in his boss's graces is to inflame his suspicions. He probably concluded that he cannot make Ivanishvili more reasonable, but

that he might as well make him much more paranoid to get things done. To rank-and-file Georgian Dream supporters, this must be a bewildering time – but amidst the confusion and misdirection, they have learned that one thing remains true: never question the leadership.

It is now entirely clear – if it were not before – that you can only have two out of these three: being honest, intelligent, and prepared to defend the Georgian Dream. In 2024, some people still tried to defend the regime on geopolitical grounds. In this defense, the Georgian Dream engaged in cautious balancing to avoid trouble. Yet, how does geopolitics force you to shred your higher education system?

There are, of course, people who will continue to defend the regime's actions, but this can only be done in bad faith or from a thorough inability to understand what is going on. If you want to make higher education fundamentally better, what has stopped the Georgian Dream from investing in ventures that already succeed? And would not any sensible undertaking at least work with the people already engaged in the enterprise? As Ilia State University is [ahead](#) in the country in established research rankings, why take it apart?

If this attack sounds like something about to happen, it is necessary to realize that, in key respects, it has already been [underway](#) for a while. The students are already under assault. Many educators have already gone into exile. One of the people who has been [fined](#) GEL 380,000 (around EUR 120,000) for a peaceful protest, Gota Chanturia, is a teacher and father of three children. The emergency is already here, not a few months down the line.

What Internationals Should Do: Support the Displaced, Isolate the Perpetrators

Perhaps even more so than in other fields, it is now essential for Georgia's international education partners to react. Higher education is a global enterprise. No serious country undertakes it in isolation. Even in Soviet days, Georgian universities benefited from international collaboration.

Partners should support genuine scholars who are threatened with displacement by this authoritarian assault.

Partners should support genuine scholars who are threatened with displacement by this authoritarian assault. Calibrating that will not be easy, as hundreds of scholars may well be affected. Offering transitional local fellowships may make more sense than mass relocations that overwhelm the limited available resources.

Expanding unpaid affiliations in themselves may be a great help, giving scholars the chance to seek their own sources of funding and access to some research infrastructure, including online resources. It may be an idea to recreate a kind of “Ilia in Exile” University at a friendly institution abroad, without expectation of an honorarium, but again to retain networks that would otherwise take a long time to recreate. In a more sophisticated version, some teaching could shift online with Georgian students obtaining degrees in delegation from, say, a university in the Baltics, and student fees supporting the professors *in situ*.

German universities must cut any collaborations in which they may still be engaged. To make a clear statement, this collaboration must be cut explicitly. A formal distancing is required, not just a quiet petering out of collaboration. Perhaps institutions cannot do more to help, but they have to clarify what is right.

Perpetrators, including those in academia, need to be isolated. This is particularly the case for the beneficiaries of this assault located around Tbilisi State University, especially the Faculty of Law, from where and with which most of the Sith Lords of the Georgian Dream come and remain affiliated. Especially German universities must cut any collaborations in which they may still be engaged. To make a clear statement, this collaboration must be cut explicitly. A formal distancing is required, not just a quiet petering out of collaboration. Perhaps institutions cannot do more to help, but they have to clarify what is right.

Cooperation should be revised based on this experience. Recently, perpetrators have abused scholarship schemes to gain attractive trips and stays in the very countries that the Georgian Dream regime [vilifies](#) on an almost weekly basis. Why do Western taxpayers continue to fund people who are attacking their governments? Funding perpetrators is a complete misunderstanding of the concept of academic neutrality.

Complicity by German University Partners

This is also the point where the complicity of some German professors and higher education needs to be revisited. A handful of German law professors have repeatedly [given](#) legitimacy to people associ-

ated with repression. Key professors, such as Martin Heger (Humboldt University of Berlin), Bernd Heinrich (University of Tübingen), and Edward Schramm (University of Jena), have never distanced themselves from compromised colleagues with whom they have continued working long after the scale of the repressive assault in Georgia was entirely clear. Several of them continue to be listed as editors in a law journal together with a senior figure of the Georgian Dream regime, a person already sanctioned for human rights violations by an EU country.

The Technical University of Munich (TUM) continues to work with Kutaisi International University (KIU), a project of Bidzina Ivanishvili, likely earning significant amounts in the process. One can argue that such technical cooperation should continue as long as there is real merit in the teaching.

It is, however, unacceptable that Wolfgang Herrmann, the former president of TUM, specifically [came](#) on the regime's propaganda TV outlet to endorse "a very good project by Bidzina Ivanishvili" at a time when his Georgian colleagues in higher education are under assault. At the very least, TUM and Professor Herrmann should transparently disclose what they earn so that people – and German taxpayers – can make up their mind on what they make of these arrangements. There is also the argument that TUM and Herrmann should sensibly donate any money they earn into a solidarity fund for Georgian scholars, rather than keeping it for themselves.

When Gravity Revolts Against Wantonness

It is possible that the assault on higher education – and education in general – also shows some of the contours of a potential self-destruction by the Georgian Dream.

To take just two examples, the changes will create massive disruption for tens of thousands of young Georgians. So far, there has not yet been a plausible explanation of how they will be addressed.

This is educational disenfranchisement on a remarkable scale – or, to rephrase these abstract words, tens of thousands of young Georgians will have their life chances significantly curtailed by reckless changes for which no one asked.

As the number of high school years is reduced from 12 to 11, the number of graduates competing for university admission will double in the first year of implementation, essentially halving the chances of securing a university spot. As established universities come under attack, one can expect they will struggle to absorb increased numbers. This is educational disenfranchisement on a remarkable scale – or, to rephrase these abstract words, tens

of thousands of young Georgians will have their life chances significantly curtailed by reckless changes for which no one asked.

Students who are currently at university will also be exposed to massive disruption as it will be hard to maintain teaching in their degree programs amidst all the structural changes to which they will be subjected – which in the most extreme cases might result in their being forced to move to another university, or even another town, in order to complete their studies. If the government wants current first-year students to complete their degree, they will also need to maintain at least some of the staffing for the following years.

When the Georgian Dream will end is unclear. Nothing is unclear, however, regarding its course being one of nihilistic totalitarianism. This does inflict a lot of destruction and it may well prove hard for the ruling regime to sustain itself when it has so little positive to offer ■

The Georgian Dream's Migrant Disenfranchisement: Cash Machines Without a Say

The Georgian Dream (GD) recently [initiated](#) changes to the electoral law that will strip Georgian citizens living abroad of their right to vote in general elections. Party leaders justify this decision as a measure to “strengthen electoral resilience” and prevent foreign interference. While countries such as Moldova and Romania have exposed Russian meddling in their electoral processes, Georgian Dream leaders instead claim that the main source of interference comes from the European Union—Germany, in particular.

As “proof,” Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili cited the 2024 parliamentary elections, which he described as an example of “open and blatant foreign informational and political pressure.” [According to him](#), statements by European officials allegedly influenced Georgian voters abroad. At the

same time, the Georgian Dream advances another argument: since Georgia [does not open](#) polling stations in Russia due to the occupation of Georgian territories and the absence of diplomatic relations, it would be “logical,” in the party’s view, to extend similar restrictions to other migrant voters abroad as well.

Yet, this political framing carefully avoids a key reality: migrants’ participation was already severely restricted through physical and administrative barriers during the 2024 or previous elections. Despite clear demand, the government [refused](#) to authorize the opening of additional election districts abroad, even in countries with rapidly growing Georgian communities. As a result, thousands of voters were [assigned](#) to a single overcrowded polling station per country or region, often hundreds of kilometers away. For many migrants, who mainly work



VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



This illustration continues the visual narrative from our [I](#) and [II](#) volumes, drawn in the style peculiar to Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani.

in low-paid, informal jobs, travel costs, time off work, and fear of attracting attention from migration authorities made participation practically unattainable.

Thus, although significantly more people wanted to vote in 2024, the physical and administrative structure of the voting process effectively suppressed participation.

The official turnout figures from abroad provide important context for the scale of participation in recent elections. In 2012, [8,750](#) Georgian citizens voted from abroad. This number declined to [4,816](#) in 2016, then rose to [12,247](#) in 2020, before reaching [34,574](#) in 2024—despite the administrative barriers imposed that year.

