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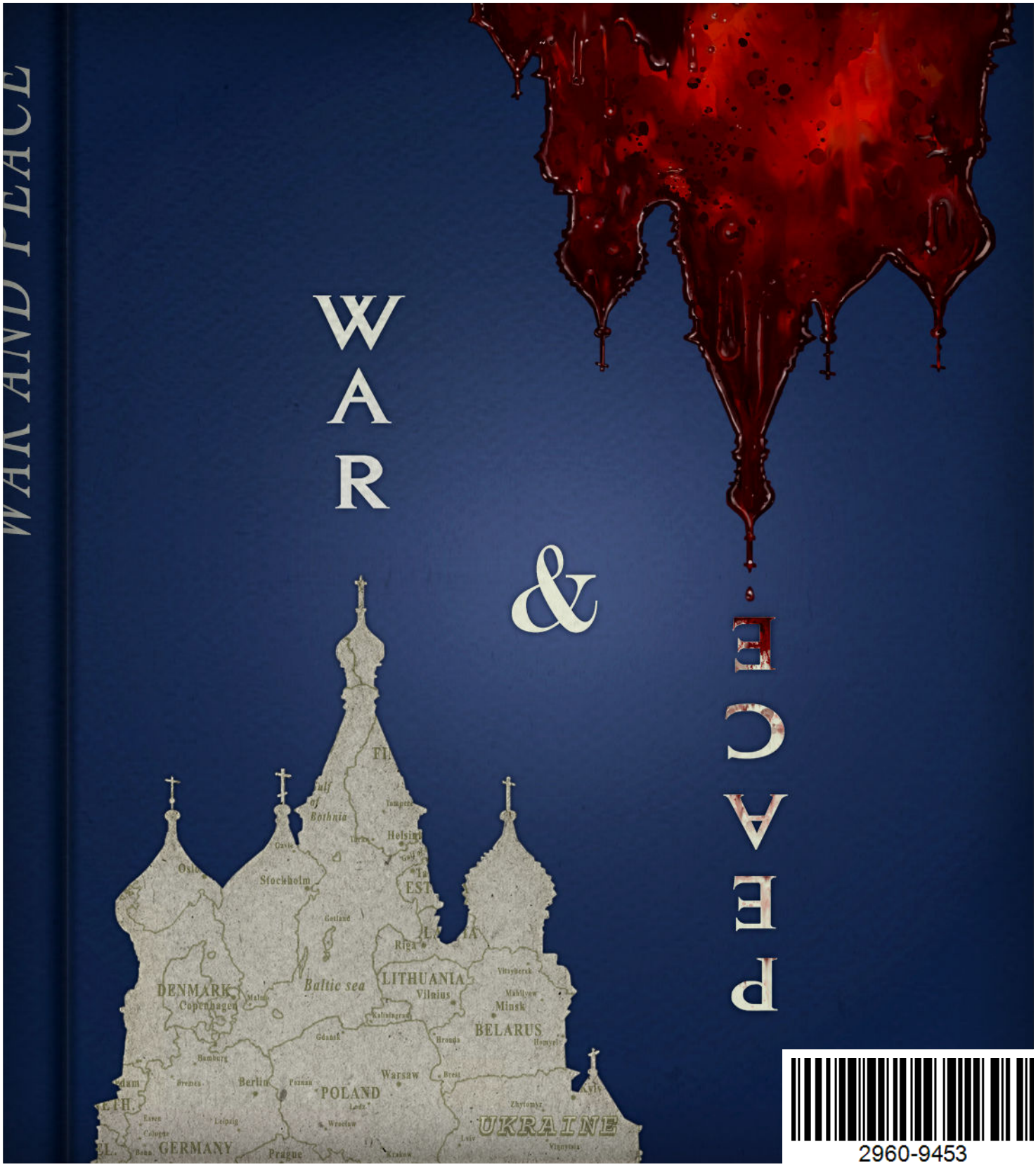

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Our Mission

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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.

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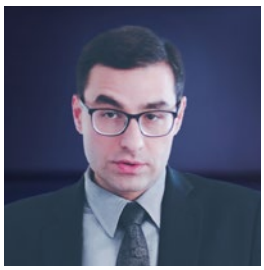

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War and Peace – Both Used Against European Security and Democracy

War and peace no longer function as opposites in Europe's security landscape. They have become tools which are selectively invoked, strategically blurred, and increasingly detached from responsibility. As the year 2026 unfolds, the time-resistant topics of Lev Tolstoy's masterpiece are poised to be revisited time and again. Russia's war against Ukraine has exposed how appeals for "peace now" can destabilize the resistance to unwarranted aggression and how the "pro-peace forces" in reality assist the authoritarian leaders to stay in power, oppress human rights, and possibly even wage future wars. Across Europe and its eastern neighborhood, conflicts persist not only where armies clash but also where societies are conditioned to accept insecurity and autocracy as the price of stability and to regard concessions on justice and democracy as realism. In this environment, the quest for peace is no longer the natural endpoint of the raging war; it is, unfortunately, often its enabling condition.

Thornike Gordadze opens this year's first issue of *GEOpolitics* with a critical examination of growing "pro-peace" discourse and its paradoxical role in prolonging Russia's war against Ukraine. He argues that calls for peace, increasingly popular among both far-left and far-right "anti-system" European parties, offer moral legitimacy at minimal political cost while evading responsibility for outcomes, enforcement, or deterrence. Detached from questions of power and agency, this rhetoric reframes aggression as tragedy, erases the distinction between aggressor and victim, and allows political actors to free-ride on the security provided by others. Gordadze demonstrates how these positions, rooted in Europe's own pacifist and sovereigntist traditions, are selectively amplified and synchronized by Russian hybrid influence without requiring direct control or command. By tracing historical parallels from interwar appeasement to contemporary hybrid warfare, the article warns that "cheap peace" weakens deterrence, signals Western division, and ultimately emboldens Russian maximalism. The central argument is uncompromising: peace cannot substitute for strategy, and when stripped of responsibility and security guarantees, peace rhetoric risks becoming an instrument of war rather than its antidote.

Shota Gvineria follows with an analysis of Europe's unfinished security architecture and the growing risk that Russia may seek to test NATO's credibility through a limited, ambiguous escalation on the Alliance's eastern flank. Contrasting the failed deterrence in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 with the relative success of deterrence in the Baltic states, he examines how political ambiguity, uneven preparedness, and slow decision-making shape Moscow's risk calculus. Gvineria argues that deterrence today depends less on formal guarantees than on the interaction of military posture, societal resilience, clarity of red lines, and alliance cohesion - variables that remain uneven across Europe. The

article situates current Baltic security debates within a shifting transatlantic context marked by uncertainty over long-term U.S. commitment and Europe's still-incomplete efforts to build credible deterrence by denial. Drawing lessons from Georgia's experience, Gvineria warns that political hesitation and fragmented responses invite escalation and that a Russia emerging from the Ukraine war without a clear defeat would likely probe NATO's most exposed regions. The article concludes that Europe's ability to withstand the next security shock will hinge on whether or not it can close the gap between declaratory policy and real-world readiness before ambiguity once again becomes an invitation to aggression.

Natalie Sabanadze zooms into the Georgian context, shedding light on why a society that remains overwhelmingly pro-European continues to sustain an increasingly illiberal and anti-Western ruling party, the Georgian Dream, arguing that this paradox reflects a deliberate political decoupling of geopolitical orientation from democratic governance. She shows how the Georgian Dream hollowed out the EU agenda without formally rejecting it, mobilizing fears of war, instability, and loss of sovereignty while redefining "the West" as a transactional, post-liberal space rather than a values-based community. Situating Georgia within a broader Eastern European pattern of pro-EU publics electing eurosceptic governments, Sabanadze argues that the erosion of the West's normative authority, accelerated by Trump-era politics, the legitimization of illiberal actors, and converging populist agendas across Moscow and Washington, has transformed the ideological clash between liberal democracy and illiberalism into the estuary from which all contemporary conflicts flow. The article concludes that the Georgian Dream's central wager is on the collapse of the rules-based order itself, a strategy that may secure short-term control but leaves Georgia dangerously exposed, without guarantees, leverage, or a democratic horizon, at a moment when democratic survival increasingly depends on internal resistance rather than external underwriting.

Jaba Devdariani continues with satire and a historical analogy to dissect the ideological turn of the United States under MAGA and its destabilizing impact on Europe's liberal order, arguing that Washington is no longer withdrawing from Europe but is actively promoting an illiberal, sovereigntist vision of "European greatness." Drawing on cultural, political, and historical references from Asterix to postwar European integration, he shows how the new U.S. National Security Strategy legitimizes concentration of power, partisan states, and closed societies by encouraging "patriotic" parties hostile to supranational governance, minority rights, and liberal norms. Devdariani argues that this shift resonates more strongly in Central and Eastern Europe, where populist leaders exploit humiliation, imitation fatigue, and identity politics, and where MAGA-style rhetoric converges with homegrown illiberalism. The article warns that this transatlantic diffusion of illiberal ideas places the European Union under pressure both normatively and institutionally, while leaving small states such as Georgia particularly exposed in a world reverting to power politics and spheres of influence. Devdariani concludes that paradoxically, defending European liberalism has become an existential necessity for Georgia as the EU remains the only political space where sovereignty, equality of states, and democratic norms can still be meaningfully upheld.

Vano Chkhikvadze continues the discussion of Europe's perils with the analysis of the EU enlargement policy as a geopolitical instrument driven by Russia's war against Ukraine. He argues that the Union has reframed accession from a technocratic process into a strategic necessity, but now risks undermining its own credibility if it cannot deliver on the timelines it has signaled. He traces how the post-2022 momentum accel-

erated procedures and expanded the enlargement horizon to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and a reactivated Western Balkans track while reintroducing explicit target dates that can mobilize reforms yet also revive the skepticism created by missed promises in earlier rounds. The article argues that the success of this enlargement wave will hinge on whether or not the EU can manage differentiated progress among candidates without sacrificing fairness while simultaneously confronting three internal constraints: consensus-heavy governance and veto politics that can hostage enlargement decisions, budgetary and absorption-capacity anxieties (especially around cohesion and agriculture), and domestic electoral pressures that empower Eurosceptic forces and raise ratification risks in key EU member states. Chkhikvadze concludes that enlargement has become a test of Europe's cohesion and strategic leadership: candidates must deliver irreversible reforms, but the EU must also prove that accession is not rhetorical by pairing ambition with institutional adaptability, clear public communication, and the political will to turn geopolitical urgency into credible commitments.

Sergi Kapanadze closes the issue by arguing that the Georgian Dream's political survival rests on the systematic weaponization of poverty as a tool of authoritarian control. Drawing on economic data and comparative research, he shows how rapid macroeconomic growth has coexisted with widespread material insecurity, regional inequality, low pensions, precarious public-sector employment, household debt, and dependence on remittances, creating a society in which dissent carries prohibitive economic risks. The article details how the regime converts this vulnerability into political obedience through selective social assistance, expanded public-sector patronage, discretionary pay and benefits, and the calibrated use of fines and administrative penalties that exhaust protesters financially rather than merely punishing them. By framing survival as contingent on regime stability, the Georgian Dream raises the price of protest and lowers the costs of authoritarian governance. Kapanadze concludes that poverty in Georgia is not an accidental by-product of underdevelopment but a managed condition that anchors regime durability, making democratic change appear dangerous rather than hopeful for large segments of the population ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

Content

Why "Cheap Peace" May Prolong the War in Ukraine and Beyond

Nearly four years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a number of political forces in Western Europe have found it expedient to adopt "anti-war" rhetoric expressed in a variety of forms. The spectrum is wide, ranging from Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise, who has claimed that NATO's promise of future membership to Ukraine and Georgia amounted to a declaration of war against Russia, to the Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders, who warned: "Do not let Dutch households pay the price for a war that is not ours." The so-called "anti-system" parties, whether on the far-right or the far-left, have found in the war in Ukraine a ready-made repertoire of political arguments, often devoid of substance, yet easily accessible to a broad public and readily convertible into popular votes.

