

Can Georgian Democracy Survive in a Post-Western Order?

One puzzle continues to confound most observers of Georgia's political life: why does a country long regarded as among the most pro-Western, where [polls](#) consistently show high levels of support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, continue to vote for a party that is anti-Western and increasingly Eurosceptic?

There is little doubt that elections in Georgia are neither free nor fair, and the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections remain highly [contested](#). At the same time, few would dispute that the Georgian Dream, which engineered its victory to form the government, is the largest and most popular single party in the country. This suggests that many voters who genuinely supported the Georgian Dream also favor Georgia's integration into the EU and identify culturally and politically with the West.

This apparent contradiction is not unique to Geor-

gia. As Ivan Krastev [noted](#) in his analysis of Eastern Europe's illiberal revolt as early as 2018, Eastern European societies rank among the most pro-EU publics on the continent, yet repeatedly elect some of the most Eurosceptic governments. This paradox suggests that support for European integration does not automatically translate into support for pro-European political elites or liberal governance models. Instead, many voters appear to separate their geopolitical orientation from their domestic political choices, prioritizing other issues, including political predictability, economic stability, and security.

The Georgian opposition [framed](#) the 2024 elections as a referendum on foreign policy and Georgia's European future. This strategy ultimately proved ineffective. The Georgian Dream did not openly challenge the goal of European integration; instead, it hollowed it out while successfully mobilizing fears of war, instability, and loss of sovereignty. By shifting the political



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terrain from policy choices to existential questions of identity, security, and survival, the ruling party galvanized the electorate around perceived threats—both real and manufactured. In doing so, the Georgian Dream demonstrated how pro-European sentiment can coexist with electoral support for an increasingly illiberal and Eurosceptic political project, underscoring the limits of framing political competition in binary, geopolitical terms in a rapidly changing international environment.

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The coexistence of strong pro-European public sentiment and sustained support for Eurosceptic governments does not reflect ideological inconsistency among voters. Instead, it points to the effectiveness of political strategies that deliberately decouple European integration and Western orientation from domestic democratic reform. This decoupling is not politically neutral; it purposefully erodes the national consensus about Georgia's European future, juxtaposing, however artificially, the protection of identity and sovereignty with 'Western values' and mobilizing voters around fear and insecurity.

In this context, elections serve as tools through which ruling elites actively redefine the meaning of the "West" to consolidate domestic power rather than promote democratic accountability. The election of Donald Trump further reinforced the plausibility of this strategy, as the very notion of the West as a coherent, values-based political community has come under increasing strain. By

privileging transactional power over democratic norms and elevating personalized leadership above institutional constraint, Trump has hollowed out the West's claim to moral and political leadership as a democratic standard-bearer.

East Meets West

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, in his Senate confirmation [speech](#), articulated the shift in the U.S. stance by declaring the principles underpinning the post-World War II order as not only obsolete but also based on dangerous delusions that led to the prioritization of a liberal global order over the pursuit of national interests and the protection of identity. At the same time, the Trump administration has insisted on defending democracy, openness, and freedom of speech in Europe, while seeking to expand political space for populist, anti-establishment forces. Framed as a challenge to liberal "orthodoxy" and elite overreach, this approach has effectively legitimized illiberal actors while hollowing out the normative foundations of democratic governance. The result is not the strengthening of democratic resilience worldwide, but rather a redefinition of democracy—one that privileges electoral majorities, identity, and sovereignty over institutional checks, minority rights, and the rule of law.

Interestingly enough, Eastern European populists—much like the ruling elite of the Georgian Dream—are not only authoritarian and illiberal, readily adopting the Russian playbook of propaganda, polarization, and state capture, but are also enthusiastic members of Donald Trump's political fan club. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, emerged as a MAGA advocate in Europe well before Trump's return to power. The admiration is reciprocal, as illustrated by Hungary's [exemption](#) from U.S.-imposed sanctions on imports of Russian crude oil. Romanian presidential candidate George Simion similarly [declared](#) himself a committed Trumpian, making alignment

with Trump's political vision a defining feature of his campaign. Although Simion ultimately lost the election, MAGA-admiring candidates have prevailed elsewhere, notably in Poland and the Czech Republic. Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico has also openly aligned himself with Trumpian rhetoric and ideology. It is, therefore, no coincidence that these same countries have repeatedly blocked EU sanctions targeting Georgian officials responsible for democratic erosion and violations of fundamental rights.

