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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.

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

Irina Gurgenashvili
Executive Director of
Gnomon Wise

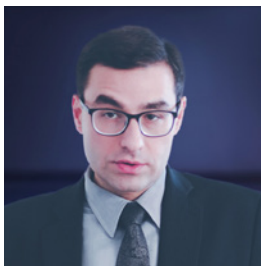
Contributors

Sergi Kapanadze
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi-based think-tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice-speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016-2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011-2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.

Thornike Gordadze
Contributor

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



Shota Gvineria
Contributor

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

Temuri Yakobashvili
Contributor

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

Natalie Sabanadze
Contributor

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

Jaba Devdariani
Contributor

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

Vano Chkhikvadze
Contributor

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

Guest Contributor

Arsen Kharatyan
Guest Contributor

Arsen Kharatyan is the founder and editor-in-chief of the Armenian–Georgian media platform Aliq Media. He served as a foreign policy advisor to Armenia's Prime Minister during the first 100 days after the 2018 Velvet Revolution and previously worked at Voice of America and the German Technical Cooperation (GIZ). Active in pro-democracy movements since the late 1990s, he holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic, studied Arabic in Damascus, and pursued Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

In the Age of Global Uncertainty, Great Expectations Must Not Be a Substitute for Strategy

This issue of *GEOpolitics* takes its cue from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* - as a parable of lives organized around futures that never quite arrive. As the international order unravels under the weight of Russia's war against Ukraine, the reassertion of force in places once governed by norms, and the return of openly transactional great-power politics, global affairs are increasingly shaped by anticipation rather than decision. Everywhere, expectations multiply: about what the United States, Russia, NATO, or the EU will do, how wars will end, whether or not regimes (like in Iran) will fall, if deals will stabilize the global conflicts, and whether or not small states, like Georgia, can still maintain democracy and security as the rules-based international system is being transformed.

Yet, when expectations substitute for strategy, dictators and war-makers thrive. More often than not, political systems and societies remain anchored to assumptions that no longer hold. This is true in Washington, where expectations about decisive leverages, quick deals, or fatigue-induced settlements increasingly shape policy toward Europe, NATO, Ukraine, Iran, and the wider international system, often blurring the line between deterrence, transactionalism, and international law. It is true in Europe, where the belief that time, Washington's shifting position, Russia's economic problems, war fatigue, or a managed compromise over Ukraine risks normalizing aggression and weakening deterrence at the continent's eastern edge. This is true in Iran, where repeated waves of popular revolt are met with unprecedented repression while external actors oscillate between pressure and negotiation, generating false hopes of change without committing to decisive political outcomes. It is also true in Georgia, where expectations of external protection and changing regional power dynamics have too often replaced domestic democratic consolidation, strategic clarity, and credible resistance to a drift towards one-party dictatorship.

Sergi Kapanadze opens this issue by dismantling one of the most persistent illusions shaping current debates about the unraveling international order: the belief that the so-called "rules-based order" ever functioned as a reliable shield for small states like Georgia. Revisiting moments that now fuel global anxiety (from Venezuela and Greenland to Ukraine), he argues that the real danger does not lie in the erosion of an order that supposedly once worked, but in the temptation to romanticize an engagement-based system that consistently normalized force, delegated accountability to aggressors, and rewarded revisionism. For Georgia, the "baby in the bathwater" was an order in which Russian occupation was managed rather than punished, sovereignty was negotiable, and international law followed power rather than constrained it. From the conflicts of the 1990s through the August 2008 war and its aftermath, Kapanadze shows that what ultimate-

ly restrained Moscow was never a legal principle but deterrence — credible, material, political power exercised by strong Western actors. The article warns that the real strategic threat today is not abstract legal decay but the gradual re-emergence of spheres of influence, accelerated by Western hesitation and misreadings of U.S. assertiveness. Against this backdrop, Georgia's current foreign policy drift and internal authoritarian consolidation appear as a fatal miscalculation rooted in false expectations. The author insists that survival still depends on a simple rule: that power matters and those who wait without leverage, without strong partners, and without strong internal cohesion are rarely spared.

Vano Chkhikvadze carries the argument forward by exposing one of the most underappreciated consequences of democratic erosion and geopolitical hesitation: the rise of transnational repression as a normalized instrument of authoritarian power. He shows how exile, long imagined as a refuge for dissidents, journalists, and human rights defenders, is increasingly transformed into an extension of repression itself, as regimes reach across borders through intimidation, legal abuse, surveillance, and proxy violence. Situating Georgia within this global pattern, Chkhikvadze argues that the country occupies a dangerous grey zone — formally embedded in democratic and human-rights frameworks, yet rapidly adopting authoritarian legal practices that mirror those of entrenched repressive regimes. As civic space collapses at home and activists relocate abroad (especially once the new changes to the Law on Grants enter into force in the next few weeks), Georgia risks becoming both a source and a facilitator of transnational repression, particularly given its growing cooperation with states such as Russia, China, Iran, Belarus, and Türkiye. The article warns that host democracies are often ill-prepared to recognize these acts as coordinated political strategies rather than isolated legal or criminal cases, thereby inadvertently enabling repression on their own territory. In a world full of great expectations (that exile protects, that law restrains in European states, that institutions respond in time to the crises), Chkhikvadze's analysis delivers a stark corrective: without proactive safeguards, accountability mechanisms, and political will, waiting merely allows repression to follow its targets wherever they go.

Shota Gvineria shifts the focus from repression and democratic erosion to the strategic environment that enables both, arguing that Russia's war against Ukraine has entered a phase where outcomes will be decided less on the battlefield than in the political, psychological, and cognitive domains. Four years into a military deadlock that neither side can decisively break, the war has evolved into a contest over legitimacy, endurance, and alliance cohesion in which diplomacy, information, and narrative control function as primary instruments of power. Drawing on debates and signals from Davos, Gvineria shows how international law no longer operates as an automatic source of legitimacy, but as a resource that must be enforced through coalitions, credibility, and political throughput. Peace initiatives, including emerging U.S.-led transactional frameworks, are recast as tools of influence that test alliance discipline and normalize power-based outcomes. In this environment, cognitive warfare becomes decisive: the struggle extends from territory to how stalemate, fatigue, compromise, and responsibility are interpreted by societies and partners. The article warns that without sustained narrative coherence and material backing, diplomacy degenerates into rhetoric and waiting becomes a strategic liability — a lesson with direct implications not only for Ukraine, but for NATO's eastern flank and exposed states like Georgia.

Natalie Sabanadze confronts one of the most seductive and ultimately perilous expectations shaping political thinking on Russia's periphery: the belief that great-power intervention, whether

in the name of democracy or stability, can substitute for domestic agency. Using the arrest of Nicolás Maduro and Washington's assertive posture over Greenland as points of departure, she shows how these moments have reignited hopes in Georgia that autocracy can be undone from the outside, even as the ruling Georgian Dream interprets the same events as a license to consolidate power through isolation, repression, and ideological retrenchment. Sabanadze situates this divergence within a broader return of spheres-of-influence logic in which rules, alliances, and democratic legitimacy are increasingly subordinated to power, utility, and effective control. Yet, she rejects the assumption that such spheres can ever deliver stability, arguing instead that intensified competition, the rise of middle powers, and the demonstrated resilience of societies like Ukraine undermine the very premise of inevitable submission. For Georgia, the article delivers an unsparing conclusion: democracy cannot be outsourced, neutrality is an illusion, and waiting for a benevolent hegemon is a strategic vulnerability in itself. In a world of great expectations and diminishing guarantees, Georgia's survival as both a democracy and a sovereign state depends on internal resistance, clear strategic alignment, and a sober understanding of power.

Temuri Yakobashvili dismantles the myth that Russia's long campaign of revisionism has ushered in a genuinely multipolar world, arguing instead that Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents one of the most consequential strategic miscalculations of the post-Cold War era. What was intended as the decisive blow against the unipolar order has, paradoxically, reactivated Western power, strengthened NATO, deepened EU security integration, and reduced Russia to a more constrained, overstretched, and increasingly dependent actor (above all on China). Yakobashvili shows how war became a trap for the Kremlin, consuming military, economic, diplomatic, and reputational capital while eroding Russia's leverage even in its own "near abroad" from the South Caucasus to Central Asia. The sanctions regime, energy diversification, and the collapse of Russia's aura of military competence have narrowed Moscow's strategic autonomy rather than expanded it. For Georgia, this diagnosis carries a sobering warning: Russia's weakening does not automatically translate into Georgian security. Survival depends not on waiting for imperial decline to do the work, but on internal resilience, democratic legitimacy, and strategic clarity. In a world of great expectations about Russia's return or collapse, Yakobashvili insists on a harder truth — revisionism can fail spectacularly, yet still leave vulnerable states exposed if they mistake weakening power for disappearing danger.

Jaba Devdariani widens the lens from geopolitical revisionism to the material infrastructure of global power, arguing that the erosion of the liberal order is now also visibly unfolding at sea and in trade, where the assumptions of free exchange are giving way to a renewed "politics of finitude." From the seizure of Russia's shadow fleet and the sabotage of undersea cables to tariff wars, contested maritime routes, and the strategic scramble over Greenland and the Arctic, Devdariani shows how control of logistics, resources, and distribution hubs is replacing openness as the organizing principle of international economic life. Drawing upon historical parallels and Arnaud Orain's concept of finitude, he situates the current moment as a return to mercantilist logic where scarcity, zero-sum competition, and state-backed economic monopolies normalize coercion and blur the line between commerce and conflict. In this emerging order, naval power, protected supply chains, and territorial control once again underpin global influence while consumers give way to producers and growth yields to power. For small states, the implication is that a world governed by great expectations about markets, multilateralism, and benign hegemony, survival will increasingly depend upon control over strategic

assets, access routes, and partnerships that can withstand coercion. The article leaves a deliberately open question — whether or not small and middle powers can still carve out autonomy in an age of scarcity, or if they will be forced to navigate a new era of pirates, buccaneers, and guarded seas.

Thornike Gordadze shifts focus to the wider region, and namely Iran, examining the Iranian uprising at the intersection of revolutionary hope and geopolitical fear, exposing the illusion that a collapsing authoritarian regime can be safely managed through negotiation rather than confronted for what it is. As Iran enters its most fragile moment since 1979, Gordadze shows how unprecedented popular mobilization, brutal repression, and the regime's strategic weakening have created a historic opening that is simultaneously resisted by nearly all external actors. From China and Russia to Gulf monarchies and even Israel, the fear of instability, democratic contagion, and economic disruption has produced a perverse consensus in favor of prolonging the life of a regime sustained primarily by violence. At the center of this paralysis stands Donald Trump, whose Iran policy oscillates between intimidation and deal-making, driven not by democracy or strategy but by the pursuit of a marketable personal victory. Gordadze argues that negotiations under these conditions are structurally dishonest: Tehran bargains to survive, Washington bargains to claim success, and the result is delay, illusion, and the betrayal of Iranian society.

Arsen Kharatyan closes the issue by staying in the wider region and exploring the concrete mechanics of peace-making in the South Caucasus. Tracing the dismantling of the OSCE Minsk Group, the collapse of Russian security mediation, and the rise of U.S.-brokered diplomacy culminating in the Washington summit and the TRIPP initiative, Kharatyan shows how the region's post-2020 order is being rebuilt through connectivity, transactional agreements, and asymmetric leverage rather than reconciliation or justice. The peace treaty itself reflects this logic: territorial recognition and economic opening are prioritized while accountability mechanisms, third-party monitoring, and the rights of displaced populations are sidelined. While the process promises stability and new transit routes for Armenia and Azerbaijan, it simultaneously reshapes Georgia's strategic environment, challenging its long-standing role as the region's primary corridor and political anchor. Kharatyan offers a sobering reminder that peace without enforcement, symmetry, and institutional depth risks becoming another instrument of power redistribution, leaving smaller states to adapt or be bypassed by the very processes meant to stabilize them.

The contributions in this edition converge on the conclusion that, in a world defined by accelerating power shifts, uncertainty cannot be managed through expectation alone. Whether in Washington, Kyiv, Tehran, Brussels, or Tbilisi, the temptation to defer hard choices, to wait for leverage to materialize, for adversaries to weaken, or for deals to resolve structural conflicts has become a source of strategic vulnerability. For Georgia and other exposed states on Europe's periphery, this moment is decisive. Their security and democratic survival will depend not upon the preservation of past assumptions, but upon the ability of domestic actors and external partners to adapt to a harsher international environment, make deliberate strategic choices, and act before expectation once again replaces action ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

Content

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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?

> ***Russia does not need precedents to violate international law. It has done so countless times and will do so again if uncontained.***

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

SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi - based think - tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice - speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016 - 2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011 - 2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.


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В ТАХИЕ ДНИ
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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.

> ***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.***

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.

> ***After the August 2008 war, Moscow was soon rewarded with the re-engagement.***

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.

> ***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.***

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.

The real danger for small states like Georgia lies elsewhere: in the possible re-emergence of spheres of influence as an organizing principle of international politics.

> ***The real danger for small states like Georgia lies elsewhere: in the possible re-emergence of spheres of influence as an organizing principle of international politics.***

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.

> ***If the threat of the spheres of influence materializes, Georgia's only natural allies are the European Union and Ukraine.***

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.

> ***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.***

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.

> ***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.***

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 ■

Transnational Repression as a Growing Threat to Democracy and Human Rights

Among the contemporary challenges facing democracy and freedom of expression, transnational repression (TNR) is increasingly emerging as one of the most serious yet insufficiently addressed threats to human rights, democratic governance, and state sovereignty. While much attention has been paid to domestic authoritarian practices, far less focus has been given to the ways in which states extend repression beyond their territorial borders to target critics in exile.

Although a universally accepted definition of transnational repression has yet to be established, there is growing international convergence around its core elements. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines transnational repression as cases in which *foreign governments reach beyond their borders to intimidate, silence, coerce, harass, or harm members of their diaspora and exile communities*. Similarly, the European Parliament, in its Resolution of 13 November 2025 on transnational repression against human rights defenders, describes it as a wide range of attacks and threats carried out by states, including authoritarian regimes and their proxies, to defend or advance their interests by reaching across borders to coerce, control, or silence dissidents, political opponents, journalists, activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), and diaspora members.

These actions may involve physical methods, such as targeted killings, abductions, violence, harassment, enforced returns, disappearances, and deportations, as well as the strategic misuse of legal and administrative instruments, including consular services, extradition procedures, arrests, and Interpol notices. In parallel, states increasingly rely

VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

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


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on non-physical methods, including digital surveillance, intimidation, blackmail, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and threats directed at family members of activists remaining in the country of origin.

> ***Approximately 48 countries—more than a quarter of all states worldwide—are engaged in some form of transnational repression.***

The primary targets of transnational repression are human rights defenders, journalists, political activists, NGO leaders, former officials, and regime critics living outside their home countries. Available evidence suggests that approximately 48 countries—more than a quarter of all states worldwide—are engaged in some form of transnational repression. Between 2014 and 2024, Freedom House documented 1,219 direct physical incidents of transnational repression occurring in 103 countries. Strikingly, 80% of these incidents were attributed to just ten regimes: China, Türkiye, Tajikistan, Russia, Iran, Belarus, Egypt, Cambodia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Transnational repression poses serious risks not only to its direct targets but also to the security, sovereignty, and legal order of host states. Such acts increasingly occur within democratic jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom, the United States, EU Member States, and Canada. Between 2014 and 2024, 92 incidents against human rights defenders, 22 against journalists, and 70 against political activists were recorded in EU Member States alone. Disaggregated data indicate that political activists and journalists account for roughly half of all targets, underscoring the strategic intent to silence those who play a critical role in promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights globally.

