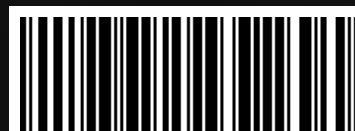


# GEO POLITICS

№29 | APRIL 2026

## THE AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCHS

THE AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCHS



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# **GEO POLITICS**


**Issue №29**

**April, 2026**

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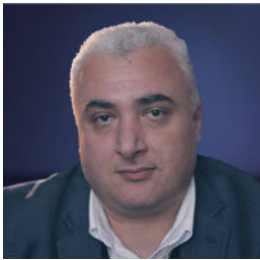
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We, at *GEOpolitics*, believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions in Georgia and across the broader region. Our journal fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, encouraging meaningful contributions to the wider geopolitical discourse, with particular attention to Georgia and the South Caucasus.

In line with our ethos, the journal is firmly committed to promoting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization, while also engaging with political and security developments across the wider region. *GEOpolitics* reflects the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to universal democratic values and to strengthening regional and international security through analytical and intellectual engagement.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with strong policy experience who enrich the debate on Georgia's foreign and security policy, while examining broader dynamics in the South Caucasus. We analyze Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and other key geopolitical actors and institutions, and assess how internal developments shape Georgia's geopolitical role, fostering informed dialogue from, about, and in Georgia and the broader region.

# Contributors



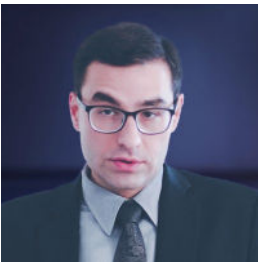
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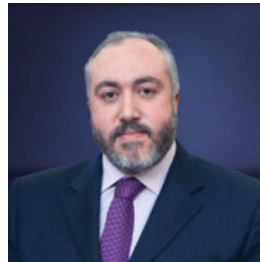
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# The Autumn of the Patriarchs: Power and Life After Permanence

**T**here are moments in international politics when systems appear stable not because they are resilient, but because they are organized around individuals whose permanence is quietly assumed. Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* captured this illusion with unsettling precision: power concentrated in a single figure acquires an aura of inevitability, until its eventual decline reveals how little was institutionalized beneath it. Today, across regions and regimes, from Hungary to Iran, that illusion is beginning to fracture. The death of long-standing figures, the political fall of entrenched leaders, and the weakening of once-dominant ideological models are not only producing clarity and drive for renewal but also exposing fragile systems, contested succession processes, and the absence of durable constraints. This issue of *GEOPOLITICS* explores what happens when patriarchs fade, whether through electoral defeat, biological inevitability, or strategic exhaustion, and, more importantly, what follows in the vacuum they leave behind.

Jaba Devdariani opens the issue with the political earthquake in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's long-standing system of illiberal rule was unexpectedly overturned by Péter Magyar's landslide victory. Yet rather than treating this as a simple democratic correction, the article interrogates the deeper mechanics of Orbánism and its resilience beyond the individual. Magyar's success, Devdariani

argues, was made possible not by dismantling the system, but by mastering it and replicating Fidesz's organizational logic, electoral strategies, and ideological positioning while redirecting them against Orbán himself. The result is less a clear ideological rupture than a reconfiguration within the same political framework. Hungary's case thus offers a cautionary lesson: even the fall of a dominant leader does not necessarily dismantle the structures that sustained him, and the durability of illiberalism may outlast the patriarchs who embody it.

Thornike Gordadze brings the metaphor to its most literal and profound expression by examining the death of Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II and the impending succession within the Georgian Orthodox Church. Through a sharp and layered analysis, he portrays Georgia as a system of dual informal sovereignty, in which the Patriarch and the oligarch coexist as parallel centers of power, both largely insulated from democratic accountability. The patriarchal succession, far from being a purely ecclesiastical matter, emerges as a decisive political and geopolitical contest involving internal factions, state control mechanisms, and external actors such as Russia. Gordadze shows how Bidzina Ivanishvili's system seeks to replace charismatic, autonomous authority with a managed, compliant figure, while the Church itself resists full subordination to preserve its own influence.

Shota Gvineria shifts the focus from leadership to systemic capacity, examining resilience as the defining condition for survival in a world where international guarantees are increasingly conditional and contested. Through a comparative analysis of Ukraine and Georgia, he demonstrates how resilience is not an abstract concept but a practical outcome shaped by identity, institutional trust, preparedness, and the cognitive domain. Ukraine's ability to consolidate national purpose under pressure contrasts sharply with Georgia's trajectory, where authoritarian consolidation, disinformation, and institutional erosion have undermined the translation of pro-Western public sentiment into effective state action. Gvineria's argument reframes the discussion: the decline of patriarchal figures matters less than whether societies possess the internal coherence to withstand pressure once those figures lose relevance. In an increasingly fragmented and contested international system, resilience becomes the only reliable substitute for absent guarantees.

Sergi Kapanadze turns to the institutional dimension of this transformation by examining the evolution of the OSCE and the activation of the Moscow Mechanism against Georgia. Once a platform through which Georgia sought to constrain Russia and assert its international position, the OSCE has gradually lost its political weight, becoming a forum for statements rather than outcomes. The Moscow Mechanism, one of the few remaining tools capable of bypassing consensus and producing authoritative findings, now serves primarily as a tool for documentation rather than enforcement. Kapanadze's central question, whether the mechanism is merely a piece of paper or can become a "paper knife," captures the broader dilemma of the current international order. Institutions still exist, reports are still produced, and violations are still documented, but without political will and follow-up action, they risk recording decline rather than reversing it.

Vano Chkhikvadze introduces a different, yet complementary, dimension by examining Iceland's upcoming referendum on reopening EU accession negotiations and its broader implications for European enlargement. In a volume dominated by themes of decline and fragmentation, the Icelandic case represents an attempt at strategic renewal. Yet even here, the process is deeply contested, shaped by sovereignty concerns, economic calculations, and shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic. Enlargement, once the European Union's most effective transformative tool, now operates within a landscape of competing narratives, disinformation, and internal constraints. The Icelandic referendum becomes more than a national decision. It is a test of the EU's continued attractiveness and its capacity to adapt to a changing geopolitical environment.