> ***Calls for peace are often presented as humane, prudent, and responsible alternatives to what is portrayed as reckless escalation by governing elites. Calls for peace require no clarity about terms, no guarantees, no enforcement mechanisms, and no accountability if negotiations fail.***

In contemporary Europe, few political positions are as morally attractive and as politically inexpensive as being "pro-peace." It offers immediate moral legitimacy while sparing parties the political, fiscal, and strategic burdens associated with supporting Ukraine. Calls for peace are often presented as humane, prudent, and responsible alternatives to what is portrayed as reckless escalation

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by governing elites. Calls for peace require no clarity about terms, no guarantees, no enforcement mechanisms, and no accountability if negotiations fail. By contrast, sustaining Ukraine entails visible costs, defense spending, energy volatility, long-term commitments, and electoral risk. This asymmetry allows opposition and "anti-system" parties to reap moral credit while free-riding on the deterrence provided by others. Detached from questions of responsibility and power, peace rhetoric thus functions less as a policy than as a politically convenient shelter from hard choices, one that may ultimately prolong, rather than end, the war.

Are European "Pro-Peace Forces" Moscow's Puppets?

In the summer of 2024, a public poster campaign in Italy declaring "Russia is not our enemy," organized by several associations close to the far-right, appeared across Italian cities, although the campaign was not formally endorsed by Matteo Salvini's *Lega*—despite Salvini's well-known admiration for Vladimir Putin. The same posters resurfaced in France and Belgium in the autumn of 2025 and went viral on social media.

This unfolded against the backdrop of warnings issued on November 18 by France's Chief of the Defence Staff, General Fabien Mandon, about the growing risk of military confrontation with Russia on the European continent, as well as an intensifying debate in Belgium in December 2025 over using Russian assets frozen in Europe to support Ukraine. In this context, the timing of these orchestrated campaigns—carried out, among others, by a group calling itself "SOS Donbas"—alongside Moscow's increasingly bellicose rhetoric was hardly coincidental.

In Germany, the *Alternative for Germany* (*AfD*), the *Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance* (BSW), and *Die Linke*, three parties with very diverse historical backgrounds and trajectories, redefine the war in Ukraine not as an act of Russian aggression, but as a geopolitical conflict provoked by Western elites. This NATO-driven proxy war allegedly does not serve German interests. As a consequence, they call for "peace negotiations immediately" without addressing Russia's responsibility or conditions and portraying military aid to Ukraine as warmongering while depicting concessions to Russia as "realism." Slogans such as "Geld für unsere Bürger, nicht für fremde Kriege" ("Money for our citizens, not for foreign wars") create a zero-sum narrative: either social welfare for Germans or solidarity with Ukraine. This approach aligns with Russia's interest in seeing allies abandon Ukraine, while ignoring Germany's long-term security interests and the costs of a Russian victory for Europe.

Even if the *AfD*, the Austrian *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ), the French *National Rally* (RN), the Italian *Lega Nord*, and others carefully avoid explicit endorsement of Russia's war, they minimize Russian war crimes, relativize responsibility ("both sides"), and emphasize "Russian security interests." Internally, party dynamics include some openly pro-Kremlin individuals with financial or business ties to Russia and networks associated with Russian media ecosystems. This aligns them de facto with Russian strategic goals.

Pro-Russian "peace" propaganda exploits every available lever: fears of a Russian attack, conspiracy theories about the hidden interests of the defense industry, public exasperation over the scale of aid to Ukraine, and broader anti-internationalist or anti-liberal multilateral and "sovereigntist" sentiments, whether directed against NATO or the European Union.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to attribute exclusive agency to Russia and treat Moscow as the sole driver of the growing "peace at any price" narrative and declining support for Ukraine. Such "pro-peace" positions among Europe's far-left and mainly far-right originate in indigenous Western ideological traditions. Russian, and earlier Soviet, hybrid influence has not created these currents, but has selectively amplified, radicalized, and coordinated them, particularly during the Cold War and again since 2022.

As we wrote earlier in *GEOpolitics*, "peace" was one of the Soviet Union's most effective ideological weapons. Moscow consistently presented itself as the champion of peace against allegedly "imperialist" and "warmongering" Western elites, framing NATO rearmament, nuclear deterrence, and U.S. alliances as the true sources of global instability. But a dense ecosystem of front organizations and campaigns, such as the World Peace Council, peace congresses, disarmament petitions, and "anti-imperialist" intellectual networks, pre-existed; the USSR sought to mobilize and help them, particularly within left-wing and anti-nuclear movements. The objective was to delegitimize Western security policy from within, weaken public support for deterrence, and create political pressure against defense spending, missile deployments, and alliance cohesion. Today, the objective remains fundamentally the same.

Pacifism in Europe: A Long and Double-Edged Tradition

Russian/Soviet hybrid methods did not invent European pacifism. They exploited it. European "peace" positions are rooted in European history and largely predate the Cold War. There was a distinct and influential current of European pacifism from the late 19th to the early 20th century, although it was neither dominant nor uniform. It appeared as a reaction to nationalism, imperial rivalry, militarism, and social Darwinism. Its intellectual and political origins were diverse, often

internally contradictory, drawing on Kantian enlightened universalism and rationalism, Christian morality and anti-violence principles, socialist internationalism, and liberal economic idealism.

Ultimately, the European pacifism failed to prevent World War I, but the horrors of the war, millions of dead and mass destruction, gave rise to a new form of pacifism, grounded in an aversion to war. The war was regarded as a collective civilizational failure, and the fear of another "total war" dominated public opinion in France, Britain, and Weimar Germany.

Post-World War I pacifism in Europe was broader, deeper, and more emotionally charged than its pre-1914 predecessor. It was no longer primarily an elite, legalistic, or economic doctrine; it became a mass cultural, political, and moral phenomenon, rooted in trauma, mourning, and disillusionment. Yet, it was also ambivalent and internally fractured, oscillating between moral rejection of war and political paralysis in the face of renewed aggression. Otto Dix and Georg Grosz in painting and Erich Maria Remarque and Louis-Ferdinand Céline in literature are a few examples of pacifism becoming existential rather than programmatic, underscoring the meaninglessness and immorality of suffering inflicted on ordinary men by a distant power.

Institutionally, the post-World War I pacifism tried to replace power politics with rules. The creation of the League of Nations, the signature of the Briand-Kellogg Pact (1928), renouncing war as a policy instrument and engaging nations to solve disputes peacefully, and the setting up of International Disarmament Conferences (in Geneva in the 1930s) were examples of these attempts and reflected a belief that naming war illegal could make it politically impossible.

Nevertheless, this institutional, political, and cultural pacifism fell short of its intended objective. Quite the opposite. International treaties were symbolically powerful, but strategically toothless. The disarmament was asymmetric, and the revisionist or expansionist powers (Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Fascist Italy) exploited restraint and opposing the war by disarming only democracies became nonsense. Cultural, artistic, and literary pacifism depoliticized responsibility and erased distinctions between aggressor and defender. This moral equivalence later proved to be dangerous and deadly.

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But the left had no monopoly on pacifism in Europe. On the far right, "peace" discourse is rooted in a different tradition. What distinguishes it from liberal or left pacifism is not a principled rejection of violence, but a selective, instrumental, and sovereigntist conception of peace. Far-right pacifism is not a commitment to international law or universal human rights; it is opposition to specific wars deemed "foreign," "globalist," or "not ours."

> ***Far-right pacifism inevitably leads to geopolitical realism and to a world divided into zones of influence in which major powers dominate, and small states' resistance is framed as futile or irresponsible. This is peace through acceptance of spheres of influence.***

Deeply rooted in philosophical traditions such as Johann Gottfried von Herder's cultural particularism and Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal universalism, far-right peace supporters hold that the culprits are universalist ideologies that moralize the world, thereby leading to war. "Humanitarian

war" is the most dangerous form of war, and opposing intervention becomes a defense of plural, sovereign spaces. Far-right pacifism inevitably leads to geopolitical realism and to a world divided into zones of influence in which major powers dominate, and small states' resistance is framed as futile or irresponsible. This is peace through acceptance of spheres of influence.

National isolationism and order that characterize the far-right pacifism are compatible with admiration for authoritarian violence. Thus, the interwar European far-right parties were for peace with Adolf Hitler, but turned a blind eye to his aggression against their neighbors. For example, the Vichy regime in France made peace with Germany, and the supposed benefits of that peace were a central pillar of its political propaganda. Right-wing pacifist rhetoric considered "peace through revision" as, for them, liberal or foreign/global elites imposed war. Peace was attainable only after the defeat of these elites, whose international institutions were responsible for the instability and destruction of the traditional order. Whoever restored conventional social hierarchy and order among nations was considered a guarantor of peace and was supported. To sum up, far-right pacifism in Europe traditionally opposes war not because it destroys human lives, but because it threatens domestic priorities and serves liberal or supranational projects.

What Russian Hybrid Methods Actually Did (and Did Not Do)

Russia's political warfare in Europe is now exceptionally well documented and explored, and the War/Peace theme is one of its pillars. As noted above, Russia did not invent pacifist ideologies from scratch. Despite some propaganda success so far, Russia has not converted pro-Ukraine parties into pro-Russia ones either. All mainstream European parties remain in pro-Ukraine positions and are increasingly cautioning their citizens about the threat coming from Russia, the need to increase military spending, and promoting societal resilience.

The sheer brutality of Russia's aggression against Ukraine has compelled many European parties that were previously openly or overtly pro-Russian to tone down that stance, but the trend is uneven and context-dependent. The scale of Russia's aggression and its human cost made open support for Moscow politically toxic; consequently, many have deliberately shifted to criticizing Western policies (e.g., inflation, energy costs, migration) rather than explicitly defending Moscow's foreign policy. This is often described as "strategic silence" or "blurring" their stance on Russia.

These parties, however, did not become pro-Ukrainian, and their geopolitical views did not fundamentally change. Parties such as the *AfD*, the *FPÖ*, and other smaller nationalist parties maintained their opposition to sanctions and continued to call for the restoration of ties with Moscow. France's RN, reflecting its domestic electoral calculations, has adapted its rhetoric, now criticizing sanctions, NATO, and EU cohesion and emphasizing "dialogue/diplomacy" rather than explicit praise for Putin.

Finally, Moscow does not control European parties in a strictly hierarchical, command-and-control manner. What exists instead is a web of asymmetric, opportunistic, and largely deniable relationships that combine ideology, finance, media ecosystems, personal networks, and tactical convergence against the liberal mainstream. The relationship is instrumental rather than organizational, and there is no Comintern-style control with a centralized chain of command, formal subordination, and systematic discipline. The only strategic objective that counts is to weaken and ultimately destroy the existing liberal-democratic model and European unity, normalize spheres of influence,

and legitimize authoritarian governance. Whether or not a party is far-right or far-left is secondary; what matters is functional utility. However, it should be emphasized that, if Russia today prefers plausible deniability and operates through fragmentation and redundancy, this is not a weakness but a design feature.

Claims that European "peace" positions are simply "Russian puppets" are analytically weak and politically counter-productive. Russia's well-cultivated plausible deniability and the popularity crisis of many mainstream political forces in Europe make these accusations less audible and credible to many European voters. On the contrary, a significant portion of the electorate believes that pointing to "Russian manipulations" serves to mask the failures of the ruling parties and coalitions in addressing "real" problems such as the economy, social issues, and immigration control.

How Russia's Hybrid Tactics Weaponize Europe's Own Pacifist Traditions

If it is true that peace rhetoric pre-exists Russian hybrid tactics, it is politically weaponized and amplified by Moscow, ultimately serving Russian strategy.

Russian hybrid influence proceeds first by narrative selection. Russian information ecosystems select Western voices that already say that "NATO caused the war," "This is not our war," "Weapons prolong suffering," and "Money spent on defense or on helping Ukraine means less money for local needs," etc. Access to these media and narrative ecosystems is sometimes more important than financial support. Russian state media (RT, Sputnik) and the pro-Russian media space (alternative media ecosystems, social media, echo chambers, and influencers) disseminate these narratives, which are amplified by European actors who serve as vectors and are more effective. These voices are amplified, translated, and circulated as proof of "Western dissent."

> ***A general call for peace is reframed as acceptance of territorial concessions and the abandonment of security guarantees under the guise of realism. At this point, traditional pacifism becomes strategically aligned with Russian objectives.***

Russian hybrid influence does not create pacifism but drives its discursive radicalization. Moscow encourages European partner parties to move beyond pre-existing ideological affinities or soft alignment around calls for "ceasefire talks" toward more operational demands such as "stop arms deliveries immediately," and from appeals for "more diplomacy" to assertions that "Ukraine must compromise." In this process, a general call for peace is reframed as acceptance of territorial concessions and the abandonment of security guarantees under the guise of realism. At this point, traditional pacifism becomes strategically aligned with Russian objectives.

