

The Dirty Bathwater: What the “Rules-Based Order” Really Meant for Georgia

The capture of Nicolás Maduro by the American military, the transatlantic stand-off over Greenland, and the rhetoric of President Donald Trump, clashing with the leaders of the EU, provoked justified debates about the future of the new world order and international system. While this debate was anticipated, particularly after the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, it has accelerated in recent weeks at Davos and possibly at the upcoming Munich Security Conference. This debate also reverberates in Georgia, prompting discussion of whether or not such violations of international law, as seen in Venezuela and possibly Greenland/Denmark, benefit small states like Georgia. After all, as one argument goes, what would prevent Moscow now from doing the same in Moldova or Georgia?

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The counterclaim, however, with which this piece also echoes, is that Russia does not need precedents to violate international law. It has done so countless times and will do so again if uncontained. Whether or not Maduro's capture gives the Kremlin one more legal argument is irrelevant. It is not the power of bad (or good) example that pushes Russia to tear up the international order and law near its borders, but the powerlessness of the West. Therefore, if the current global order unravels into a stronger America and a more resilient, militarily assertive Europe, and a weaker



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Russia, then let it be. It is the “might” of the West and the “right” of democracy that the small states like Georgia require to stay alive, prosperous, and democratic.

What Baby?

As the President of Finland, Alexander Stubb, rightly [noted](#) in his interview with *Foreign Affairs*, “the international world order has never been perfect.” Yet, he argues, at least there has been an engagement, and as the order changes, we should not “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Implicit in this claim is the idea that engagement, however flawed, was anchored in international law, multilateral institutions, and shared rules of the game.

But what exactly was that “baby in the bathwater” for small states such as Georgia?

For countries on the periphery of the Euro-Atlantic system, engagement, international organizations, and rules of conduct under international law often meant something very different from rule-based protection. In Georgia’s case, the (dis)engagement of the 1990s did not translate into the consistent application of international law; instead, it produced a system in which violations were managed and ghosted, leaving Georgia weaker and the breaker of the international rules – Russia – stronger.

When Russia actively intervened in and fueled the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region in the early 1990s, violating Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the international response was not grounded in legal accountability or protection of international law. On the contrary, the dominant “rules of the game” of the post-Cold War order effectively delegated regional conflict management to Moscow itself. The wrongdoer was actually empowered. And as the joke went (long before [Elon Musk](#)), Russia did not keep peace; it kept pieces of Georgia.

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In the 1990s and for much of the 2000s, Russia, the principal actor in the conflicts, was formally designated as a “peacekeeper” by the UN Security Council. This arrangement institutionalized a profound asymmetry: the state responsible for destabilization was simultaneously entrusted with guaranteeing stability. For Georgia, this meant that occupation was not framed as a breach of international law requiring remedy, but as a frozen status quo to be administered by the perpetrator.

Crucially, this structure proved almost impossible to dismantle. Once Russia’s role as mediator and peacekeeper was normalized, it became embedded in diplomatic formats, security arrangements, and international expectations. Georgia’s repeated efforts to internationalize the conflicts and replace Russian “peacekeeping” with genuinely neutral mechanisms met resistance – not from Russia alone, but from an international system reluctant to disrupt an established equilibrium. In 2008, when Georgia was seriously [considering](#) withdrawing from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) treaty obligations, Washington, Brussels, and Berlin urged Tbilisi to reconsider. Tbilisi did. That did not prevent the August 2008 war.

Therefore, for Georgia, the “baby in the bathwater” was an order in which sovereignty was negotiable, accountability was selective, and international law yielded to geopolitical management. This legacy continues to shape Georgia’s security environment today and raises the question of whether or not preserving that form of engagement is truly worth preserving.

The second, even starker test of this engage-

ment-based order came with the August 2008 war. When Russia illegally “passportized” the residents of South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia, there was no international legal remedy against this. Once the Russians declared that they were not withdrawing their military base from Gudauta (Abkhazia), despite the [1999 Istanbul Document](#), no one could change their mind. When Russia violated Georgia’s territorial integrity in 2007 and 2008 through [illegal incursions](#) of the fighter jets, all OSCE instruments [were used](#), leading only to fruitless discussions in the Permanent Council.