Temuri Yakobashvili closes the edition by expanding the lens to the Middle East, examining the consequences of the war with Iran and the demise of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for regional and global order. His analysis underscores that the weakening of a central ideological and political pillar does not produce stability, but rather accelerates fragmentation across multiple dimensions: religious authority, regional power balances, alliance structures, and economic connectivity. The potential decline of Iran's role as the center of Shia political power, the repositioning of Kurdish actors, the evolution of the Abraham Accords into a broader security architecture, and the reconfiguration of global trade routes through the South Caucasus all point to a world in which established structures are giving way to fluid, transactional arrangements. The question "how to run after Iran" captures the central challenge: once a system anchored around a dominant actor begins to unravel, adaptation requires speed, clarity, and strategic direction - qualities that are often in short supply.

The contributions in this issue suggest that the “autumn of the patriarchs” is not only a moment of resolution but also of exposure. The decline of dominant figures reveals systems that were less stable, institutions that were less effective, and alliances that were less reliable than they appeared. In such an environment, neither the fall of leaders nor the existence of formal mechanisms guarantees trans-

formation. What matters instead is whether political systems can move beyond personalized power, whether institutions can regain their capacity to shape outcomes, and whether societies can sustain resilience in the absence of certainty. If the era of patriarchs is indeed ending, the defining question is no longer who replaces them, but whether anything durable replaces them at all ■

With Respect,  
**Editorial Team**

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# Hungary: Back from the Brink?

**A**s the election results poured in after the April 12 elections, the sigh of relief was heard far afield from Hungary. Péter Magyar's landslide win, which gave him a supermajority, has rekindled hopes among the Georgian [opposition](#) that the Georgian Dream (GD) may also be compelled to loosen its grip on the captured state, just like its ally, Fidesz, had to yield to the will of the Hungarian voters. In the United States, too, opponents of President Donald Trump have locked onto what they felt is a "[cautionary tale](#)" for the MAGA movement.

Indeed, Viktor Orbán has emerged as one of the leading ideologues of "illiberal democracy," tinted by reactionary ideas about family, immigration, and gender. Orbán-backed foundations seem to have [bankrolled](#) the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the MAGA movement's international roadshow, which Georgian Dream leaders have also repeatedly [attended](#). But is Orbán's dramatic fall a precursor of the collapse of his ideology? The jury is still out. For one, many lessons about Fidesz's failure (and Tisza's rise) seem too specific to the Hungarian context and

may prove difficult to replicate. Secondly, it is still unclear whether Tisza's success represents a failure of Orbán's ideology elsewhere – or, indeed, in Hungary itself.

## Local Hound for Local Hare

It is hard to ignore that some contextual conditions of Tisza's victory in 2026 closely resemble those of Fidesz in 2010. Now, as then, Hungary is badly managed: people fear galloping inflation, and Budapest [trails](#) the EU in GDP per capita and individual consumption. Public services, education, and health-care are chronically underfunded and crumbling, just as Hungarians see their leadership mired in corruption and collusion. Then, as now, a charismatic, young, conservative, and lawyerly politician launched a nationwide movement and captured a supermajority with 53% of the ballots cast. Then, as now, over 6 million Hungarians voted in a massive turnout. As an insightful commentator of Hungarian politics, Kim Lane Scheppele [noted](#), Magyar "will remind those with long memories of that young Orbán – handsome and charismatic with the fluency of a lawyer and an ability to speak easily to diverse crowds."



**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.



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*This illustration was inspired by Henri Matisse's Icarus from his 1947 artist's book Jazz.*

But similarities don't stop here. It has been well [demonstrated](#) that Orbán's four supermajorities allowed him to fine-tune the electoral system in ways that nearly guaranteed Fidesz's success. Orbán locked down the countryside conservative voters and Hungarians abroad, whom he granted citizenship. Fidesz's parliament has gerrymandered districts to check even the most influential opposition coalitions. The electoral system was designed to reward the leading party; despite receiving 54% of the vote in 2022, Fidesz won 70% of seats.

If Magyar and his Tisza managed to pick the lock Orbán put on Hungarian politics, that is in large part because they shared Fidesz's unique fingerprint. Tisza replicated Fidesz's nationwide network of local chapters (this time amplified through social media), placed the weight of its campaign in the countryside, attacked corruption, and promised tangible improvements, as Orbán once did. A former Fidesz man himself, Magyar also famously managed to preempt or neutralize multiple character assassination plots. He did not feel compelled to fight an average Fidesz supporter on identity politics. Conservatively minded, with a campaign that promoted national identity and unity, Magyar could not be painted as a Brussels stooge or "woke" either.

## Nation vs. Mr. Orbán

Viktor Orbán has prided himself on redefining the concept of Hungarian nationalism and linking it closely to land, family, and faith in a vision of polity that is distinctly majoritarian (and "democratic" in that sense) and downgrades the rights of minorities as subservient to the will of the majority (hence, "illiberal"). This message has been readily echoed by, for example, Georgian leadership. Typically, Speaker Shalva Papuashvili [said](#) that "democracy is not apartheid, where a minority rules over the majority. Democracy is where the will of the majority is decisive."

As Filip Milačić convincingly [argued](#), in Orbán's vision, the quest for each individual's dignity

(equal rights) was overruled by the quest for the collective dignity of the Nation, narrowly defined in ethno-religious terms. This often pushed the liberal-minded opposition into identifying with the minority cause, making it an easy target for the ruling party-controlled propaganda and media machinery.

In the past, Orbán has managed to successfully cast (non-Christian) immigrants and sexual minorities as threats to the Hungarian national identity and dignity. But his attempt to portray Brussels and Ukraine as military threats has apparently failed to resonate. By contrast, Magyar succeeded in portraying Orbán as too focused on his international acclaim, too isolated from Europe to continue receiving EU subsidies, too negligent of ordinary people's needs, and a threat to the Hungarian national project.

***Just as Fidesz's campaign traditionally picked the shrill tone and tried to raise the temperature of the campaign, Magyar's cool demeanor and Tisza's campaign have left the door open for Hungarians who backed Fidesz.***

Milačić claims the opposition leader redrew the frontier of the political confrontation from "Hungarians vs. outsiders" to "(All) Hungarians vs. Orbán" – and that framing worked. Importantly, just as Fidesz's campaign traditionally picked the shrill tone and tried to raise the temperature of the campaign, Magyar's cool demeanor and Tisza's campaign have left the door open for Hungarians who backed Fidesz. One nation, in other words, against an authoritarian leader way past his prime, who overstayed his welcome.