What makes these figures sensitive is not their size but their direction. In all three elections—2016,

2020, and 2024—the Georgian Dream lost decisively among voters abroad. Its support fell from [39.6%](#) in 2016 to [29.3%](#) in 2020 and collapsed to [13.5%](#) in 2024. While migrant votes alone do not currently threaten the Georgian Dream's grip on power, their political orientation clearly signals an uncomfortable truth for the ruling party. In countries where the Georgian Dream cannot weaponize poverty, intimidate public servants, or control voters through administrative pressure, its support is dismally low. The diaspora votes from environments free of coercion and patronage reveal what Georgian political preferences look like when citizens are economically secure and politically unpressured. And that is precisely why the ruling party finds the diaspora's verdict so threatening.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, around 1.5 million Georgian citizens [live](#) abroad, with major communities in Russia, Greece, the United States,

Italy, and Germany. A crucial factor is that a large share of these migrants live without legal residence permits, placing them in an especially vulnerable position.

Given that migrant votes remain numerically limited but politically symbolic, the question remains unavoidable: Why is the Georgian Dream moving to eliminate even this restrained participation—and why at this moment?

The Georgian Dream Still Seeks International Legitimacy

Despite the visible drift toward one-party dictatorship, violent crackdowns on protests, political prosecutions, and the effective suspension of Georgia's EU accession process, the Georgian Dream continues to care deeply about its international image and symbolic legitimacy.

This explains why the party reacted sharply to the critical European Commission Enlargement [Report](#) published in November 2025. It also clarifies why the government [insisted](#) on initiating a human rights dialogue with the European Union and why Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze persistently [seeks](#) invitations to the European Political Community summits. The ruling elite systematically uses every opportunity to appear alongside EU leaders, carefully curating photographs, handshakes, and diplomatic visibility. This is why the photos of the Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili at the OSCE ministerial in Vienna were widely distributed by the state propaganda, stressing that the Georgian minister is well received by colleagues from Slovakia, Luxembourg, or the OSCE secretary general.

Against this backdrop, the sharp discrepancy between voting behavior inside Georgia and among migrants abroad becomes deeply problematic for the ruling party. In the 2024 elections, 86.5% of migrants voted for the opposition while only 13.5%

supported the Georgian Dream. Inside Georgia, by contrast, the government officially [secured](#) 54% of the vote, despite widespread reports of vote-buying, misuse of administrative resources, voter intimidation, and media capture.

In the 2024 elections, 86.5% of migrants voted for the opposition while only 13.5% supported the Georgian Dream.

This contrast fuels domestic and international doubts about electoral integrity. Excluding migrants from voting abroad helps the Georgian Dream remove the most visually striking evidence of this contradiction. Although the party claims that similar restrictions exist in countries such as Ireland or Malta, this argument selectively ignores the broader European trend toward expanding, not narrowing, external voting rights.

In countries such as Malta and Ireland, the restriction on external voting arises from long-standing constitutional and political considerations rather than the fear of foreign political pressure. Malta's position is shaped by its small electorate, where even a modest number of overseas voters could shift the balance in a tightly contested political landscape. Successive Maltese governments have argued that extending the franchise abroad would effectively empower non-resident citizens to determine domestic outcomes without bearing the social and economic consequences of their decisions. Ireland's stance is different but similarly grounded in constitutional caution: the country has grappled for decades with how to integrate a vast diaspora—many of whom have been abroad for generations—into a political system premised on residency. Irish policymakers have consistently expressed concern that extending full voting rights abroad could dilute the legitimacy of elections and tie national politics to transnational identities that the state cannot practically represent. In both cases, the debate is open, public, and rooted in transparent domestic reasoning.

Rather than citing constitutional principles, demographic constraints, or philosophical debates about residency and representation, the ruling party has chosen to claim—without evidence—that host countries would exert “political pressure” on Georgian migrants to influence Georgian elections. This argument collapses under scrutiny.

The Georgian Dream's justification bears no resemblance to these democratic dilemmas. Rather than citing constitutional principles, demographic constraints, or philosophical debates about residency and representation, the ruling party has chosen to claim—without evidence—that host countries would exert “political pressure” on Georgian migrants to influence Georgian elections. This argument collapses under scrutiny. Georgians abroad vote overwhelmingly in free environments with functioning democratic institutions and no European government conducts political mobilization of foreign nationals as an instrument of foreign policy. What the Georgian Dream fears, therefore, is not foreign pressure but the absence of domestic pressure: the inability to intimidate, monitor, or manipulate voters in settings where the party's usual tools—poverty, administrative leverage, and media capture—hold no sway. Unlike Malta and Ireland, which grapple with the complexities of diaspora enfranchisement in good faith, the Georgian Dream invokes imaginary threats to conceal its real objective: eliminating a segment of the electorate that consistently rejects it at the ballot box.

Snap Elections, Managed Outcomes, and Strategic Exclusion

Following the 2024 elections, the Georgian Dream preserved power with 89 seats out of 150, yet fell short of the constitutional majority of 113 seats needed to unilaterally amend the Constitution. This remains a key obstacle in the party's longer-term project of institutional consolidation.

At the same time, pro-government proxy movements, such as *United Neutral Georgia*, have openly questioned Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory, advocating a “neutrality” model and even [calling](#) for a national referendum on EU membership. Historically, such narratives tend to migrate from proxy groups into official government policy.

Yet, a central legal barrier remains: [Article 78](#) of the Constitution obliges all constitutional bodies to pursue Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO. Overcoming this would require a constitutional change.

One possible mechanism is snap parliamentary elections, particularly when the opposition parties are [banned](#), the remaining forces are fragmented, and might still boycott the process. Under such circumstances, the Georgian Dream's chances of securing a constitutional majority would significantly increase.

At first glance, if opposition parties boycott elections, migrants' participation might seem strategically irrelevant. However, it remains critically important because the migrant participation, even in limited numbers, undermines the appearance of uncontested legitimacy by visibly demonstrating political dissent. Migrant voting abroad also inev-

itably becomes a reference point for international observers when assessing the credibility of electoral outcomes.

At the same time, the ruling party is already systematically distancing Georgia from the European Union in practice through legislative restrictions, [attacks](#) on civil society, and the consolidation of executive power while rhetorically denying this shift. In this context, excluding migrants is part of a broader effort to reshape the political playing field in advance of decisive institutional changes, including potential constitutional amendments and a managed foreign policy reorientation.

Migrants represent a political variable that the Georgian Dream prefers to eliminate entirely rather than manage.

Simply put, migrants represent a political variable that the Georgian Dream prefers to eliminate entirely rather than manage.

More Migrants Means Fewer Votes

Georgia has been a net emigration country since its independence. Today, approximately 1.5 million Georgian citizens live abroad. Traditionally, emigration was driven by economic insecurity, unemployment, healthcare needs, and access to education. These drivers remain fully intact. A May 2024 survey [showed](#) that 45% of Georgia's population expressed interest in temporary emigration. Despite recent growth indicators, around 700,000 citizens still [depend](#) on social assistance.

What has changed is that political repression and democratic rollback have become powerful new push factors. Public intimidation, criminalization of protest, and the shrinking space for dissent increasingly push politically active citizens, especially youth, journalists, and civil society actors, out of the country.

Pro-government figures have openly reinforced this logic. Some have publicly suggested that those uncomfortable with the country's political direction should simply leave. As a result, the pool of politically engaged migrants abroad is growing steadily.

Yet, returning to Georgia to vote is not a realistic option for most migrants. The obstacles they face are deeply structural. Many work in informal sectors without any legal employment protections, which means that even short absences can lead to immediate dismissal. A large share lives without residence permits, so travel carries the risk of deportation, job loss, or permanent re-entry bans. For low-wage workers, the cost of airfare alone often exceeds several months' income, making even a brief trip financially impossible. Added to this is the fear—especially among politically active migrants—of harassment or legal repercussions upon re-entering the country.