This phenomenon unfolds within a broader context of shrinking civic space worldwide. Governments and other powerful actors increasingly restrict freedom of expression, association, and participation in public life through legal barriers, funding cuts, administrative pressure, smear campaigns, and digital surveillance. These conditions compel many activists and organizations to leave their home countries in search of safer environments. Yet exile no longer guarantees protection. Authoritarian states are increasingly extending repression beyond their borders, transforming exile into another arena of coercion.

Why Georgia Matters: A Critical Case in the Context of Transnational Repression

While transnational repression is a global phenomenon, the Georgian context merits particular attention. Georgia represents a hybrid political environment: a country that remains formally embedded in democratic institutions and international human rights frameworks, yet is simultaneously undergoing rapid backsliding towards a one-party dictatorship. This transition increases the risk of emerging transnational repression, which remains insufficiently acknowledged.

> ***These trends are poised to intensify, given the recently proposed legislation, which effectively criminalizes NGO work, bars numerous individuals from joining political parties, and targets activists and critical media, which have been outspoken but will now be silenced with criminal sanctions and jail time.***

Georgia's relevance within the broader discussion of transnational repression stems from three interrelated factors. First, for many years, Georgia functioned as a relatively safe haven for journalists, activists, and political exiles from neighboring au-

thoritarian regimes, including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Iran. Second, in recent years, Georgia has increasingly adopted legal and administrative practices commonly associated with authoritarian governance, particularly regarding civil society organizations, independent media, and public protest. Third, Georgian civil society actors are increasingly relocating abroad to continue their work, thereby placing them directly within the risk landscape of transnational repression. These trends are poised to intensify, given the recently proposed legislation, which effectively criminalizes NGO work, bars numerous individuals from joining political parties, and targets activists and critical media, which have been outspoken but will now be silenced with criminal sanctions and jail time.

This convergence creates a grey zone in which repression may initially appear fragmented, ambiguous, or incidental rather than systematic. As a result, threats may be underestimated, incidents may be treated as isolated, and responsibility may be diffused across jurisdictions. Georgia thus illustrates how transnational repression can emerge not only from entrenched authoritarian regimes but also from states undergoing democratic erosion while maintaining formal commitments to international norms and institutions.

Understanding Georgia's position within this evolving landscape is therefore essential for assessing both the potential risks faced by Georgian human rights defenders operating from abroad and the broader implications for democratic resilience in the region.

Methods of Transnational Repression

In carrying out transnational repression, perpetrating states employ a wide range of tools, shaped by the constraints they face when operating beyond their borders. These methods can be broadly grouped into four main categories.

The first category involves remote threats and intimidation, physical violence, digital surveillance, online harassment, coordinated smear campaigns, and threats directed at family members of activists who remain in the country of origin. These methods allow states to exert pressure at a distance while maintaining plausible deniability.

The second category concerns restrictions on mobility, such as passport cancellations, revocation of citizenship, denial of consular services, or the imposition of travel bans. These measures aim to render the target legally vulnerable, restrict movement, or trigger detention or deportation by host-state authorities. In many cases, the affected individuals are left without effective legal remedies.

The third category involves manipulation of international and bilateral mechanisms, including cooperation with third countries to secure detention, extradition, or unlawful deportation. The abuse of the Interpol notification system is a particularly common practice, whereby politically motivated requests result in international alerts that can lead to detention, denial of financial services, and restrictions on travel.

The fourth category consists of direct physical attacks, carried out either by state agents or by proxies operating abroad. These include assaults, kidnappings, assassination attempts, enforced disappearances, and, in extreme cases, killings.

Disaggregated data shows that detention and rendition are among the most frequently used methods against political activists and journalists. In many cases, states combine several methods simultaneously, amplifying pressure and increasing the likelihood of silencing the target.

The implementers of transnational repression may be state institutions, such as law enforcement or in-

telligence agencies, or non-state proxies, including criminal networks operating in host countries. This reliance on intermediaries further complicates accountability and investigation.

It is noteworthy that all of these instruments have been used by the Georgian authorities. However, their use still appears sporadic and uncoordinated, rather than part of a well-thought-out strategy. However, the imminent increase in the number of people fleeing the country as the dictatorship strengthens and new laws are applied will lead to more critical voices relocating abroad and, subsequently, to more of these instruments being used by the Georgian security services and ruling regime.

Host State Responsibility

> ***Although transnational repression is initiated by perpetrator states, its effectiveness often depends on institutional weaknesses, policy blind spots, or fragmented responses within and by the host countries.***

Although transnational repression is initiated by perpetrator states, its effectiveness often depends on institutional weaknesses, policy blind spots, or fragmented responses within and by the host countries. Democratic states hosting exiled activists, journalists, and human rights defenders are not merely passive settings where repression occurs; they are key actors whose actions, or inactions, can either deter or inadvertently enable cross-border abuses.

One of the primary challenges host states face is misclassifying transnational repression incidents. Such cases are frequently treated as isolated criminal acts, immigration matters, or diplomatic disputes rather than as elements of a coordinated strategy pursued by foreign governments. As a result, investigations may be limited in scope, political motives may be overlooked, and protective measures may not be triggered.

Host-state vulnerabilities are particularly evident within immigration, asylum, and residency frameworks. Exiled activists often depend on temporary or precarious legal statuses that can be exploited through politically motivated extradition requests, administrative pressure, or the abuse of international cooperation mechanisms. When host states rely uncritically on information provided by countries of origin—such as arrest warrants or criminal allegations—they risk facilitating repression rather than preventing it.

Financial and administrative systems can also become tools of repression. Bank account freezes, denial of access to financial services, or restrictions imposed under anti-money-laundering regimes may disproportionately affect activists targeted through fabricated or politically motivated accusations. Similarly, digital harassment and surveillance campaigns frequently unfold in host states with limited regulatory oversight, allowing foreign actors to operate with relative impunity.

> ***Failure to address transnational repression decisively undermines not only the safety of individuals but also the sovereignty and rule of law of host states.***

Failure to address transnational repression decisively undermines not only the safety of individuals but also the sovereignty and rule of law of host states. Allowing foreign governments to intimidate or coerce individuals within democratic jurisdictions erodes institutional integrity and sets dangerous precedents for external interference.

Addressing these challenges requires host states to move beyond ad hoc responses and adopt systematic, coordinated approaches, including specialized training for law enforcement, human rights-based

screening of extradition and Interpol requests, secure reporting mechanisms for diaspora communities, and sustained cooperation with civil society organizations.

Transnational Repression: Possible Risks Facing Georgian Human Rights Activists

In recent years, Georgia has experienced a rapid deterioration of the environment for civil society. Beginning in 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party adopted a series of legislative measures that significantly restricted freedoms of expression and association. These include the so-called law on transparency of foreign influence, requiring NGOs and media organizations receiving foreign funding to register as entities "implementing the interests of a foreign power"; the Foreign Agents Registration Act, adopted in April 2025, which introduces criminal liability for individuals and organizations deemed to act as "agents of a foreign principal"; amendments requiring prior state approval for most foreign grants and technical assistance; and bans on foreign financing for broadcasting. The new family of laws, which will enter into force in March 2026, will simply criminalize all NGO activity, either by linking it to the out-of-country finances or dubbing them as political-party entities, equating them with political parties, with draconic legal consequences, including the confiscation of funds.

These legal measures have been accompanied by detentions of protesters, freezing of bank accounts, police raids on offices and private homes, and other forms of intimidation aimed at silencing dissent and creating a chilling effect. As a result, many civil society organizations have found it increasingly impossible to operate within the country.

Some organizations and individuals have attempted to adapt to the restrictive environment, while others have ceased operations altogether or relocated abroad to continue their work. Although relocation may appear to offer a viable strategy for survival, it also exposes activists to the risk of transnational repression, particularly given Georgia's evolving political trajectory.

> ***Georgian authorities have strengthened political, economic, and security ties with several states known for engaging in transnational repression, including Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye, Belarus, and Tajikistan.***

Georgian authorities have strengthened political, economic, and security ties with several states known for engaging in transnational repression, including Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye, Belarus, and Tajikistan. A cooperation agreement with the State Security Committee of Belarus has been in force since 2021; a Strategic Partnership with China was signed in 2023; diplomatic engagement with Iran has intensified; and trade and political relations with Tajikistan have expanded significantly.

Past incidents raise further concerns. At Türkiye's request, Georgian authorities have taken steps against private educational institutions allegedly affiliated with the Gülen movement. As it became known a few days ago, Türkiye put at least three Georgian opposition leaders on a "border-crossing ban list." In 2017, an Azerbaijani investigative journalist was abducted in Tbilisi and later appeared in detention in Baku, suggesting cross-border cooperation between law enforcement agencies. In 2023, several Russian opposition journalists were reportedly poisoned abroad; among them was Irina Babloyan, who was poisoned in Tbilisi and later designated a "foreign agent" by Russian authorities. Georgian authorities have also denied entry or asylum to several Belarusian activists. In recent years, Georgia has also strengthened its ties with Tajikistan; bilateral trade increased by 432% in 2025, and the foreign ministries of both countries have

expressed interest in deepening political dialogue. In May 2025, Georgia's State Security Service detained and returned Giorgi Bachiashvili — a former financial aide to Bidzina Ivanishvili who had been living abroad — after he was captured in the United Arab Emirates and flown back to Tbilisi in what his lawyers described as a forcible and legally irregular rendition rather than a formal extradition.

Taken together, these developments suggest both capacity and willingness—whether active or passive—to engage in practices that resemble or facilitate transnational repression.

Watching Out

Transnational repression is no longer an exceptional practice but an increasingly normalized strategy used by authoritarian and hybrid regimes to silence dissent beyond their borders. It poses serious threats to individual safety, democratic governance, and the sovereignty of host states. Addressing this phenomenon requires coherent, coordinated, and multi-level responses.

> ***Transnational repression is no longer an exceptional practice but an increasingly normalized strategy used by authoritarian and hybrid regimes to silence dissent beyond their borders.***

First, the international community should work toward establishing a universally accepted definition of transnational repression to provide a clearer legal and policy framework. Second, international mechanisms—particularly Interpol—must be subject to enhanced oversight and human rights safeguards to prevent political abuse. Third, global and regional actors, including the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, and international financial institutions, should consider conditioning financial assistance and cooperation on respect for human rights, including accountability for transnational repression.

Existing sanctions frameworks, such as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, could be expanded to explicitly cover individuals, institutions, and non-state proxies responsible for organizing or enabling transnational repression. The Council of Europe could also play a key role by initiating discussions on a Convention on Transnational Repression to establish shared standards and obligations.

> ***As domestic space for civil society, activism, and political opposition continues to shrink and dissenters increasingly operate from abroad, the risk of transnational repression becomes tangible.***

In the Georgian context, these issues are particularly urgent. As domestic space for civil society, activism, and political opposition continues to shrink and dissenters increasingly operate from abroad, the risk of transnational repression becomes tangible. Georgian civil society organizations and activists should therefore be integrated into international coalitions and protection mechanisms to enable shared learning, preparedness, and collective response.

Ultimately, confronting transnational repression is a shared responsibility. Ensuring that exile does not become an extension of repression by other means requires sustained commitment from states, international institutions, and civil society alike ■

Political, Psychological, and Cognitive Warfare in an Asymmetric Conflict Environment

Four years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the conflict has reached a condition of strategic deadlock defined by clear military limits. Russia cannot achieve its maximalist objective of occupying and controlling all of Ukraine through military force, nor can it credibly secure even a minimum threshold for decisive military victory, defined as full control and consolidation of the five regions it claims as its own. At the same time, Ukraine is unable to attain its ultimate objective of expelling all Russian forces from its internationally recognized borders, or even the more limited outcome that would qualify as victory from Kyiv's perspective: Russia's return to its pre-2020 positions. The war has therefore entered a phase of political warfare in which outcomes will be decided primarily outside the battlefield.

The Politics of Asymmetric Equilibrium

The strategic deadlock that defines the war in Ukraine is a characteristic feature of contemporary warfare between adversaries, even when capabilities and constraints are clearly, but not decisively asymmetric. In such conflicts, the absence of decisive military superiority shifts the center of gravity toward nonmilitary instruments of power. Technological adaptation, precision strike capabilities, drones, cyber domain, and information operations allow opposing sides to compensate for conventional disadvantages and redefine battlefield outcomes. As a result, military force increasingly serves to shape bargaining positions rather than to deliver conclusive outcomes.

SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

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

This environment elevates political warfare from a supporting function to the primary arena in which victory and defeat are determined. Theoretically, political warfare constitutes the coordinated use of diplomatic, informational, economic, legal, and alliance-based instruments to influence strategic outcomes in the absence of decisive military victory. Its purpose is to generate leverage, legitimacy, and endurance over time, both domestically and internationally. In the context of Ukraine, these factors increasingly condition what is militarily sustainable and politically acceptable for both sides.

Within this framework, psychological and cognitive warfare operate as distinct but interconnected mechanisms. Psychological warfare targets morale, perceptions, and risk tolerance among political elites, military forces, and societies, shaping short-term behavior and crisis responses. Cognitive warfare reaches deeper, aiming to disrupt how societies interpret information, assess credibility, and sustain collective action. By eroding trust in institutions, alliances, and shared narratives, cognitive warfare seeks to paralyze decision-making and fragment political cohesion, especially within open and pluralistic systems.

Diplomacy, alliances, and the information domain sit at the intersection of these forms of warfare. Diplomacy functions not only as a channel for negotiation but as a tool for signaling resolve, managing escalation, and structuring the political environment in which military force is employed. Alliances and partnerships convert political alignment into strategic endurance by pooling legitimacy, resources, and risk, while also becoming prime targets of cognitive and psychological pressure. The information domain acts as the connective tissue, shaping how actions are interpreted, justified, and contested across domestic and international audiences.

> ***Moscow's modern hybrid kill chain weaponizes vulnerabilities, manufactures crises, escalates under ambiguity, and seeks concessions through pressure rather than battlefield resolution.***

Russia's hybrid warfare approach integrates these dimensions into a single operational logic. Moscow's modern hybrid kill chain weaponizes vulnerabilities, manufactures crises, escalates under ambiguity, and seeks concessions through pressure rather than battlefield resolution. Cognitive and psychological effects are employed to disrupt decision-making and alliance cohesion, enabling political warfare to compensate for military limitations and prolong the conflict on terms favorable to the Kremlin.

Diplomacy and the informational domain function as decisive instruments in this phase of the war. Analyzing their use and effectiveness in the Ukrainian case is crucial for understanding how political tools shape leverage, legitimacy, endurance, and ultimately influence outcomes in contemporary conflicts where military victory alone is unattainable.

Snapshot of Davos 2026

Davos 2026 distilled a defining feature of the current strategic competition: power shifts to the instruments that can reframe legitimacy, constrain choices, and mobilize coalitions. The most consequential Davos signals sidestepped military aspects of the war in Ukraine, and centered on whether international law is treated as a binding constraint or negotiable language, whether alliances still function as discipline and guaranteed solidarity, and whether strategic endurance can be manufactured through partnerships that survive domestic politics, economic strain, and informational pressure.