## Hungarian EUconomy

Orbán has obstructed, insulted, and frustrated the European institutions at every turn, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, yet this should not obscure the fact that his political

longevity has been quite considerably fueled by the EU funds. Central European University (CEU) scholars have [calculated](#) that annual transfers have constituted around 3% of Hungarian GDP, exceeding the Marshall Plan funding. They argue that EU money for Fidesz served the same function as the hydrocarbon resources for the Middle Eastern or Central Asian dictatorships. Through blatant corruption, the regime siphoned off the EU funds to cronies, and kept its voter base happy, too – at least for a while, from 2013 to 2020.

***EU money for Fidesz served the same function as the hydrocarbon resources for the Middle Eastern or Central Asian dictatorships. Through blatant corruption, the regime siphoned off the EU funds to cronies, and kept its voter base happy, too – at least for a while, from 2013 to 2020.***

That very fact speaks perhaps as much about the deep dysfunction of the European Union as a politico-economic mechanism as it does about the nature of Orbán's regime. Yet, it also gives clues to why the Hungarians opted for the radical political change.

After all, Orbán's grandiloquent ideological politics cost Hungary more than half of its allocated EU funds in December 2022. His courting of Vladimir Putin's Russia did not deliver economic dividends – at least not sufficiently to trickle down and patch up the crumbling infrastructure or health system. Simply by being elected with a massive mandate (and by being a tad less obstructive than Orbán), Magyar can realistically promise that the EU funds would start flowing again in the weeks after the new government takes office. That, and a promise to root out the “mafia state,” are widely appealing.

Yet the signs are that Orbán may want to benefit from EU funds, too. Hungary has applied for EUR

16 billion in EU defense loans. This money is likely to be approved, now that Orbán is gone. Yet, in the run-up to the elections, the Fidesz government has privatized much of the defense industry to the party loyalists, who are likely to benefit from the EU loans – again.

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## Does Hungary Teach Us Anything?

It is undeniably good news for the EU that Hungary is likely to abandon Orbán's ideologically tinted positioning and return to doing pragmatic politics. The initial [indications](#) about Tisza's new cabinet point to another reprise of the Central European technocratic phase: CEOs of local and international companies, former international civil servants, will likely be tapped to revive key government sectors. But the Hungarian result is more ambiguous than the initial euphoria may suggest, in several ways, and rather than copying Tisza's tactics, those who hope to unseat the authoritarian populist leaders and regimes should look deeper.

***So the lesson is that pragmatic adaptation to the system requires scouting out its weak points: sometimes that means ideological or institutional mimicry of the ruling party to trick the system; at other times, innovating to exploit the open spaces.***

First, the scale of Tisza's success is largely determined by its [compatibility](#) with Fidesz's matrix of operation. Magyar did not campaign extensively

in the countryside because he is particularly beholden to the fate of the “ordinary Hungarian,” but because Fidesz set up the election system in a way that whoever won the countryside, won the elections. The failure of the popular, united, but very urban-based opposition in 2022 to gain enough seats despite electoral success taught Magyar a lesson. Similarly, Tisza’s reliance on social media was largely due to Orbán’s methodical locking up of the mainstream media for the opposition. So the lesson is that pragmatic adaptation to the system requires scouting out its weak points: sometimes that means ideological or institutional mimicry of the ruling party to trick the system; at other times, innovating to exploit the open spaces.

**One thing that the opposition movements can learn is not to believe in the inevitability of autocratic systems and to try again; each failure could still chip away at the autocrats’ armor.**

Second, time is a factor: leaders age, and people get tired of them, seeking fresh faces. Viktor Orbán is, in many ways, a talented politician, but his 16-year rule has blunted the attraction of his rhetorical flourish. His foreign engagements and attempts to punch way above his (political) weight internationally made him seem out of touch with Hungarians – a trait especially irritating to voters, when combined with the apparent crony network he cemented. One thing that the opposition movements can learn is not to believe in the inevitability of autocratic systems and to try again; each failure could still chip away at the autocrats’ armor.

Third, the economy matters: Fidesz thrived when the European economy was growing or was heavily subsidized during the post-COVID recovery. When growth slowed and subsidies dried up, patron-client networks came under strain: siphoning money from Brussels is one thing, but taking it away from hospitals to line one’s pockets is enough to rile

even formal supporters. It can be very difficult to remove autocratic regimes through elections that either have their own assets to finance the system (like oil-rich states) or benefit from an international context that provides windfall profits (such as regimes profiting from Russia’s war).

**Hungarian experts pointed out that the membership in the EU and NATO made Belarus or Georgia-style police repression unthinkable, not because of Orbán’s inherent virtues, but because a decisive break with those institutions would not have been pragmatic in economic and security terms.**

Fourth, [competitive authoritarianisms](#) can still absorb change through elections – especially in the EU context – but not a consolidated authoritarian rule. In the end, Orbán has delivered on the “democratic” part of his ideological promise: when the majority turned against him, he yielded. Many, especially those east of Budapest, were surprised that Orbán did not use the security or police apparatus more forcefully to obstruct the growth of Tisza, falsify the election results, or contest the election results. Indeed, some [analyses](#) of the results were too close to call. True, security services tried to infiltrate Tisza, and on election day, the Fidesz spokesperson [made](#) fraud allegations, but the scale of victory rendered those obsolete. In a recent webinar, Hungarian experts [pointed out](#) that the membership in the EU and NATO made Belarus or Georgia-style police repression unthinkable, not because of Orbán’s inherent virtues, but because a decisive break with those institutions would not have been pragmatic in economic and security terms.

## What’s in Store for Hungary?

The rise of the illiberal ideology under Orbán was a symptom of Hungary’s malaise, but his 16-year rule only made things worse. Since its independence,

the country has been very badly run. State capture by a single party, severe pressure on the media and civil society, capture of significant portions of the Hungarian economy by Orbán's cronies, and the collapse of an independent civil service and public services would be very hard to redress in a sustained and sustainable way. Magyar and his new cabinet have a job cut out for them, and Poland's example shows clearly that backsliding on the rule of law, loss of popular confidence in the institutions, and abandonment of the deliberative culture in politics are very hard to reclaim.

There are fears that Magyar's similarity to Orbán may lead him and his party into similar temptations, especially since they control the supermajority and Fidesz is their largest opponent in parliament. Informed experts [wonder](#) whether Orbán may make a comeback in the very short term as Hungary's president – a position that his party made unimpeachable in the run-up to the elections.

Tisza's landslide win did not in itself undermine the key thesis of illiberal democracy – that the majority rule prevails over individual rights. That would be for the Magyar government to affirm through deeds, in the coming months. Populist leaders abroad will continue to use Orbán's political vocabulary and may even engage him as a well-paid consultant, if he chooses that path.