Additionally, Russian narratives encourage convergence between the far-left and the far-right despite ideological hostility. The key elements of the far-left ideology are anti-(Western) imperialism, anti-NATO, anti-U.S., and "peace." The far-right is more built on anti-liberalism, anti-multilateralism (EU, NATO), pro-sovereignty, and pro-"national interest." Russia does not unify them ideologically, but it synchronizes their outputs.

Russia also chooses the timing for escalation. In the first year of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the "peace with Russia" message was given a boost when the energy crisis, provoked by cutting the purchase of Russian gas, was supposed to hit the EU. The same resurgence occurred with inflation,

which surged to a record high of 9.2% in 2022. In the last two years (2024 and 2025), inflation rates returned to near-normal levels, pro-peace rhetoric progressively shifted toward "war fatigue" themes, which have now become dominant.

And last but not least, Russia's appeasement discourse is systematically revived whenever Moscow escalates its threats against the West. Repeated nuclear warnings issued by Russian officials, such as Dmitry Medvedev, or amplified by regime propagandists like Vladimir Soloviev and Dmitry Kiselev, are designed to deepen existing divisions within Western European societies. A generalized nuclear war remains highly improbable, as experts in nuclear deterrence broadly agree—a reality well understood by European political and military leaders, who therefore refrain from reacting to such verbal provocations. Nor do these threats resonate in Ukraine, where a society already at war has endured daily violence for nearly four years. The intended target, therefore, is Western public opinion. By stoking fear, Moscow seeks to prompt domestic pressure on European governments to curtail support for Ukraine and accommodate Russian demands. Much like a hostage-taker exploiting the psychology of fear to extract concessions, Russia expects that societies threatened with nuclear escalation will pressure their own leaders into compliance with Moscow's dictates.

Why "Peace" Became the Perfect Vector?

"Peace" is uniquely effective because, first of all, it is normatively unassailable and emotionally resonant. No serious political force can run a campaign against peace and in favor of war. Not everyone can be Winston Churchill, who said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat," or Giuseppe Garibaldi, who addressed his followers in Rome in 1849 with, "I offer you hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles and death." Times have changed, and bellicose discourse is no longer audible, especially given that the war outside Ukraine is essentially hybrid and difficult for many to grasp.

In democratic politics, this makes "pro-peace" rhetoric immune to moral criticism, resistant to factual rebuttal, and easily framed as common sense. Being simply pro-peace is politically low-cost because it allows parties to gain moral legitimacy while avoiding responsibility, risk, and strategic clarity. It requires no policy detail, no enforcement mechanism, no accountability for outcomes, and no responsibility if peace fails. In short, it functions as a form of political free-riding on the security provided by others.

> ***Supporting Ukraine is politically costly because it entails budgetary trade-offs, energy price volatility, defense spending, naming the aggressor, long-term strategic commitments, and voter fatigue. Hence, the asymmetry: those who defend Ukraine bear the costs; those who call for peace reap the moral credit.***

In contrast, supporting Ukraine is politically costly because it entails budgetary trade-offs, energy price volatility, defense spending, naming the aggressor, long-term strategic commitments, and voter fatigue. Hence, the asymmetry: those who defend Ukraine bear the costs; those who call for peace reap the moral credit.

In "pro-peace" discourse, strategic ambiguity is an electoral asset, which is why "pro-peace" talking heads consistently and deliberately avoid answering core questions about the terms of peace, the security guarantees, and the future of Ukrainian state sovereignty and territorial integrity. They also remain silent on what would happen if Russia refuses to stop the war. This ambiguity is not accidental; it is electorally functional. It allows parties

to address war fatigue, capture protest votes, and unite heterogeneous constituencies by casting a wide net of peace.

A key feature of contemporary "peace" rhetoric is the erasure of responsibility; this is peace without an aggressor and no (or displaced) agency. War becomes a tragedy, not a crime. A testament to this is Donald Trump's obsessive craze for "people dying" and "killings should stop," with established moral equivalence between the aggressor and the aggressed. In this discourse, violence becomes abstract, and the aggressor and the victim are moralized symmetrically. This framing lowers the cognitive burden on voters, avoids naming Russia explicitly, and peace becomes a psychological refuge from uncomfortable realities. But this works for the voters. One may reasonably question the sincerity of the lamentations over human lives expressed by political leaders who promote this reading of the conflict. Beyond electoral calculations, there also looms the prospect of material gains from future "deals" with the aggressor, including benefits from lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia.

> ***For many European parties, especially populist, far-right, or far-left actors, the war in Ukraine (in reality, a war in Europe) is framed as an externality. This "not our war" narrative is politically comfortable as it allows governing elites to be portrayed as diverting attention from pressing social concerns.***

For many European parties, especially populist, far-right, or far-left actors, the war in Ukraine (in reality, a war in Europe) is framed as an externality. This "not our war" narrative is politically comfortable as it allows governing elites to be portrayed as diverting attention from pressing social concerns. The war is described as an elite obsession, while "peace" serves as a euphemism for lower energy prices, greater social spending, and national prioritization. Of course, all is presented in general and loose terms, without providing concrete details. Ukraine's fate is treated as external to domestic political responsibility.

Pro-peace rhetoric allows anti-system parties to appear morally superior to governing elites. It provides an ideal instrument for attacking NATO, the EU, and so-called "globalist" forces, which are portrayed as constraining national sovereignty and imposing decisions from outside. It is both convenient and effortless, as it relieves proponents of the burden of expertise and strategic planning. Lastly, it mobilizes fear without proposing solutions. It is a perfect opposition posture: maximum rhetoric, minimum responsibility.

> ***History shows that peace without deterrence increases the risk of war.***

Unfortunately, history shows that peace without deterrence increases the risk of war. Politically low-cost peace rhetoric is strategically high-risk because it weakens deterrence, the only truly effective instrument for peace. It also signals the Western division, which encourages Russian maximalism. Russia has repeatedly interpreted Western weakness or fragmentation as an invitation to pursue increasingly aggressive policies, including outright invasions. This approach prolongs rather than shortens the war, yet its costs are deferred in time, diffuse, and externalized, which makes them politically invisible. Peace is popular, preparedness is not.

Peace As an Outcome, Not a Substitute

As noted earlier, the "pro-peace" positions of some European political forces are neither purely legitimate pacifism nor purely Russian manipulation.

They are hybrid phenomena where moral (left) or national interest (right) language masks power asymmetry. Peace rhetoric is politically weaponized, and, as agency remains Western, its consequences serve Russian strategy. European far-left and far-right "pro-peace" positions on Ukraine are best understood as endogenous ideological traditions that Russian hybrid methods have strategically activated, synchronized, and weaponized without fully controlling them. This is precisely why they are so effective and so difficult to counter.

By the 1930s, liberal and left pacifism increasingly collided with reality, and fear of casualties outweighed fear of dictatorship. Democracies like France and Britain were ready for "peace at almost any price," and it resulted in one of the most shameful moments of 20th-century Europe, the October 1938 Munich agreement and the acceptance of Nazi Germany's claims over Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland. Only a few months later, Hitler occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia, and less than a year later, he attacked Poland. Democracies hesitated to judge while aggressors framed themselves as "grievance bearers." Pacifism morphed into appeasement, often unintentionally, but with consequences, as it shaped the conditions under which aggressive revisionism could advance unchecked. The far-right pacifism also contributed to the rise of Hitler by advocating non-resistance to the newly rising German power and by accusing its enemies - liberals, Jews, and democrats - of wanting war.

The interwar experience showed that pacifism born of trauma can become politically disabling, and "never again war" can eclipse "never again aggression." It also showed that peace rhetoric can be both morally sincere and strategically exploitable. These dynamics resonate strongly with current European debates on Ukraine, deterrence, and rearmament.

History suggests that peace cannot be conjured by moral invocation alone. Today, in the war against Ukraine, "cheap peace" rhetoric risks repeating these patterns by offering moral comfort while eroding the conditions under which a just and durable peace might actually emerge.

> ***Peace remains a legitimate and necessary goal. But when it becomes a politically cost-free substitute for strategy, when it evades questions of agency, enforcement, security guarantees, and deterrence, it no longer constitutes a policy but rather a shelter from responsibility and, more troublingly, a signal that may encourage continued aggression.***

Peace remains a legitimate and necessary goal. But when it becomes a politically cost-free substitute for strategy, when it evades questions of agency, enforcement, security guarantees, and deterrence, it no longer constitutes a policy but rather a shelter from responsibility and, more troublingly, a signal that may encourage continued aggression. In Ukraine, as in earlier European crises, the uncomfortable truth is that peace is not achieved by wishing for it, but by sustaining the conditions that prevent aggression. Peace should be an outcome, not a substitute ■

Europe's Unfinished Architecture: Who is Prepared for the Next Security Shock?

Vladimir Putin's frustration with Russia's setbacks in Ukraine has not overshadowed his long-standing interest in undermining NATO's cohesion. On the contrary, there are growing concerns that this may now be the moment Moscow finds suitable for a limited, ambiguous hostile act against a NATO member, designed to probe whether the Alliance would respond collectively. Such an operation could involve a small-scale, deniable military incident or a multi-domain provocation that generates sufficient violence and confusion to constitute an armed attack while preserving plausible deniability.

Yet Allied assessments of the likelihood that Russia will pursue such a course vary widely. In the Baltic states, policymakers and society treat the possibility of Russian aggression as high and actively prepare for it, discussing these risks openly in daily life. However, in much of southern and western Europe, the idea that Russia might attack a NATO country is viewed as unrealistic or overstated.

> ***Only a clear Russian defeat in Ukraine can prevent further aggression in Europe.***

Whether Russia might attempt to strike a NATO member to test the Alliance's credibility, and what would guide the Kremlin's calculus in deciding whether such a move is worth the risks, remain open questions. What shapes Putin's assessment of escalation and de-escalation remains one of the most contested debates in global security today. Some argue that accommodating Russia's demands in Ukraine will satisfy Putin's ambitions and

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turn him into a constructive player. Others maintain that only a clear Russian defeat in Ukraine can prevent further aggression in Europe.

The answer depends on which European and transatlantic decision-making structures are prepared to recognize that such an attack would require a decisive response. If analysts focus only on conventional invasions or missile strikes on European capitals, escalation by Russia may appear irrational at this moment. But if the attack scenario involves cross-domain pressure, calibrated ambiguity, and gradual escalation toward a military incident, the outcome instead depends on the clarity of Allied red lines, the strength of military and civil preparedness, the resilience of societies under psychological pressure, and the extent to which Europe completes its unfinished security architecture before the next security shock arrives.

We should, therefore, turn to recent history, beginning with Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and its successive acts of aggression against Ukraine since 2014, as cases where deterrence failed to prevent the use of force and contrast them with the Baltic states, where deterrence has held so far. Taken together, these cases crystallize a central puzzle. Why did the Kremlin judge that it could attack Georgia and later Ukraine, yet refrain from similar action against Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania? If deterrence has worked in the Baltics to date, what has changed in the strategic and political environment that fuels growing fears of a possible Russian move against them?

Europe's Unfinished Security Architecture

Europe's eastern flank is entering a strategic turning point. Russian aggression, both military and hybrid, has forced front-line states to reconsider

whether deterrence by punishment alone can still guarantee security, or whether the region now requires sustained, defense-centered deterrence by denial. The question is not only what Russia might do next, but what kind of European and transatlantic architecture will confront that challenge. Europe clearly needs readiness and resolve, yet the design of its future security structure remains unresolved.

> ***The question is not only what Russia might do next, but what kind of European and transatlantic architecture will confront that challenge.***

At the heart of this problem lies a deep strategic uncertainty. Every sound strategy rests on explicit and shared assumptions. In the European case, many of the most basic assumptions remain contested or undefined. Will the United States remain the central security guarantor for Europe in the coming decade? If yes, in what form and with what political and military commitments? If not, who will shape the new European security architecture and how? What exactly does European defense mean in institutional terms? Does it encompass only the European Union and its member states, or does it also include the United Kingdom and other non-EU Allies within a broader constellation of actors? Who is setting the principles and institutional frameworks of this emerging architecture, at which decision-making tables, and through which political processes?

As Russian aggression continues to evolve, frontline states must decide whether or not to rely primarily on the threat of overwhelming retaliation or to invest much more heavily in deterrence by denial; that is, in making their territories and societies extremely difficult to coerce or subdue. The answer depends on the interaction of military capability, political signaling, societal resilience, and alliance cohesion. To understand how these elements come together in practice, we should first examine the evolving posture in the Baltic region and the debate on European strategic autonomy within the broader Euro Atlantic framework; second, we can turn to the case of Georgia and ask what the failures of deterrence in 2008 can tell us about current vulnerabilities and options for Ukraine, the Baltic Sea region and for Europe as a whole.