When large-scale hostilities began in August 2008, the Russian 58th Army [crossed](#) into Georgia, launching a coordinated campaign across land, sea, air, and cyberspace. For the first time in the twenty-first century, Europe witnessed a full-scale interstate war of this magnitude.

The institutions and norms that supposedly constituted the “baby in the bathwater” failed to prevent the war, stop it decisively, or impose consequences afterward. Russia was never sanctioned. No senior decision-makers were held accountable. Only 15 years later did the International Criminal Court (ICC) [issue](#) arrest warrants related to the war – and even then, the indictments focused on a narrow set of individuals connected to the South Ossetian regime and the Russian military. One of them, a Russian major general, was already dead by the time accountability formally arrived.

Ironically, Alexander Stubb, then Finland’s foreign minister, was directly involved in mediating the ceasefire alongside France. Yet, the war did not end because international law asserted itself. It ended because of power: U.S. pressure, European diplomacy, and, crucially, Vladimir Putin’s calculation that pushing further carried unacceptable risks. In 2008, bombing cities like Tbilisi was still considered crossing an uncharted line, even for Moscow. The norms that Russia would later obliterate in Ukraine had not yet been fully tested. At

the end of the day, what stopped Russia was not law, but deterrence – credible, material, political deterrence exercised by strong actors.

What followed only reinforced Georgia’s grim lesson. Russia was never punished for its actions. There was no sanctions regime, no diplomatic isolation, and no sustained disengagement. Lithuania [blocked](#) the EU-Russian agreement for a few months, but that was it. Weapons deliveries to Moscow were never affected and diplomatic isolation of an aggressor country did not happen either. Western powers preferred to distribute blame on Russia and Georgia. [The Tagliavini report](#) was a good example of that. The report argued that both violated international law. Russia – because it crosses into a different country (a blatant violation!). Georgia, because its use of force was not proportional. It was necessary; it was on its own territory, but it was disproportionate and, therefore, violated international law. This duplicity has been and remains characteristic of the international order which has always been and will always be dominated by power and alliances as any IR student knows.

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Even worse, after the August 2008 war, Moscow was soon rewarded with the re-engagement. The “reset” policy pursued by the United States under Barack Obama signaled that aggression in Georgia was not a red line. That signal eventually opened the doors for Moscow to attack Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

A very telling detail illustrating the toothlessness of international law and the documents and signatures upon which it was based became apparent just weeks after the 12 August 2008 [ceasefire](#). Russia effectively withdrew from the ceasefire agreement, unilaterally [recognizing](#) Abkhazia and South

Ossetia and declaring that the obligation to withdraw troops from Georgian territory was no longer relevant. A “new reality,” Moscow argued, had emerged and must be respected. The international order acquiesced.

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For small states like Georgia, this was the real meaning of engagement under international law. Rules existed, agreements were signed, institutions recorded violations, but when confronted with a determined revisionist power, the system adapted to force rather than resisting it. The bathwater, in other words, was not merely dirty. It normalized the idea that law follows power, not the other way around.

A Real Danger – Spheres of Influence

The indeed changing international world order is dangerous for Georgia, although not because it threatens to dismantle a system that once worked well. That system never worked properly for Georgia to begin with. Nor is the danger primarily about the erosion of international law, unfortunately, a body of rules that, in practice, was applied selectively and often along political lines. One need only recall Georgia's case against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) following the 2008 war, where the Court [declined](#) to hear Georgia's claims on procedural grounds, in a decision that reflected the political alignments of the judges rather than the substance of Russia's violations.

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At first glance, contemporary rhetoric by world leaders may appear to support this fear. References to a modernized Monroe (or Donroe) Doctrine, suggesting that the Western Hemisphere is primarily America's domain, feature in U.S. strategic thinking, including the National Security Strategy. Yet, neither Donald Trump nor any American high official has argued that this logic should be universally replicated, that Russia should control its “near abroad,” or China its neighborhood. In fact, if anything, China's immediate strategic neighborhood overlaps directly with Russia's, illustrating the inherent instability of such arrangements.