Crucially, Hungary taught autocrats that can afford a hard security crackdown against the opposition, that they should do so early, because even charisma and talent, even 16 years of shaping the law to the whims of one party, do not guarantee eternal rule in competitive authoritarianism.

The reverse lesson is addressed to the EU: its normative power and economic attraction are working, and even Orbán appears to prefer being out of power but still inside the EU, perhaps hoping to retain some of his financial gains and eventually reverse his political fortunes. This raises complex questions about accession: what lessons is Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić likely to draw? Already far more heavy-handed than Orbán in dealing with the opposition, is he likely to lean further toward autocracy? Should the EU admit Serbia—imperfect as it is—as a member to prevent such a scenario? And what about Moldova or post-war Ukraine?

***The EU should also take a long, hard look at the perverse incentives its financial support mechanisms have nurtured, and helped prop up anti-EU regimes in Hungary, Czechia, and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.***

The EU should also take a long, hard look at the perverse incentives its financial support mechanisms have nurtured, and helped prop up anti-EU regimes in Hungary, Czechia, and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Has the Commission been too locked on nurturing the “absorption capacity” of its new(ish) members and candidates and too prone to ignore the red flags on the rule of law and democratic participation? This is a discussion worth having. But it is also the one we are unlikely to have, given the heady aftertaste of the Hungarian success ■

# The Patriarch and the Oligarch: A Hidden Struggle for Georgia

**A**t the beginning of the 18th century, in the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu had one of his Oriental travelers observe that the Pope appeared to him as “an old idol to whom people have grown accustomed to render worship.” This judgment, at once naïve and penetrating, revealed less about Pope than about Europe itself, seen through the eyes of a foreigner pretending not to understand what everyone else took for granted.

Let us, in turn, imagine such an observer, a fictional stranger, transported to contemporary Tbilisi on March 22, the day of a patriarchal funeral. He would first see an immense crowd, disciplined without apparent coercion, pressing forward to glimpse a coffin of the Catholicos Ilia II. He would then notice, not without surprise, that the highest dignitaries of a state that constitutionally claims to be secular, arrive in luxury cars, surrounded by small armies of bodyguards, directly at the entrance of the cathedral, where thousands [stood](#) for endless hours to approach the deceased Patriarch.

The foreigner would observe them adopting attitudes of solemnity whose nature he might struggle to determine, whether they belong to devotion or to political [communication](#). Perhaps he would notice, with a mixture of curiosity and irony, that neither of the two most influential men in the country present there, one lying in his coffin, the other standing beside it and presiding over the scene, was elected by anyone from the hundreds of thousands gathered outside.

Insiders say the two men didn't like each other much, but what made them similar was that they exercised immense, almost unlimited power, largely informal and diffuse, escaping the usual mechanisms of democratic accountability.

Our traveler, taking appearances seriously, might then conclude that he finds himself in a singular regime, where sovereignty is divided, or at least staged in a dual form. At the same time, the Georgian Constitution affirms the separation of church and state and guarantees freedom of religion.



**THORNIKE GORDADZE**  
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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).



Yet, it simultaneously recognizes the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) as having a “special role” in the nation’s history. It is within this gap, between what the law proclaims and what bodies express, that the central question of this article emerges: while Georgia is, without question, a secular state in law, why does the issue of the succession of the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church become such a significant political and even geopolitical issue?

The process of selecting the head of any major religious organization can carry political implications and consequences, and this is not unique to non-Western societies. However, in Georgia, such an event assumes significance that extends well beyond the average, certainly beyond that of any post-Soviet country. This spillover effect stems from persistent ambiguity and opacity in the separation between church and state, the loss of credibility of political institutions, actors, and media, and a thoroughly Georgian passion, in a country with richer monarchical traditions than anywhere else in the entire post-Soviet space, for the mystical aura that surrounds crowned idols.

## **Ecclesiastical Empowerment and State Connivence: The GOC after the 2012 Political Shift**

The United National Movement (UNM) initially treated the Georgian Orthodox Church as a secondary institution, prioritizing rapid modernization and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, from the late 2000s onward, the Church emerged as a central actor in political competition. Faced with declining legitimacy and growing opposition, the Mikheil Saakashvili government moved toward cautious accommodation with the Patriarchate, despite ideological differences. At the same time, the Church strengthened its ties with domestic opposition forces and increasingly maintained channels with

Russia. This period marked the gradual transformation of the GOC from a primarily religious institution into a politically consequential actor capable of influencing electoral outcomes and shaping governmental legitimacy.

By the time of the 2012 parliamentary elections, relations between the Church and the UNM had significantly deteriorated. A decisive factor was the rise of Georgian Dream (GD), led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose substantial financial resources far exceeded those of the incumbent party. Ivanishvili also cultivated a reputation as a major benefactor of the Church, financing flagship projects such as the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi and providing direct support to clerical networks. This fostered a strong alignment between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the opposition. In practice, the vast majority of bishops were openly sympathetic to GD, with some instances of overt political signaling within churches, including the display of party symbols and campaign paraphernalia. During the electoral campaign, the clergy was even reported to encourage voting for GD from the pulpit, blurring the boundary between pastoral authority and political mobilization. Only a marginal minority within the episcopate expressed support for the UNM.

Following GD’s victory, the Church appeared politically empowered, a shift that coincided with rising pressure on religious minorities. Between 2012 and 2013, incidents targeting Muslim communities increased, culminating in the [destruction](#) of a minaret in the village of Chale, justified officially on procedural grounds but widely perceived as reflecting alignment with Orthodox demands. The trend reached its peak on May 17, 2013, when anti-LGBT demonstrations were violently [disrupted](#) by large counter-mobilizations involving clergy. The state’s failure to protect participants or ensure accountability reinforced perceptions of institutional tolerance toward religiously framed violence.

Shortly thereafter, following an initiative originally [proposed](#) by Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, the government declared May 17 a “Family Purity Day,” formalizing its implicit alignment with the Church’s positions. While initially perceived as political reciprocity, this also revealed growing ambivalence within the ruling elite: the Church had become both a crucial ally in consolidating power and a potentially autonomous force capable of mobilizing society against the state itself.