In this context, the Georgian Dream's claim that migrants should simply return home to vote is a mere talking point rather than a genuine option. The government knows full well that for most migrants, returning is economically, legally, and politically unfeasible.

Migrants as Cash Machines

While the Georgian Dream pushes migrants out of political life, it remains profoundly dependent on them economically. Remittances are not simply private transfers between families; they have become a central pillar of Georgia's economic stability. When the Georgian Dream came to power in 2012, [remittances](#) totaled USD 1.77 billion. By 2024, they had climbed to USD 4.06 billion—roughly a tenth of the country's entire GDP. These flows keep households afloat, sustain consumption, support small businesses, and cover essential expenses such as education and healthcare. They also cushion the effects of unemployment and inflation nationwide.

At the macroeconomic level, remittances help stabilize the national currency, expand domestic demand, and, indirectly, raise tax revenues through increased consumption. They ease pressure on the welfare system and reduce the likelihood of social unrest in economically fragile regions. Despite this, a new government narrative has taken hold. Figures such as MP Davit Matikashvili now [claim](#) that remittances do not benefit the state because they do not enter the budget directly. This line of reasoning is misleading. Remittances circulate through the broader economy, generating VAT and excise revenue, stimulating employment, and reinforcing financial-sector stability. Without them, poverty would deepen and the fiscal situation would be far more precarious.

For the Georgian Dream, migrants are no more than cash machines and soon - voteless ones.

Migrants thus sustain the economy in ways the government cannot replicate. Yet, from the Georgian Dream's perspective, they remain economically indispensable but politically troublesome. Once the ruling party concluded that even a small diaspora vote could complicate its long-term consolidation plans, it moved to eliminate migrant participation while continuing to rely on their earnings. The result is a system in which migrants are valued as financial lifelines but stripped of political agency. As we wrote earlier, for the Georgian Dream, migrants are no more than cash machines and soon - voteless ones ■

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



JABA DEVDARIANI
Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI
Guest Contributor

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher and practitioner with a focus on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the broader Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike Zurabashvili also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, as well as master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.



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

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.

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.

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.

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.

Another element of self-identification that emerged with the regaining of independence is Georgia's status as a progressive, democratic country in the region.

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.

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.

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 ■

Between Iran, Russia, and Türkiye: Policy Choices for Israel in the South Caucasus

I lham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan, once described the relationship between his country and Israel as “like an iceberg” with most of its mass “below the surface,” invisible to the public eye. This striking metaphor appeared in a 2009 diplomatic cable, later [revealed](#) by WikiLeaks, in which Aliyev noted that “nine-tenths” of the Azerbaijani-Israeli relationship remained hidden. The remark reflected a deliberate policy of discretion, particularly in sensitive sectors such as defense, intelligence, and energy, designed to avoid provoking Iran, antagonizing other regional actors, or sparking internal dissent (political Islam).

The disclosure of this cable confirmed what analysts and diplomats had long suspected: the alliance between Baku and Tel Aviv was largely clandestine, grounded in pragmatic strategic interests

rather than ideology, a careful balancing act focused on security, regional influence, and geopolitical survival. Over the past decade and a half, the iceberg has gradually emerged from the depths. Security cooperation has expanded, new sectors such as technology and energy have come into play, and Azerbaijan has emerged as Israel’s dominant partner in the South Caucasus.

Israel’s Core Foreign-Policy Principles

Israel’s foreign policy has long been shaped by security-first pragmatism. Geography (regional isolation), demography, and the perception of existential threats from neighboring states produced a doctrine centered on proactive defense: nuclear deterrence, pre-emptive strikes, containment of hostile actors such as Iran, Hamas, or Hezbollah,



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at Sciences Po in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris (2005).



and the prevention of strategic encirclement. To support this posture, Israel developed formidable intelligence services, cyber capabilities, advanced airpower, and high-precision missile technology.

Although Israel built a uniquely close partnership with the United States, it also recognized that dependence on a single ally was untenable. It, therefore, diversified its external relationships through arms exports, intelligence cooperation, and flexible diplomacy. Within the Middle East, where relations were often tense, Israel pursued selective integration, limited cooperation with states such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, and discreet engagement with Kurdish and Druze factions in Iraq and Syria. When possible, Tel Aviv cultivated pragmatic ties with non-Arab or moderate Muslim-majority states, often through confidential channels (the “iceberg” model of quiet partnerships). Arms sales, intelligence sharing, energy arrangements, and back-channel diplomacy formed a dual system of visible alliances complemented by covert ties. For decades, Türkiye was Israel’s closest regional partner until Ankara’s shift under the *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) to a foreign policy aiming for leadership of the Muslim world and the use of the Palestinian issue for this matter.

While firmly anchored in the Western community, Israel has consistently sought to broaden its strategic options. Its diplomacy has been flexible, interest-driven, and rarely ideological. Security, opportunity, and leverage, rather than normative commitments to democracy or “Western values,” guided decisions in energy, defense sales, peace negotiations, and regional alignments. Israel’s relationship with post-Soviet Russia exemplifies this blend of pragmatism and hedging.

The Hamas [attack](#) of 7 October 2023 and the ensuing war in Gaza profoundly altered Israel’s strategic environment. The conflict shifted Israel’s perception of threat from localized arenas to a regional confrontation with an Iranian-led axis

spanning Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and the Red Sea. As a result, Israel has expanded its doctrine of pre-emptive, multi-theatre operations, striking not only Gaza but also Iran-backed networks, supply chains, and logistical hubs. The shift is from “contain and manage” to “degrade and dismantle.”

The resulting diplomatic constraints create new openings for actors such as today’s Georgia, but also compel Israel to rely more heavily on military tools, asymmetric operations, and intelligence rather than soft power.

Simultaneously, the war’s humanitarian toll and devastation in Gaza have generated intense global condemnation, damaging Israel’s international image and straining long-standing alliances. Growing criticism regarding human rights and international law has complicated relations with traditional Western partners and reduced the space for discreet cooperation with Arab or Muslim states whose governments face increasingly hostile public opinion. The resulting diplomatic constraints create new openings for actors such as today’s Georgia, but also compel Israel to rely more heavily on military tools, asymmetric operations, and intelligence rather than soft power.

Despite these shifts, core principles endure. Security-first pragmatism remains the foundation, strengthened rather than weakened by the expanded sense of threat. As Western alignment becomes more complex, Israel is likely to intensify its outreach to non-Western or emerging powers wherever strategic benefits arise. The deepening Israel-India partnership, increasingly resembling a strategic alliance, is emblematic of this evolution.

The South Caucasus as a Strategic Periphery

Israel’s engagement in the South Caucasus fol-

lows the same foreign-policy logic that structures its global posture: security primacy, diversified partnerships, pragmatic diplomacy, and discreet influence. Although the region is not a core theatre for Israel, overshadowed by the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Gulf, it sits at the intersection of three of Israel's central strategic concerns: Iran, great-power competition (Russia-Türkiye-West), and access to energy from the Caspian basin.

As such, Israel's relations with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are peripheral but highly functional extensions of its broader geopolitical aims, chiefly containing Iran and managing risks linked to Russia and Türkiye. Energy considerations add a further layer of importance: nearly 40% of Israel's crude oil imports [originate](#) in Azerbaijan via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC pipeline), making Baku a vital non-Arab supplier.

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The principal driver of Israel's presence in the Caucasus is Iran. The region provides one of the rare geostrategic spaces where Israel can maintain proximity to Iranian territory without direct confrontation. For decades, the South Caucasus has served as a platform for intelligence gathering, surveillance, and strategic depth, allowing Israel to monitor Iranian missile deployments, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) activity, and nuclear-related sites. This aligns perfectly with Israel's doctrine of forward defense and pre-emptive deterrence, aimed at extending strategic depth beyond its borders.

Azerbaijan holds a singular place in this archi-

tecture. Long shrouded in deliberate opacity, the Azerbaijan-Israel partnership has evolved into one of Israel's most consequential security relationships outside its immediate region. It reflects Israel's traditional pattern of cultivating non-Arab, peripheral allies, akin to Cold War partnerships with Türkiye, Ethiopia, or the Shah's Iran, based on shared threat perceptions. In some respects, Azerbaijan has replaced Türkiye in this role as Ankara's neo-Ottoman turn and ambition to lead the Muslim world have made its foreign policy increasingly antagonistic with Israel's.