Posture and Decision-Making on the Baltic Frontline

Debates about the Baltic posture now unfold inside a transforming transatlantic context. The new United States National Security Strategy and the surrounding commentary mark a clear shift in how Washington conceives alliances. Clearly visible is the emphasis on sovereign power as the central organizing principle of foreign policy, and a deliberate reframing of Europe away from its long-standing supranational political project, up to and including an explicit disregard for or marginalization of the European Union as a strategic actor. These elements reveal a multilateral worldview centered on sovereign nation-states and transactional bilateralism, consciously detached from the normative and institutional frameworks that previously underpinned the liberal international order. For European allies, especially those on the eastern flank, this raises a fundamental problem. They can no longer assume that the United States' power will automatically anchor deterrence in the Baltic region as before.

> ***If Russia can stabilize the front in Ukraine on terms it deems acceptable and then return a reconstituted, battle-tested army to the eastern flank, the risk picture for the Baltic region will look very different from the assumption that Russia is too weak to threaten NATO territory.***

At the same time, Russia is not a static or permanently weakened actor. The war in Ukraine has imposed severe costs but has also driven a large-scale mobilization of resources and the militarization of the economy. The Russian budget for 2025 envisioned military spending accounting for approximately 40% of total state expenditure, a historically high level. The same 40% is true for the 2026 state budget. Most assessments suggest that Moscow intends to rebuild and modernize its armed forces by 2030, drawing on combat experience, large-scale production of drones and missiles, and lessons from high-intensity warfare. If Russia can stabilize the front in Ukraine on terms it deems acceptable and then return a reconstituted, battle-tested army to the eastern flank, the risk picture for the Baltic region will look very different from the assumption that Russia is too weak to threaten NATO territory.

These trends intersect with an ambitious but still incomplete European adaptation. The White Paper for European Defense and the Readiness Roadmap 2030 outline plans to move the European pillar from chronic underinvestment to a posture of genuine readiness. The White Paper presents a once-in-a-generation surge in defense investment under the ReArm Europe plan, aimed at closing critical capability gaps, rebuilding ammunition stocks, and establishing a strong and sufficient European defense posture by 2030, explicitly linked to support for Ukraine and the credibility of the transatlantic bargain. The Readiness Roadmap translates this into concrete flagship projects, such as the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Drone Defense Initiative, the European Air Shield, and the European Space Shield, all intended to strengthen situational awareness, air and missile defense, and the resilience of critical infrastructure, with particular relevance for the Baltic region.

Yet, these documents also expose the central dilemma of European strategic autonomy. If the United States remains engaged in Europe with substantial conventional and nuclear forces, these initiatives reinforce NATO and provide better burden sharing. If the United States' conventional presence is reduced or redirected, the same initiatives would have to serve as substitutes, at least in part, for the United States' strategic capabilities. That would mean Europeans not only spending more on national forces, but also assuming responsibility for long-range strikes, high-end air power, strategic transport, theatre missile defense, large-scale command and control, and the industrial base required to sustain a prolonged crisis in the Baltic area.

For the Baltic states, the practical question, therefore, is not abstract support for "more Europe" but whether the evolving European architecture can produce real capabilities, credible planning, and timely decision-making. The new roadmaps and white papers show that Brussels recognizes the scale of the challenge and is trying to inject coherence into defense industrial policy, procurement, and readiness. At the same time, foreign and security policy inside the European Union remains largely consensus-based with complex procedures and national veto points. As the failed deterrence in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates, in a cross-domain crisis involving calibrated Russian pressure against the Baltic region, when the aggressor moves at lightning speed, slow and contested decision-making would itself become a major vulnerability.

These variables and uncertainties compel the Baltic states to invest all available resources in comprehensive defense strategies that extend beyond traditional military planning. In addition to strengthening hard capabilities, Baltic governments are developing programs that integrate societal preparedness into national defense. This involves preparing societies to defend their countries if necessary, communicating existing threats clearly so that public opinion is adequately in-

formed and fostering citizen willingness to support sustained investment in defense arrangements. A recent example of this approach is Latvia's ambition to become a drone powerhouse in Europe. The initiative aims not only to expand national and regional unmanned aerial capabilities but also to develop education, industrial partnerships, workforce training, and civic engagement in technology and defense innovation. This reflects a broader understanding that modern deterrence and defense require both advanced capabilities and resilient societies prepared to respond collectively to an increasingly complex security environment.

> ***The debate about a European army functions as a proxy for deeper questions rather than as an immediate institutional project. A fully unified army would require pooling sovereignty over the use of force to a degree that few member states currently accept, even on the frontline.***

In this setting, the debate about a European army functions as a proxy for deeper questions rather than as an immediate institutional project. A fully unified army would require pooling sovereignty over the use of force to a degree that few member states currently accept, even on the frontline. In practice, given the scarcity of material and human resources, the likely path for the Baltic region is more incremental and more hybrid. It will rely on denser integration of national forces, framework nation concepts, forward-deployed units, and joint projects funded through European instruments, all nested within NATO planning. Whether this will be enough to deter a Russia that has rebuilt its forces and faces a more fragmented NATO and a transactional United States is precisely the uncertainty that raises the stakes and motivates a comparison with the cases of Georgia and Ukraine.

The Georgian Case of Failed Deterrence

The war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 was the first major test for Western deterrence and resolve after the Cold War and it revealed how quickly uncertainty, indecision, and unpreparedness can be turned into an opportunity for aggression. For Moscow, the conflict demonstrated that a calibrated use of force could alter borders, establish new facts on the ground, and still avoid a decisive Western military response. For Georgia, it marked a painful demonstration that political assurances without clear and credible guarantees do not deter a determined adversary.

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The August war did not appear out of nowhere. It arose from a prolonged period of tension over the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, combined with Russia's growing discomfort with Georgia's westward orientation. In the months before the conflict, Russia increased its presence in and around the separatist regions, conducted large exercises close to Georgian territory, and used strong rhetoric to frame Tbilisi as the source of instability.

A central turning point was the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Allies agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members in the future, but could not agree on a Membership Action Plan. The result was an ambiguous formula that signaled political support while withholding a concrete path or security guarantees. From Moscow's perspective, this mixture of promises and hesitation suggested that Georgia was important enough to provoke political debate, but not important enough to

trigger a firm and unified response if Russia used force. That impression, combined with unresolved conflicts on the ground, limited Georgian military capacity, and total absence of societal mobilization and engagement practices, encouraged the belief that a short, sharp intervention would be manageable.

The fighting lasted only a few days, yet the strategic effects have been long-lasting. Russian forces pushed Georgian units out of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, advanced into other parts of Georgia, and paralyzed key elements of its defense infrastructure. Shortly after the ceasefire, Russia recognized Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as independent states and entrenched its military presence there. For Georgia, this meant a permanent loss of control over parts of its territory and a constant security pressure along new dividing lines.

> ***The message the Kremlin received was loud and clear: limited use of force, combined with psychological warfare and sowing uncertainty through strong narratives about protecting compatriots and restoring order, could reshape the security environment without provoking a united and decisive response from the Euro-Atlantic community.***

Equally important were the political signals. The absence of any meaningful response from NATO and the European Union confirmed to Moscow that the costs of this operation would remain limited. Western governments condemned the intervention and launched symbolic diplomatic and economic measures. Still, the basic structure of the European security order insulated this clear act of military aggression as an isolated incident between the two neighbors. But the message the Kremlin received was loud and clear: limited use of force, combined with psychological warfare and sowing uncertainty through strong narratives about protecting compatriots and restoring order, could reshape the security environment without provoking a united and decisive response from the Euro-Atlantic community.

From Georgia to Ukraine and Beyond

The failure to deter Russia in Georgia became a stepping stone to the next phase of its strategy. Six years later, in 2014, Russia seized Crimea and fueled war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Once again, it used a blend of covert action, rapid military moves, and political narratives to present its intervention as a response to local grievances and Western encroachment. The pattern that had worked in Georgia was adapted to a much larger and more complex target.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented another qualitative leap. It showed that the Kremlin was willing to gamble on a major war in Europe to reassert its influence in its neighborhood. At each stage, the prior failure of deterrence lowered the perceived risks of the next step and encouraged raising the stakes even further. Georgia demonstrated that a limited war on the periphery could be tolerated. The attack on Ukraine in 2014 showed that salami tactics and ambiguous forces could be managed. The attack on Ukraine in 2022 tested whether a much larger use of force would still elicit a fragmented response.

The same logic underpins concerns about the future. If Russia concludes that it can secure gains in Ukraine, or at least avoid a clear defeat, the next rational step in its strategy is to test NATO's credibility. Such a test is unlikely to begin with tanks rolling openly into a Baltic capital. It is far more plausible that it would start with a cross-domain scenario in a border region with a large Rus-

sian-speaking population, combining disinformation, internal unrest, cyberattacks, pressure on infrastructure, and a staged incident involving unidentified armed groups or limited strikes on Allied territory. In other words, something very similar to the scenarios successfully rehearsed in Georgia and Ukraine.

Lessons for European Deterrence

> ***Once an adversary learns that aggression carries manageable costs, it is likely to apply the same method again in new forms and against new targets.***

The Georgian case and its lead into Ukraine speak directly to the Baltic context. It shows that political ambiguity, hesitant decision-making, and incomplete preparedness invite probing and escalation. It illustrates that declarations of eventual support are insufficient unless they are backed by actionable security guarantees that include visible forces, integrated planning, and clear strategic communication. It also demonstrates that once an adversary learns that aggression carries manageable costs, it is likely to apply the same method again in new forms and against new targets.

> ***The lesson from Georgia and from the path that led from Georgia to Ukraine is that deterrence cannot tolerate prolonged uncertainty and hesitation.***

For the Baltic states, the central question is whether they can avoid repeating the sequence experienced by Georgia and Ukraine. Membership in NATO and the European Union provides formal guarantees that Georgia lacked. Yet, the underlying variables that shaped Moscow's choices in 2008 and later in Ukraine remain: perceptions of allied cohesion, clarity of red lines, readiness of national forces, and resilience of societies under pressure. The lesson from Georgia and from the path that led from Georgia to Ukraine is that deterrence cannot tolerate prolonged uncertainty and hesitation. If Russia emerges victorious in Ukraine, or even manages to save face and find an off-ramp without paying a clear price for its aggression, the next arena for testing the Euro-Atlantic architecture will almost certainly be the regions where that architecture is most exposed, which makes the entire Eastern frontline central to any serious discussion of Europe's unfinished security architecture.

The lesson from Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 is that Russia advances when deterrence hesitates, when allies disagree on red lines, and when societies are unprepared for the political, informational, and military pressures that precede open conflict. At every stage, Moscow has acted not out of overwhelming strength but out of confidence that the response to its aggression would be fragmented, delayed, or constrained by ambiguity.

Whether or not such a test succeeds against NATO depends on the choices made now. The Baltic region is preparing with urgency, building comprehensive defense models that integrate societal resilience, territorial defense, and forward posture. Europe is reshaping its defense industrial and organizational landscape, albeit too slowly. The United States remains indispensable, yet increasingly unpredictable in its long-term commitments. Meanwhile, Russia, far from being permanently weakened, is rebuilding its forces, production lines, and ambitions for the coming decade.

History shows that the Kremlin exploits the moments when the West is uncertain about itself. The question that hangs over Europe today is simple. When the next security shock arrives, whether through a staged incident, a hybrid strike, or an escalation that tests NATO's credibility, will Eu-

rope respond with clarity, unity, and force, or will it relive the pattern that began in the Caucasus and expanded across the Black Sea? The answer will determine not only Russia's behavior but also whether Europe's unfinished security architecture can withstand the pressures already gathering on its eastern horizon ■

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 Georgia. 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.***

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. This model enables ruling elites to pit competing powers against one another or accommodate them through transactional deals while consolidating domestic control and insulating themselves from external scrutiny over democratic backsliding and human rights abuses. The result is a deliberate fusion of regime survival with the national interest, blurring the boundary between the state and the ruling elite.

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?

> ***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.***

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 conservative 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.

> ***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.***

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.