***Tensions also emerged in the economic sphere, as the Church, emboldened by political and ideological gains, increasingly sought to convert its influence into material benefits, revealing a transactional dimension of Church–state relations.***

Tensions also emerged in the economic sphere, as the Church, emboldened by political and ideological gains, increasingly sought to convert its influence into material benefits, revealing a transactional dimension of Church–state relations. A recurring pattern of bargaining developed: the Church would mobilize campaigns against “moral decay,” targeting specific commercial projects, such as the Shangri-La casino [near the Patriarchate](#) or electronic music festivals on the Black Sea coast ([KaZantip](#)), which clerics denounced as a “den of vice.”

These pressures were often resolved through negotiated exchanges, including material concessions or shared economic arrangements. In the Shangri-La Casino case, land and property were reportedly transferred to secure ecclesiastical approval. For KaZantip, an agreement allowed the Church-affiliated “Sno” mineral water to be supplied and exclusively distributed at the festival. Similarly, a dispute with SOCAR over mosque financing in Muslim regions was defused through pragmatic accommodation, including energy-related benefits to Church institutions.

## A Managed Rival: Ivanishvili and the Gradual Containment of the GOC

An excessively powerful Georgian Orthodox Church does not align with Bidzina Ivanishvili’s broader logic of power. A defining feature of his informal system has been the systematic neutralization of autonomous centers of authority. From the outset, he has fragmented political parties, weakened influential figures, and hollowed out state institutions to prevent the emergence of any rival power. In this framework, the Church, initially a useful ally against the UNM, gradually came to be perceived as a potential competitor once the political landscape stabilized.

***An excessively powerful Georgian Orthodox Church does not align with Bidzina Ivanishvili’s broader logic of power. A defining feature of his informal system has been the systematic neutralization of autonomous centers of authority.***

Rather than confronting it directly, Ivanishvili adopted a strategy of calibrated pressure. In 2014, he publicly [stated](#) that even the Patriarch “can make mistakes,” framing criticism as being in the Church’s own interest. The same year, he [supported](#) the anti-discrimination law linked to EU integration despite ecclesiastical opposition, testing the Church’s resistance.

Tensions deepened in 2017 with disputes over liberal drug [reforms](#) and the presidential nomination of Salome Zourabichvili, both strongly contested by conservative clergy. While some policies were later adjusted (repressive drug policy was reinstated as a primary method for detaining disloyal youth, and Mrs. Zourabichvili, accompanied by an unconventional group of priests and nuns, [marched](#) on the steps of St. Nino while carrying a large wooden

cross), this period marked the Church's growing role as both moral veto player and political constraint within Ivanishvili's evolving system of controlled pluralism.

## Cyanide, Crowns and Controlled Holiness: Anatomy of a Managed Patriarchate (2017–2024)

The most destabilizing episode in the internal politics of the Georgian Orthodox Church was the so-called “cyanide case” of 2017, which unfolded as a quasi-medieval political-religious drama. In February, authorities announced an alleged plot to poison the Patriarch, later reframed as an assassination attempt targeting his influential secretary, Shorena Tetrushvili. Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze, director of the GOC medical clinic, was [arrested](#) at Tbilisi Airport carrying cyanide and a firearm, and accused of planning an attack on figures within the Patriarchal inner circle. The case exposed deep [rivalries](#) within the Church and particularly damaged the reputation of the Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili of Batumi and Lazeti, the Patriarch's nephew, who had long been seen as his potential successor.

The scandal weakened the Patriarchate's cohesion and undermined Ilia II's succession strategy, which increasingly reflected his eschatological and quasi-dynastic worldview. He had come to associate his lineage with the Bagrationi royal tradition (hence the nephew as potential successor) and cultivated a symbolic geography centered on his family's ancestral village, which he believed held sacred significance.

Tensions resurfaced in 2019 when Bishop Petre Tsaava publicly [accused](#) the Patriarch of homosexual misconduct and systemic corruption. Although swiftly removed from office, his statements circulated widely, inflicting lasting damage on the Patriarch's moral authority. In retrospect, these episodes have been interpreted as part of a broader pattern in which state security structures and political actors close to Bidzina Ivanishvili exploited

internal divisions to weaken the Church's institutional autonomy and reputational standing.

Some time later, according to [testimony](#) by Bishop Iakob of Bodbe, senior state officials, Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and State Security service head, allegedly discussed a managed transition in 2017, involving the possible resignation of Ilia II and the transfer of effective authority to Metropolitan Shio Mujiri, a cleric with strong ties to Moscow who had been appointed in January 2017 as Patriarch's *locum tenens* amid Ilia II's declining health.

While the plan was not implemented, the Catholics' health and public appearances continued to decline, contributing to a gradual shift in influence within the Patriarchate toward state-aligned actors and intermediaries embedded in its administrative structure. The government was reported to exert influence both over the Patriarch's security detail and through elements of the Patriarchate's administrative apparatus, notably figures such as Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze, Head of Public Relations of the Patriarchate, and Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Rector of the Theological Academy and Seminary, who acted as key intermediaries between the Church leadership and Ivanishvili's state apparatus. This dual structure, between the Patriarch's personal secretariat and a more politically aligned institutional bloc, produced growing divergences between the comparatively cautious, politically neutral, and somehow equivocal and enigmatic interventions of Ilia II and the official positions of the Patriarchate, which increasingly echoed government narratives.

Thus, Ilia II's rare interventions, including a May 2024 biblical [reference](#) to Nebuchadnezzar, amid the pic of street rallies against the Russia-inspired “foreign agents law” and police brutality, were widely read as a veiled critique of Ivanishvili, and were quickly neutralized by official clarifications from the Patriarchate, underscoring the growing contest over the Church's voice and autonomy.

## Surveillance, Scandal, and Soft Control: The Quiet Capture of the Patriarchate

State security structures have reportedly deepened their leverage over the GOC through the strategic use of compromising material targeting senior clerics. This included intercepted communications and private recordings related to corruption, moral misconduct, and alleged sexual improprieties. In September 2021, thousands of such files, gathered by the State Security Service, were [leaked](#) online, most of which implicated members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These disclosures functioned less as instruments of justice than as tools of political discipline, signaling the state's capacity to expose or withhold damaging information at will.

***This pattern reflected Ivanishvili's broader strategy of indirect control: rather than formal subordination, the Church is managed through pressure, fragmentation, and dependence. Over time, such practices have strengthened the state's influence within the Patriarchate, including within the Holy Synod.***

This pattern reflected Ivanishvili's broader strategy of indirect control: rather than formal subordination, the Church is managed through pressure, fragmentation, and dependence. Over time, such practices have strengthened the state's influence within the Patriarchate, including within the Holy Synod. Several influential bishops are now perceived as structurally aligned with the government, forming an informal bloc capable of shaping decisions in line with political preferences.