It is difficult to ignore the fact that Moscow and Washington increasingly find themselves supporting the same political forces across Europe, from Hungary's *Fidesz* to Germany's *AfD*. In a striking twist, Trump may have blunted one of Moscow's most effective ideological instruments of influence. Vladimir Putin's Russia had positioned itself as a champion of anti-liberal, anti-establishment populist conservatism, presenting it as an alternative to what it portrayed as decadent Western liberalism. With Trump embracing a similar ideological posture, the two now find themselves on the same side of the so-called "culture wars," with Trump increasingly winning the popularity contest. At the same time, this convergence has only deepened questions about the very notion of the West as a value-based political and institutional construct.

These doubts were further amplified by the recent publication of the [U.S. National Security Strategy](#), which depicts Europe as an ideological adversary more significant than Russia or China. As Michael Ignatieff [notes](#), the document portrays Europe as a declining continent, trapped in past glories and incapable of defending itself against what it frames as the threat of "civilizational erosion" driven by migration. "The West is gone," Ignatieff concludes, and with it the belief, "so dear to Churchill and Roosevelt, that America's vision of freedom began its life in the Old Continent's traditions of liberty, is waved aside as a 'sentimental' fiction."

The hard-power logic that regards the promotion of democracy and human rights as a costly distraction and treats mutually binding moral commitments as dispensable is the one that favors a world ruled by the few and the strong. It reflects a broader vision of the global order, grounded in the balance of power rather than in the power of norms, in which spheres of influence are treated as both legitimate and inevitable. This transformation generates acute insecurity for small states such as Georgia, where uncertainty about Western resolve strengthens authoritarian elites by creating the illusion that stability can only be secured through accommodation abroad and autocracy at home.

Small democracies have a structural interest in a rules-based international order and strong multilateral institutions, which provide a degree of protection against the predatory instincts of great powers. Small autocracies, in contrast, as the Georgian case illustrates, tend instead to favor a transactional order shaped by great-power competition.

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In this context, the traditional categories of “pro-Western” and “anti-Western,” which have long structured Georgia’s political life, lose much of their political relevance. If the West is no longer a coherent value-based political and institutional project, what does alignment with it actually mean? Can there be a West without the United States and if so, what obligations would that impose on Europe? And can Europe assume this mantle after decades of outsourcing its security and strategic leadership to Washington? Or has the Georgian Dream, however cynically, proven more adept at anticipating a world in which the West-non-West divide no longer holds?

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Yet, this moment of fragmentation also creates an opening. In a world where democratic governance is under strain both in the East and the West, the erosion of democracy is no longer a peripheral problem but a central threat to the West’s own coherence. This, paradoxically, creates an opportunity for societies that emerged from communist dictatorship to move from imitation to ownership of democracy. If democratic resistance is no longer externally underwritten but driven from within, the East may yet become a standard setter rather than a laggard. The streets of Budapest, Belgrade, Tbilisi, and Istanbul, where peaceful protests erupt with an intensity rarely matched elsewhere, offer a powerful reminder that democratic agency has not disappeared, even as the geopolitical environment that once sustained it is rapidly changing.

Georgia’s Gramscian Moment

Having aligned itself, presumably under Orbán’s tutelage, with an anti-liberal, populist conserva-

tive agenda, the Georgian Dream unsurprisingly came to view Donald Trump’s return to the White House as the [return of a savior](#). The party rapidly adapted its discourse, identifying the so-called “deep state” as a common enemy, abandoning its earlier fixation on the imaginary “global war party,” and aligning itself closely with the rhetoric of the new administration.