More importantly, U.S. behavior does not support a retreat into rigid spheres of influence. Washington remains deeply engaged in the Middle East, has threatened and conducted strikes against Iran, and has increased its involvement in the South Caucasus. None of this resembles a power content to stay within neatly demarcated zones. Even U.S. efforts to bring the war in Ukraine to a halt, potentially freezing territorial realities on the ground, should not be misread as endorsement of Russia's sphere of influence. They are driven by MAGA ideology, battlefield realities, war fatigue, financial constraints, and the logic of attrition, not by acceptance of Moscow's claims.

The risk of reestablishing new spheres of influence is valid, but it is neither imminent nor new. Spheres of influence were never absent from Russian thinking. Moscow has consistently sought them. What prevented their consolidation after

the Cold War was not the Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter, the Istanbul Document, or other well-intentioned but toothless documents. What prevented them was power. The West was strong enough to block them and Russia was too weak to impose them.

That fundamental logic has not changed. International relations do not transform overnight. In the current dynamic, the only force capable of preventing European security from sliding back into a system of coercive spheres, whether marketed as “stability” or “realism,” is a strong United States and a strong European Union.

This is why reactions to assertive U.S. behavior are often misplaced. When Georgians or Europeans worry that American actions, whether against Venezuela or elsewhere, undermine international law, they focus on the wrong lesson. The real lesson is not the fragility of legal norms, but the importance of power in enforcing them. A confident, assertive United States can help rebuild international law and a security order in which revisionist powers like Russia and China cannot freely dominate their neighborhoods.

In practice, it is power, not a legal argument, that determines what becomes “acceptable” under international law.

Yes, U.S. actions may stretch or violate certain provisions of the United Nations Charter. But those same provisions have been violated repeatedly by Russia over the past two decades - without hesitation, without precedent, and without remorse. The argument that Moscow needs precedents to justify aggression is ridiculous. Russia did not need precedents or pretexts to attack Georgia in 2008, annex Crimea in 2014, or invade Ukraine in 2022. It acted when it believed it had sufficient power. In practice, it is power, not a legal argument, that determines what becomes “acceptable” under international law.

For a small country like Georgia, the danger posed by a gradual return of spheres of influence is, therefore, tangible, even if not imminent. Such systems do not emerge overnight. Even the Yalta arrangements between Joseph Stalin and Franklin D. Roosevelt took years to harden into the Iron Curtain. But the warning signs matter. In any such system, survival depends on one simple rule: if you are not at the table, you are on the menu. Georgia is not at the table today. It was literally absent from Davos, from any discussions on global issues in Washington, Brussels, Paris, or Berlin, and from any high-level interaction with Western leaders. It is, though remarkably present where the West's antagonists meet - in Ashgabat, the Georgian Prime Minister sitting at the same roundtable with Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, or Beijing, meeting with the party leaders and Chinese government members.

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If the threat of the spheres of influence materializes, Georgia's only natural allies are the European Union and Ukraine. Both have experienced the realities of spheres of influence firsthand—and both have rejected them. Ukraine's resistance to Russian domination, at extraordinary cost, is the clearest rejection imaginable. The EU's enlargement policy, its refusal to recognize territorial conquest, and its drive towards more economic and military independence rest on the understanding that the spheres of influence are incompatible with European security.

Against this backdrop, the current foreign policy course pursued by the Georgian Dream is not merely misguided but strategically disastrous. By attacking Europe, alienating EU partners, turning Ukraine into an adversary, and cozying up to Russia, Georgia's ruling regime is weakening the

very alliances that could prevent Georgia from being absorbed into Russia's sphere of influence. This foreign policy will lead to the sabotage of the state's interests in favor of the ruler's interests. And this is the second aspect of the story about which small states like Georgia should be worried.

Dictatorship Under the Guise of the Changing World Order

Georgians, for sure, have noticed how the changing global world order affected domestic politics. As the international actors pursued self-serving foreign policy goals, whether Russia in Ukraine, Azerbaijan in the region, the U.S. in the Middle East and the American continent, and Europe in the Eastern neighborhood, Georgian rulers pursued the goals of strengthening their authoritarianism even at the expense of traditional partnerships.