Dissenting voices have been muted, while others have openly accepted pervasive surveillance. In this

context, the election of a new Patriarch is likely to be influenced by this internal faction, giving the state significant indirect control. Ecclesiastical autonomy formally endures, but in practice it is increasingly mediated by networks of loyalty, patronage, and constraint.

## “Thank you for the Orthodoxy:” Competitive Piety and the Politics of Ecclesiastical Patronage under Gharibashvili

After failing to secure the Patriarch's resignation, the authorities under Ivanishvili shifted to a more calibrated strategy. A tacit compromise emerged: the Patriarch would remain in office, while the *locum tenens*, Metropolitan Shio, gradually assumed de facto leadership. In parallel, following the political crisis that led to Giorgi Gakharia's [departure](#), Ivanishvili [reinstated](#) Irakli Gharibashvili as prime minister, marking a new phase in state–Church relations.

Gharibashvili cultivated the image of a devout, conservative Orthodox leader, frequently invoking the “will of the majority” while downplaying protections for minorities. His rhetoric [contributed](#) to a permissive climate for radical groups, notably during the July 2021 [violence](#) in Tbilisi against activists and journalists. He consistently embedded religious symbolism into political life, speaking from the church ambo, emphasizing personal piety, and presenting himself as a national defender of Orthodoxy. During regional visits, pro-government supporters would publicly thank him “for Orthodoxy” in front of cameras, an orchestrated refrain that reflected the fusion of political authority with religious identity.

His outreach extended beyond Georgia's borders: during a [visit](#) to Jordan, he secured from the Jordanian authorities a plot of land near the Jordan River, traditionally associated with the baptism of Christ, intended for the construction of a Georgian

religious complex, similar to those already established by other Orthodox nations. Gharibashvili presented this as a major diplomatic and spiritual achievement, underscoring his effort to position himself as a guardian of national faith.

Yet this overt religiosity blurred constitutional boundaries. By repeatedly describing Georgia as an “Orthodox state,” Gharibashvili challenged its secular framework and used proximity to the Church as a resource in intra-elite competition against his rivals, Irakli Kobakhidze and Kakha Kaladze, at the court of Bidzina Ivanishvili. This strategy extended across all his political roles, including his tenure as defense minister (2019–21), when he commissioned waterproof Bibles to be included in soldiers’ standard equipment.

***Rather than confronting the Church, Ivanishvili’s system sought to absorb and reframe it. Although Gharibashvili’s eventual downfall for corruption interrupted this trajectory, the broader objective of subordinating ecclesiastical influence within a controlled political order remained intact.***

Paradoxically, this state-sponsored piety encroached on the Church’s own domain. In this sense, Ivanishvili’s choice of Gharibashvili could have been deliberate. By elevating a figure whose religiosity was difficult to challenge, the government could both appease conservative constituencies and subtly redirect their allegiance toward the state. Rather than confronting the Church, Ivanishvili’s system sought to absorb and reframe it. Although Gharibashvili’s eventual [downfall](#) for corruption interrupted this trajectory, the broader objective of subordinating ecclesiastical influence within a controlled political order remained intact.

## The Offer It Could Refuse: Why the Church Rejected Becoming a State Religion

The most ambitious attempt by Bidzina Ivanishvili to consolidate control over the Church came during the 2024 electoral [campaign](#). Alongside anti-LGBT rhetoric, anti-war messaging framed against Western pressure, and proposals for reconciliation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region, he [advanced](#) a striking initiative: declaring Orthodoxy the state religion of Georgia. The move aimed to mobilize conservative sentiment and anchor GD within a narrative of national identity and tradition.

Ivanishvili appeared to assume broad support, believing the GOC would accept what seemed like the ultimate recognition of its status. Yet the Church [declined](#). This refusal revealed a deeper logic. What appeared as elevation in fact implied subordination: a state religion would entail government oversight over appointments, finances, and doctrine, eroding ecclesiastical autonomy.

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In its current position, the Church enjoys a more advantageous equilibrium, exercising significant informal influence without direct responsibility. It shapes public discourse, secures material benefits, and retains strategic flexibility. Formal integration into the state would jeopardize this balance.

By rejecting the proposal, the Church preserved its autonomy and avoided being incorporated into Ivanishvili’s system of control, thereby maintaining its role as a powerful yet independent actor in Georgia’s political order.

## From Charisma to Compliance: Engineering a Manageable Patriarch

The death of Ilia II has opened a long-awaited window for Bidzina Ivanishvili to pursue a central objective: bringing the GOC under tighter political control. The goal is clear: to prevent the emergence of another patriarch with the kind of supra-political authority Ilia II accumulated over nearly five decades. Despite controversies, Ilia II embodied a form of moral legitimacy that consistently surpassed that of any political leader, including Ivanishvili himself. Such an autonomous and widely trusted figure is structurally incompatible with Ivanishvili's model of governance.

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Throughout his informal rule, Ivanishvili has systematically neutralized potential counterweights by weakening institutions and promoting dependent figures. The presidency offers a clear example. Although already limited, its powers were further reduced, and direct [elections](#) were abolished. Yet even carefully selected figures such as Giorgi Margvelashvili and Salome Zourabichvili developed unexpected independence. The subsequent elevation of a football player without a college degree, Mikheil Kavelashvili, illustrates a more refined strategy: the deliberate devaluation of the office to eliminate residual autonomy.

A similar trajectory is visible in the public defender's office. While earlier appointees like Nino Lomjaria became vocal critics, the current ombudsman,

Levan Ioseliani, is widely seen as compliant and non-confrontational. The pattern is consistent: positions with symbolic or institutional potential are filled with figures whose authority remains structurally constrained.

It is within this logic that the patriarchal succession must be understood. Ivanishvili appears to favor a candidate who would replicate this model: loyal, low-profile, and politically manageable. However, the challenge is greater. The Holy Synod, largely shaped by Ilia II, retains a degree of autonomy. While not liberal or pro-Western, many of its members are protective of the Church's independence. The preferred candidate, Metropolitan Shio, lacks broad support and faces competition from other influential figures.

Reports suggest that state security structures may attempt to shape the outcome through informal pressure, including compromising material. Yet the Synod's fragmented and competitive nature introduces uncertainty. Unlike other institutions, the Church remains only partially penetrated, making the effort to engineer a "smaller" patriarch both central to Ivanishvili's system and far from guaranteed.