The Greenland dispute captured this shift with unusual clarity. President Donald Trump reiterated at Davos that the United States needs Greenland for strategic national security and pressed for immediate negotiations while stating he would not use force. Denmark and NATO responded by moving the issue into Alliance management and Arctic security coordination, with Danish leadership and NATO emphasizing the need for collective security engagement in the region and rejecting any discussion of sovereignty. The diplomatic lesson was uncomfortable and simultaneously operationally decisive: legitimacy is no longer assumed to flow from existing rules alone. It is increasingly produced and defended through coalition tradeoffs, security narratives, and credible reassurance mechanisms. In this setting, international law still matters, but its practical force depends more than before on whether allies enforce norms through unity, costs, and strategic messaging.

> ***Diplomacy functions as a force multiplier only when backed by robust decision-making and credible coalition commitments. Without that, diplomacy becomes rhetoric, and stalemate becomes an opportunity for the best able to manipulate time, fatigue, and escalation anxiety.***

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Davos intervention placed Europe's political performance at the center of the war's next phase. His argument was that European resilience depends on an autonomous capacity to decide and act quickly, including stronger collective defense capabilities, tighter enforcement of pressure tools against Russia, and institutional readiness to sustain long-war politics rather than episodic crisis response. The operational implication of his stance was that diplomacy functions as a force multiplier only when backed by robust decision-making and credible coalition

commitments. Without that, diplomacy becomes rhetoric, and stalemate becomes an opportunity for the best able to manipulate time, fatigue, and escalation anxiety.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz's critique of Europe as a champion of overregulation and underachievement, delivered against the backdrop of great power politics, linked domestic governance to strategic leverage. His point was rather strategic: economic capacity, regulatory speed, industrial scaling, and political willingness to accept tradeoffs now directly shape diplomatic credibility. In a prolonged conflict, every promise is discounted by the adversary unless it is anchored in demonstrable output, meaning defense production and the political ability to sustain support through electoral cycles. This is where legitimacy and endurance intersect. States retain legitimacy when they can translate values into policy continuity and material capacity, not when they merely repeat declaratory positions.

> ***Russia's war has been a strategic failure in its intended outcomes, but that failure does not automatically become a Western win unless the West turns it into coordinated action.***

President Alexander Stubb sharpened the same logic from another angle, arguing that Russia's war has been a strategic failure in its intended outcomes, but that failure does not automatically become a Western win unless the West turns it into coordinated action. In Davos remarks reported by multiple outlets, he pointed to Moscow's failure indicators, such as NATO enlargement, Ukraine's growing integration into Europe, and the surge in European defense investment and in debates about self-reliance that the Kremlin sought to prevent. The analytic takeaway is that advantage in a deadlocked war is rarely created by the adversary's setbacks alone. It is created when alliances exploit those setbacks through robust responses, sustained aid architectures, and the management of escalation signaling in ways that deny the opponent political exits framed as victory.

Adding to all those concerns, Trump's Board of Peace initiative, advanced further in Davos, offered the clearest example of the decline of traditional diplomatic forums and the substitution of practices reflecting new multipolarity, rather than multilateralism based on Western institutions and principles. The design is explicitly hierarchical and inherently transactional, with decision authority concentrated in the chair and membership structured around loyalty, money, and access rather than universal rules or values. The new Board of Peace was not welcomed unanimously; however, France and Spain decided not to join on grounds tied to multilateralism, international law, and the United Nations system, and there was limited participation within the European Union, while controversy arose over the revocation of Canada's invitation after a petty political disagreement.

The core implication for the Ukraine context lies in how peace initiatives themselves are being reconceptualized as instruments of influence rather than neutral frameworks for conflict resolution. President Trump was explicit that participation in the Board of Peace would be determined by influence, effective control, and the ability to shape outcomes, not by formal adherence to international rules or institutional standing. In this model, legitimacy is no longer primarily derived from international law, multilateral norms, or universal procedures, but from power relationships and access to decision-making authority. Peace, in this framing, becomes a managed outcome produced by those who control the process, rather than a rule-governed settlement grounded in established legal principles.

This approach directly tests alliance cohesion and the resilience of the rules-based order. By forcing

states to choose between transactional inclusion and normative alignment, such initiatives expose fault lines within alliances and reframe legitimacy as something granted by power holders rather than conferred by institutions. For Ukraine, this shift reshapes the diplomatic battlefield on which its future will be negotiated, determining who has a voice, who sets the agenda, and whether outcomes are anchored in law or in the cards each side holds.

> ***By forcing states to choose between transactional inclusion and normative alignment, such initiatives expose fault lines within alliances and reframe legitimacy as something granted by power holders rather than conferred by institutions.***

These Davos signals point to a diplomatic domain in which outcomes are shaped less by formal legal claims and more by the operational use of partnerships, institutional capacity, and narrative control. Diplomacy becomes decisive when it builds coalitions that can enforce constraints, absorb costs, and deny the adversary an informational path to normalize aggression. This same logic also explains why the informational domain is inseparable from diplomacy in the Ukraine war: diplomatic choices only hold when publics and partners interpret them as legitimate, sustainable, and strategically coherent, and when adversarial narratives fail to fracture that perception.

The Informational Domain as a Battleground of Legitimacy

When legitimacy is no longer grounded primarily in international law and shared norms but increasingly vested in power, access, and control, it cannot endure without narrative construction and cognitive reinforcement. Power-based legitimacy is inherently unstable unless it is made to appear normal, inevitable, and acceptable to key audiences. This is where the informational domain becomes decisive. Diplomatic leverage achieved through power asymmetries must be translated into stories of necessity, responsibility, realism, or inevitability if it is to hold over time. Without such narration, power-driven arrangements remain exposed to contestation, resistance, and reversal.

This logic sits at the core of political warfare theory. Classical literature on political warfare emphasizes that the influence is sustained not just by coercion or material advantage but by shaping how political realities are understood and internalized. Political outcomes become durable only when they are cognitively embedded within societies and alliances as reasonable, unavoidable, or even desirable. Contemporary cognitive and information warfare literature extends this insight by showing how modern conflicts target opinions and wider frameworks through which legitimacy, risk, and responsibility are interpreted. The objective is normalization, that is, making power-based decisions appear as common sense responses to complex realities rather than as departures from established rules.

In the context of Ukraine, this means that diplomatic initiatives, alliance behavior, and settlement proposals gain traction only if they are accompanied by narratives that redefine what constitutes justice, peace, and security amid prolonged conflict. Informational operations, therefore, do not simply support diplomacy; they condition its effectiveness by shaping how power-based legitimacy is received, debated, and ultimately accepted across domestic publics and international partners. Understanding this dynamic is essential for assessing how political tools influence outcomes in contemporary warfare, where the decisive struggle increasingly unfolds in the cognitive and informational space rather than on the battlefield alone.

Indicators of effectiveness in this domain are observable. They include public tolerance for long-term costs, stability of alliance consensus under pressure, persistence of support despite escalation risks, and the absence of narrative fragmentation that adversaries can exploit. Conversely, informational vulnerability is revealed through fatigue framing, the normalization of aggression, the erosion of responsibility attribution, and the growing acceptance of imposed settlements as pragmatic inevitabilities rather than coerced outcomes.

Russia's approach to hybrid warfare, which seeks concessions by escalating pressure, exploits precisely these dynamics. By contesting meaning rather than facts alone, it seeks to normalize stalemate, shift blame, amplify divisions, and recast power-based outcomes as reasonable compromises. The informational domain thus becomes the mechanism through which political warfare either succeeds or collapses. If power-based legitimacy is not continuously narrated and reinforced, it decays. If it is successfully internalized, it reshapes the strategic landscape without further military action.

Power, Legitimacy, and the Future of War Beyond the Battlefield

For the Euro-Atlantic community, the implications extend beyond Ukraine in ways that are now impossible to ignore. Recent debates surrounding Greenland (even if an amicable solution is found, as the latest statements suggest) and the framing of U.S. security interests showcase a potentially profound erosion of the foundational assumptions underpinning NATO. When the territorial integrity of an ally is discussed primarily through the lens of great power necessity rather than alliance obligation, the credibility of collective defense is inevitably called into question. A NATO whose guarantees are perceived as conditional, negotiable, or subordinate to alternative power-based arrangements ceases to function as a stabilizing security institution. For Ukraine, this is deeply consequential. For NATO's eastern flank, it is existential. Without a rock-solid alliance commitment, the Baltic states are not strategically insulated from the vulnerabilities Ukraine has faced; they are merely buffered by political expectations instead of enforceable deterrence.

> ***When the territorial integrity of an ally is discussed primarily through the lens of great power necessity rather than alliance obligation, the credibility of collective defense is inevitably called into question.***

The broader strategic implication is that legitimacy itself is being reordered. If power increasingly defines outcomes, and if the United States signals a preference for ad hoc structures such as a Board of Peace over treaty-based alliances, the Euro-Atlantic security environment is poised to be fundamentally transformed. NATO, long the anchor of stability and collective defense, risks being displaced by more fluid, hierarchical, and transactional arrangements in which access and influence matter more than membership and legal obligation. This would weaken NATO and accelerate the transition toward a multipolar system in which security is negotiated on a case-by-case basis, norms are selectively applied, and smaller states are forced to navigate between power centers rather than rely on institutional guarantees.

In this context, the war in Ukraine becomes more than a test of resilience or endurance. Despite being a partner rather than a member, it serves as a bellwether for whether coalition-based security can survive in an era of political warfare where legitimacy is no longer assumed but must be continuously defended against power-driven alternatives. A discredited NATO would repre-

sent a strategic failure far exceeding the outcome of the war itself, undermining deterrence across the eastern flank and reshaping the Euro-Atlantic order in ways that favor coercion over commitment. The stakes, therefore, are not confined to Ukraine's sovereignty, but to whether collective security remains a viable organizing principle in a world increasingly defined by power, perception, and political bargaining.

> ***The war in Ukraine becomes more than a test of resilience or endurance. Despite being a partner rather than a member, it serves as a bellwether for whether coalition-based security can survive in an era of political warfare where legitimacy is no longer assumed but must be continuously defended against power-driven alternatives.***

What follows from this diagnosis is an unavoidable strategic question rather than a policy checklist. It is no longer clear whether President Trump has already settled on a vision of a reordered international system in which Russia, as a nuclear great power, cannot be allowed to lose. Whether this represents a transitional moment or the consolidation of a genuinely multipolar order remains open, but the direction of travel is unmistakable and troubling, including for Georgia. Given Trump's publicly articulated skepticism toward the European Union, reinforced in the recently released U.S. national security concept, the long-standing European strategy of compensating for fragmentation through rhetorical unity appears increasingly ineffective. Even a hypothetically rearmed and institutionally coherent Europe may no longer align with prevailing U.S. strategic priorities.

> ***Ukraine, backed decisively by the United States, can function as a durable counterweight to Russian expansion in Europe and as a major European power capable of sharing the strategic burden of transatlantic security.***

In this context, the center of gravity shifts toward Ukraine itself. The decisive task becomes persuading Washington that a strong, sovereign Ukraine is not a liability to be managed, but a strategic asset to be cultivated. Ukraine, backed decisively by the United States, can function as a durable counterweight to Russian expansion in Europe and as a major European power capable of sharing the strategic burden of transatlantic security. Beyond deterrence, such a partnership offers tangible alignment with American interests through access to critical natural resources, mutually reinforcing defense industrial cooperation, and large-scale investment opportunities tied to postwar reconstruction. If power now defines outcomes, then Ukraine's future will depend on whether it can anchor itself not only in law and principle, but in a compelling strategic proposition that aligns its survival with the interests of the dominant power shaping the emerging order ■

Georgia, Venezuela, and the New Scramble for Spheres of Influence

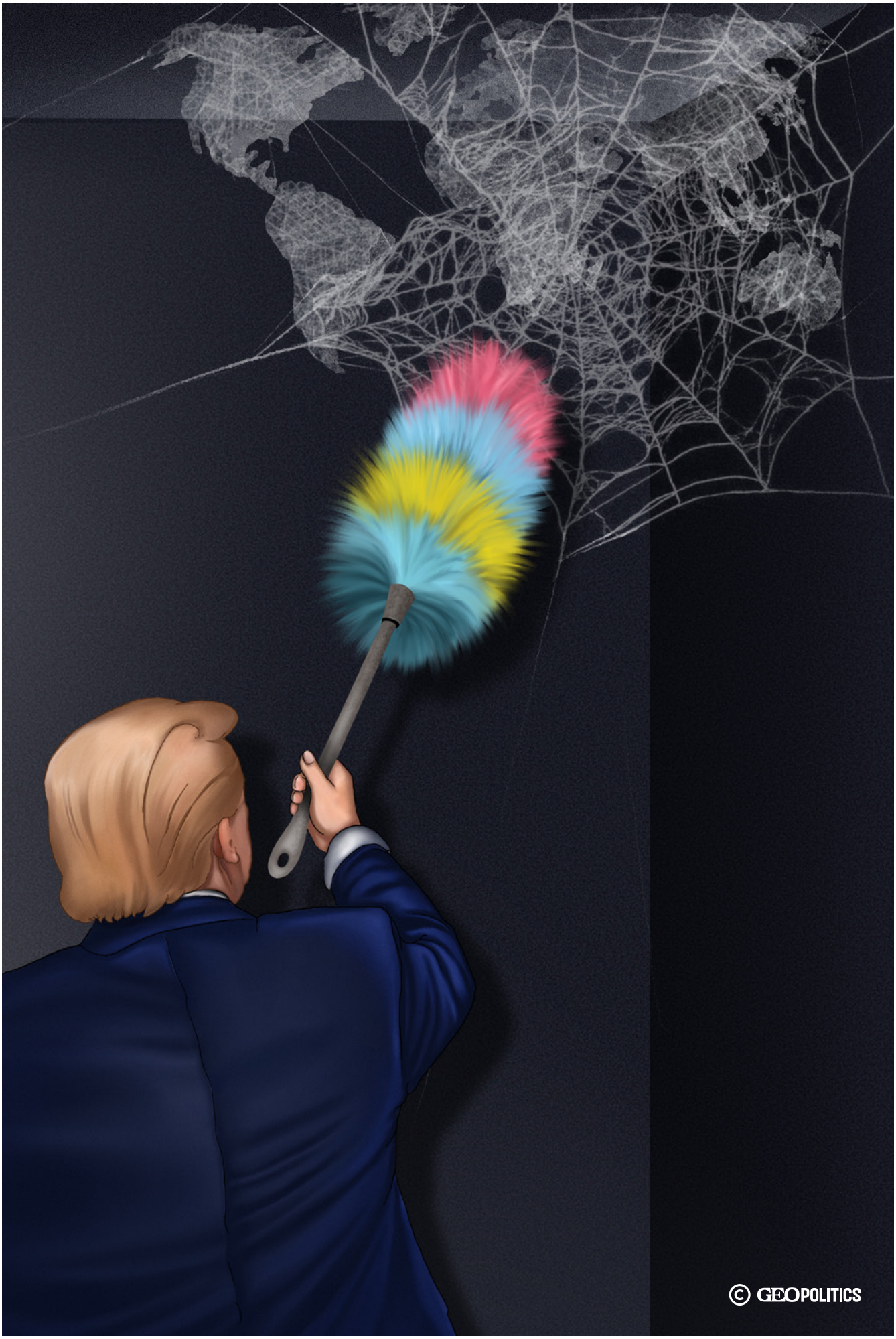
The image of Nicolás Maduro and his wife being dragged away in handcuffs triggered a mix of contradictory reactions in Georgia. Among opponents of the Georgian Dream, it was greeted with a sense of elation. They hailed the move as a sign that autocrats and Vladimir Putin's allies around the world are no longer untouchable, that the United States was "back in the game," pursuing illegitimate dictators and abandoning its earlier posture of restraint and indecision. For many, it was not only a gesture of solidarity with Venezuelans, millions of whom have fled their country, but also an expression of hope that Georgia's own increasingly authoritarian rulers might one day face a similar fate.