Facing sustained public resistance and prolonged street protests following the suspension of Georgia’s EU integration process, Georgian Dream leader Irakli Kobakhidze [declared](#) that January 20, the day of the U.S. President’s inauguration, would settle all the problems in Georgia’s relations, not only with the U.S. but also with the EU. He maintained confidently that “it will be as Trump says.”

In a country where public support for EU integration consistently nears 80%, suspending accession talks with Brussels should have amounted to political suicide. The Georgian Dream, however, calculated that it could absorb the domestic backlash without jeopardizing its grip on power. The party’s best bet was that if it could hold out until Trump’s return, its international legitimacy would be restored and, with it, its unchallenged control at home. The abrupt closure of USAID, a gift even the Georgian Dream had not anticipated, was perceived as a major vindication. It dealt a significant blow to Georgia’s civil society, which had become the primary locus of resistance to the country’s authoritarian drift. This, in turn, reinforced the Georgian Dream’s narrative of NGOs as instruments of illegitimate foreign interference and emboldened the government to double down on repressive measures.

The anticipated reset in relations between the Georgian Dream and the Trump administration, however, failed to materialize. While Washington appears to have deprioritized human rights and democracy promotion, it has not endorsed the Georgian Dream’s authoritarian governance

and has instead largely ignored Georgia altogether. At the same time, negotiations over the war in Ukraine, trade and tariff disputes, and growing uncertainty regarding U.S. security commitments to Europe have further strained transatlantic relations. This has fueled broader doubts about the viability of the Western alliance, thereby reinforcing the Georgian Dream's skepticism about the strategic value of alignment with the West.

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In this sense, the Georgian Dream's wager is not merely about surviving domestic opposition, but about betting on the collapse of the West as a value-based political project. By aligning with a world defined by transactional power, ideological fragmentation, and cultural warfare, the ruling party has sought to escape the traditional West-non-West dichotomy altogether. The risk, however, is profound: if the West is indeed gone, Georgia may find itself not liberated from constraints, but stranded, without guarantees, without leverage, and without a democratic horizon. The ultimate question, then, is not whether or not the Georgian Dream correctly anticipated geopolitical shifts, but if Georgia can afford to be right for the wrong reasons.

Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that "the old world is dying and the new one struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters." As the international order undergoes a profound transformation, Georgia is living through its own Gramscian moment. In such an interregnum, Gramsci [warned](#), even the smallest act may acquire decisive weight. Georgia today is caught between the forces of populist nationalism, authoritarian consolidation, and the erosion of meaningful political life.

With much of the opposition jailed, marginalized, or systematically weakened, the Georgian Dream has thrived not through political success or vision but through the destruction of alternatives. It [governs](#) through fear, repression, and the calculated exploitation of international distraction. Yet, this illusion of strength masks deep fragility. The Georgian Dream is a failing political force whose authority rests less on popular support than on the absence of credible competitors. It lacks both domestic and international legitimacy, has delivered little in terms of governance, reversed key democratic gains, and reduced Georgia to an increasingly isolated bystander amid major geopolitical shifts.

Rather than offering a viable future, the Georgian Dream has aligned itself with the global illiberal agenda, betting on the erosion of the rules-based international order and preparing Georgia for reintegration into a revived Russian sphere of influence, hoping, above all, to secure the best possible deal for itself in any emerging geopolitical reordering. Pretending to protect national sovereignty, this strategy in fact relinquishes it altogether in return for short-term political control and regime survival.

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Yet, the success of this project is far from guaranteed. In this Gramscian moment, even small acts can have a disproportionate impact, and triggers of change are difficult to predict. A regime without legitimacy at home, without reliable patrons abroad, and facing sustained civic mobilization is inherently fragile. The streets of Tbilisi, like those of other capitals, suggest that while the West may be losing its monopoly as a democratic reference

point, democratic resistance itself has not disappeared. If anything, it may yet be redefined from below. The opening puzzle, then, is not merely about Georgia's electoral paradox, but about a

broader historical transition—one in which the future of democracy may be decided not by great powers, but by societies forced to defend it without external guarantees ■