Metropolitan Shio embodies a paradox: he combines strong theological credentials and an elite pedigree with a marked lack of charisma and popular appeal. Often perceived as distant and hierarchical, he appears more at ease with institutional authority than public engagement. His elevation would likely signal a shift, from Ilia II's charismatic, national leadership to a more restrained, technocratic patriarchate better aligned with the logic of political control.

## Patriarchal Vacancy: When the Holy Synod Meets Geopolitics

The election of a new Catholicos-Patriarch in Georgia is never merely an ecclesiastical affair. It is a decisive political moment at home, and

a geopolitical signal closely watched abroad. In Tbilisi, it will reshape the internal balance of power; in Moscow, it is treated as a strategic variable in a broader contest over influence in the post-Soviet space.

Russia's attention is neither incidental nor discreet. The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) has recently [accused](#) Ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I of attempting to expand Constantinople's influence in Georgia by backing candidates deemed sympathetic to its line. Two senior Georgian hierarchs, Metropolitan Abraham Garmelia and Metropolitan Grigol Berbichashvili, have been singled out in this narrative. In Moscow's framing, Georgia is becoming the next arena of ecclesiastical and geopolitical competition after Ukraine.

What is striking is not only the accusation itself, but the language used. A secular intelligence agency invoking canonical law and the authority of Ecumenical Councils illustrates the extent to which Russia blurs the boundaries between statecraft and religious discourse. The patriarchal succession is thus elevated to a strategic issue, embedded in the wider Russia-Georgia-West confrontation.

Formally, the Georgian Orthodox Church is autocephalous and has no hierarchical dependence on Moscow. In practice, however, this independence conceals a dense web of historical and ideological ties. As we [argued](#) in *GEOPOLITICS*, these links, many forged during the Soviet period under the KGB's watch, have endured, shaping a shared worldview marked by skepticism toward liberalism and Western normative influence.

This convergence is most visible in the Ukrainian case. Following Constantinople's recognition of an independent Ukrainian Church, the Georgian Church has maintained a position of studied ambiguity. Officially "examining" the issue, it has in effect avoided recognition, an ambiguity widely interpreted as tacit alignment with Moscow.

For Russia, this alignment is strategic. The Church remains the most trusted and influential institution in Georgia, a far more stable vector of influence than any elected government. Political power in Tbilisi is volatile and contested, and is periodically challenged by mass mobilization. The Church, by contrast, offers continuity: insulated from electoral cycles, less exposed to external pressure, and governed by slow-moving internal dynamics.

This is precisely why the patriarchal succession matters. It is a rare moment when long-term orientations can be recalibrated. For Moscow, the objective is to see the emergence of a patriarch broadly aligned with Russian positions, yet not fully subordinated to the Georgian state.

***The succession of Georgia's patriarch is not just a religious transition. It is a quiet battle over the country's long-term geopolitical orientation.***

By maintaining parallel vectors, state and Church, Russia reduces its dependence on any single lever of influence. The result is a more resilient and flexible system in which the Church functions not as an extension of policy but as a parallel infrastructure of power. In this light, the succession of Georgia's patriarch is not just a religious transition. It is a quiet battle over the country's long-term geopolitical orientation.

## **A Narrow Corridor Between Moscow and Tbilisi: The Politics of an "Ideal" Patriarch**

The pre-electoral configuration linking the Georgian government under Bidzina Ivanishvili, Russia, and the Georgian Orthodox Church reveals a relationship that is at once convergent and structurally contradictory. At first glance, there is a zone of alignment: both Tbilisi and Moscow prefer a future Patriarch who would avoid openly pro-Western positions and

would not frame the Church as a vehicle for liberal normative agendas. This shared preference establishes a minimal consensus around blocking a clearly pro-Western ecclesiastical leadership.

Beyond this surface convergence, however, the divergences are significant as well. Russia's ideal Patriarch is a strong and charismatic figure, ideologically sympathetic to Moscow but institutionally autonomous from the Georgian state. Paradoxically, this is not a replication of the Russian model itself. In Russia, the Orthodox Church is closely integrated into the state apparatus and functions as an instrument of domestic order and external projection. In Georgia, by contrast, Moscow's interest lies in maintaining the Church as a relatively independent structure, precisely because such autonomy increases Russia's own capacity to influence it directly, without mediation by the Georgian state.

***Russia seeks an independent Georgian Church to maximize external leverage. In contrast, parts of the Georgian political establishment would prefer a Church more structurally subordinated to the state.***

The Georgian ruling elite, in other words, Ivanishvili and his cronies, by contrast, often gravitate toward a different logic: a Church more disciplined, more predictable, and more closely aligned with state authority, closer, in effect, to the Russian domestic model of Church–state integration. This produces a paradoxical inversion: Russia seeks an independent Georgian Church to maximize external leverage. In contrast, parts of the Georgian political establishment would prefer a Church more structurally subordinated to the state.

Within this configuration, Metropolitan Shio emerges as a pivotal but ambivalent figure. As *locum tenens* of the Patriarchal throne, he is arguably the

most institutionally legible candidate for Moscow. His biography reflects deep integration into Russian ecclesiastical and intellectual networks: long residence in Moscow, theological training at the St. Tikhon Institute, a doctoral degree obtained there, and service within Georgian ecclesiastical structures in Moscow. His return to Georgia in 2016, reportedly accompanied by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev, then a central figure in Russian Church external relations, was widely interpreted as a sign of Moscow's strategic interest in his trajectory. His subsequent appointment by Ilia II as *locum tenens* further reinforced this perception.

Yet the alignment remains incomplete. In Georgia, Shio lacks strong popular support among clergy and laity, limiting his capacity to serve as a fully consolidated moral authority. From Moscow's perspective, this weak domestic legitimacy is a strategic drawback: influence without social anchoring risks fragility. For the Georgian political establishment, however, this limitation is precisely what is attractive. A less popular Patriarch is, in political terms, more manageable, less capable of generating autonomous legitimacy or challenging state authority.

It is therefore within this narrow corridor of partially overlapping but ultimately divergent preferences that the real logic of the Patriarchal succession is unfolding.

## **The Last Arbiter: Patriarchal Succession and the Politics of Change in Georgia**

Whatever the outcome, the succession of the Georgian Orthodox Church marks a historical rupture. None of the candidates can replicate the aura or authority of Ilia II, who effectively embodied the institution for decades. When he assumed the patriarchal throne in 1977, the Church was marginal, with only seven members in its Holy Synod. Today, it is a vast institution with more than 40 hierarchs,

thousands of churches and monasteries, and a transnational presence. It has become the most powerful social actor in Georgia, an evolution inseparable from Ilia II's personal authority.