The Georgian Dream, characteristically, translated the Maduro episode into the language of domestic politics. The parliamentary speaker mocked the opposition and its supporters, quipping that Georgia's own "Maduro" was already in prison - a reference to former president Mikheil Saakashvili. He also took aim at the European Union, declaring it no longer a relevant political force while notably refraining from criticizing the United States. Georgian Dream messaging stressed the need to remain focused on "national interests" amid uncertainty and turbulence. The speaker later added that Georgians would be far better off listening to their church rather than seeking inspiration abroad and adopting foreign values. A month later, the Georgian Dream introduced a new package of Soviet-style legislative changes restricting political participation for anyone with ties to foreign-funded organizations or to Georgians abroad who receive financial support.

The Georgian Dream's reaction and the policies that followed suggest a strategy of self-preservation through isolation. According to this logic, Georgia as a whole is safer if it keeps its head down, shielded from external influences. This, in turn, leaves the ruling regime more secure. With the rest of the world distracted and increasingly

NATALIE SABANADZE
Contributor

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

> ***The belief that a rules-based international order can protect smaller states from the predatory instincts of great powers has been discredited in Georgia. It failed to prevent Russian aggression in 2008 and later proved equally powerless in Ukraine.***

Those on the democratic side of the political spectrum, however, continue to cling to the idea of the United States as a benign hegemon that is even more effective when unconstrained by rules and norms. The belief that a rules-based international order can protect smaller states from the predatory instincts of great powers has been discredited in Georgia. It failed to prevent Russian aggression in 2008 and later proved equally powerless in Ukraine. This outlook also reflects Georgia's enduring tradition of seeking an external patron: the conviction that democracy can be saved if sufficient external pressure is applied, sanctions are imposed, and the regime is punished abroad.

The "Maduro moment," followed shortly by Washington's insistence that Greenland is vital to U.S. national security, has brought the old question of spheres of influence back to the fore. The United States claims the Western Hemisphere; Russia claims its "near abroad." Rules no longer matter, democracy is dispensable, and so are old commitments and alliances. Great powers decide; smaller states fall in line. If Greenland is vital to U.S. national security, then Crimea, as Sergey Lavrov was quick to note, is vital to Russia's. As a new scramble for influence unfolds, Georgia is once again confronted with uncomfortable questions. What choices does it really have? Will it fall back into Russia's sphere of influence? Is this inevitable, or does it still have agency in shaping its fate?

Georgia today faces a dual challenge: preserving its democracy while surviving as an independent state in a world that, in Stephen Miller's words, is "governed by force, by strength and power." This blunt affirmation that "might is right" exposes a reality many in Georgia are reluctant to accept: the United States is increasingly behaving less like a benign hegemon and more like a predatory one. The Donald Trump administration no longer regards the promotion of democracy as a core American interest and has accordingly abandoned it as a policy priority. Maduro may be gone, but his regime remains intact.

> ***The erosion of norms and multilateral cooperation does not reduce risks for small states; it amplifies them.***

The lesson for Georgia is evident. Democracy cannot be outsourced; it must be defended internally by domestic forces. Ultimately, it is Georgians themselves who have the greatest stake in the kind of state in which they will live. It is also up to Georgia to decide where it positions itself in an emerging, fractured international order. What is clear, however, is that the erosion of norms and multilateral cooperation does not reduce risks for small states; it amplifies them.

Russia in Trump's World

Russia, along with China and others, has long contested U.S. hegemony and resented the promotion of democracy and human rights as universal values. Moscow saw this agenda as hypocritical, masking unilateral dominance, stoking "color revolutions," and justifying interventionism with little regard for the strategic interests of others. Today, the United States and Russia appear to be speaking the same language of power politics. The irony, however, is that even if the emerging order is more congenial to the Kremlin, it remains one shaped by the United States. This reflects a deeper strate-

gic problem confronting Moscow: in a world that increasingly resembles the one it long claimed to want, Russia appears to have lost the initiative to shape it.

Did Russia wage four years of war only to wake up in Trump's world? A new scramble for spheres of influence may indeed be underway—but one stripped of rules and driven by intense great-power competition could leave Russia at a disadvantage. The United States appears to be preparing precisely for such a contest: its recent moves in both Greenland and Venezuela reflect a determination to secure a competitive edge over its rivals. Although President Trump has signaled accommodation of certain Russian interests in the context of Ukraine, he has simultaneously targeted Putin's allies one by one, undermining and constraining Russia's global ambitions. This, in turn, has been interpreted as a reassuring sign, helping to explain a somewhat paradoxical embrace of Trumpism among many on Russia's periphery, including Georgia.

Russia enters this competition weakened by its war in Ukraine. Its limited responses to events in Venezuela, Iran, and earlier in Syria underscore a growing overstretch. Far from moderating Moscow's behavior, this vulnerability is likely to make it more assertive where it believes outcomes still matter most. For the Kremlin, Ukraine is not only about territory. It is about control over Ukraine's political orientation and governance system. From this perspective, regime change, not merely territorial gains, remains central to Russia's war aims.

Seen through this lens, Venezuela matters less as a theatre than as a precedent. The United States removed Maduro because it judged Venezuela more useful without him. Moscow draws a parallel conclusion: Ukraine, in Putin's view, will remain hostile so long as Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains in power. If Venezuela demonstrates that regime change is permissible in the name of strategic utility, then Russia can argue that its own objectives in Ukraine require the same outcome—whether through coercion, manipulated elections, or imposed political settlements.

> ***Where Venezuela illustrates regime removal in the name of stability, Ukraine risks becoming the inverse case: regime change pursued to neutralize a perceived threat.***

This logic is not new; Russia violated international law long before Venezuela and will continue to do so. What has changed is the permissive environment. Great powers now act with increasing disregard for popular will or democratic legitimacy, guided instead by advantage in an intensifying competition. Where Venezuela illustrates regime removal in the name of stability, Ukraine risks becoming the inverse case: regime change pursued to neutralize a perceived threat.

The implications extend beyond Ukraine. For Georgia's democrats, the emerging order offers little reassurance. Even in the unlikely event of U.S. intervention against the ruling Georgian Dream party, Trumpian logic would not necessarily favor democratic opposition or new elections. Stability and effective control would matter more than legitimacy. Supporting incumbents could be justified as the least disruptive option.

> ***In the struggle over power, resources, and influence, Russia faces a stronger, freer, and less predictable competitor. But in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, where democratic legitimacy collides with great-power pragmatism, the erosion of rules may work in Moscow's favor.***

Paradoxically, then, Trump's worldview helps Russia in its near abroad even as it disadvantages Moscow globally. In the struggle over power, resources, and influence, Russia faces a stronger, freer, and less predictable competitor. But in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, where democratic legitimacy collides with great-power pragmatism, the erosion of rules may work in Moscow's favor.

The Return of Spheres of Influence

There is nothing new about spheres of influence themselves. Despite decades of rhetoric about sovereign equality and a rules-based international order, great powers have always exerted disproportionate influence over their smaller neighbors. What has changed is how that influence is exercised. Previously, it was constrained, even if imperfectly, by norms, institutions, and reputational costs. Today, those constraints have visibly weakened. Yet, it would be unwise to assume that great powers can now dominate their respective spheres as they once did or that such domination would go uncontested. Nor is there reason to believe that mutual recognition of spheres would produce greater stability or security.

First, spheres of influence are no longer geographically bounded, nor are they static or uncontested. Russia's policies in the Sahel are an attempt at expanding its sphere of influence beyond the traditional "near abroad." At the same time, Russia's once-uncontested dominance is increasingly constrained by Türkiye in the South Caucasus and by China in Central Asia. China's economic footprint in Latin America is substantial and growing and U.S. pressure is more likely to deepen Chinese engagement than to eliminate it. The Canadian prime minister's recent visit to Beijing underscores this reality. Rather than restoring order, aggressive reassertion of influence may encourage smaller states to hedge, playing one power against another and intensifying great-power rivalry.

Second, intensified competition does not lead to a stable equilibrium. Even where great powers tacitly acknowledge one another's interests, they still seek advantage. Control over Venezuela does not automatically entitle Russia to control over Ukraine or to the restoration of its influence all over the former Soviet Union. Trump's overtures towards Central Asian states or his involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict demonstrate that the U.S. is not inhibited when it comes to engaging in, and if necessary, sidelining Russia in its traditional area of domination. According to the latest reports, Trump is dispatching Vice President J.D. Vance to both Baku and Yerevan to advance the work on the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

> ***The logic of spheres of influence assumes that smaller states will submit because resistance is futile. Ukraine has demonstrated the opposite. Resistance is not irrational; it is value-driven.***

Third, the logic of spheres of influence assumes that smaller states will submit because resistance is futile. Ukraine has demonstrated the opposite. Resistance is not irrational; it is value-driven. States value independence, people care about their rights, and they are increasingly willing to fight for them, even against overwhelming odds. Venezuelans may still put up a fight to dismantle what is left of Maduro's regime rather than accept decisions made for them, as do Iranians, and durable stabilization may ultimately require democratic governance.

Moreover, while the power and capability imbalance between smaller and larger states persists, the gap has narrowed. Former Soviet republics, having gained their independence, were initial-

ly far weaker than Russia, allowing Moscow to project influence with little resistance. That is no longer the case. States that emerged from colonial domination across the globe are no longer uniformly weak or passive. Ukraine's valiant resistance to the Russian aggression defied all expectations. Today, even smaller states are stronger than they used to be and better positioned to push back and boost their positions in partnership with others.

This leads to a final observation: the international system is no longer neatly divided between great powers and everyone else. Middle powers matter, and they are likely to play an increasingly significant role in shaping a fragmented global order—both within their regions and beyond. Türkiye's expanding role in the Black Sea, the Middle East, and parts of Africa illustrates this shift. In the South Caucasus, the emerging Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis has become an effective counterbalance to Russia's hegemonic ambitions. The influence of middle powers is likely to grow further as the multilateralism characteristic of the post-Cold War order gives way to more flexible, minilateral arrangements centered on shared threats and interests.

Georgia's Choices

What, then, are Georgia's choices under these circumstances? As with any period of change, the moment presents both risks and opportunities. Georgia should give up the illusion that Western support will help restore its rapidly eroding democracy, not because democracy has lost its value, but because the West, as it once existed, may no longer be there, and its principal architect, the United States, is no longer committed to promoting it. Democracy will, therefore, have to be defended primarily through domestic means.

This matters not only because of the intrinsic value attached to living with dignity and protected rights, but also for strategic reasons. In a highly competitive environment, where miscalculations carry prohibitive costs, democracy remains the most resilient and error-correcting system of decision-making. Authoritarian regimes, such as the one that the Georgian Dream is constructing, prioritize loyalty over competence and devote much of their political bandwidth to regime survival rather than to addressing genuine national security challenges.

In a world where spheres of influence are both fluid and contested, Georgia could increase its room for maneuver and protect itself by forging alliances and durable partnerships. It is not a world in which a small nation can survive in isolation and retain effective, not just nominal, sovereignty. In an era of intensifying competition, neutrality is illusory, and abstention is not an option. Participation is unavoidable, and those who fail to choose will find that choices are made for them.

This requires a strategic choice: whether to align with a reconfigured community of democracies or to acquiesce to a model of submissive authoritarian stability. It also demands a reassessment of Georgia's strategic value amid intensified systemic rivalry. Its transit potential remains important but is no longer unique. If and when the TRIPP becomes operational, Georgia's route will be one among several, requiring it to compete and to demonstrate reliability. To that end, Georgia will need to work closely with regional partners—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Türkiye—to prevent Russia from re-establishing uncontested dominance, leveraging Georgia's position on the Black Sea coast.

> ***As Europe assumes greater responsibility for deterring Russia, it too stands to benefit from close alignment with Georgia. Supporting a democratic Georgia is, therefore, not only a matter of values but a security imperative.***

Most importantly, however, Georgia must decide who its principal strategic partners are and how to anchor itself within a European security architecture that is being reshaped in real time. If Georgia values sovereignty, peace, and democracy in equal measure, European integration remains its best and only viable option. As Europe assumes greater responsibility for deterring Russia, it too stands to benefit from close alignment with Georgia. Supporting a democratic Georgia is, therefore, not only a matter of values but a security imperative ■

Revenge of Revisionism

For more than three decades after the Cold War, the international system was widely described as unipolar, defined by U.S. military primacy, the global reach of American alliances, and Washington's outsized influence over international institutions and economic rules. While this unipolar moment was never as absolute as its advocates claimed, it nonetheless shaped global expectations: major wars of territorial conquest were presumed obsolete in Europe, the United States was assumed to be the default security provider for much of the world, and global finance and trade remained deeply integrated into a Western-led order. Russia, a former superpower that had lost an empire and endured a painful transition, increasingly viewed this system as humiliating, illegitimate, and strategically dangerous.

Since Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the Russian Federation has emerged as a champion challenger of the existing world order. Challenges aimed at carving out a more profound role for Russia in world affairs as a part of the attempt to restore its former glory, otherwise known as a policy of "rising from its knees." For a while, such a policy seemed to have been "working well" for Russia: the invasion in Georgia and the de facto occupation of two of its regions, the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of other regions of Ukraine, the formation of the Russo-centric Eurasian Economic Union, re-projecting power in the Middle East by actively deploying and employing its military in Syria, the proliferation of activities of the allegedly "private" Wagner military company in Africa and Asia, re-surfacing in Venezuela and in other parts of Latin America, openly challenging the West by forming institutions like BRICS, and many more. But the price to be paid for all of the abovementioned was either minimal or negligible.

Russia's Strategic Miscalculation

The Kremlin's long-term objective was always clear: weaken U.S. dominance, fracture Western unity, and force the world to accept Russia as a decisive pole in a multipolar system.

TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

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

The war has constrained Moscow's power, exposed structural weaknesses in its state and military, and made it a far less credible and capable player in world affairs. The invasion did not destroy the Western-led order; it reactivated it.

Yet, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, intended as the decisive act of strategic revisionism, became one of the greatest geopolitical miscalculations of the post-Cold War era. Rather than accelerating the decline of unipolarity and elevating Russia's global standing, the war has constrained Moscow's power, exposed structural weaknesses in its state and military, and made it a far less credible and capable player in world affairs. The invasion did not destroy the Western-led order; it reactivated it.