The partnership's sensitivity derives from Iran's perception that Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation represents strategic encirclement. For both Baku and Tel Aviv, discretion was long a structural necessity. Yet, since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, during which Azerbaijan [deployed](#) Israeli drones (SkyStriker), much of the "iceberg" has become visible. The [opening](#) of Azerbaijan's embassy in Israel in 2023 formalized what had been implicit for decades.

Despite deepening ties, Azerbaijan cannot afford open hostility with Iran for three structural reasons. First, geography: the two states share a 765-kilometre border, making Azerbaijan uniquely exposed to immediate spillover from any crisis. Second, infrastructure vulnerability: Iran's missile arsenal could easily target Azerbaijani energy assets: refineries, the Sangachal terminal, offshore fields, the BTC pipeline, and the future Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) corridor, crippling the country's economy and European energy supplies. Third, domestic fragility: Iran retains significant leverage inside Azerbaijan through ethnic, religious, intelligence, and economic channels. It can influence border communities, shape narratives, or destabilize internal politics.

For these reasons, Baku has consistently calibrated its diplomacy: expanding cooperation with Is-

rael while ensuring Iran is neither cornered nor humiliated. When Tehran accuses Baku of harboring Israeli intelligence assets, Azerbaijan reaffirms sovereignty over its partnerships, stresses non-interference, and often initiates high-level dialogue to de-escalate. This caution is a strategic calculation, not necessarily an ideological affinity. A direct Israel-Iran large-scale confrontation would make Azerbaijan an inevitable battleground, threatening its stability, economy, and energy transit role.

Georgia: Strategic Transit, Intelligence Concerns, and Anti-Western Drift

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Georgia occupies a modest but non-negligible place in Israel's South Caucasus strategy. While far less central than Azerbaijan, Georgia nonetheless matters for Israel's security calculus, above all because of Iran. Israeli officials discreetly follow Iran's intelligence activity on Georgian territory and the broader evolution of Iran-Georgia relations. These concerns are rarely articulated publicly, yet they are structurally embedded in Israel's regional threat assessments.

Georgia is operationally relevant for Iranian intelligence. Although not a frontline arena in the Israel-Iran confrontation, it sits at a sensitive crossroads: bordering NATO-member Türkiye and Iranian partner Armenia, hosting key energy corridors such as BTC and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), and maintaining relatively open entry policies that have, at times, facilitated access for Iranian nationals. For Israeli ser-

vices, this makes Georgia a potential transit hub for Iranian operatives, a platform for monitoring Israeli-linked activity, and, in extreme scenarios, a soft target for attacks against Israeli citizens. The [defused](#) 2012 car bomb intended for an Israeli embassy vehicle in Tbilisi remains a defining episode, reinforcing Israel's belief that Iran or its proxies are willing and able to act in Georgia.

Israel also views Iran-Georgia economic and diplomatic ties with caution. Georgia's engagement with Iran has historically been pragmatic, motivated by trade, tourism, and investment, and not ideological. Yet, from an Israeli perspective, Iranian commercial networks may mask IRGC-affiliated fronts, and tourism flows can offer cover for intelligence activity. Georgia has periodically tightened visa and oversight regimes, but vulnerabilities persist.

These concerns intersect with another issue: Georgia's geographic position between Azerbaijan, Israel's main partner in the region, and Türkiye, a critical logistical route. Iranian intelligence activity in Georgia could therefore enable observation of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation, including cargo transfers or personnel movements. For Israel, Iranian eyes in Georgia may imply surveillance of the entire Israel-Azerbaijan corridor.

Israel's unease has sharpened in recent years as Iranian influence in Georgia has grown while Western leverage has receded. Symbolic moments have intensified this perception. The [attendance](#) of Georgia's top leadership at Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's funeral in 2024, alongside figures from Hamas and Hezbollah, prompted public [dis-](#)
[may](#) from the Israeli embassy. A similar [reaction](#) followed in 2025 when a Georgian deputy foreign minister participated in an Iranian embassy "solidarity" event, criticizing Israel. Yet, Israel avoided escalation, treating these gestures as troubling but not transformative.

Shortly afterward, the [visit](#) of Israel's National Security Minister to Tbilisi and the Georgian Minister of Interior to Israel [underscored](#) continued cooperation, even as Israeli media highlighted Georgia's "delicate balancing act" between outreach to Iran and ties with Israel. For Israel, the risk is that deeper Iranian penetration could compromise Georgia's reliability as a strategic transit corridor and expand the space for Iranian intelligence near Israel's periphery.

Armenia and the TRIPP Opportunity

Israel's relations with Armenia have long been constrained by geopolitical realities, above all the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and Israel's strategic priorities in the region. These factors have limited the depth, reliability, and even the relevance of the bilateral partnership.

The foundations of this divergence were laid at the Soviet Union's collapse and the onset of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. Iran sided with Armenia against Azerbaijan, a state Tehran distrusted for its perceived irredentist ambitions, encouraged by Türkiye and the symbolic prospect of unifying "the two Azerbaijanians." Armenia, blockaded by Türkiye and Azerbaijan and lacking a direct border with Russia, seized the opportunity offered by Iran. Tehran enabled Yerevan to break isolation, secure supply routes, and receive Russian weapons at a time when Georgia, Armenia's only other potential outlet, was mired in civil conflict.

Israel entered the region once these alignments were already in place. Seeking an observation point on Iran, it gravitated toward Azerbaijan, whose own threat perceptions vis-à-vis Tehran aligned with Israel's. Azerbaijan also offered advantages over Georgia, which, despite historically warm attitudes toward Jews and Israel, had no border with Iran and faced chronic vulnerability to Russian military pressure. Israel considered this

a strategic risk. Thus, for more than two decades, Armenia and Israel evolved along opposing, or at best parallel, diplomatic tracks.

Armenia's strategic partnership with Iran is not an immediate security threat to Israel, but it complicates Tel Aviv's regional calculus. Israel views Iran's presence in the South Caucasus through the prism of Tehran's broader ambitions, its nuclear program, and its proxy networks. In this context, Armenia's reliance on Iran for trade corridors and energy links gives Tehran an indirect platform in a sensitive space bordering Israel's closest regional partner, Azerbaijan. Yet Yerevan's alignment is driven far more by structural isolation than by ideology. For Israel, Armenia thus appears more as an enabler of Iranian influence than a deliberate ally of Tehran.

Still, from Yerevan's point of view, the chronically low level of Armenia-Israel ties is rooted less in Iran than in Israel's enduring strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and the geopolitical realities of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia's [recognition](#) of the State of Palestine in 2024 triggered Israeli criticism, but Yerevan justified the move as a response to Israel's arms supplies to Azerbaijan during the 2020 and 2023 conflicts. Diplomatic relations were briefly downgraded, with Armenia [recalling](#) its ambassador in 2020.

The August 2025 U.S.-mediated Armenia-Azerbaijan agreement [creating](#) the TRIPP corridor—linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenian territory—marks a potential turning point. Designed to normalize relations and reshape regional connectivity while bypassing Iran, TRIPP could become a catalyst for recalibrating regional alignments. If Armenia transforms itself into a stable transit hub rather than a geopolitical outlier, Israel may find it easier to pursue economic, diplomatic, or technical engagement without undermining its partnership with Baku, particularly once a peace treaty is in place.

Participation in TRIPP under U.S. auspices also signals Armenia's tentative pivot away from Russia. This shift aligns with Israel's interest in reducing Moscow and Tehran's influence in the South Caucasus. Should Armenia leverage TRIPP to attract Western investment, it could evolve at least into a neutral actor open to diversified partnerships, including with Israel.

Yet, the path remains fraught. An American-supervised transit route through Armenia will likely provoke hostility from Russia and Iran, which could deter rapid or visible Israeli engagement.