> ***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.***

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 ■

Asterix in MAGAland

The year is 2025 and Europe is facing "civilizational erasure." Well, not entirely... A small group of "patriotic parties" still holds out against the invaders. But life is not easy for the U.S. Ambassadors who try to fortify the garrisons of *AfD*, RN, and *Fidesz*...

This paraphrase of the opening lines of the *Asterix* comic book series, cherished by generations of European children, could easily fit the recently published U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS). While Anne Applebaum gloomily described it as "the longest suicide note in American history," it could easily be an animated superhero story, at times forceful and others naïve, shifting from pragmatic transactional specifics of trade to romanticized grounds of "Western civilization," interspersed with dystopian gloom of demographic collapse.

Yet, it struck a nerve in Europe. Gone are the days when the 2017 NSS of the first Trump administration declared: "We are bound together by our shared commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." In the renewed reading, those bonds remain – but the commitment is no longer shared.

Instead of abdication from Europe (which many feared), the U.S. is making the claim of taking the reins to direct Europe – beset by the lack of "civilizational self-confidence" – to a better place, that of "European Greatness."

That place, if we are to believe the Strategy, can be reached by "patriotic" parties firmly in power to leave behind the "unstable minority governments, many of which trample on basic principles of democracy to suppress opposition." New Europe that is composed of "aligned sovereign nations" instead of the supranational EU, which, in President Donald Trump's now famous dictum, was "formed in order to screw the U.S."

I Am So Bored With the U.S.A. (The Clash)

The irony is not lost on many Europeans. That kind of Europe – driven by patriotic pride and rivalries, unthinking about the controversies of its historical heritage – did indeed exist. That kind of Europe unleashed two self-destructive, monstrous world wars that not only led to the decline of European

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power but also dragged the previously isolationist United States deep into continental affairs as an external guarantor, shaping what some historians have called the "transatlantic century."

There is nothing natural about the European Union. Quite the contrary. As Mark Mazower convincingly demonstrated in his book *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, the nativist, sovereign, authoritarian, and totalitarian tradition is as "European" as the liberal democratic model we have come to associate with it. In fact, in 1921, a British scholar spoke about "universal acceptance of democracy as the normal and natural form of government." Neither ten years earlier nor ten years later was such universal acceptance apparent in Europe.

But after the horrors of World War II, then Europe "screwed itself over" to borrow Trump's colorful phrase, some Europeans decided to reach out to the dream, a peculiar (and very U.S.-inspired) idea of an economic and trade union fostering lasting peace outside the framework of nationalist rivalries. The security of this entity, which later became known as the European Union, was underwritten by the U.S., which felt it was in its interest to provide an ironclad security guarantee against the return of fascism and the menace of communism.

> ***This partnership – like any close partnership – was never without its grievances. The Americans have chided Europeans for military weakness and often fairly so.***

This partnership – like any close partnership – was never without its grievances. The Americans have chided Europeans for military weakness and often fairly so. After all, the European military power was insufficient to stop and contain a relatively minor conflagration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, with a leading German diplomat saying that "Kosovo was two or three sizes too big for us."

And yet, as the former French Ambassador to the U.S., Gérard Araud, noted in his recent interview, whenever the talk turned to more integrated European military cooperation – a standing French preference – it was the U.S. diplomats who were "in his face."

And while the evil tongues demeaned Western Europeans as "EU-nuchs," the excitement at the "butch" liberator GI was replaced by derision in Europe once Korea and, especially, Vietnam exposed the injustices of the new global power's overreach.

And if The Clash were "bored with the U.S.A." in 1977, that is because:

"*Yankee dollar talk to the dictators of the world*
In fact, it's giving orders, and they can't afford
to miss a word."

That sentiment persisted well into the 1990s and 2000s as many of Western Europe's citizens – if not the leaders – looked skeptically at the first Iraq war and clearly broke ranks with Washington, D.C. during the second.

It is one of politics' current great ironies that the MAGA criticism of the "neo-liberal" administrations' many wars is in complete concordance with the opinions of people derided as Europe's "woke Socialists."

Here We Go-Go-Go To the Temple of Consumption (Stakka Bo)

Yet the deeper controversy between Western Europeans and their transatlantic guardian was not about the army; it was always about culture, and specifically the culture of consumerism.

Long before the NSS expressed concern that "certain NATO members will become majority non-European," post-liberation France was already resisting American cultural influence, saying "Non!" to "Coca-Colonization" in 1947. True, the French Communists had their clearly partisan reasons to jump into the fray, but the more stolid French bureaucrats from the finances department advanced another argument: Coca-Cola had no value for France because it would enable the French people to form a new habit of drinking this beverage and, as a result, France would spend large amounts of dollars to import the ingredients, but all the profits would be repatriated, thus engendering a lasting economic dependency.

The time passed, and soon the Marshall Plan roared in U.S. goods and Hollywood spread its wares across the Old Continent. But the Euro-suspicion at the "Coca-Cola culture" of the United States remains just as potent today in some quarters. The left-leaning parties in Western Europe often bristle at "cultural imperialism" and while the French consume considerable amounts of U.S. beverages, the Gaullist French exception pops up everywhere – from the intent to create its own search engine to rival U.S. giants to insistence on the promotion of the French cinema – and now also streaming services – and ending with the considerable degree of military hardware self-sufficiency.

Yet, transporting the U.S. culture wars to the European terrain does not sit well with either Western European politicians or the wider public. On December 6, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau accused the EU of committing "civilizational suicide" through its policies and openly questioned whether "the great nations of Europe are our partners in protecting the Western civilization that we inherited from them."

That formula of "inheritance" rings as blatantly arrogant and untrue in Europe, especially when taken in the context of Vice President J.D. Vance's rousing cry of "You don't have to apologize for being White anymore" at the Turning Point USA (TPUSA) convention. Europe, at least for most

Western Europeans, is a spiritual child of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of the ideas of tolerance articulated by John Locke, Spinoza, and Rousseau. These values are set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, adherence to which is obligatory for membership of the European Union. Falling back into Christian identitarian nationalism sounds more than retrograde to their ears – it is downright reactionary and contrary to the European legal system to boot. But if things were so simple, one could argue that the European model of liberal government was bound to weather Trump's second term.

Falling back into Christian identitarian nationalism sounds more than retrograde to their ears – it is downright reactionary and contrary to the European legal system to boot. But if things were so simple, one could argue that the European model of liberal government was bound to weather Trump's second term.

Losing My Religion (R.E.M.)

Yet, it is not by accident that this article has focused on Western Europe so far because much of the wording and spirit of the new U.S. strategy is likely to find a higher degree of adhesion in the East. To begin with, only a small part of Central Europe identifies itself with the ideals of the Renaissance and "laicity." The nations born out of the collapse of the multinational Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires may not fundamentally disagree with the dictum of the French President François Mitterrand that "nationalism means war." Still, they believe in the just war of national liberation. Christianity, as an ethno-national and political identity marker, if not the actual religious sentiment, remained potent in opposition to the externally imposed communist regimes – think Poland.

As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have shrewdly noted, the Central and Eastern European states after 1989 were absorbed into a political vortex of imitation – their national project became the duplication of the Western European "normality" rather than a fully fledged project of a new life. This approach assumed the Westerners, their lifestyle, and their liberal institutions were somehow normatively "better" and the Eastern ones backward, worse, less valuable. The authors argue that populist leaders exploit the humiliation experienced by citizens who consider themselves "second-rate" Europeans after being expected to follow Western examples blindly. The core of their argument is that the "abhorrence of compulsory imitation is primary"—meaning that the primary driver of the populist backlash is the gut-level rejection of having to be an inferior copy. The political and intellectual arguments against the Western model are seen as just a convenient excuse or merely secondary and collateral.

One cannot help but notice that the diverging political streams brought to the surface of U.S. political life by MAGA share the "humiliation-driven repudiation of liberal ideas" with Eastern Europeans. The declarations that chimed with the tenor of J.D. Vance's rallying cry – "You don't have to apologize for being White anymore" – were omnipresent at the recent TPUSA gathering, and they do draw on the reservoir of dismay at humiliation – real or imagined.

Just as Viktor Orbán turned his coat from a Soros-bred liberal young leader to become the standard-bearer of illiberalism at the back of economic collapse, the *Rassemblement Nationale* (RN) in France is finding its electoral revival not in the racist and nationalists circles but among farmers, urban poor irrespective of their race, and middle-class French who fear "*déclassement*" – descent on the social ladder. And the *Alternative for Germany* (*AfD*) is feeding on the humiliation of the failed "catching up" of Eastern Germany.

The U.S. turn onto the familiar grounds of populist Christian nationalism, executive and security overreach of the Trump administration, is likely the death knell of the erstwhile aspirational "normality" of liberal institutions. To paraphrase Dostoevsky's dictum (so beloved by Bolsheviks), with nothing to imitate, everything is allowed.

Should We Stay or Should We Go? (The Clash)

The European liberal project thus risks being caught in a dangerous pincer movement – the U.S. adopting the relatively marginal European ideas of illiberalism and "Great Replacement Theory," which draws instinctive acclaim (or at least not automatic rejection) in Europe's East and generates a sense of the rising tide of European illiberal parties.

Yet, what is illiberalism, and how can it be defined? The RN in France, the *AfD* in Germany, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) in Austria, the *Fratelli d'Italia* (*FdI*) in Italy, the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (*PiS*) in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary share tactical and narrative similarities, but they are also distinct enough not to sit around the same political table at the European Parliament. All of them work within their national contexts, and being pro-MAGA may work for Orbán, but it definitely is not playing in Paris with Marine Le Pen and the heir apparent, Jordan Bardella, distancing themselves from Washington. Giorgia Meloni manages to govern the country with a mix of conservative and right-wing policies, without virulent Euroscepticism and, in particular, without adopting the pro-Russian tendencies of the RN and the *AfD*.

An inclusive definition of anti-liberalism developed by Zsolt Enyedi provides good grounds for defining this movement in a manner that encompasses its divergent strands. According to this model, illiberalism is literally the opposite of liberalism and rests on three tenets: the concentration of power (rejecting constraints of checks on the executive, undermining independent institutions), a partisan state (the imposition of the cultural standards of the dominant group and favoring it in distributive conflicts, depriving minority groups of resources for participation in democratic deliberations), and a closed society (resistance to social change perceived as externally generated and opposition to universalist norms). The author notes that "illiberalism is not a specific ideology but a syndrome whose common core is the questioning of liberal democracy."

> ***In the coming years, the European Union will have to counter this broadside against its fundamental principles, which – whatever the MAGA leaders claim – would destroy the EU as we know it.***

The 2025 NSS clearly seeks to encourage this "syndrome" in Europe and to lead the charge to promote its tenets – it is no accident that the Old Continent is mentioned nearly 50 times in the document. In the coming years, the European Union will have to counter this broadside against its fundamental principles, which – whatever the MAGA leaders claim – would destroy the EU as we know it.

The meta-level confrontation will be on principle and vision, and the first developments of 2026 already give ample pretext. Washington's lightning-fast intervention into Venezuela to kidnap the local dictator Nicolás Maduro may not have raised more than a formalistic ripple in Europe, and EU foreign policy chief Kaya Kallas was quite restrained in her response on behalf of 26 states (Hungary habitually apart).

Yet what worries European capitals are three principled things combined: the lack of reference in

the U.S. administration's statements to an orderly democratic transition or support to Venezuela's democratic opposition; the failure of the U.S. President's Administration to follow the appropriate domestic democratic procedures (lack of formal notification to Congress and the failure to involve the Gang of Eight); and the parallel resuscitation of the talk about capturing Greenland. "We do need Greenland, absolutely," President Trump told The Atlantic, triggering an angry response from Greenland and Denmark's Prime Minister. But over a practical matter of Greenland, the larger question looms – would the U.S. continue to be a democratic ally?

But a more practical, tactical battlefield of contestation is also clearly sketched:

- **The Digital Services Act** and broader European protections on its digital market are being targeted to allow U.S. companies a free rein in the market, but also to encourage political interference through platforms like Elon Musk's X. The Trump administration's sanctioning of the former commissioner Thierry Breton on Christmas Eve is just a symbolic opening salvo, which points to the intensity of the debate.

- **Strategic Balance with Russia** – The NSS clearly intends to end the war in Ukraine as soon as possible, even if at the expense of Kyiv and European interests. This is another ironic reversal of roles: before the war started, a similar position was more often heard from Paris and Berlin. But the brutal war has changed the calculation; Europe can no longer conceive Russia as a partner, and the territorial dismemberment of Ukraine, which now seems inevitable, represents a clear threat to the sovereignty of the European nations. In this sense, the Eastern European nationalists – traditionally ardent Atlanticists – find themselves in a tight spot.