Meanwhile, American President Donald Trump - and not the Russian one - became a major challenger of the world order. The Ukrainian "adventure" did not restore Russian prestige; it reduced Russia's strategic autonomy and narrowed its options. And it did not produce a new multipolar equilibrium with Russia at the center; rather, it accelerated Russia's drift toward dependence on a smaller set of partners, especially China, while limiting its ability to shape events beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The Logic of Russia's Challenge to the Unipolar System

Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy evolved through phases. In the 1990s, Moscow was weakened internally and sought integration with the West, albeit from a position of inferiority. By the early 2000s, fueled by energy revenues and political consoli-

dation, Russia regained confidence and began reasserting influence in its near abroad. Over time, the Kremlin developed a narrative in which NATO enlargement, U.S. interventions (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya), and the "color revolutions" were not separate events but components of a coherent Western strategy to encircle Russia, undermine its regime, and deny it great-power status.

This worldview framed the unipolar order as a direct threat. If the United States and its allies could determine European security, shape political outcomes in post-Soviet states, and enforce norms through sanctions or military intervention, then Russia's sovereignty, as the Kremlin defined it, was perpetually vulnerable. In response, Moscow pursued several tools of resistance: energy leverage, disinformation, cyber operations, military modernization, and selective intervention (Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014, Syria 2015). These moves aimed to demonstrate that Russia could veto outcomes, impose costs, and force the West to negotiate.

> ***For Moscow, Ukraine (like previously Georgia) represented not merely a geopolitical battleground but a symbolic and strategic frontier: a successful, democratic, European-oriented Ukraine would have been a long-term ideological and political threat to Russia's authoritarian model and imperial self-conception.***

By 2021-2022, the Kremlin appears to have concluded that incremental disruption was insufficient. Ukraine's westward orientation was accelerating. The Ukrainian state, despite its weaknesses, was consolidating a civic identity increasingly incompatible with Russian imperial narratives. The Minsk process had stalled. NATO was not offering membership, but Western military support was growing. For Moscow, Ukraine (like previously Georgia) represented not merely a geopolitical battleground but a symbolic and strategic frontier: a successful, democratic, European-oriented Ukraine would have been a long-term ideological and political threat to Russia's authoritarian model and imperial self-conception.

Thus, the invasion was not only about territory. It was about rewriting the rules of European security and proving that the West could not defend its principles. In effect, Russia attempted to force the end of the post-1991 settlement by demonstrating that military conquest was still viable, that NATO was risk-averse, and that the United States would not sustain long-term confrontation.

The Core Miscalculation: Overestimating Russia, Underestimating Ukraine and the West

Russia's strategic failure began with flawed assumptions. The Kremlin expected a rapid collapse of Ukrainian resistance, a decapitation of the government in Kyiv, and a swift installation of a compliant regime. It assumed that Ukraine was a weak, divided state whose institutions would crumble under pressure. It also believed that Europe, dependent upon Russian energy and accustomed to internal divisions, would not sustain unity or accept major economic costs. Finally, Moscow assumed that the United States, distracted by domestic polarization and competition with China, would limit its response to symbolic sanctions.

All three assumptions proved disastrously wrong.

Ukraine did not collapse. It mobilized. The Ukrainian state and society demonstrated resilience, and the armed forces adapted rapidly. The invasion, rather than fracturing Ukrainian identity, consolidated it. Russian military shortcomings,

logistical failures, poor coordination, low morale, and inadequate intelligence turned what was expected to be a lightning operation into a grinding war of attrition.

Europe did not fracture. It aligned, against all odds. While debates over escalation and aid levels persisted, the overall trajectory was not what Russia expected. European sanctions expanded, defense budgets increased, and the European Union took unprecedented steps to support and even integrate Ukraine. Even more consequential, NATO did not weaken but actually grew in size and strength. Finland and Sweden, long neutral, moved toward membership, a strategic outcome that directly contradicted Russia's stated objective of reducing NATO's footprint.

The United States did not disengage. It started to lead. Washington coordinated military assistance, intelligence support, and sanctions and framed the war as a defining contest over the rules of the international system. Rather than proving that American power was exhausted, the war demonstrated the enduring capacity of the United States to organize coalitions and sustain strategic pressure—especially when allies perceive existential stakes.

The Kremlin's miscalculation was, therefore, systemic. It was not merely a tactical error in battlefield planning; it was a strategic misunderstanding of political will, national identity, alliance cohesion, and the long-term consequences of attempting to overturn norms through force.

So far, Russia has profoundly miscalculated the second presidency of Donald Trump. At first glance, this presidency was supposed to be beneficial for Russia (challenging the world order, making unnecessary rifts with traditional allies, stopping direct military supplies to Ukraine to name few), but factually, successfully pressuring India to drastically diminish procurement of Russian crude, altering Venezuela's oil flow and the seizure of tankers of the so-called "shadow fleet" severely hindered Russia's revenues, hence the ability to balance its books and sustain a protracted war. Even if a peace deal is reached on Ukraine, it is doubtful that Trump will treat Russia as an equal partner; most likely, Russia will be forced to cede substantial economic power to American business conglomerates.

War as a Trap

As history books teach, great powers can lose influence not only by defeat but by overextension. The war in Ukraine has become a trap that consumes Russia's attention, manpower, finances, and diplomatic capital. The longer the war continues, the more it functions as a gravitational pull that limits Moscow's ability to act elsewhere. Russia's armed forces have been heavily committed, necessitating continuous recruitment, mobilization, and equipment expenditures. This has reduced readiness and flexibility for contingencies across the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Arctic.

> ***The war has also reshaped Russia's military reputation. Prior to 2022, Russia cultivated an image of modernized competence, reinforced by its operations in Syria and its posture in Europe. The invasion shattered that image.***

The war has also reshaped Russia's military reputation. Prior to 2022, Russia cultivated an image of modernized competence, reinforced by its operations in Syria and its posture in Europe. The invasion shattered that image. Even if Russia can adapt and learn, the perception of its conventional military power has been permanently altered. For states weighing partnerships, arms purchases, or security alignments, credibility matters. A military that struggles in a major war against a neighbor

is less intimidating globally and less persuasive as a guarantor of security, especially when the perceived status of the "second most powerful army" in the world and the previous glory of Russian/Soviet weaponry has vanished.

At the same time, Russia's war economy, while capable of sustaining production, has imposed opportunity costs. Resources that could have been invested in modernization, technology, infrastructure, human development, or long-term competitiveness are now channeled into sustaining a war. The result is the economy's strategic stagnation. Over time, a state that militarizes its economy to sustain a prolonged conflict often becomes less innovative, less diversified, and more dependent upon a very narrow set of exports and partners.

The Sanctions Regime and the Limits of Russia's Economic Power

One of the Kremlin's central bets was that the West would be unwilling or unable to impose truly damaging economic measures. This bet failed. While sanctions did not collapse Russia's economy overnight, they have structurally constrained Russia's long-term capacity to compete as a global power.

Sanctions targeting financial systems, technology imports, and defense-industrial components have limited Russia's access to advanced machinery, semiconductors, and high-end industrial inputs. Even where Russia has found workarounds through third countries, these are less efficient, more expensive, and politically conditional. The war has accelerated the decoupling of Russia from global financial markets and advanced technology - two resources essential for modernization in the 21st century.

Energy, Russia's most powerful economic tool, has also become less effective. Europe's rapid diversification away from Russian gas reduced Moscow's ability to use energy as geopolitical leverage. Russia can redirect some exports to Asia, but this often occurs on less favorable terms and requires costly infrastructure adjustments. The broader result is a shift from being an energy superpower with strategic influence over Europe or elsewhere to becoming a more constrained supplier, increasingly dependent upon a limited set of buyers.

Economic power is not only about GDP. It is about connectivity, access, innovation, and the ability to shape rules. The war has reduced Russia's connectivity to the most advanced parts of the global economy. This limits its ability to be a serious global player, especially in areas like high technology, finance, and industrial competitiveness.

Diplomatic Isolation and the Erosion of Power Projection Instruments

> ***A great power's influence depends upon more than coercion. It also relies upon diplomatic credibility, legitimacy, and the ability to build coalitions. The invasion of Ukraine severely damaged Russia's diplomatic standing in much of the world, particularly among European states and many developed democracies.***

A great power's influence depends upon more than coercion. It also relies upon diplomatic credibility, legitimacy, and the ability to build coalitions. The invasion of Ukraine severely damaged Russia's diplomatic standing in much of the world, particularly among European states and many developed democracies. Even in regions where anti-Western sentiment exists, Russia's actions have produced unease. Many states may resist Western pressure to fully isolate Russia, but they also hesitate to embrace Moscow's revisionism too openly.

Moreover, Russia's claim to defend sovereignty against Western interference became difficult to sustain while it pursued a war of conquest. This contradiction weakened its ideological appeal, especially among states that value territorial integrity. While some governments remain neutral or opportunistic, the war has made Russia a more polarizing and less trusted actor.

Russia's soft power has also been damaged by the visibility of destruction, civilian suffering, and the perception of imperial aggression. In the long term, soft power is difficult to rebuild, and reputational losses can outlast battlefield outcomes. For a state seeking to be a global pole, this matters. Influence requires partners who choose alignment not only out of fear but also out of perceived benefit and legitimacy.

Russia's power projection through private military networks has likewise been constrained. The Wagner Group once served as a flexible tool for influence in Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan—offering security services, regime support, and political leverage in exchange for access to resources. After Wagner's 2023 mutiny and the subsequent death of its leadership, Russia moved to bring these operations under tighter state control. Yet, this restructuring reduced the group's autonomy and agility, limiting one of Moscow's most effective low-cost global instruments.

One may argue that the current U.S. administration is facing the same problem: a decline in its soft power and a loss of trust among traditional allies. The fundamental difference is that, unlike Russia, the U.S. remains a global, and in many cases indispensable, power that can afford a temporary setback. Even the current American administration considers traditional allies as essential and is allegedly merely trying to bring them more in line with its vision on issues like immigration, climate change, anti-woke-ism, etc.

The China Factor: From Strategic Autonomy to Asymmetrical Dependence

Perhaps the most consequential result of the war has been Russia's deepening reliance upon China. Before 2022, Russia and China had developed a partnership based upon shared opposition to U.S. dominance. Yet, Russia maintained strategic autonomy: it could sell energy to Europe, import technology from the West, and act as a swing player between East and West. That autonomy is now diminished.

As Russia's access to Western markets and technology narrowed, China became an increasingly vital economic outlet. This shift has made the relationship more asymmetrical. China has a far larger economy, greater technological capacity, and a broader network of trade partners. Russia, under sanctions and at war, has fewer options. In such a relationship, Russia risks becoming the junior partner - useful as a supplier of raw materials and a geopolitical distraction for the West, but less capable of shaping China's strategic decisions.

This undermines Russia's claim to be an independent pole in a multipolar order. Multipolarity, in theory, implies multiple centers of power with strategic autonomy. If Russia becomes structurally dependent upon China, it ceases to be a pole and becomes an adjunct. The war, therefore, may have accelerated the emergence of a world with greater Chinese influence, but not necessarily one in which Russia is a true equal partner.

The Near Abroad: Shrinking Influence Where It Once Dominated

Ironically, the war in Ukraine has weakened Russia's influence in precisely the region it claims as its sphere of privileged interests. States in the post-Soviet space have observed Russia's military struggles and the costs of alignment with Moscow. Some have sought greater autonomy; others have diversified partnerships with Türkiye, China, the EU, or regional actors.

> ***Russia's security commitments in places like the South Caucasus and Central Asia have been strained by the demands of the war. When a hegemon is preoccupied, local actors exploit the vacuum. Even if Russia retains significant leverage, its ability to enforce outcomes has diminished.***

Russia's security commitments in places like the South Caucasus and Central Asia have been strained by the demands of the war. When a hegemon is preoccupied, local actors exploit the vacuum. Even if Russia retains significant leverage, its ability to enforce outcomes has diminished. Over time, this erosion of regional dominance further limits Russia's global role because power projection typically begins with stable control of the near periphery.

Russia's traditional role as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus weakened dramatically after 2020. Armenia, formally allied with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), received no meaningful protection during repeated Azerbaijani pressure and the eventual collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Moscow's inability (or unwillingness) to enforce its own security order exposed the limits of its regional authority. Now, Türkiye and, to a certain extent, the U.S. determine new trade corridors in the region, directly contradicting Russia's declared interests.

A second instrument, economic leverage, has also diminished. Russia historically used trade, labor migration, and energy dependence to influence neighboring states. Today, Caucasian and Central Asian countries see Russia as much less favorable for economic migration. Open hostilities toward the Azerbaijani and Central Asian diasporas and attempts to use the Armenian diaspora against the Armenian state, often manifested on the policy level, further pushed the "near abroad" away from Russia. Russian "cultural centers" and media outlets are seen as hostile actors, further eroding their influence and diminishing Russian soft power.

Meanwhile, Türkiye has expanded its role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia through defense cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and economic ties. China continues to grow as the dominant economic force in Central Asia, offering infrastructure and investment without Moscow's coercive baggage. Even within Russia's former sphere, states now hedge more actively, seeking diversification rather than dependence.

The Unipolar Order Did Not End—It Hardened

The Kremlin's ultimate goal was to end unipolarity by demonstrating that the West was decadent, divided, and incapable of defending its order. Instead, the invasion of Ukraine triggered a partial reconsolidation of Western powers. NATO expanded and rearmed. The European Union is re-evaluating its security posture and drastically increasing not only support for Ukraine but also its own military industry and expenditure. The United States demonstrated renewed leadership

in world affairs, often supplemented by real-time tariff wars and decisive military actions.

This does not mean the world returned to a simplistic unipolar model. China remains a major rival to the United States. India and other middle powers seek strategic autonomy. The global South is not uniformly aligned with Western positions. Yet, Russia's war did not produce the multipolar outcome Moscow sought. Rather than proving that American power was finished, the war underscored that U.S. alliances remain the central organizing force in global security.

In other words, Russia attempted to break the unipolar order through military revisionism, but it ended up strengthening the institutions and coalitions that sustain Western primacy. Russia became the clearest example of how revisionism can backfire when pursued through maximalist military aggression.

Russian Demise and Implications for Georgia

Russia's "demise," understood as strategic weakening rather than collapse, will not automatically liberate Georgia. But it does change the structure of risk and possibility. Russia's decline increases the urgency of Georgia's internal choices. The greatest risk is not that Georgia misses an opportunity, but that it becomes trapped in a gray zone - too vulnerable to Russia, yet too politically inconsistent to anchor itself firmly in the West. As Russia's coercive capacity erodes, the decisive factor becomes Georgia's own institutional strength: the rule of law, democratic legitimacy, economic resilience, and defense modernization. In a region where power is shifting, small states survive not by waiting for history to favor them, but by building the capacity to exploit openings while deterring threats.

The occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia nervously observe events in Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia-Azerbaijan, and even more so in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran. Against this background, the prospects for international recognition of their "independence" are vanishing, and the two regions have become increasingly concerned about whether Russia will be able to continue supporting them economically and politically. It may not be an immediate threat, but the possibility is no longer unthinkable.

Also against such a background, the self-isolated and ostracized Georgian government has become a real liability for Georgia's national interests and is rapidly losing its relevance. For the first time in a generation, Georgia may have a real chance to reduce Russia's grip - if it can act with unity, clarity, and long-term discipline, but not with the current regime ■

Pirates and Buccaneers: Battle of the Seas and the End of the Liberal Century?