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Nonetheless, TRIPP represents a remarkable geopolitical gamble, one that could [reshape](#) connectivity, diminish Russian and Iranian leverage, and offer Israel a rare opportunity to re-engage Armenia on pragmatic, economically driven terms. It is no coincidence that Armenia and Israel [held](#) their first round of political consultations in years in Yerevan on 26 November 2025, signaling a deliberate effort to revive the bilateral relationship in the wake of the 8 August White House [declaration](#) by Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev.

Hedging Strategies: Navigating Russia, Compartmentalizing Türkiye, and Prioritizing Azerbaijan

As we mentioned earlier, the Caucasus sits at an intersection of overlapping hegemonies. For Israel, this makes the region not only strategically useful

but diplomatically delicate. Navigating these pressures requires the hedging instincts that have long characterized its diplomacy.

For years, Israel sought to minimize friction with Moscow in the Caucasus, preserving a diplomatic balance that safeguarded critical channels in the Middle East, above all in Syria, Lebanon, and vis-à-vis Iran. The relationship between Israel and Russia over the past decade rested on a tension between pragmatic security coordination and widening geopolitical divergence. What had once been a workable equilibrium gradually eroded under the weight of overlapping crises: Russia's war in Ukraine, shifting regional alignments, and the 2023 Hamas-Israel war. Although ties have deteriorated, several structural factors still sustain a minimal *modus vivendi*.

After Russia's 2015 [intervention](#) in Syria, both countries established a de-confliction mechanism that became the backbone of their tacit security cooperation. It enabled Israel to strike Iranian-linked assets across Syria while avoiding direct confrontation with Russian forces. Scholars have described this period as one of "friendship balancing," in which both sides managed interests and rivalries through elite contacts rather than overt alignment. Social and demographic links, especially Israel's large Russian-speaking community, further underpinned this cautious accommodation.

Despite divergent strategic orientations, Israel firmly in the Western orbit, and Russia retrenching from it, the two states maintained a pragmatic understanding: limited cooperation, managed competition, and an acknowledgment that each would pursue its own priorities.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point. Israel refrained from joining Western sanctions, yet the war altered Moscow's perception of Israel as a manageable partner. Russia's deepening confrontation with the West

pushed it closer to Middle Eastern and non-Western actors, often hostile to Israel. As Moscow strengthened ties with Iran, long viewed by Israel as an existential threat, the previous equilibrium became harder to sustain.

The rupture came with the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent campaign in Gaza. Russia [condemned](#) Israel's military actions and called for an immediate ceasefire, abandoning its earlier posture of relative restraint. Israel [responded](#) sharply, summoning the Russian ambassador after Moscow hosted a Hamas delegation and criticizing Russia's alignment with Iran. Some analysts [described](#) bilateral ties as reaching "their lowest point since the fall of the Soviet Union." Yet, despite public acrimony, neither side opted for a full diplomatic break. Structural constraints, demographic linkages, and pragmatic calculations preserved a minimal channel of communication. Moscow also continued to value Israel as a potential conduit to the West.

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 and Russia's diminished operational footprint in Syria significantly expanded Israel's freedom of action. Even more consequential has been the consolidation of the Russia-Iran partnership: Tehran's provision of drones, missiles, and military technology for Russia's war effort in Ukraine now anchors a structural alignment directly opposed to Israeli interests.

While Tel Aviv will avoid gratuitous confrontation with Moscow, Russia is no longer the pivotal actor whose sensitivities Israel must systematically accommodate.

These changes reduce Israel's incentive for strategic restraint. While Tel Aviv will avoid gratuitous confrontation with Moscow, Russia is no

longer the pivotal actor whose sensitivities Israel must systematically accommodate. The balance of power in Syria and across the Middle East-Eurasia nexus has shifted in ways that render Russia's preferences far less central to Israeli strategy.

This new context has enabled Israel to recalibrate its posture in the South Caucasus. First, it can now deepen its partnership with Azerbaijan without fearing Russian retaliation. In earlier years, Israel moderated the visibility of this cooperation; today, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine limits its ability to penalize closer Israeli-Azerbaijani ties, while Baku's value as a counterweight to Iran has grown.

Second, Russia's weakness has opened space for limited engagement with Armenia. Long embedded in Moscow's security system and reliant on Iran, Armenia had been effectively off-limits. Its recent westward pivot, accelerated by its embrace of the TRIPP corridor and disillusionment with Russia's failure to defend Armenian interests, now permits Israel to explore technocratic and economic cooperation with Yerevan, more feasible than at any time since the early 1990s.

Third, Israel's interests increasingly align with Western efforts to reshape the South Caucasus, counter the Russia-Iran axis, and reduce Tehran's influence over Armenia. Georgia remains an exception: Western influence has declined while Russia has gained ground. The prospect of Russian control over key transit routes, including hydrocarbon corridors such as the BTC pipeline, is a concern for Israel and the West. Still, Israel will maintain political and economic links with Georgia, albeit at a lower level than with Azerbaijan. The Georgian government remains receptive to Israeli investment in technology and cyber cooperation (for homeland security and political surveillance of opponents), even if defense is not a priority for its Moscow-leaning leadership.

Accepting the Türkiye-Azerbaijan Alliance

Israeli strategies in the South Caucasus coexist with Ankara's expanding presence in Azerbaijan and its ambition to shape regional transport corridors. Israel neither challenges Türkiye's role nor subordinates itself to it: it adapts, exploiting complementarities in Baku and avoiding entanglement where interests diverge. Even if Türkiye adopts more confrontational rhetoric against Israel, Baku does not relay that hostility. On the contrary, Azerbaijan deliberately keeps its partnerships compartmentalized: on the one hand, it pursues deep security cooperation with Israel (intelligence, UAVs, energy), and on the other, it maintains a strategic, identity-based alliance with Türkiye (military integration, political solidarity). Because Azerbaijan separates these tracks, Israel trusts that Ankara cannot easily instrumentalize Baku against Israeli interests.

Both Baku and Tel Aviv believe that Azerbaijan acts as a moderating buffer, not a conduit for Turkish hostility. Israel sees Azerbaijan as more pragmatic, more secular, more non-ideological, and more stable in its foreign policy than Türkiye.

Azerbaijan's simultaneous [management](#) of a deep strategic partnership with Türkiye, a discreet but extensive security relationship with Israel, and a non-confrontational posture toward Iran is one of the most delicate balancing acts in its foreign policy.

Even when Turkish-Israeli relations soured sharply after 2010, and again after 2023, Ankara never forced Baku to downgrade ties with Tel Aviv. Instead, a tacit strategic division of labor has emerged between the two Turkic states: Türkiye benefits indirectly from Israeli intelligence and technology that Azerbaijan acquires and employs in ways broadly compatible with Ankara's regional

aims. This arrangement allows Turkish leaders to sustain a public posture critical of Israel over the Palestinian issue while preserving *de facto* operational channels.

Ankara generally respects the strategic value of an autonomous, interest-driven Azerbaijani foreign policy and avoids pushing Baku into unwanted choices. Baku sometimes returns the courtesy with diplomatic gestures toward Ankara; for example, by so far refraining from joining the [Abraham Accords](#). Israel, for its part, does not regard the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis as a decisive risk.

Many in Israel view Turkish hostility as primarily political rather than structural. Throughout periods of intense diplomatic friction, the two countries have maintained working intelligence links, NATO frameworks for cooperation, and airspace deconfliction. A considerable trade relationship persisted until recently (May 2024) when Turkish authorities officially [halted](#) import-export transactions with Israel.

Several factors limit the likelihood of direct military confrontation (a non-direct clash has already happened in Syria in April when Israel [destroyed](#) military bases in Hama and Homs). Türkiye and Israel share, albeit for different reasons, strategic concern about Iranian regional behavior; Azerbaijan, facing Iran on its southern border, shares elements of that threat perception. This overlapping suspicion produces implicit alignment and mitigates perceived risks within the Türkiye-Azerbaijan bloc. Moreover, Turkish-Azerbaijani military integration indirectly benefits Israel: Azerbaijan's battlefield successes, reliant in part on Israeli drones, missiles, and ISR systems, validate Israeli defense technology and do not contravene Ankara's interests.