- **Social Model of Inclusion** – The anti-immigration and anti-universalist stance of the illiberal media is fueling the "entryism" of the illiberal forces in Europe. The transfer of U.S. culture wars to European soil could become extremely destabilizing, given the reach of social media, and especially as the U.S. and its situational allies are waging a quiet battle against established public broadcasters. The Trump administration's legal challenge to the BBC, concurrent with the amplification of GB News as an alternative, the pressure on the French Public Broadcaster from the empire of media mogul Vincent Bolloré and his allies from the RN are good examples of how the interests of the local illiberal forces converge with those across the Atlantic.

Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

Georgia's current regime is closely aligned with the illiberal tenets as described above. The concentration of power is extreme, and the partisan state is being consolidated further. The discourse of majority rule and authority over liberty is permeating the political field through loyal media. Independent groups are starved of funding and platforms to participate in what remains of the democratic process. The Georgian Dream government is at the forefront of states that advocate for a closed society. PM Irakli Kobakhidze recently stated that there is "no such thing as civil society" and that all bodies that claim that name are externally funded by malicious actors, including the "American and European bureaucracies."

With the 2025 NSS, Georgia's liberal actors must take note that the consolidation of the illiberal discourse is now a transatlantic phenomenon. The instinctive Americanism of the Georgian pro-democratic elites - once again evident in their reactions to Venezuela – is becoming hard to recognize with their liberal beliefs. Yet, Europe does not and, at this stage, cannot present itself as an alternative security shield from the existential danger of Russia.

The pragmatic political reckoning must take into account that in the world redesigned under the illiberal doctrine, the weakening of the international normative framework and the reemergence of trade-offs among the major powers as key structuring elements of the global system have sealed the fate of small states and nations like Georgia. They are forever bound to be subjugated by regional powers, and Georgia's history has traditionally led to the country being absorbed in whole or in part.

> ***If there is a place where the sovereign equality of states still matters, it is within the EU, and Georgia must not only seek to integrate with that place but contribute to constructing it with its own insights and checkered democratic experience.***

Political solidarity with those political forces in Europe that are committed to the European liberal idea and practice is thus not a fleeting ideological preference, but an existential imperative for Georgian political forces. If there is a place where the sovereign equality of states still matters, it is within the EU, and Georgia must not only seek to integrate with that place but contribute to constructing it with its own insights and checkered democratic experience ■

EU Enlargement: Can the Union Deliver on Its Own Timelines?

European Union enlargement did not return to the political agenda because Brussels suddenly rediscovered its transformative mission. It returned because Russia's war against Ukraine forced a strategic choice. When Russian tanks and soldiers crossed into Ukraine in February 2022, enlargement re-emerged as a tool to strengthen the long-term resilience of Europe's eastern flank, simultaneously signaling deterrence toward Moscow, incentivizing Kyiv, and repositioning the European Union as a security actor. Within 96 hours of the invasion, Ukraine submitted its application for EU membership, which at the time was viewed as a demonstration of European unity. This move, unprecedented in both speed and political symbolism, fundamentally altered the trajectory of EU enlargement.

Ukraine's application triggered immediate repercussions beyond its borders. Moldova and Georgia followed by submitting their own applications, while the long-dormant enlargement agenda for the Western Balkans regained political relevance. For the first time in years, EU enlargement ceased to be a technocratic exercise as evidenced by lightning-fast (by European standards) Commission opinions, questionnaires, and other EU decisions. This shift was openly acknowledged at the highest political level. As EU High Representative Kaja Kallas stated, enlargement is "not a 'nice to have,' it is a necessity if we want to be a stronger player on the world stage."

This new enlargement momentum also extended the EU's political horizon beyond the Black Sea. Granting Georgia a European perspective and, later, candidate status, in a geopolitical move signaled a willingness to rethink not only the pace of enlargement but also its geographical and strategic scope. Enlargement became increasingly embedded in the Union's broader geopolitical positioning as a peace project for a wider continent.

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However, as enlargement returned to the continent's political agenda and expectations rose on all sides, long-standing questions of credibility, absorption capacity, budget, and political sustainability once again came to the fore of the debate. The ability to answer these questions will now determine the fate of the enlargement process, either bringing it to a logical end in the near future or reinforcing the view that the EU's enlargement capacity is long exhausted and now a mere rhetorical exercise rather than a potent geopolitical instrument of transformation and resilience.

> ***EU's enlargement capacity is long exhausted and now a mere rhetorical exercise rather than a potent geopolitical instrument of transformation and resilience.***

Renewed Momentum and Differentiated Progress

The current enlargement wave encompasses ten countries at varying stages of readiness. Among them, Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, and Ukraine are generally viewed as the most advanced. Compared to the preceding 15 years, the process is unfolding at an accelerated pace. Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos has openly referred to potential timelines, noting that "if we finish the technical part of the accession negotiations in 2026, then in 2028 we could get the 28th member of the EU. Albania could join as the 29th member in 2029."

Such explicit political signaling marks a departure from the EU's previous caution in setting timelines. The European Commission's most recent enlargement communications explicitly reference target dates. In contrast, the EU Presidency conclusions on enlargement in December 2025 announced the establishment of an Ad Hoc Working Party to draft Montenegro's Accession Treaty. The Commission further assessed that Montenegro and Albania could realistically conclude accession negotiations by 2026 and 2027, respectively, provided reform momentum is sustained. Ukraine and Moldova have indicated their ambition to close negotiations by the end of 2028.

However, the revival of deadlines also reopens unresolved questions about credibility. The EU's 2018 Western Balkans strategy had suggested a 2025 membership perspective for Montenegro and Serbia, contingent on sustained reforms and political will. Those expectations were not met, leaving behind skepticism both within candidate countries and among EU citizens. The failure to honor earlier timelines entrenched a perception of the systematic shifting of goals whereby compliance with ever-expanding conditions did not translate into political rewards. In such a setting, new deadlines risk being read less as commitments than as tactical declarations, helpful in managing expectations but reversible when domestic constraints or internal EU divisions prevail. Timelines can mobilize reforms, but they also risk accelerating disillusionment when promises once again outpace delivery, a routine practice in the Balkans.

Public Opinion and the Geopolitical Logic of Enlargement

Unlike earlier enlargement rounds, the current process enjoys relatively solid public backing within the EU. As of September 2025, 56% of EU citizens expressed support for further enlargement. Support is particularly strong among younger generations, with nearly two-thirds of respondents aged 15-39 favoring enlargement once candidates meet the required criteria. Nevertheless, public opinion remains fragmented with lower levels of support in Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and France.

From a strategic standpoint, Brussels and eager capitals increasingly frame enlargement as a re-

sponse to geopolitical competition and Russian encroachment. EU policymakers openly acknowledge that prolonged stagnation in the accession process risks creating a strategic vacuum in the Union's neighborhood, which Russia, China, or other external actors could exploit. This logic has gained additional traction as Donald Trump gradually recalibrates U.S. engagement in Europe. As outlined in the U.S. National Security Strategy, Washington seeks to prevent NATO from being perceived as a perpetually expanding alliance.

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In this context, the EU's role as a stabilizing force becomes more pronounced. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen argued: "In the age of geostrategic rivalries, a larger European Union gives us a stronger voice in the world." Enlargement is, therefore, increasingly justified not only on normative grounds, but as a strategic investment in European security and influence.

Higher Expectations and No Shortcuts

Despite the renewed political momentum, the European Union has been explicit that enlargement will remain a strict, merit-based process. According to Kaja Kallas, the EU "will not cut corners" and "does not offer shortcuts" even if membership by 2030 is described as a realistic objective for some candidates. The Copenhagen criteria—democracy, rule of law, human rights, and an independent judiciary—remain the cornerstone of the accession process.

For candidate countries, this translates into heightened scrutiny and more demanding conditionality. The EU has drawn lessons from democratic backsliding observed in several Central European states following the 2004 enlargement. As a result, future Accession Treaties are expected to include stronger safeguards against post-accession regression and explicit requirements to render reforms irreversible.

At the same time, differentiation among candidates has become increasingly pronounced. Montenegro and Albania are institutionally advanced and politically aligned with EU priorities. Ukraine and Moldova benefit from strong geopolitical support but face extraordinary challenges related to war, security, and internal political resilience. Georgia's accession path, by contrast, has stalled amid tensions between its political leadership and the EU, placing it outside the grouping of Eastern Partnership frontrunners.

This differentiation complicates the EU's traditional regional approach to enlargement. While regional frameworks were designed to prevent fragmentation and rivalry, the current context makes uniform progress increasingly unrealistic. Managing these asymmetries without undermining fairness or credibility remains a central challenge for the enlargement policy.

Governance and Decision-Making

One of the most significant challenges for the European Union in the context of enlargement concerns its governance and decision-making capacity. Although the Lisbon Treaty reduced the scope of unanimity voting, consensus remains the dominant mode of operation within both the Council and the European Council. This practice, rooted in political culture rather than legal obligation, has increasingly limited the Union's ability to act decisively.

Key policy areas in the EU, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy, taxation, enlarge-

ment, treaty change, and the Multiannual Financial Framework, still require unanimity. Between 2011 and 2025, 46 vetoes were exercised by 15 member states across 38 policy issues, with nearly one-third occurring in the last 18 months. Hungary alone accounted for 19 vetoes, followed by Poland (7 vetoes) and other countries (2 or 1 vetoes). Enlargement and sanctions have been among the most affected areas.

> ***This pattern has fueled concerns that a larger Union could become increasingly paralyzed. Vetoes are no longer exceptional instruments but are increasingly used as leverage in broader political bargaining.***

This pattern has fueled concerns that a larger Union could become increasingly paralyzed. Vetoes are no longer exceptional instruments but are increasingly used as leverage in broader political bargaining. Enlargement, in this environment, risks becoming hostage to bilateral disputes or domestic political agendas.

Debates on institutional reform have, therefore, resurfaced. Proposals range from expanding Qualified Majority Voting and invoking passerelle clauses to more controversial ideas such as temporary accession without voting rights. The latter, however, has encountered strong resistance from candidate countries. Montenegro's Deputy Prime Minister, Filip Ivanović, has warned that "accession without full voting rights would be hardly acceptable."

This approach also raises several substantive concerns. It offers no guarantee that member states currently using veto power to block decision-making would refrain from doing so even if new members were temporarily deprived of voting rights. Moreover, such an arrangement could conflict with EU law by undermining the principle of equality among member states. It would also risk placing new members in a position where they are expected to implement EU decisions without being able to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process. Further questions of democratic representation arise as MEPs and ministers from future member states would be unable to fully represent their citizens within EU institutions. Finally, concerns of fairness persist as these states would be excluded from shaping discussions on future enlargement rounds or treaty reform processes.

Budgetary Pressures, Absorption Capacity, and Public Perception

Financial considerations represent another major challenge for the European Union. Enlargement is frequently portrayed as a costly undertaking that would strain the EU budget and disproportionately burden current member states. However, empirical analyses suggest that these fears are often overstated.

Studies indicate that while some net beneficiary states might receive slightly reduced allocations following enlargement, the overall impact would be modest. In the long term, enlargement tends to generate economic benefits through expanded markets, increased investment, and higher productivity. From a macroeconomic perspective, previous enlargement rounds have contributed positively to the Union's overall growth.

The more significant challenge lies in public perception. According to Eurobarometer data, 67% of EU citizens feel poorly informed about enlargement. This information gap has enabled the dissemination of disinformation and fear-based narratives. As of September 2025, the most common public concerns related to enlargement were uncontrolled migration, corruption and organized crime, and costs to taxpayers.

In parallel, enlargement raises legitimate questions about the EU's absorption capacity. Integrating large

and economically diverse countries—particularly Ukraine—would have far-reaching implications for cohesion policy, agricultural funding, and regional development. Addressing these issues requires early, transparent debate rather than postponement until accession is imminent.

Domestic Politics and Electoral Constraints

Domestic political dynamics within EU member states constitute the third major challenge to enlargement. The rise of far-right and Eurosceptic parties has narrowed the political space for enlargement-friendly policies. These actors frequently frame enlargement as a threat to national sovereignty, economic stability, and social cohesion.