A brief glance at the international headlines in recent months leads one to suspect that something has visibly shifted on the high seas. As Russia (and Iran and Venezuela before it) resorted to a vast fleet of decrepit oil tankers to ship its crude oil, the U.S., France, UK, and Finland have moved to board and seize them, including in international waters. Before that, Russian shadow fleet tankers had resorted to tactics straight out of the buccaneer movies, changing flags, ports of attachment, and names several times during their voyage. Similarly, Russian and Chinese "shadow" ships are likely to have damaged vital communication cables in a tactic that the British head of MI6, an intelligence agency, called "tactics just below the threshold of war."

> ***The high seas are becoming less free for trade, with littoral powers securing their rights.***

Increasingly, the high seas are becoming less free for trade, with littoral powers securing their rights. And while the U.S. administration's renaming of the Gulf of Mexico is more of a symbolic gesture, it carries a hint of real concern about securing the domination of maritime routes near its economic borders. And the recent transatlantic spat over Greenland is, among other things, driven by the desire to control Arctic trade routes, leading researchers to call it a "New Security Frontier." This trend was further underscored just days ago, when thirteen states with access to the Nordic and Baltic seas coordinated efforts to effectively push Russia's shadow fleet out of the Baltic Sea.

And the determination to lock down territorial seas for access – for economic and strategic ends – was put to a startling show, when China amassed thousands of fishing ships and apparently assembled them in blocking patterns in the East China Sea.

JABA DEVDARIANI
Contributor

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

Simultaneously, the tariff wars, unleashed by President Donald Trump with such media fanfare, are wrecking the WTO-policed system of free trade, which had already been challenged for a decade, including by replacing NAFTA with USMCA. The series of trade deals between the European Union and major regional economic actors, such as India and MERCOSUR, which had been in the works for years and even decades, has been accelerated by geopolitical rather than purely economic considerations.

Some analysts and observers wonder whether all of these events are merely symptoms of a broader shift in the international order's underlying economic structure, at the juncture where trade and politics make each other tick in recognizable patterns. Some think that the capitalist system is reverting into an economic profile that has been just as characteristic to it as the liberal market, namely, mercantilist, regionally defined economic empires. That has profound implications for the way international relations are structured.

Politics of Finitude?

French historian Arnaud Orain, in his 2025 book, introduced a polemical reading of economic and trade history. In his reading, global economic relations have been structured by two types of tendencies: free–trade liberalism and the mercantilist periods (16-18 cc, 1880-1945). He believes we are living, or rather have been falling into one of these periods after the global financial crisis of 2008 and more fundamentally since 2010.

Orain advances a hypothesis that goes beyond the classification of "mercantilism" but refers to the underlying philosophical and practical assumptions of such global periods, which he calls "the politics of finitude."

Free trade liberalism is based on the assumption that trade is mutually enriching for the participants. By drawing on comparative and competitive advantages, linking the supply chains of resources and goods, and lowering tariffs and other trade barriers, the global economy and prosperity grow, benefiting the greatest number of people. Deep down, free-market liberalism is based on the idea of infinite growth, which is driving a nearly obsessive focus on GDP and trade growth figures. It also carries the underlying assumption that growth benefits everyone – perhaps not equally, but still helps lift millions out of poverty, which is considered economically beneficial. Richer masses are better consumers, expanding demand and fueling further growth. It also has political implications: it is assumed (though often unsupported by reality) that wealthier citizens (the Weberian middle class) demand voice and participation, pushing societies towards greater pluralism. The adherents of this view tend to see the world (in economy and in politics) through the prism of an individual, a consumer, and a citizen, who are supposed to benefit from globalization.

But another type of worldview is based on the assumption of precarity, the inherent finitude of resources. The writers and philosophers in the late 19th and early 20th century have postulated that since the globe is by definition finite and most of the territories on it are more or less occupied, while the population is growing "the offer is limited, while the supply is without limits [...] and thus the price of one meter of land is growing by day." That kind of thinking led to the so-called "colonial race" among the European powers, bent on solidifying their regional trade empires through closed supply chains. The famous writings in geopolitics, concepts of the "vital space" and "closed space" popularized by Friedrich Ratzel and Halford Mackinder have reflected this thinking and underpinned this worldview. As opposed to free-market capitalism, this "mercantilist" version looks at the world through the prism of zero-sum competition among (industrialized) states for finite resources. The benefit for the "nation" outweighs the benefit of the individual, and politics, as well as economic and trade policy, places itself on the side of the producers rather than the consumers. The competition of the industrial nations also connotes the normality of conflicts between them.

Privates of the Caribbean

This brings us back to the initial point of discussion – naval power and trade. It has been theorized that the free-trade episodes in modern history have coincided with the emergence of the hegemonic naval superpowers – Great Britain since 1815, the U.S. and its allies since 1945. The freedom of the high seas, however, is not the norm during the "mercantilist" phases, and its apparent gradual disappearance can be a symptom of the world falling into precisely such a phase.

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What are its key signs and symptoms? First, contested seas. The (real) pirates of the Caribbean in the 1630s, the corsairs, the all-powerful navies of the international trading companies in the 1700s, the naval forces in the lead-up to WWI, and the German Navy in the interwar period all disrupted the naval trade routes and interdicted access to their rivals – both state and quasi-state (like competing trade companies).

Second, the armament and militarization of the merchant navy. As historians and most gamers with a penchant for strategy games know well, 17th-18th-century merchant ships also pack formidable firepower. By the end of the 19th centu-

ry, the colonial trade companies – while nominally civilian – were structured along military lines, and their merchant fleets were heavily militarized. What is more, the states "delegate" their sovereign powers – military, law enforcement, public administration - to these companies in the overseas colonies. Throughout the mercantilist period, trade and war were intrinsically linked. Navies accompany and protect merchant fleets, fight for trade routes, and naval officers have careers that span both the navy and the merchant fleet.

> ***The extreme monopolization of distribution is a contemporary reality: the Big Five (MSC, Maersk, CMA CGM, COSCO, and Hapag-Lloyd) dominate the global shipping trade. Amazon and its Chinese copycats are distribution companies that operate worldwide and often operate under special legal regimes in host countries.***

Third, the growing economic and political influence of the distribution companies and logistical hubs. In contrast to the free-trade periods, most international trade is conducted within spheres of influence; ports are closed to outsiders, and trade with them is almost always conducted through highly militarized hubs. Since the objective of the politics of finitude is to maximize the use of natural and other finite resources (remember the current obsession with rare-earth metals, potassium, etc.), it requires establishing territorial supply chains that bring primary materials to production facilities. The emergence of the global markets is indeed initially structured by distribution (of colonial produce), which is replaced by industry only by the end of the 19th century. The extreme monopolization of distribution is a contemporary reality: the Big Five (MSC, Maersk, CMA CGM, COSCO, and Hapag-Lloyd) dominate the global shipping trade. Amazon and its Chinese copycats are distribution companies that operate worldwide and often operate under special legal regimes in host countries. The mega-logistical hubs are key to these companies' operations.

What does this analysis tell us about the direction of the world? If Orain's analysis is correct, then several things are going to happen in international affairs.

On the one hand, the free-market ideology will be increasingly questioned and rejected. Tariffs and trade barriers will become increasingly common, triggering trade wars.

An accelerated rush for resources will lead to the "securitization" of trade. This would become especially visible in two areas. First, navies will be called upon to accompany and protect merchant vessels carrying critical resources (a practice increasingly undertaken by China and Russia, and to a lesser degree by European and U.S. navies, in critical straits). Second, states will compete for establishing sovereign control of the "distribution hubs" - critical regional ports. This can be done either by states or quasi-state companies (elements of these approaches are already evident in Chinese Belt-and-Road projects).

> ***The pursuit of "growth" will be replaced by the pursuit of "power" – the focus would shift from the consumers to the producers. This is where the "multipolar" vision of the world meets the economic reality.***

On the other hand, the pursuit of "growth" will be replaced by the pursuit of "power" – the focus would shift from the consumers to the producers. This is where the "multipolar" vision of the world meets the economic reality. If the regional powers consolidate economic influence over major landmasses, the economic logic will shift from

the benefits of competition (prices are down, efficiency grows, prosperity grows) to the benefits of consolidation (state and quasi-state economic monopolies accumulate more power within their own sphere of influence, so that they can subsequently expand that sphere of influence through power projection and weaken others).

And finally, Orain thinks that the territorial colonization that historically accompanied the domination of the "politics of finitude" will return, both in the simple form of "landgrabs" and in the more modern phenomenon of the occupation of productive landmasses by monopolist quasi-states (such as hubs for Amazon or databanks for the GAFAM).

What About Us?

The analytical prism presented by Orain can be contested on many levels. It is, as the author readily admits, intuitive, rather than analytical, but it is still rooted in history. From the perspective of small states, it offers a useful meta-frame of reference that can help make sense (or not) of the deluge of information we confront every day. More specifically, it situates the seemingly inexplicable will of the global superpower – the United States – to shed the free trade system and trans-Atlantic security alliance that underpinned the world order after 1945, or to insist on the „need" to fully and physically control Greenland. Truth is, that the current U.S. administration's fascination with the Gilded Age and Monroe Doctrine harkens back precisely to the periods that Orain qualifies as "politics of finitude."

> ***The current U.S. administration's fascination with the Gilded Age and Monroe Doctrine harkens back precisely to the periods that Orain qualifies as "politics of finitude."***

Moreover, the world has become increasingly concerned about resource scarcity. The technological advances in energy-saving technologies and sustainable energy generation – falling prices of solar power plants, the exploitation of offshore wind, advances in nuclear fission and fusion – have made the rush to hydrocarbons less pressing. Yet, these very advances made the control of the new resources – rare earths, is a good example – a priority. In addition, even (and, somehow, especially) the climate change deniers feel that the transformation of our planet is likely to make the simplest and vital resources – like drinkable water – relatively rare, and that the parts of the globe that are likely to be relatively shielded from the nefarious effects of global warming, more desirable.

> ***All of this is likely to lead to an age when direct territorial control is once again a priority, and the seemingly inevitable (re)division into spheres of influence will be shaped by economics and supply chains – rather than ideology.***

All of this is likely to lead to an age when direct territorial control is once again a priority, and the seemingly inevitable (re)division into spheres of influence will be shaped by economics and supply chains – rather than ideology.

In his acclaimed speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke about the possibility of a middle-power trade alliance to resist and counter the expansionist designs of the big powers. That may, perhaps, prove possible.

Yet, whether small states can carve out their independent existence in the dawning world of finitude, and what are the resources whose sovereign control could grant it the "ticket" to perdure in the new era, remains to be seen ■

Between Collapse and Deal: Iran's Revolt, Geopolitical Fear, and the Illusion of Negotiation

With the new uprising of Iranian society against the theocratic-security regime, the unprecedented violent repression resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of protesters, and the concentration of U.S. military assets around the country, Iran is entering a period of profound uncertainty.

> ***It now seems that the question is no longer whether or not the Islamic Republic will survive, but rather how much violence it will be able to deploy and for how long.***

The regime has never been as weak as it is today since its establishment in 1979; this is widely acknowledged from U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to regional experts. Its legitimacy within the population has never been so low. The regime appears to have retaken control of the streets through unprecedented and ostentatious violence, massacring nearly 30,000 people, but it has lost its sense of purpose, its capacity for persuasion, and now governs solely through fear and violence. It now seems that the question is no longer whether or not the Islamic Republic will survive, but rather how much violence it will be able to deploy and for how long. The regime's survival will also hinge upon decisions taken by the United States and its regional ally, Israel: will they decide that the fruit is ripe enough to fall, or will they continue to squeeze it while keeping it on the tree, even if that means extending the agony of the Iranian people?

The countries of the South Caucasus will be affected, albeit unevenly, by the changes that will in-

THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

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


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evitably unfold in Iran. These changes may follow several different scenarios, which will determine how Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are impacted. This multi-variable equation will also depend upon the influence and behavior of regional actors such as Türkiye, Russia, the EU, and the United States. In short, following the turbulence triggered by the war in Ukraine, upheavals in Iran may bring a new series of shocks that could reshape regional balances.

Hope Dies Last

Shortly after the wild repression of Tiananmen Square in June 1989, the French President François Mitterrand declared that a regime that opens fire on its own youth has no future. Skeptics today argue that the Chinese Communist regime not only survived but has since become the world's second-largest power, challenging American economic and political hegemony. This is a sad truth. Just as Vladimir Putin's regime has managed to navigate several waves of protest, there are many examples of the resilience of authoritarian regimes.

Yet the Iranian case still offers grounds for cautious hope. Few countries have witnessed such a large share of their population repeatedly engage in sustained struggles for freedom: from the Green Movement of 2009, through Bloody Aban in November 2019, to the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022, and most recently the January 2026 uprising.

> ***After each wave of repression, Iranians have re-emerged with renewed energy against the military-theocratic regime of the Ayatollahs and the Pasdaran.***

In contrast to China and Russia, where pro-democracy movements never recovered after the brutal suppression of Tiananmen Square and the gradual exhaustion of the Bolotnaya protests in Moscow in 2011-2012, the Iranian public has returned to the streets with remarkable resilience. After each wave of repression, Iranians have re-emerged with renewed energy against the military-theocratic regime of the Ayatollahs and the Pasdaran.

Today, Iran arguably has the most pro-Western and pro-democracy population in the region. It is also among the most secular societies in the Middle East and one of the most openly opposed to the political instrumentalization of Islam. These internal dynamics are reinforced by a large, wealthy, and well-educated Iranian diaspora, whose global networks and influential media platforms further strengthen the prospects for long-term change.

Past the Breaking Point: Is Iran Beyond Reversal?

> ***For Europeans, this is not merely another Iranian crisis, but a genuine point of no return.***

The events of January 2026 may represent a further step forward or even an irreversible rupture. Proof of this is that even French diplomacy, always ready to capitalize on rifts between autocrats and democratic countries in order to be the sole Western actor to "maintain dialogue," has judged its resistance to designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization to be untenable and has aligned itself with the decision of the EU Council. This suggests that, for Europeans, this is not merely another Iranian crisis, but a genuine point of no return. The level of violence was so unprecedented that the regime may have permanently lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the population. Unlike the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, in which most protesters were young people or members of educated social groups, the uprising of last January was far more socially diverse and articulated demands that were both more radical and broader. The fact

that the revolt began with the bazaaris of Tehran's Alaeddin market allows for a parallel to be drawn with the two other successful revolutions in Iranian history: the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1909 and the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

> ***Even if some express reservations about the Crown Prince and his life in exile, it is evident that no leader can emerge from within the country without running a near-certain risk of being eliminated by the regime.***

Moreover, for the first time, the protesters have rallied around an alternative figure, a leader who had been sorely lacking in previous protest movements: Crown Prince of Iran Reza Pahlavi. His candidacy is far from beyond criticism; first and foremost, because he has not lived in Iran since early childhood. Nevertheless, his involvement in the movement and the rather unexpected level of popular support he has received have clearly made the regime more vulnerable, which helps to explain the unprecedented degree of violence used to re-impose terror. Even if some express reservations about the Crown Prince and his life in exile, it is evident that no leader can emerge from within the country without running a near-certain risk of being eliminated by the regime.