Crucially, Israel values Azerbaijan highly as a major hydrocarbon supplier (more than 40% of Israel's crude oil), a rare friendly Muslim-majority

state with open intelligence links, and a strategic foothold near Iran and the Caspian corridor. Israel, therefore, treats Azerbaijan as an independent strategic actor, not a Turkish proxy.

New Phase

Israel's position in the South Caucasus is entering a new phase. The collapse of old strategic equilibria, Russia's reduced leverage in Syria, Ankara's sharper anti-Israeli posture, Iran's growing assertiveness, and Georgia's drift from the West have transformed what was once a peripheral arena into a key vector of Israel's security strategy. Baku remains Israel's anchor, but Azerbaijan's delicate balancing vis-à-vis Iran and Türkiye highlights the need for broader diversification. Armenia's tentative Western pivot, especially through frameworks like TRIPP, creates new opportunities for Israel to support regional connectivity, thereby weakening Iranian and Russian leverage.

In a rapidly shifting Eurasian landscape, the South Caucasus is becoming a strategic hinge for Israel's long-term security and geopolitical resilience.

Israel's task now is to move from quiet, security-driven engagement to a more deliberate regional strategy: supporting Western presence, protecting energy and transit routes, encouraging plural alignments, and preventing Tehran and Moscow from shaping the region's future architecture. In a rapidly shifting Eurasian landscape, the South Caucasus is becoming a strategic hinge for Israel's long-term security and geopolitical resilience ■

How Should Georgia Treat America's "Retreat?"

In the annals of American diplomacy, few slogans have provoked as much debate as "America First." Coined during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and revived with intensity in his second term beginning in January 2025, the phrase is often misinterpreted as a call for isolationism and a retreat from the world's complexities to Fortress America. Yet, the evidence of the past year points in the opposite direction. Rather than withdrawing, the United States has expanded its footprint through tariffs, airstrikes, diplomatic bargaining, and selective multilateralism—all calibrated to advance U.S. interests with greater efficiency and fewer ideological constraints.

America First, in its 2025 incarnation, is a form of strategic interventionism. It is not a plea for quietism but a doctrine of muscular engagement performed on America's terms. Trump's approach reflects a belief that the world is best shaped

through concentrated, transactional relationships that deliver measurable benefits. Stephen Wertheim's [observation](#) that Trump does not "leave the room" but rather "turns the tables" captures this shift well.

Trump's first term hinted at this pattern through selective exits from frameworks like the Paris [Agreement](#) or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA](#)), the moves often misread as broader disengagement. In reality, the United States remained deeply entangled in global affairs, expanding defense spending, confronting China's economic dominance, and brokering the [Abraham Accords](#). By 2025, the posture hardened. An USD 848 billion defense budget, modernization of air and naval assets, and a comprehensive reorientation toward critical supply chains all signaled a renewed push for geopolitical dominance.

Trump's revival of aggressive tariff policy in 2025



TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



extends America First into economic coercion. The administration's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act ([IEEPA](#)) enabled it to deploy tariffs as technical instruments and political tools to extract concessions. A universal [10% tariff](#) on imports, supplemented by targeted levies on Canadian, Mexican, Indian, and Brazilian goods, created negotiating leverage across multiple theaters. China [faced](#) peak tariffs of 145% before settling at 30%. Rare earths, TikTok's operational structure, and Chinese port investments all became bargaining chips.

A view of trade has replaced traditional liberal assumptions about the autonomy of commerce as a pressure mechanism. In this world, the question is not whether trade is free or fair, but whether it advances U.S. strategic advantage.

This aggressive economic posture links trade to national security in ways unseen since the early Cold War. It reflects the administration's view that markets and geopolitics are inseparable. A view of trade has replaced traditional liberal assumptions about the autonomy of commerce as a pressure mechanism. In this world, the question is not whether trade is free or fair, but whether it advances U.S. strategic advantage.

"Peace through strength," long a Republican mantra, has become the operational logic of Trump's second term. Military interventions have intensified, not diminished. Over 500 airstrikes were [carried out](#) by mid-2025, nearly matching the pace of the entire previous administration. From Yemen to Fordow, from Al-Shabaab to Latin American narco-terror networks, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to act independently of multilateral institutions when its interests demand it.

This unilateral assertiveness is not a sign of American insecurity but of renewed confidence. The administration views military force, economic leverage, and cyber capabilities as integrated tools of statecraft. War is deterred not by treaties but by capacity and resolve. In this worldview, hesitation invites escalation; action imposes order.

New Security Strategy and What Should Georgia Make of It?

The November 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) formalizes the America First concept. It identifies economic security, reindustrialization, and energy dominance as core objectives. It re-frames multilateral institutions as instruments to be used only when they advance U.S. power. It insists that allies and partners perform a larger share of regional security (“burden-shifting” and “burden-sharing” are central pillars). And it underscores sovereignty as a guiding principle, elevating the autonomy of nation-states over transnational structures. The result is a foreign policy that is neither isolationist nor idealistic, but sharply pragmatic.

Georgia’s recent habit of proclaiming value proximity and strategic partnership with China looks strategically tone-deaf in this context: aligning with the very power that Washington now treats as its central competitor is a self-inflicted wound and a very lousy geopolitical strategy.

One of the most striking features of the new NSS is its implicit hierarchy of U.S. adversaries. China is never explicitly labeled “the enemy,” yet the entire strategy is organized around the need to compete with and constrain Beijing. Control of rare earths, access to strategic minerals, dominance in critical technologies, and the defense of supply-chain

sovereignty are all framed through this lens. Georgia’s recent habit of proclaiming value proximity and strategic partnership with China looks strategically tone-deaf in this context: aligning with the very power that Washington now treats as its central competitor is a self-inflicted wound and a very lousy geopolitical strategy.

Equally important is the NSS’s treatment of Russia. Moscow is no longer described as an existential threat but as a threat to Europe, which should be strengthened with U.S. support. The primary U.S. interest vis-à-vis Russia is the termination of the war in Ukraine and “strategic stability.” This does not signal deference to the Kremlin; rather, it reflects a strategic assessment that Russia lacks the economic, military, and technological base to serve as a peer to a great power.

Russia’s war economy is weakening under U.S. pressure and can be weakened further if the U.S. continues its efforts in this direction.

It is a fact that Russia’s war economy is weakening under U.S. pressure and can be weakened further if the U.S. continues its efforts in this direction. The October 2025 sanctions [aimed](#) at the energy sector struck at the financial core of Moscow’s war machine. Rosneft, Lukoil, and their networks have seen declining revenues and Russia’s National Wealth Fund has contracted dramatically. Putin’s fiscal space is narrowing. Washington’s goal is clear: undermine Russia’s long-term capacity for regional disruption while intensifying the search for an acceptable end to the Ukraine war.

The broader implication of Trump’s Russia policy for Georgia is evident. Cozying up to a state the United States now treats as a declining power, rather than as a strategic adversary, is a miscalculation of historic proportions.

For Georgia, the lesson should be not that the U.S. has given in to Russia's claim to reestablish its zones of influence, but that it should align more closely with Europe in its quest for stability and strength. Aligning with Russia at a time when Washington openly deprioritizes it is not only unwise but also counterproductive. In American eyes, Georgia begins to resemble a country voluntarily subordinating itself to a declining regional actor at the expense of its Western trajectory.

The NSS also questions another long-held Georgian expectation - NATO enlargement is no longer a policy priority for Washington. For Georgia, this requires a fundamental recalibration. The path to security cannot lie in bandwagoning with Russia nor in illusions of neutrality. It lies instead in deeper cooperation with the United States and Europe on defense reform, intelligence collaboration, and Black Sea security - tangible guarantees that do not depend on the enlargement paradigm of the 2000s. It is also more important than ever to couple Georgia's security and stability with the ongoing peace negotiations over Ukraine, since the outcome of the talks and the new security order will determine the rules of the game on the European continent. America, neither in its statements nor its security strategy, plans to allow Russia and China to take over European interests. After all, the Security strategy states that Washington "will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our [Western] Hemisphere."

This is the strategic environment in which Georgia must operate, whether its leaders acknowledge it or not.