[Losing](#) the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, or the prospect of Accession Negotiations with the EU, has been instrumentalized by the Georgian Dream to build resilience from Western pressure. Draconic laws, which are tabled almost every month, leave no space for internal opposition and dissent, strengthening the tight grip on power and on the average Georgian citizen.

The domestic governance model of Bidzina Ivanishvili's party is a "shushocracy." He is silencing the opposition political leaders by putting them in jail and limiting their communication. He is silencing the universities by [merging](#) them, threatening critically minded academics with layoffs and attacking them via lawsuits. He is silencing the political parties by [banning](#) them. He is silencing his former allies by locking them up in jail. And he is silencing civil society organizations, media, and activists, by equating their work with political activity, targeting their finances, freedom of expression, and basic human rights.

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For instance, with the recently announced [changes](#) to the law on grants and several other laws, any NGO that makes a statement or publishes work that affects the opinion of even a part of society can be deemed an entity "pursuing party political interests." This qualification will make it impossible for such an organization to fundraise either from foreign donors or the domestic business community. Moreover, if democracy activists who have ever benefited from foreign donor funding decide to enter politics, they will be barred from party membership for eight years. If they emigrate, lawsuits will follow, and in six months, they will not even be able to [vote](#) in national elections. Any business that openly intervenes in politics will become liable to administrative and then criminal charges. Any civil society track-two public diplomacy effort to engage with the partner states' governments, politicians, or embassies can be dubbed "external lobbying."

One of the primary reasons Bidzina Ivanishvili has grown so openly dictatorial is his conviction that neither the European Union nor the United States has the time, energy, or mental bandwidth to deal with him or to impose the costs that erecting a dictatorship would require. Acting on this assumption, he has systematically insulated himself from Western leverage. Gold reserves have been moved into the country, significant assets have been [transferred](#) to family members, alternative sources of capital have been [secured](#) in the Arab

world, sanctioned trade arrangements with Russia [have been exploited](#), and reliance on non-Western financing, most notably from the Asian Development Bank, has reduced Georgia's exposure to Western conditionality.

In parallel, Ivanishvili's propaganda apparatus has skillfully exploited the narrative of a "changing international order" to instill fear among the Georgian public, fear of war, instability, and abandonment by the West. The regime's main mouthpiece, *Imedi* TV, recently [changed](#) ownership for the symbolic sum of GEL 1,000 (approximately USD 370), a transaction that underscores how media assets are no longer commercial enterprises but instruments of political control. New "owners" are political or business "nobodies" without relevant capital or recognition. *Imedi* TV and affiliated outlets relentlessly amplify messages portraying the West as war-mongering, morally decadent, and intent on dragging Georgia into war while presenting accommodation with Russia as prudence and patriotism.

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Under the guise of adapting to a changing global order, the Russian oligarch and his party have all but constructed a totalitarian-style system - one that will make Georgia a poor ally for anyone in the West. Even for the United States, whose recent foreign policy increasingly emphasizes pragmatism and transactional outcomes, a pariah state that imprisons opposition leaders, shuts down NGOs, criminalizes dissent, silences independent media, and systematically dismantles political pluralism is hardly a reliable partner. A country that simultaneously opens its doors to Chinese, Arab, and Russian capital while cold-shouldering U.S. strategic interests, most [notably](#) at the Anaklia Port, cannot credibly claim alignment with the West.

As [shown earlier](#) on the pages of *GEOPOLITICS*, the Georgian Dream's rhetoric (anti-war, anti-LGBT, anti-regulation, anti-European) is largely mimicry designed to appeal to shifting global moods. In practice, the party's actions reflect a deep convergence with the illiberal and revisionist currents shaping contemporary Russian politics, aligning with what Anne Applebaum calls Autocracy Inc. Far from adapting Georgia to a safer world, this course isolates the country, strips it of allies, and pushes it closer to the very sphere-of-influence logic that threatens its sovereignty. And this is what Georgians and Georgia's partners should be primarily concerned about ■