The key difference from previous uprisings is that the regime now appears particularly weakened. It is weakened internally in terms of legitimacy, as noted earlier, as well as economically and socially. It bears recalling that the unrest began among mobile telephone merchants and sellers of accessories and goods, largely imported through smuggling networks and purchased in dollars across the Persian Gulf. The collapse of the exchange rate by more than 50% since the "twelve-day war" last June (compounded by a deep sense of injustice, as regime insiders benefit from a preferential state-set exchange rate), rampant inflation (with an official annual rate of 42% in 2025 and over 70% for food products alone), the state's inability to provide basic services such as 24-hour access to water and electricity, and the glaring injustices stemming from the capture of 40 to 60% of the economy by senior officers of the IRGC have all contributed to this fragility.

Externally, the regime has become more vulnerable than ever. Since 7 October 2023, the Middle East has been profoundly destabilized. The so-called "Axis of Resistance," the network of proxy militias established by Tehran, has been severely weakened by Israeli military action: Hezbollah and Hamas, although not eliminated, have been badly battered, while former Sunni jihadists from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have taken power in Syria, toppling Bashar al-Assad, the central pillar of the pro-Iranian axis. The importance of Hezbollah for Iran can hardly be overstated, as it has effectively acted for nearly 40 years less in the interests of Lebanon than as a strategic shield for Iran itself. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Hezbollah has been gravely weakened for the first time since its creation and that Iran itself has been attacked on its own soil at this level of intensity for the first time since the establishment of the militia.

In addition to Iran's failure in the proxy war with Israel, the "twelve-day war" in June and the Israeli and American air strikes significantly weakened the regime. This conflict, which resulted in the elimination of numerous Iranian military and security leaders, nuclear scientists, the substantial destruction of air defense systems, and serious damage to Iran's nuclear program, revealed the extent of Iran's vulnerability and the degree to which even its highest levels of command are permeable to infiltration.

Even if the much-discussed 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to over 60% remain intact, the infrastructure required to build a nuclear weapon has been severely damaged and would require a

significant period of time to be rebuilt. The deployment a few months later of what Donald Trump described as a "beautiful armada floating toward Iran," namely, a carrier strike group soon to be joined by a second, combined with the policy of maximum pressure, has fostered among those seeking the end of the Iranian regime a sense that a historic opportunity may be emerging.

The Friends and Enemies Who Keep the Regime Alive

This does not mean that the regime has no supporters, nor that it will fall easily. Paradoxically, the regime is more supported, more accurately, "sustained" from the outside than from within. Inside Iran, the regime's direct beneficiaries, namely, a significant portion of the clerical class, members of the ideological armed forces (the IRGC), and the paramilitary militias tasked with regime security (the Basij), form the hard core that will defend the Islamic Republic to the very end. Some segments of society that had previously supported the regime passively, out of fear of chaos or war, drawing upon memories of the long and deadly conflict with Iraq in the 1980s or of civil wars in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen, are now harboring serious doubts as it is increasingly the preservation of the regime itself that appears to be the primary source of instability and chaos.

Externally, Iran is widely feared, but its fall is desired by few. First, the regime is supported by its allies in what may be called the "triangle of revenge" - China and Russia. China purchases more than 80% of Iran's oil, averaging 1.38 million barrels per day, acting as the country's economic lifeline and the regime's main source of revenue. China also provides military support and supplies modern surveillance and repression technologies widely used by the regime. Beijing invited Iran to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2023 and supported its application to BRICS+ in 2024. China will likely do everything possible to prevent the regime's collapse, primarily to safeguard its energy supplies.

Iran constitutes a key component of the alternative international order that China and Russia began to construct more than two decades ago; within multilateral frameworks and particularly in Beijing's efforts to expand its influence over international organizations, Iran has proven to be a valuable ally, as illustrated most clearly by its role in the UN Human Rights Council several years ago.

Russia, for its part, is Iran's main arms supplier and a key partner in the nuclear field. Ties between Tehran and Moscow tightened after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and even more so following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Stymied by fierce Ukrainian resistance, Russia became bogged down in a prolonged war of attrition and developed a strong need for Iranian drones, supplied in the thousands, as well as for the establishment of serial drone production on Russian territory. Iranian military personnel were even dispatched to Russia and to occupied Ukrainian territories (for the first time outside the Middle East) to train Russian forces in the use of these drones. The Kremlin has also come to appreciate the value of its Iranian partner and its expertise in operating a "shadow fleet" following EU and U.S. restrictions. Indeed, Iran's long experience served as a model for Russia in developing its strategy to circumvent international sanctions.

More surprisingly, however, some regional actors, rivals, or even declared enemies of Iran do not presently appear to desire a rapid end to the Islamic Republic. The Sunni monarchies of the Gulf: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Türkiye, Jordan, and others, have never held Iran in high regard. Saudi King Abdullah had even advised the Americans to attack Iran on several occasions and "cut off the head of the snake," as revealed by WikiLeaks. Yet in recent years, these

same actors have actively sought to prevent a potential U.S. operation against Tehran.

The official reason invoked is fear of Iranian ballistic retaliation against strategic sites: military bases, oil and gas infrastructure, and of massive refugee flows from Iran flooding neighboring countries, with Syria often cited as a precedent. For this reason, these states have refused to allow the United States to use their territories as rear bases for an attack against the Islamic Republic.

It is highly likely that these stated reasons are secondary to more important and less openly acknowledged factors. In the event of a regime change that reintegrates a democratic Iran into the international community, with partnership or even alliance relations with Europe and the United States, the region's authoritarian regimes would face the risk of democratic contagion among their own populations. This is their fundamental and primary fear. Iran, a country of over 90 million people with a well-trained and highly educated population, better educated than most neighboring Arab countries, not to mention Central and South Asia, could easily become the dominant power in the region.

The lifting of sanctions would open Iran's market to foreign investment and give international markets access to its oil and gas, driving down prices and reducing revenues for other exporting countries, many of which are heavily dependent upon hydrocarbon income. A weak Iran, ostracized internationally, sustaining its economy through smuggling and parking its illicit funds in regional financial hubs (primarily Dubai), even under the rule of the ayatollahs, who have long since abandoned Ruhollah Khomeini's original ambition of exporting the Islamic Revolution and now focus above all on preserving their own regime, is ultimately more desirable for its neighbors than a democratic, free Iran allied with the West or with Israel.

Israel's position on regime change in Iran is more ambiguous than its long-standing hostility toward the Islamic Republic might suggest. While Tehran has made opposition to Israel's existence and the "liberation" of Jerusalem central to its ideological legitimacy, recent signals indicate that Israel has at times put the brakes on direct U.S. military action against Iran. Beyond the obvious fear of Iranian ballistic retaliation, this hesitation may reflect a deeper strategic calculation. A post-Islamic Republic Iran that is democratic, economically reintegrated, and closely aligned with the West could, over time, emerge as a powerful regional actor capable of challenging Israel's relative supremacy. From this perspective, a weak, internally fragmented Iran, potentially divided along ethnic lines among Kurds, Azeris, Balochs, and others, and amenable to tactical alignments with smaller factions, may appear more manageable to Israeli strategists.

Ultimately, Israel's core objectives are not regime change per se, but the elimination of Iran's nuclear program, the destruction or strict limitation of its ballistic missile capabilities, and an end to Tehran's support for proxy forces such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. If these goals can be achieved through a weakened and constrained Iran, that outcome may be seen in Tel Aviv as preferable to the rise of a strong, stable, and prosperous Iran that could compete with Israel for regional influence.

> ***If faced with a choice between managing long-term competition with a potentially resurgent Iran and supporting decisive U.S. military action to irreversibly degrade the regime, Israel may opt for the latter, even at the cost of short-term escalation.***

That said, Israel may ultimately conclude that the current moment represents a rare historical opportunity, either to eliminate the Islamic Republic altogether or to weaken it beyond recovery. If faced with a choice between managing long-term competition with a potentially resurgent Iran and supporting decisive U.S. military action to irreversibly degrade the regime, Israel may opt for the latter, even at the cost of short-term escalation.

Trump and Iran: Between Deal, Force, and the Need for Victory

Donald Trump's approach to Iran is less a coherent strategy than a shifting equilibrium between intimidation, ad-hoc decision-making, and personal political calculation. The question that has long preoccupied diplomats, analysts, and allies alike—war or no war?—may never receive a clear answer, in part because Trump himself is unlikely to know it until the final moment. What is evident, however, is the driving force behind his policy: neither ideology nor democracy promotion and certainly not concern for the Iranian people, but the pursuit of a highly visible, easily sellable political win.

From the outset, Trump sent contradictory signals. He publicly told Iranians that American aid was coming and that Washington stood with them, statements that helped fuel internal unrest and raised expectations among dissidents. Yet, these declarations were never followed by a concrete commitment to regime change or democratic transition. Almost immediately afterward, Trump escalated militarily, dispatching what he famously called a "beautiful armada" to the region and threatening Iran with attacks "far worse than in June." At the same time, he authorized backchannel and open negotiations in Muscat. The coexistence of threats and diplomacy was not accidental; it was pressure as performance.

Trump does not care about freedom or democracy in Iran. His record shows he is perfectly comfortable dealing with dictators and authoritarian rulers and, in many cases, prefers them. They offer clarity, centralized power, and the possibility of quick deals. What Trump wants above all is a result he can frame as a personal success. Substance matters only insofar as it supports the narrative that he achieved something historic, something no one else, especially Barack Obama, could.

This is why Trump's ideal outcome is a deal that looks better than the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He does not need a perfect agreement; he needs one that allows him to say he outperformed Obama. Maximum pressure, crippling sanctions, military deployments, and relentless rhetoric are the tools he uses to achieve this result. If Iran were to agree to a complete halt of its nuclear program, Trump would already consider this a triumph. If, in addition, Tehran accepted meaningful limitations on its ballistic missile program and curtailed support for its regional proxies, such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraqi Shiite militias, and Hamas, demands strongly backed by Israel, Trump would present it as the greatest diplomatic victory in modern history.

Negotiating with Iran: A Fool's Game

> ***Negotiating with the Iranian regime is, by nature, a hopeless venture. It cannot be honest, symmetrical, or durable because the two sides' objectives are fundamentally incompatible.***

Negotiating with the Iranian regime is, by nature, a hopeless venture. It cannot be honest, symmetrical, or durable because the two sides' objectives are fundamentally incompatible. Tehran negotiates to survive, Washington negotiates to obtain commitments. These logics do not meet. They col-

lide, and the result is illusion, delay, and eventual rupture.

The Iranian authorities are backed into a corner. Sanctions, internal unrest, economic collapse, and growing regional vulnerability leave them with one overriding priority: saving the regime and buying time. In that context, they are ready to say almost anything at the negotiating table. Promises regarding the nuclear program are the easiest currency. Tehran can propose a "total stop" or the evacuation of enriched uranium stockpiles to a third country, conveniently Russia, another self-proclaimed "responsible actor" of international relations. These offers are designed to appear historical while remaining reversible and opaque.

Beyond nuclear concessions, the Iranians reportedly float something far more seductive to Trump's transactional mind: business. Oil contracts, Iran's automotive industry, real estate development, access to a large consumer market, and proposals allegedly aimed at figures like Steve Witkoff or Jared Kushner. For Donald Trump, this may look like proof that pressure works and that he has forced Iran to the table. He may even believe he has struck a great deal.

The problem is structural. Trump wants to cut deals with actors who do not respect deals and who define themselves through permanent hostility to the West. For the Iranian regime, the United States and Israel are not just adversaries; they are "consubstantial enemies," essential to the regime's ideological legitimacy and internal cohesion. The Islamic Republic is by its auto-definition a regime of virtue combatting the Evil: *Shaytan-e Bozorg*, the Great Satan (U.S.) and *Shaytan-e Kuchak*, the Little Satan (Israel). And for the Islamic Republic, these are not metaphorical categories, but rather real and analytical ones. Without them, the regime loses its justification for existence and repression. The January protests, crushed with extreme violence, were officially described by regime propaganda as the "thirteenth day of the twelve-day war." Thousands of Iranians were arrested on absurd charges of espionage for the U.S. and Israel. In this context, any genuine deal with Washington is politically suicidal for the regime. It cannot be sold to the population without undermining the regime's own narrative.

This is why the three main U.S.-Israeli demands on the negotiation table (nuclear program, ballistics, and proxies) are existentially unacceptable to Tehran. Renouncing the nuclear program may prolong the regime's life, but only temporarily. Iranian leaders constantly invoke Libya and Muammar Gaddafi, who abandoned his nuclear ambitions only to be overthrown later. A non-nuclear Iran is, in their eyes, a far easier target. The same logic applies to ballistic missiles: without medium- and long-range capabilities, Iran becomes vulnerable, particularly to Israel, which could strike at will.

Most crucially, Iran's regional proxies are not optional. Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, and Iraqi Shiite militias are not merely allies or ideological partners; they are extensions of the IRGC, forward military bases beyond Iran's borders. They deter Israel, threaten maritime routes, harass U.S. forces, and can be redeployed internally. Witnesses from January report that some of the worst massacres, committed with heavy machine guns known in the Middle East as *Dushkas*, were carried out by these very proxies brought in to repress Iranian civilians.

Negotiating under these conditions means missing a historic opportunity to side with the Iranian people. An Iranian friend told me that while all authoritarian states of the region were rushing to save the dying Ayatollahs' regime, the Free World and its leader were unable to help their natural ally, Iranian society. Any deal will be tactical, temporary, and broken as soon as one party finds it convenient. In the meantime, Iranians will feel betrayed and abandoned, once again sacrificed to

the illusion that this regime can be bargained with rather than confronted for what it is.

But What If He Gets Nothing?

Trump cannot afford a total failure. Losing credibility, especially after months of escalation, would undermine his image of strength at home and abroad. In that scenario, a military option becomes likely, not necessarily because Trump wants war, but because he cannot appear to retreat. Yet, such a military action would be limited by design. The forces the United States has gathered in the region are insufficient for a prolonged campaign aimed at total regime destruction or occupation. Trump knows that American public opinion is deeply hostile to foreign military interventions. His own MAGA base is particularly opposed to "endless wars," and a conflict that spirals out of control would weaken him politically, especially ahead of midterm elections.

Trump cannot afford a total failure. Losing credibility, especially after months of escalation, would undermine his image of strength at home and abroad. In that scenario, a military option becomes likely, not necessarily because Trump wants war, but because he cannot appear to retreat.

Trump is also constrained by his relationships with Gulf leaders. While the United States no longer depends on Gulf oil, thanks to domestic production and alternative sources such as Venezuelan oil, it still depends on the massive investments these states have promised to pour into the American economy. These "trillions" matter more to him than regional democratization or long-term stability. As a result, he will not move against their core interests.

The most Trump is likely to do, if negotiations fail, is to authorize targeted strikes, possibly in coordination with Israeli aviation, against key strategic assets of the Islamic Republic. These could include missile depots, remaining nuclear facilities, centers of political and military decision-making, and potentially even an attempt to eliminate Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Such strikes would aim to weaken the regime, restore American deterrence, and embolden internal dissent. They would, however, not be sufficient to trigger rapid regime change.

Some analysts argue that Trump might contemplate a "Venezuelan scenario" applied to Iran: decapitating the top of the regime without fully dismantling the system and then seeking a new modus vivendi. In this model, Khamenei would serve as the expendable figure while the IRGC could remain as the backbone of power, much like the Chavista apparatus that still dominates Venezuela after leadership transitions. The IRGC, pragmatic and survival-oriented, might accept such an outcome if it ensured institutional continuity and relief from economic strangulation.