Diplomatic Maneuvers and Global Bargaining in the Neighborhood

Diplomatically, 2025 has been a year of intense engagement. The United States has shaped NATO procurement, revitalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, negotiated Gaza cease-fire channels, and scrutinized Chinese-linked infrastructure from the Pacific to the Caribbean. Even territorial ambitions—such as renewed interest in Greenland—reflect the administration's readiness to rethink traditional boundaries.

Critics warn that shuttering USAID programs or scaling back the Voice of America undermines soft power, yet the overall pattern of U.S. foreign policy contradicts claims of retreat. America is not withdrawing, but rather reprioritizing.

Trump's diplomacy has affected the South Caucasus as well. In August 2025, Trump hosted Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev for the signing of a landmark peace framework. The Trump-brokered TRIPP Corridor through Syunik/Zangezur has become a flagship of American strategic engineering: a U.S.-led consortium, a bypass of Russian and Iranian routes, a direct reduction of Moscow's leverage, and an integration of the region into Western logistics networks. TRIPP is now an infrastructure project with a geopolitical goal to reorder Eurasian transit. Recent visits of U.S. high officials to Yerevan and Tbilisi confirm that the U.S. interests in TRIPP are real. In addition, TRIPP, if linked with the Central Asian transit, can indeed become an alternative to Russian transit capability, especially in time of war or after it ends.

The November 2025 C5+1 (Central Asia plus U.S.) Summit in Washington marked a watershed moment for entrenching U.S. interests in the wider region. Uzbekistan is [committed](#) to investing and purchasing over USD 100 billion in the United States over the next decade. Kazakhstan [added](#) USD 17 billion in deals. The region's leaders arrived with uranium, rare earths, gold, and connectivity proposals. The United States arrived with capital, technology, and the promise of a "direct line to the White House." Both sides left with a shared understanding: Central Asia is no longer an afterthought of U.S. policy but a core element of the strategy to diversify away from China and Russia.

This shift is entirely consistent with the NSS. Control of critical minerals, supply chains, and overland corridors defines the new map of American engagement. But in this concert of diplomatic and strategic interactions, Georgia is remarkably absent.

Georgia – “Uncatchable Joe”

As Armenia integrates into American diplomacy and Azerbaijan becomes a logistical pivot, as Türkiye maintains its irreplaceable strategic role, as Central Asia's leaders secure access and attention, Georgia stands alone – absent, isolated, misaligned, and self-indulged in incomprehensible propaganda-driven assaults on the “deep state,” the “global war party,” and anyone who criticizes Tbilisi's drive towards one-party dictatorship.

Georgia's governing elite misread global reality with stunning confidence. They believed in an American retreat that never came, in a European collapse that never occurred, and in a Russian lightning victory that never materialized.

Georgia's governing elite misread global reality with stunning confidence. They believed in an

American retreat that never came, in a European collapse that never occurred, and in a Russian lightning victory that never materialized. They imagined partnerships with China at the very moment Washington identified Beijing as its principal competitor; they pursued warmer ties with Russia as U.S. strategy downgraded Moscow from primary threat to manageable disruptor; they chose the pragmatic isolationism at the moment when the opportunity opened for the strategic U.S. transit interests in the wider region.

By passing Russia-inspired “foreign agents” laws, attacking Western institutions in domestic propaganda, and flirting with alternative geopolitical patrons, the Georgian government turned the country from a strategic partner into a reputational risk. Meanwhile, every other state in the region found its place. Armenia delivers peace, realigns with the EU, and strives for the opening of trade routes with all neighbors. Azerbaijan delivers energy resources and connectivity while building alliances across the region and the world, including Europe and Washington. Central Asia delivers minerals and transit, including through the TRIPP corridor. Türkiye delivers strategic balancing, military strength, and transit from East to West. Georgia delivers only uncertainty.

The implications for Georgian foreign policy are profound. A country that should be central to Black Sea security, the Middle Corridor, and Western deterrence architecture is now perceived as drifting toward dictatorship and strategic ambiguity. In the emerging Eurasian order defined by TRIPP, critical minerals, burden-shifting, and supply-chain sovereignty, Georgia is the only actor not adapting.

Yet, Washington still possesses significant leverage and should use it deliberately. American financial scrutiny can limit oligarchic influence, targeted visa and property measures can introduce costs for anti-Western behavior, stricter conditionality

on defense cooperation can reestablish red lines, and closer coordination with Brussels can prevent Tbilisi from playing partners against each other. At the same time, Washington should deepen direct engagement with Georgian society, municipalities, civil actors, and the private sector, ensuring that the country's pro-Western majority remains anchored even if its government drifts. The alternative would be Georgia under Russian and Chinese influences, neither of which is there to defend American interests in the region.

American financial scrutiny can limit oligarchic influence, targeted visa and property measures can introduce costs for anti-Western behavior, stricter conditionality on defense cooperation can reestablish red lines, and closer coordination with Brussels can prevent Tbilisi from playing partners against each other.

The Wild West anecdote remains painfully relevant. A man storms into a saloon, shouts, and fires into the air, then rushes out. When asked who he

is, the answer comes: "Uncatchable Joe." When asked why he is uncatchable, the reply is simple: because nobody wants him. Today, this moniker applies not to Georgia's people, who remain steadfastly pro-Western, but to their leadership, whose erratic course has made Georgia the region's lone outlier.

In the musical-chairs game that best illustrates the new Eurasian diplomacy, everyone else has found their seat. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sits firmly. Aliyev and Pashinyan sit after reshaping their region. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the other Central Asian leaders sit after bringing billions to the table. They all understood the music and sat before it stopped. Only Georgia is left circling. Unless it changes direction—and unless the United States uses its leverage with clarity and purpose—the music may stop with Georgia still standing, without a chair, and without a place in the room where decisions about its neighborhood are now being made ■

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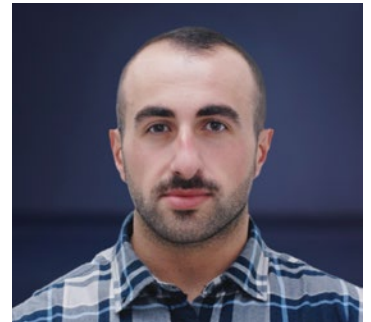
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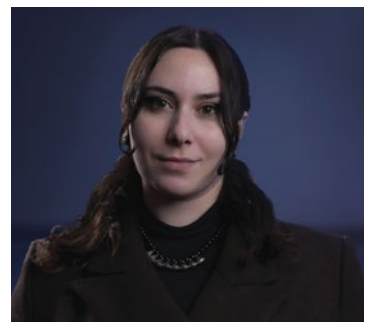
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Illustrator

Pool of Our Experts



Olena Halushka

Olena Halushka is co-founder of the International Center for Ukrainian Victory and board member at Ukraine's Anti-corruption Action Center. She previously served as chief of international advocacy at the Reanimation Package of Reforms coalition and as a Kyiv City Council member.



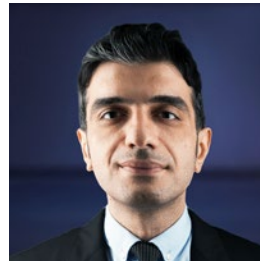
Hugues Mingarelli

Hugues Mingarelli served as EU Ambassador to Ukraine (2016-2019) and previously led Middle East and North Africa affairs at the European External Action Service. He negotiated the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement and established the European Agency for Reconstruction of the Balkans.



Mitat Çelikpala

Dr. Mitat Çelikpala is Professor of International Relations and Vice-Rector at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. He specializes in Eurasian security, energy policy, and Turkish foreign relations, serving as academic advisor to NATO's Center of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism.



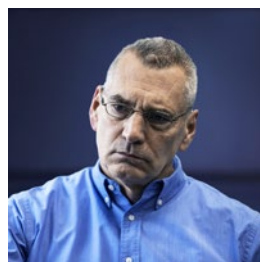
Zaur Shiriyev

Zaur Shiriyev is an independent scholar with fifteen years of expertise in South Caucasus security and conflict resolution. He previously worked as an analyst at the International Crisis Group and Academy Associate at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme.