Electoral cycles further complicate decision-making. France's presidential election in 2027 coincides with key phases of the enlargement process. Under Article 88-5 of the French Constitution, any treaty authorizing the accession of a new state to the European Union must be submitted to a referendum by the President of the Republic unless both chambers of Parliament approve it by a three-fifths majority. While the 2008 constitutional revision provides an alternative to a popular vote, the possibility of a referendum introduces political uncertainty and may incentivize caution in ratifying accession treaties.

Germany faces different, but comparable, pressures. While referendums are not constitutionally required, declining public support for enlargement and the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany party constrain political leadership. In this context, governments may recognize the strategic necessity of enlargement while hesitating to defend it openly.

These domestic dynamics reveal a central paradox: enlargement is increasingly justified on geopolitical grounds, yet its success depends on sustained domestic political consent. Without proactive leadership and public engagement, enlargement risks being undermined from within.

Enlargement as a Test of European Cohesion

The war in Ukraine decisively returned EU enlargement to the political agenda, transforming it from a long-neglected policy into a strategic imperative. Ukraine's application reshaped not only its own European trajectory but also the prospects of Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans. Yet, the renewed momentum has also exposed enduring structural weaknesses within the enlargement framework.

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Accelerated timelines, heightened expectations, and unprecedented geopolitical urgency characterize today's enlargement process. Candidate countries face stricter conditionality and demands for irreversible reforms, while differentiation among candidates has become unavoidable. At the same time, the European Union confronts governance constraints, budgetary debates, and domestic political pressures that increasingly shape enlargement outcomes.

Proposals such as accession without voting rights illustrate the depth of concern regarding institutional capacity. Yet, their rejection underscores the EU's continued commitment to equality among member states—a principle enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Enlargement re-

mains, fundamentally, a two-way process. Candidate countries must demonstrate credible reform and political will, while the EU must show strategic leadership, institutional adaptability, and the ability to communicate honestly with its citizens.

> ***Enlargement today is not merely about expanding borders; it is about defining the future political shape, credibility, and resilience of the European Union.***

Whether the current window of opportunity leads to a successful enlargement wave will depend less on external circumstances than on the Union's capacity to reconcile ambition with cohesion. Enlargement today is not merely about expanding borders; it is about defining the future political shape, credibility, and resilience of the European Union. The EU enlargement process is a test for both accession countries, which must demonstrate their genuine interest in implementing reforms, and for the European Union, which must prove that the process is credible ■

Weaponization of Poverty – A Primary Tool for Regime Survival in Georgia

A recent research project by the Eastern Neighborhood Bulletin examined why the Georgian Dream remained in power following Georgia's contested October 2024 parliamentary elections, the subsequent November-December protest wave, and ongoing protests throughout 2025. Drawing on structured reflections from the experts on Georgian politics based in Georgia, Europe, and the United States, the study sought to identify the factors that prevented mass mobilization from escalating into a regime-threatening crisis.

Across the assessments, several converging explanations emerged. First, analysts consistently pointed to the fragmentation, strategic incoherence, and limited societal legitimacy of the opposition spectrum, which proved unable to transform protest energy into sustained political pressure or a credible alternative political project. Second, experts highlighted the Georgian Dream's extensive institutional capture and coercive capacity, including control over the judiciary, law enforcement, electoral administration, media, and local governments, enabling the regime to combine selective repression and legal harassment. Third, many emphasized heterogeneous public opinion, particularly the divide between protest dynamics in Tbilisi and more risk-averse regional constituencies that are more susceptible to regime propaganda. Finally, several contributors underscored the limited effectiveness of international pressure, noting that Western sanctions and diplomatic measures remained fragmented, delayed, and insufficient to meaningfully disrupt the regime's material foundations.

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Taken together, these explanations are valuable and we have analyzed many of them on the pages of *GEOpolitics* over the past two years. However, they do not tell the full story.

I argue that the primary reason the Georgian Dream remained in power is the economy. On the one hand, the Georgian Dream has managed to maintain economic growth, largely based on tourism, shady trade with Russia, and the growing tech sector. These factors have been addressed elsewhere in the findings of Gnomon Wise and Fact-Check Georgia. However, in addition to the economic growth, which allows the Georgian Dream to score propaganda points, the primary reason for its political survival is the ability to weaponize the economy, and more importantly, to weaponize poverty.

The Georgian Dream's survival can only be fully understood when examining how poverty, economic precarity, and selective growth are deliberately weaponized to stabilize authoritarian rule. Beyond repression and institutional capture, the regime has systematically transformed social policy, employment dependence, regional inequality, and fear of material loss into mechanisms of political obedience. In contexts where large segments of the population rely on state-mediated access to jobs, healthcare, subsidies, and informal economic protection, political loyalty is increasingly enforced through material vulnerability.

> ***The Georgian Dream's survival can only be fully understood when examining how poverty, economic precarity, and selective growth are deliberately weaponized to stabilize authoritarian rule.***

Georgia is Poor, but Growing

Georgia's recent macroeconomic performance, which the Georgian Dream often takes pride in, is outstanding, but it still reflects a low-income, poor European society in lived terms. Georgia's real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 7.2% in November 2025, compared to the same month last year, according to data released by the National Statistics Office (GeoStat) on 31 December. In 2025, Georgia's economy grew by 7% (per EBRD assessment), and it is expected to grow by 5% in 2026. Between 2019 and 2025, Georgia's nominal GDP nearly doubled and is projected to exceed GEL 100 billion in 2025, while GDP per capita is expected to exceed USD 10,000, a claim recently highlighted by Georgian Dream's Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze.

On paper, the figures appear impressive; however, they obscure poverty, which becomes apparent when either juxtaposed with European figures or analyzed more deeply. Georgia's GDP per capita of USD 9,241.5 in 2024 was less than one-quarter of the EU average of USD 43,145. Moreover, rapid growth from a low base of 9.7% in 2024 and around 7% in 2025 can generate record propaganda headlines while leaving most households materially insecure. GeoStat's own welfare indicators confirm this: 9.4% of the population lived below the absolute poverty line in 2024, with poverty sharply regionalized (11.9% in rural areas versus 7.8% in urban ones).

If one looks at the share of the population, median consumption figures below 60% (or at risk of poverty) are even more telling. At no point during the Georgian Dream's tenure has it come below 18.9% (2024), with the highest being 22.3% in 2017. Compared with the EU average at-risk-of-poverty rate of 16.1%, this number is relatively high. Methodological differences aside, the direction of the comparison is telling. Georgia's relative poverty rate (18.9%) is already higher than the EU's income-based at-risk-of-poverty rate of around 16%. Importantly, Georgian numbers are measured using a consumption-based methodology, which, in countries with large informal sectors and high reliance on remittances, typically dampens the measured extent of poverty relative to income-based metrics. Consumption smooths volatility and often masks underlying income insecurity. If Georgia were measured using the EU's stricter income-based, equivalized disposable income methodology, the share of the population falling below the 60% threshold, or being at risk of poverty, would be remarkably higher than the headline consumption-based figure suggests.

> ***In practical terms, this level of inequality means that GDP growth does not translate smoothly into welfare gains for the median household, exposing these families to political pressure.***

The same pattern is evident in Georgia's Gini coefficient of 0.36 (just 0.03 points better than the 2013 value), which indicates that the income inequality is moderate but clearly significant, well beyond what would be considered egalitarian, and high enough to have visible social and political consequences. This indicates that economic growth is unevenly distributed: gains are disproportionately captured by higher-income groups while large segments of the population experience limited improvements in living standards. In practical terms, this level of inequality means that GDP growth does not translate smoothly into welfare gains for the median household, exposing these families to political pressure.

These vulnerabilities are visible in day-to-day household arithmetic. GeoStat reported average monthly income per capita of GEL 590 in 2024, alongside an average monthly nominal wage of GEL 1,970.8 - numbers that can rise while still pro-

ducing a society where saving, exit options, and risk-taking are limited for hundreds of thousands of Georgians. And the classic "Engel's law" signal of poverty - how much of a household budget goes to food - remains severe. A 2024 ISET policy paper noted that food and non-alcoholic beverages accounted for roughly 43% of household consumption spending in 2023 (after peaking earlier) compared with 14.8% in the EU (2021) and 25% in Romania.

Similarly, the analysis of the evolution of the subsistence minimum in GEL from 2022 to 2025 for both a working-age male and an average consumer shows a clearly upward trend, reflecting a steady increase in the cost of living. While the subsistence minimum for a working-age male stood at approximately GEL 226 at the beginning of 2022, it had risen to approximately GEL 292 by mid-2025. For the average consumer, the corresponding increase is from roughly GEL 200 to about GEL 255. This data indicates a sustained rise in basic living costs, suggesting that households require progressively higher incomes merely to meet minimum subsistence needs. And even if the numbers are unrealistic, as one cannot possibly survive on a meager USD 85 per month in Georgia, the numbers show that the life of an average Georgian is far from being well-off.

> ***In EU member states, parliamentary salaries are typically four to seven times the average pension; in Georgia, a member of parliament earns approximately 30 times the average pension, a ratio that attests to the ruling elite's insulation from the material realities of society.***

Poverty in Georgia is also structurally embedded in the country's pension system, which functions as a mechanism of economic discipline over one of the most politically sensitive and active groups - older voters. While the average monthly salary is approximately GEL 2,200, the average state pension is GEL 350 (GEL 400 for those aged 70 and over), indicating that pensions account for only 18% of the average wage. Such a ratio is extraordinarily low by European standards and has no real analogue within the EU, where pension replacement rates are substantially higher. This gap shows that pensioners are treated as a residual social category rather than as citizens entitled to income security. The disparity becomes even more striking when elite compensation is considered. In EU member states, parliamentary salaries are typically four to seven times the average pension; in Georgia, a member of parliament earns approximately 30 times the average pension, a ratio that attests to the ruling elite's insulation from the material realities of society.

This pension structure must be viewed within a broader demographic and socio-economic context. According to official data, Georgia has 881,000 minors with no independent income, 213,700 unemployed adults, and 864,300 pensioners living largely on pensions of approximately GEL 400 per month. In addition, 314,000 wage earners receive less than GEL 1,200 per month, and 127,000 earn less than GEL 600. In total, more than 2.3 million people - over 60% of the population - either have no income or live on extremely low and unstable earnings. For pensioners in particular, this creates a condition of permanent vulnerability: even small discretionary increases to pensions, seasonal bonuses, or symbolic indexation measures can have disproportionate political effects. In such an environment, pensions become a tool of political management, reinforcing risk aversion, discouraging protest participation, and anchoring electoral loyalty among voters for whom any disruption, real or perceived, threatens basic survival.

This logic is reinforced by a wider pattern of electoral instrumentalization of social assistance. The

analysis of the increase in social assistance shows that the number of recipients of subsistence allowances systematically increases in the months preceding elections and declines afterward, a trend observed across multiple electoral cycles since 2008. While governments justify these fluctuations through methodological updates or crisis responses, the consistency of the pattern raises strong grounds for political inference: social assistance is not merely expanded in times of need, but selectively activated as an electoral resource. In this context, low pensions are not an accident of underdevelopment but part of a broader governance model in which poverty is managed, calibrated, and periodically alleviated in ways that maximize political leverage.

> ***Low pensions are not an accident of underdevelopment but part of a broader governance model in which poverty is managed, calibrated, and periodically alleviated in ways that maximize political leverage.***

Public-Sector Jobs as Administrative Resources

A central and often underappreciated pillar of the Georgian Dream's resilience is the political economy of public-sector employment, particularly outside Tbilisi, where the state (and the municipality) is frequently the largest and most stable employer. Multiple independent trackers have documented both the scale and the growth of this ecosystem. According to reporting based on the IDFI's analysis, 320.5 thousand people worked as civil servants in 2023, a record high compared with the previous decade. In parallel, the country has seen a steady expansion of employment through state-affiliated legal entities—LEPLs and N(N)LEs—which are structurally well-suited for politically loyal hiring, particularly when staffing is done through more flexible (and less merit-based) arrangements.

This matters because municipal LEPLs/NNLEs operate as a regional patronage mesh: they distribute salaries, contracts, and informal status through local networks that are easier to monitor and mobilize than private employment. A Fact-Check review of Finance Ministry execution data highlights that employment and wage spending in LEPLs/NNLEs has been on an upward trend and notes that non-staff (contract) hiring, procedurally easier than competitive staffing, has grown especially sharply since 2020, including a notable jump in 2022 (+7,745; +15.3% y/y). Moreover, the State Audit Office findings have repeatedly flagged that municipalities created entities whose necessity was weakly justified, with duplicated functions and unreasonably high headcounts, a pattern consistent with using these bodies as political and electoral infrastructure rather than service-delivery instruments.