Trump's Iran policy is driven less by strategy or ethics than by optics. War is not the goal, but peace is valuable only insofar as it looks like victory—and any such victory must be unmistakably his ■

Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Talks

Over the past five years, the political, economic, and security architecture of the South Caucasus region has undergone major transformations. This process is a direct result of the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh of 2020, followed by the exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians of 2023. While the wounds of these dramatic changes are still fresh, Armenia and Azerbaijan are actively engaged in a peace process that will ultimately create new realities in the region.

Recent Developments

On December 1, 2025, the OSCE Minsk Group – a format where the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict negotiations were taking place was officially dissolved. France, Russia, and the United States were the co-chair countries mediating the negotiations, where "constructive ambiguity" was the main philosophy for this quarter-century-long peace process. While this format was the main context within which the three major powers were present together with Armenia and Azerbaijan, after the second full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, it stopped functioning.

The dissolution of this format was a request and a precondition for future peace talks by Azerbaijan after the 44-day war. Immediately after the war, Russia sought to take a dominant position in the negotiation process, but the situation changed when the new U.S. administration (Biden-Blinken) came to power. Official Washington sought to maintain its involvement through the non-functioning OSCE Minsk Group; however, it soon became clear that this format was not viable, so the approach was to engage in a trilateral format among Washington, Yerevan, and Baku.

The first meeting between Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers to discuss the possibility of a peace document took place in Washington, D.C., where the U.S. Secretary of State was the host. The parties began discussing the main principles of the future peace document bilaterally through the Washington process, while other interested parties were informed of the progress.

After several rounds of negotiations between the ministers over the next two years, in March 2025, the official Baku announced that the document was ready for signing. Azerbaijan also announced

ARSEN KHARATYAN
Guest Contributor

Arsen Kharatyan is the founder and editor-in-chief of the Armenian–Georgian media platform Aliq Media. He served as a foreign policy advisor to Armenia's Prime Minister during the first 100 days after the 2018 Velvet Revolution and previously worked at Voice of America and the German Technical Cooperation (GIZ). Active in pro-democracy movements since the late 1990s, he holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic, studied Arabic in Damascus, and pursued Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

This illustration was inspired by the 'Epic Split' advertisement for Volvo Trucks.

that it will sign and ratify a peace agreement only if/when the OSCE Minsk Group is dissolved and Armenia changes its constitution. According to official Baku, Armenia's current Constitution contains provisions that assert territorial claims against Azerbaijan. While official Yerevan denied such claims in its Constitution, Armenia's ruling Civic Contract party announced that it will initiate constitutional amendments regardless of Azerbaijan's request.

U.S. Mediation

August 8, 2025, became a historic day in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace negotiations. A summit took place in Washington, D.C., where U.S. President Donald Trump hosted Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the White House. One of the key results of this meeting was the trilateral declaration aimed at ending hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the willingness to promote stability in the South Caucasus.

> ***The reconstruction of a Soviet-era railroad is considered the first connectivity element, following possible gas and oil pipelines along the same route from Azerbaijan to Armenia and further to the West.***

The Washington summit also led to a new U.S.-Armenia connectivity agreement, called the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). While the details of this agreement remain to be seen, this new route is expected to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave, Nakhchivan, through Armenian territory. According to recent statements from all three parties, the reconstruc-

tion of a Soviet-era railroad is considered the first connectivity element, following possible gas and oil pipelines along the same route from Azerbaijan to Armenia and further to the West.

Another important achievement of the Washington summit is the initialing of the Peace Treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was signed by the two countries' Foreign Ministers. As described above, this document was negotiated between Yerevan and Baku over the past two years and was announced to be completed in February 2025. The Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations consists of 17 articles and will come into force after it is signed by the official representatives of Yerevan and Baku, followed by ratification by the Armenian and Azerbaijani parliaments.

The Peace Agreement

The text of the Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan was negotiated by the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan beginning in 2022. After the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh of 2020 and the trilateral ceasefire statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, the regional security architecture had changed significantly, with Russia's unilateral peacekeeping forces present in Nagorno-Karabakh and a Russian-Turkish joint monitoring center in Aghdam.

> ***This Russia-brokered statement failed to provide Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians with security guarantees.***

This Russia-brokered statement failed to provide Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians with security guarantees. In December 2022, Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor under the Russian peacekeepers' watch, who had a mandate and obligation to ensure the unimpeded movement of goods and people to and from Nagorno-Karabakh. For the following nine months, the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were left on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe, with no food, medicaments and access to basic human needs.

With Russian peacekeepers and a Turkish-Russian monitoring center on the ground, on September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan began a deadly attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in the exodus of Armenians over the next week. Over 100 thousand Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were forced to move to Armenia, leaving their homes and belongings behind. This marked the beginning of the end for both Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian-Turkish monitoring center in Aghdam, dramatically changing the region's demographic, military, and security picture.

> ***Official Yerevan and Baku continued negotiations on the Peace Agreement, reflecting the new realities of the post-Nagorno-Karabakh war era.***

In this context, official Yerevan and Baku continued negotiations on the Peace Agreement, reflecting the new realities of the post-Nagorno-Karabakh war era. The document was pre-signed by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on August 8 in the White House. To come into force, it must be ratified by the respective parliaments of the two countries and finally signed by the heads of state. Armenia has shown readiness to begin the ratification process in the aftermath of the Washington, D.C., summit, while Azerbaijan shows little interest in moving forward quickly. In my personal encounters with Azerbaijani experts linked to the Azerbaijani government, officials in Baku have indicated that progress on ratifying the Peace Agreement will come only after Armenia's 2026 June parliamentary elections.

Details of the Peace Agreement

The Armenian-Azerbaijani Peace Agreement document consists of 17 articles. The document underlines that the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan recognize each other's territorial integrity with the borders of Soviet Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan. The parties commit to having no territorial claims from each other, including by refraining from the use of force and allowing any third party to use force against Armenia or Azerbaijan.

By signing this agreement, Yerevan and Baku take an obligation to combat discrimination, racial hate speech, and separatism in their communities, as well as violent extremism and terrorism within their respective jurisdictions (Armenia and Azerbaijan). Instead, Armenia and Azerbaijan take responsibility for building confidence and ensuring economic cooperation between the two states and nations.

A highly criticized part of this document in the Armenian political and expert circles was the article in the Peace Agreement, which obliges the parties to recall all court cases against each other before international criminal and judicial institutions, and to commit not to initiate such cases in the future. The opponents of this particular article in the document argue that Armenia has serious leverage against Azerbaijan through some of the already existing decisions of the International Criminal Court, which prove that Azerbaijan had Genocidal intent against Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, as well as committed war crimes during the 44-day war of 2020 and the 1-day war of 2023.

After the Peace Agreement comes into force, Armenia and Azerbaijan should also remove all third-party military and civilian presence from each other's borders. This particular part concerns the European Mission in Armenia (EUMA), a roughly 200-member civilian group from EU countries that has been monitoring the Armenian-Azerbaijani border under Armenia's unilateral invitation since October 2022. Given the lack of trust and confidence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, this article has also been a source of worry for Armenian society.

Last but not least, the implementation of the Agreement should include an oversight committee, a bilateral body with specific tools and monitoring mechanisms to monitor and ensure the realization of this Peace Agreement. The modalities and the structure of this commission should be agreed upon between the parties after the Peace Agreement enters into force.

Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)

As mentioned above, the August 8th Peace Summit in Washington, D.C., resulted in the announcement of the TRIPP. This unique new avenue of cooperation between the U.S. and Armenia is viewed as part of the so-called middle corridor connecting Central Asia with Europe - bypassing Russia and the Suez Canal. Even though there are already routes enabling international trade through Georgia, there is a clear need to increase the volume of goods transported through the South Caucasus region.

However, it is important to note that the TRIPP project involves not only global trade interests but also local and regional (South Caucasus) aspects. For Azerbaijan, this is a direct connection to its Nakhchivan enclave for the transportation of goods and people, as the route is expected to provide Azerbaijan with unimpeded access. For Armenia, this is a start toward de-blocking communications and connectivity routes, bringing an important transit element with economic benefits and providing additional security layers. In the meantime,

TRIPP may bring challenges for Georgia, which has been instrumental as a transit country over the past three decades.

New connectivity infrastructure, such as railroads and highways bypassing Georgia, will ultimately change Georgia's significance as a regional transit hub at least from the perspective of east-west transportation routes. In the meantime, if there is further progress in the Armenia-Türkiye normalization process, including a possible border opening and the final de-blocking of communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia's current access to Russian and other Eurasian Economic Union markets will no longer depend on Georgia's transit monopoly. Thus, TRIPP is a project that will bring clear benefits to Armenia and Azerbaijan, but pose economic challenges for Georgia and diminish Tbilisi's political weight in the South Caucasus.

On January 13, 2026, Armenia's foreign minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, was hosted by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington, D.C. The meeting resulted in a joint statement about the modalities of the TRIPP project. While the document provides an overview of the framework for this future transit route, it lacks clarity on the timing and sequencing of the project's implementation. In the meantime, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance plans to visit Armenia and Azerbaijan in early February, during which TRIPP will be at the center of his agenda, possibly with news about further details regarding the implementation of the project.

Armenian-Azerbaijani Delimitation and Demarcation Commission

In 2021, a special commission between Armenia and Azerbaijan was established to discuss the delimitation and demarcation of their border. This intergovernmental commission became the first bilateral institutional format to adopt a document describing the functions and procedures of work for this body. This 7-page text became the first official document signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan since their independence in 1991.

The demarcation and delimitation commission is headed by the Deputy Prime Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since its inception, the commission heads and their teams have met over a dozen times along the Armenian-Azerbaijani 1000-km-long border. The most significant outcome of this commission's work is the 13 km border delimitation and demarcation in northeastern Armenia and western Azerbaijan.

While this is the only part of the border that is officially demarcated and delimitated, with border guards on the frontline rather than military personnel, the opposition viewed the process as a one-sided concession, as Armenia had to return territories to Azerbaijan without reciprocity. However, the Armenian government's argument that this process was a political and diplomatic success for Yerevan is that it secured recognition of the two countries' territorial integrity and sovereignty under the Almaty Declaration of December 21, 1991.

While the bases for the delimitation and demarcation process are clear and the commissions meet regularly, there has been no significant progress since 2023. In the aftermath of the 44-day war of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan has made several military attacks on Armenia proper, resulting in the occupation of over 200 km^2 of Armenia. While official Yerevan has mostly raised this topic in domestic political debates, it is clear that Azerbaijan is not in a hurry to finalize the delimitation and demarcation process. Territories occupied by Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the 44-day war are used to build military-defense capacities by official Baku, thus one can argue that Azerbaijan does not plan to return lands in the foreseeable future.

Another unclear issue relates to the enclaves and exclaves between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This Soviet-era heritage, in which territories belonged to one republic but were surrounded by another, will also be an issue to address. Both sides have such territories within their boundaries, yet there is no clear understanding of how to address this problem. The solution regarding enclaves and exclaves is not reflected in the Peace Agreement or in the context of delimitation and demarcation commissions; hence, this problem may become a point of contention between the parties in the future.

Way Ahead

The U.S. mediated Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process has been bringing changes, which would be unimaginable prior to the war of 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh. As argued at the beginning of this article, the region's security architecture has changed drastically, with a reduced Russian military and political presence. In the meantime, the U.S.-led TRIPP project will bring new realities from economic and connectivity perspectives. Before the normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia played the most important transit role in the South Caucasus; new connectivity routes from Azerbaijan through Armenia will also change Georgia's economic realities.

This change does not and will not mean that the routes which exist through Georgia (i.e., Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars) will lose their significance; however, the main goal of de-blocking Armenian-Azerbaijani transit routes is aimed at bringing greater volumes for transit from Central Asia and the wider Caspian Sea region, thus, worries about Georgia's isolation by TRIPP are exaggerated.

Moreover, there may be new opportunities for Georgia to get involved in the de-blocking process in the South Caucasus. One visible opportunity for Georgia may be the Georgian Railway's involvement in the rehabilitation and management of Armenian railways, which are currently managed by Russia's CJSC "South Caucasus Railway," a 100% subsidiary of JSC "Russian Railways." The company has a concession agreement with Armenia's government under which the Russian state-owned company has obligations to make investments.

Armenia's Prime Minister has called on Russia to begin investing in the restoration of Armenia's railway system. If Moscow's response is negative, Armenia's government may consider revoking the existing concession agreement and seeking potential partners in this area. While Armenia lacks capacity in railway management and restoration, Georgian Railways may be the most viable option for Armenia, both politically and practically. In the meantime, this may be an important avenue for Georgia's involvement in the new design of the regional connectivity and integration process ■

Editorial Team

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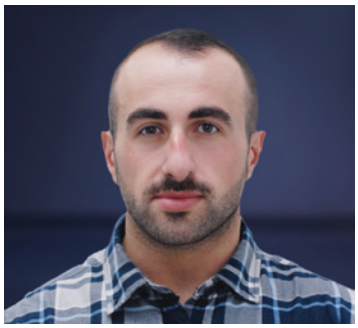

Paata Dvaladze
Graphic Designer

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Mariam Vardanidze
Illustrator

Mashiko Mindiashvili
Illustrator

Pool of Our Experts

Olena Halushka

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

Hugues Mingarelli

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

Mitat Çelikpala

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

Zaur Shiriyev

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

Mustafa Aydın

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

Richard Giragosian

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

Khatia Kikalishvili

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

Teona Giuashvili

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

Volodymyr Yermolenko

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

Denis Cenusa

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

Ghia Nodia

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

Hans Gutbrod

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

Tefta Kelmendi

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

Tamara Kovziridze

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

Grigol Mgaloblishvili

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

Eka Tkeshelashvili

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

Tornike Zurabashvili

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

Miro Popkhadze

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

Galip Dalay

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

Adina Revol

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

Arsen Kharatyan

Arsen Kharatyan is the founder and editor-in-chief of Aliq Media. He advised Armenia's Prime Minister on foreign policy after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, worked at Voice of America and GIZ, and holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic, with studies in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

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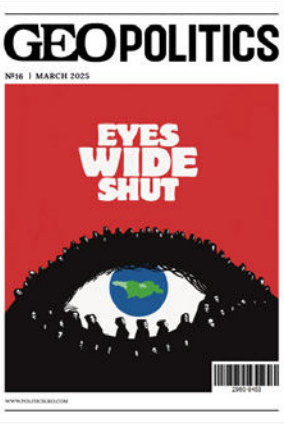

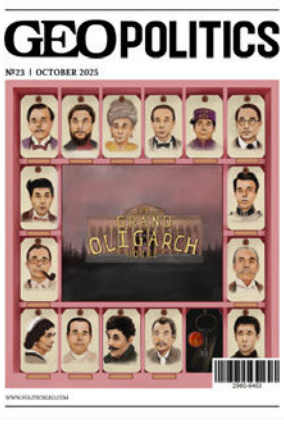

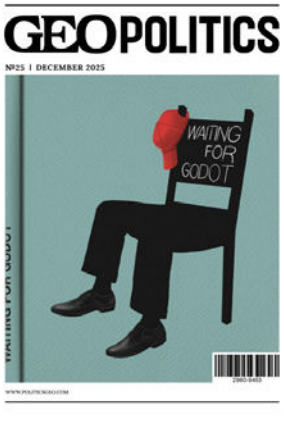

GEOPOLITICS

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