Mustafa Aydın

Mustafa Aydın is Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University and President of the International Relations Council of Türkiye. Former university rector, he has held research positions at Harvard, Michigan, and the EU Institute for Security Studies.



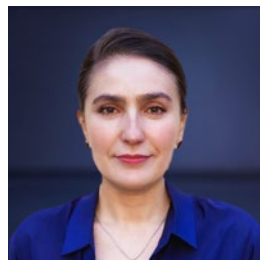
Richard Giragosian

Richard Giragosian is Founding Director of the Regional Studies Center in Armenia and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe. He serves as consultant for international organizations including the Asian Development Bank, EU, OSCE, and U.S. Departments of Defense and State.



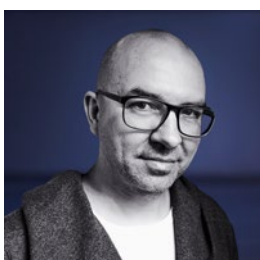
Khatia Kikalishvili

Dr. Khatia Kikalishvili is Programme Director for Eastern Partnership at the Centre for Liberal Modernity. She previously advised on Foreign and European policy in the German Bundestag and holds a Ph.D. in European Law from the University of Saarland.



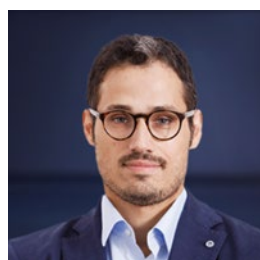
Teona Giuashvili

Teona Giuashvili is a former Georgian diplomat with eleven years of experience, currently researching European and regional security at the European University Institute. She specializes in multilateral diplomacy, conflict resolution, and Georgia's European integration.



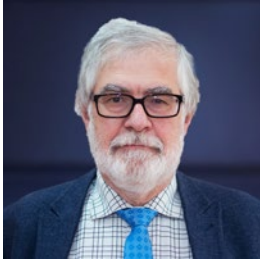
Volodymyr Yermolenko

Dr. Volodymyr Yermolenko is President of PEN Ukraine and Analytics Director at Internews Ukraine. A philosopher, journalist, and writer, he is Chief Editor of UkraineWorld.org and associate professor at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, with publications in major international media outlets.



Denis Cenusa

Denis Cenusa is associate expert at the Centre for Eastern European Studies and Expert-Group think tank. Based in Germany conducting doctoral research, he specializes in democratization, geopolitics, and security in the post-Soviet and Eurasian space.



Ghia Nodia

Ghia Nodia is Professor of Politics at Ilia State University and founder of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development. He served as Georgia's Minister of Education and Science and has published extensively on democracy and Caucasus politics.



Hans Gutbrod

Hans Gutbrod is Professor at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, and former regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers. He has observed elections in Georgia since 1999 and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics.



Tefta Kelmendi

Tefta Kelmendi is Deputy Director for the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her research focuses on EU policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, particularly EU enlargement and democracy promotion.



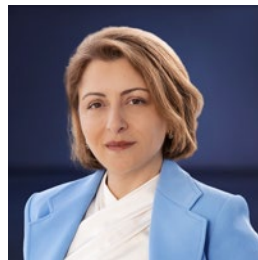
Tamara Kovziridze

Tamara Kovziridze held senior positions in the Government of Georgia (2004-2012), including Deputy Minister of Economy. As a partner at Reformatics consulting firm, she has advised governments across Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on regulatory reforms.



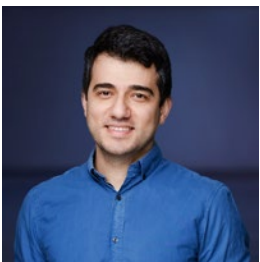
Grigol Mgaloblishvili

Ambassador Grigol Mgaloblishvili is a career diplomat with twenty years in Georgian Foreign Service. He has served as Prime Minister of Georgia, Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador to Türkiye, and faculty member at the U.S. National Defence University.



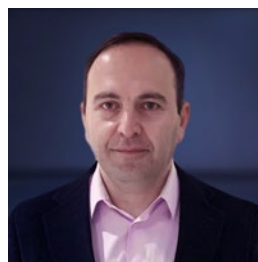
Eka Tkeshelashvili

Eka Tkeshelashvili is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. Former Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Georgia, she led key Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reform initiatives.



Tornike Zurabashvili

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher focusing on political and security affairs in Georgia and the Black Sea region. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University and extensive experience in development program management across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.



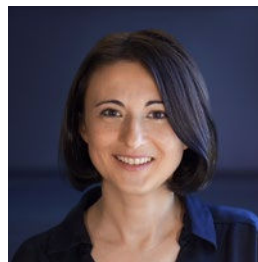
Miro Popkhadze

Miro Popkhadze is a Senior Fellow at the Delphi Global Research Center and a Non-Resident Fellow at FPRI. A former Representative of the Georgian Ministry of Defense to the UN, his work focuses on Russian foreign policy and Eurasian security. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech.



Galip Dalay

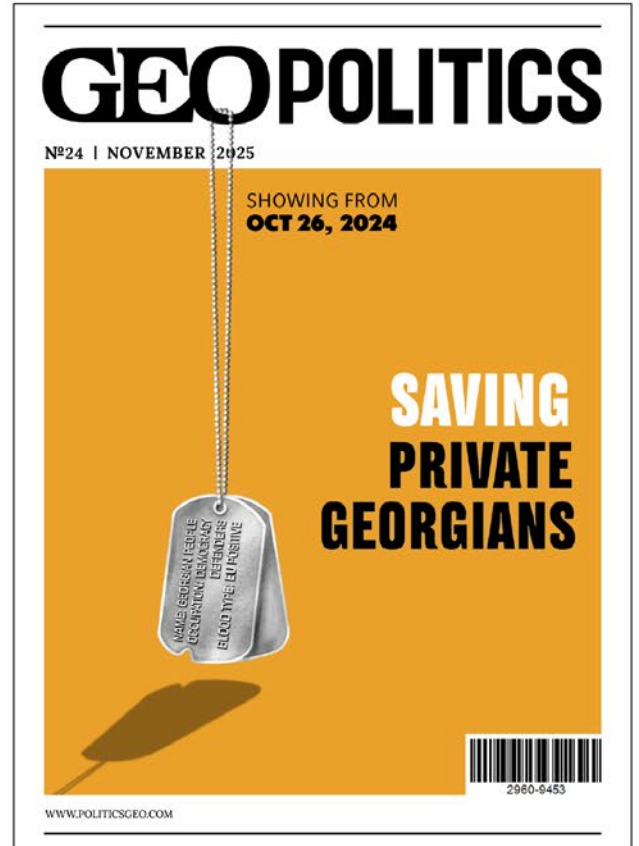
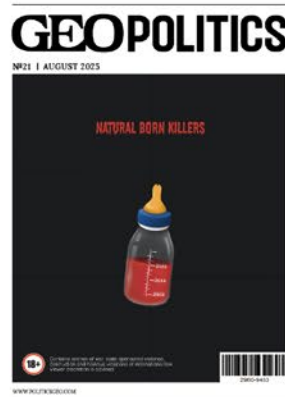
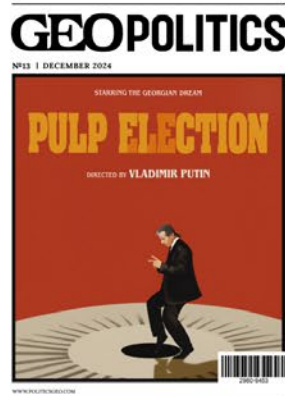
Galip Dalay is a senior fellow at Chatham House and a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on Türkiye, the Middle East, Russian foreign policy, and relations with the West. His work has been published in outlets like Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy.



Adina Revol

Adina Revol, PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris, is a former spokesperson of the European Commission in France and author of *Breaking with Russia – Europe's Energy Awakening* (Odile Jacob, 2024). An expert on EU affairs, energy geopolitics, and Russia's hybrid warfare, she teaches at Sciences Po and ESCP Europe and frequently appears in French media.

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