Finally, this "administrative resource" is reinforced not only by headcount but by regularized pay rises that increase the opportunity cost of dissent. Transparency International Georgia's analysis of the 2026 draft budget indicates a baseline pay increase from GEL 1,460 to GEL 1,600 (≈10%), resulting in an additional GEL 385 million in annual labor remuneration and raising total wage spending in the budget to GEL 3.4 billion. GeoStat data also shows public-sector earnings rising (+13.0% in 2024 vs 2023). Taken together, this is not just a "big government" but a weaponization of poverty, particularly in regions where employment in LEPLs/NNLEs can be expanded, renewed, or withdrawn, and where salary policy can be timed and framed as benevolence, thereby converting economic vulnerability into political obedience.

In Georgia's regions, the public sector is often the main source of stable income, status, and day-to-day security. That makes it uniquely political. Education is the clearest example because of its scale

and its hierarchical management chain. GeoStat reports that 66,000 teachers were employed in general education institutions at the start of the 2024/2025 school year (up 3.7% year-on-year). Teachers are also embedded in a dense "local influence" ecosystem - schools, kindergartens, municipal social services - where reputations travel fast, and informal pressure is easy to apply. And unlike many private-sector jobs, these positions are often tied (directly or indirectly) to the Georgian Dream's gatekeeping: contracts, attestations, workload allocation, bonuses, and institutional "discipline."

This is where regional education resource centers matter politically. Formally, resource centers are territorial arms of the Ministry of Education that monitor schools and the learning process and oversee implementation tasks within their area. In practice, that monitoring function creates an administrative ladder through which pressure can be transmitted downward, especially in small towns where "a school job" is a household's main safety net. The risk is highly practical: Georgian watchdogs have long documented the politicization of educational administration, including controversies surrounding politically motivated dismissals involving ministry territorial agencies (including resource centers) and school employees. International election observers have also repeatedly flagged patterns consistent with administrative-resource politics, including pressure on public-sector employees and misuse of state advantages during campaigns.

The salary channel further enhances the political utility of this ecosystem. The government implemented a major teacher pay reform starting 1 July 2024, stating that the average salary for public school teachers would rise by about GEL 500, with increases varying by workload/status. A teacher's compensation under the new mechanisms consists of a base salary and potential bonuses. The base salary is categorized according to (1) education and qualifications, (2) work experience, and (3) workload. Potential bonuses are divided into the following categories: functional bonuses for lead or mentor teachers, bonuses for teaching a full class, bonuses for teaching certain subjects in non-Georgian-language schools/sectors – Georgian language, Georgian history, Georgian geography – or as a class supervisor and bonuses for teachers working in public schools located in highland areas. This grants considerable discretion to the school directors who, in turn, are controlled and subordinate to the resource centers.

> ***When the electorate includes tens of thousands of teachers (and many more family members), a centrally announced "raise" can be framed as benevolence while the administrative system retains multiple levers that affect real take-home pay and job stability at the local level.***

This is precisely why education-sector pay is politically sensitive: when the electorate includes tens of thousands of teachers (and many more family members), a centrally announced "raise" can be framed as benevolence while the administrative system retains multiple levers that affect real take-home pay and job stability at the local level.

Debts and Credits

Georgia's long-running "immigration as exit option" in reality serves as a pressure-release valve in the political economy. Official statistics show extremely large outflows in recent years: emigrants totaled 245,064 in 2023, and although 2024 emigration fell to 121,425, the migration profile remained heavily working-age (15-64), indicating that mobility continues to externalize labor-market pressures and household hardship rather than forcing a domestic political settlement around jobs and welfare.

Remittances then act as the financial counterpart to this externalization. World Bank data indicates that personal remittances received accounted for 11.9% of the GDP in 2024 - a very high share by European standards and large enough to matter for macroeconomic stability and household consumption. The National Bank's balance-of-payments reporting likewise highlights the scale of private transfers within current transfers, even when year-on-year flows fluctuate. Politically, this is essential: remittances can keep families afloat without the state having to deliver deep reforms (productivity, regional development, social insurance adequacy). They stabilize consumption and reduce overt desperation, yet they also create a model of survival that depends on external income rather than on accountable domestic governance. As we have written previously in *GEOpolitics*, Georgian migrants are largely viewed as ATMs by the Georgian Dream, ensuring that the cash is transferred to those who stay, but as politically unacceptable, as they are largely against the government. Hence, the recent initiative has deprived them of the right to vote in national elections.

Alongside remittances sits a second stabilizer with sharper coercive potential – a household debt. The National Bank's monthly lending statistics indicate that the resident household loan portfolio reached GEL 35.97 billion by the end of November 2025, following continued monthly increases. In its 2024 Financial Stability Report, the NBG explicitly notes that household credit growth remains high, discusses debt-service indicators (e.g., PTI), and emphasizes the role of macroprudential rules in containing risks, thereby implicitly confirming that household borrowing has become structurally significant. The IMF's 2024 Article IV reporting also flags that "high indebtedness and the significant exchange rate risk of unhedged borrowers still represent key vulnerabilities in the household sector." In plain terms, a large share of households is now linked to the banking system in ways that make them highly sensitive to shocks, fines, job loss, and any policy signals that could change monthly repayment burdens. This is a primary reason why tens of thousands of Georgians, who were discontent with the Georgian Dream's rising authoritarianism, decided to stay home and protest silently or on social media, especially when they have seen how the Georgian Dream has fired hundreds of civil servants who signed the petitions in late 2024 without hesitation and a sign of remorse.

> ***Household debt and financial distress can reshape political behavior—often by increasing vulnerability to parties that promise relief and by discouraging risky political action.***

Comparative research helps explain why this matters politically. A growing body of literature finds that household debt and financial distress can reshape political behavior—often by increasing vulnerability to parties that promise relief and by discouraging risky political action. Wiedemann (2024) shows that household indebtedness has electoral consequences in contexts where welfare is under strain. Gyöngyösi & Verner (2022), exploiting debtor distress during a currency/debt shock, find that distress can increase support for populist forces that champion aggressive debt relief. These findings make it clear that when a ruling party presides over a system in which households survive on remittances plus debt, it can credibly position itself as the only actor able to protect that fragile equilibrium through selective "mercy" and by amplifying the perceived risks of political change.

Poverty as the Hidden Pillar of Authoritarian Stability

The Georgian Dream's endurance in power is based on the successful weaponization of poverty. By weaponizing socio-economic vulnerability,

controlling access to relief, and politicizing survival, the regime has reduced the costs of authoritarian governance and increased the cost of dissent.

One of the clearest instruments of repression employed by the Georgian Dream in recent years has been the systematic escalation of administrative and criminal fines, particularly against protesters, critics, and politically active citizens. Under the guise of maintaining public order, the government has repeatedly amended the Law on Assemblies and Manifestations and the Code of Administrative Offenses, tightening them no fewer than five times within a single year. These changes began with a threefold increase in fines and culminated in the introduction of administrative detention and criminal liability for actions previously considered lawful forms of protest.

The new regime of penalties is deliberately broad and punitive. Citizens who participate in demonstrations by stepping onto the roadway or wearing face coverings now face administrative detention of up to 15 days, while repeated "offenses" can lead to criminal prosecution and prison sentences of up to one year. In practice, this has resulted in mass punishment: more than 1,000 individuals were fined, many on multiple occasions, and approximately 150 people were sentenced to administrative imprisonment within a few weeks. The financial burden of these fines, often imposed arbitrarily and without meaningful judicial oversight, functions not merely as punishment but as a deterrent designed to exhaust protesters economically.

Fines have also been used to restrict freedom of expression. Criticism of high-ranking Georgian Dream officials has increasingly led to administrative or criminal proceedings, with verbal insults or public criticism now punishable by fines of up to GEL 6,000 or by 60 days of imprisonment. This represents a dramatic departure from democratic standards, effectively reintroducing punitive sanctions for speech and fostering a climate of self-censorship. Combined with rising living costs and stagnant incomes, the expanding system of fines operates as a form of economic coercion, disproportionately affecting ordinary citizens and turning administrative penalties into a central pillar of the ruling party's authoritarian toolkit.

> ***Authoritarianism survives not because people believe in it, but because poverty makes alternatives frightening.***

It must be noted, however, that this strategy of weaponizing poverty does not eliminate dissent, but it raises its price. In a society where many citizens live close to subsistence, political change is perceived not as hope, but as risk. Authoritarianism survives not because people believe in it, but because poverty makes alternatives frightening. Understanding the Georgian Dream's rule and the reasons why the protests have not been successful, therefore, requires moving beyond institutional analysis and confronting a harder truth: authoritarian power in Georgia rests not only on repression and propaganda but also on deprivation, carefully managed and politically exploited.

Weaponized Poverty and Authoritarian Durability

Research on authoritarian welfare and clientelism has long demonstrated that poverty and inequality shape political incentives in systematic ways, often helping authoritarian regimes to stay in power. Seen through this lens, the Georgian Dream's governance trajectory appears less anomalous and more structurally intelligible. Poverty in Georgia has not been eradicated despite the rising economic figures, nor has it been meaningfully reduced in ways that would empower citizens. Instead, it has been managed. Social assistance, pensions, state jobs, and infrastructure projects have been structured and communicated in ways

that sustain dependence on the Georgian Dream, rather than independence from politics. Benefits are experienced by many citizens not as enforceable rights but as contingent goods, closely associated with the ruling party's continued dominance. The literature on authoritarian welfare, particularly studies of child welfare and pension systems in Russia, shows how such systems foster loyalty by keeping beneficiaries in a permanent state of vulnerability in which the loss of even modest assistance is perceived as an existential threat.

Recognizing the weaponization of poverty as a central pillar of the Georgian Dream's rule has implications that extend beyond academic explanation. If poverty functions as a mechanism of political control, then strategies by domestic opposition political actors cannot focus solely on human rights, media freedom, institutional reforms, or European integration. They must also confront the socio-economic structures that sustain political dependence and appeal to the voters who are trapped in the ready-to-be-weaponized poverty cycle ■

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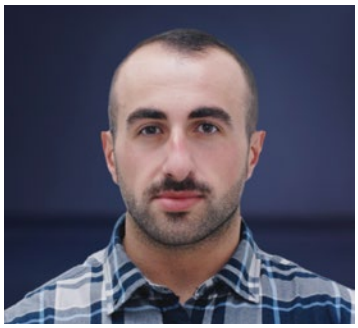

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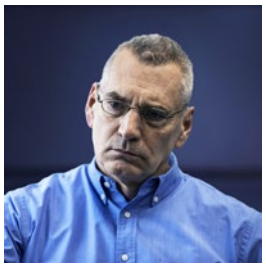

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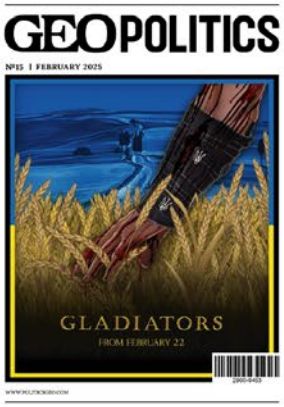
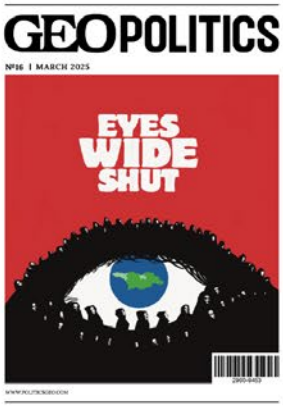
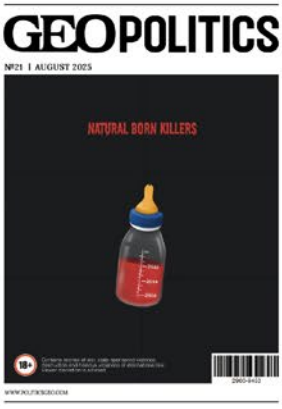
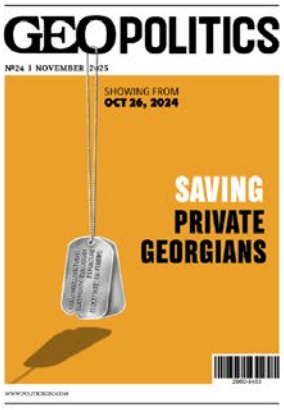
DIGITAL ARCHIVE









GEOPOLITICS

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