The succession is therefore unusually uncertain. The field includes candidates associated with authorities, figures perceived as close to Moscow, and intermediaries who combine both profiles. Yet there is no guarantee that any "official" candidate will prevail within the Holy Synod. Paradoxically, patriarchal elections appear more competitive than parliamentary or local elections, where power has become increasingly structured and predictable under conditions of political monopolization and state capture by the oligarch and his party.

Yes, most candidates are not pro-Western. But the decisive cleavage is instead internal: whether the Synod prioritizes institutional autonomy or ideological alignment. If autonomy becomes the overriding concern, even conservative bishops could rally behind a moderate figure. If, however, Western liberalism is perceived as the primary threat, the balance could tilt toward candidates closer to the ruling authorities, who, in turn, possess significant informal leverage and kompromats over parts of the ecclesiastical elite.

***Today, the Church remains the only institution capable of constraining the concentration of power around Bidzina Ivanishvili.***

Today, the Church remains the only institution capable of constraining the concentration of power around Bidzina Ivanishvili. While its compatibility with liberal democracy is limited, it has historically functioned as a counterweight to state domination since the Soviet period. It may again play that role in the future.

At the same time, it is equally capable of legitimizing authoritarian consolidation, as historical precedents from Francisco Franco's Spain to Colonels' Greece illustrate. Its position in any future contestation would therefore be decisive. Today's opposition to Ivanishvili is largely urban and educated, but structurally weak in reaching rural and peripheral segments of society. With political parties unable to mobilize nationally, only the Church retains the capacity to connect these fragmented social spaces, making it an indispensable, and potentially decisive, actor in Georgia's evolving political equilibrium. ■

# Resilience in Practice: Lessons from Ukraine and Georgia

In today's world, global and regional orders are under growing strain as international rules, norms, and frameworks are pressured by the interconnected conflicts from the Western Hemisphere to the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Sovereignty is no longer treated as self-enforcing, international law is increasingly contested, and even security guarantees once assumed to be stable now appear more politically conditional than many small states had hoped. In such an environment, deterrence, in its strongest form, remains concentrated in the hands of great powers, especially nuclear powers. For everyone else, survival depends less on abstract legal protections and more on the capacity to endure, adapt, and recover under pressure. Resilience, once treated largely as a broad and often over-theorized concept, is increasingly becoming a central strategic requirement for exposed states. Rather than adding yet another definition to an already crowded resilience debate, it may be more useful to examine what resilience looks like in practice. Ukraine and Georgia offer two sharply different

trajectories under prolonged pressure from the same revisionist power - Russia. One shows how sustained external pressure can consolidate national purpose, political will, and societal resistance. The other shows how similar pressure, when filtered through internal fragmentation, institutional weakness, and material constraints, can erode a state's ability to respond coherently. Analysis of the two cases can shed light on what resilience entails for vulnerable states when the surrounding security order no longer holds sway.

## Russia's Strategic Attack on the Euro-Atlantic Security Order

Former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [recounts](#) that in autumn 2021, he sought to convene a session of the NATO Russia Council to explore, among other issues, geographically defined military limitations or buffer zones between NATO and Russia. He acknowledged that several allies, particularly those on NATO's eastern flank, strongly



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opposed such ideas because they would complicate the defense of their territories. Yet the initiative rested on the assumption that Moscow might again accept negotiated military constraints if the West were to consider meaningful concessions. According to Stoltenberg, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed the proposal as a “waste of time,” refusing to participate in discussions that would inevitably focus on Russia’s violations of international law in Ukraine, namely the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

***Even as Russia sharply escalated military pressure around Ukraine in late 2021, Western actors were still exclusively exploring formulas that only assumed the negotiability of the core principles underpinning the Euro-Atlantic security order.***

Despite conflicting interpretations and remaining ambiguities, this episode illustrates a deeper structural problem. Even as Russia sharply esca-

lated military pressure around Ukraine in late 2021, Western actors were still exclusively exploring formulas that only assumed the negotiability of the core principles underpinning the Euro-Atlantic security order. Among these was whether NATO members, particularly those on the eastern flank, could fully exercise membership rights, including hosting allied defensive capabilities on their territory. Russia, by contrast, approached the negotiations from a fundamentally different strategic position. When the NATO-Russia Council convened in January 2022, Moscow made clear that its [demands](#) were not a starting point for discussion but a non-negotiable ultimatum. Russian proposals were [described](#) as “not a menu from which one could pick suitable items,” but rather a take-it-or-leave-it offer. While parts of the Western policy community were still searching for compromises to stabilize relations, Russia was already pursuing a maximalist revisionist [agenda](#) aimed at dismantling the post-Cold War security architecture.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided a stark lesson in how Moscow interprets

weakness and concessions. For Russia, compromise is not a stabilizing mechanism but an indicator of weakness and an opportunity to press further. Misjudging what provokes Russian aggression and what restrains it has been a recurring blind spot in Western policy since the end of the Cold War. The pattern was already visible after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, when the international response proved insufficient to alter Moscow's strategic calculus. Instead of reinforcing the principles of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the limited consequences helped convince the Kremlin that revisionism could proceed at manageable cost. In this sense, the war against Ukraine represents the culmination of a longer trajectory in which Russia has steadily pursued its objective of dismantling a Western-dominated security system that it has [rejected](#) since its inception.

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## Ukraine's Case: Consolidation of Civic Identity and Societal Mobilization

Ukraine's resilience was not an immediate reaction to the 2022 invasion but the result of a transformation that began with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Over the following years, Ukrainian society consolidated a civic identity centered on freedom, democracy, and aspirations for European integration. Shared determination, collective memory, and the vision of a European future increasingly replaced regional, linguistic, or ethnic markers as the primary foundations of national identity.

Based on the 2026 [study](#) on the correlation between identity and resilience in Ukraine, at the core of its national resilience were four main societal components. First was patriotism, understood as the willingness to contribute to the country. This was already the strongest resilience component before 2022, but by 2022 it surged further, with 80% of respondents rating it at the highest level. Second was social unity or solidarity, which also rose sharply under pressure. Third was trust in public institutions, which moved from moderate importance before 2022 to much higher significance during full-scale war. Fourth was trust in government and political leaders, which had been the weakest component before 2022 but improved notably during the invasion. Together, these four elements formed the social backbone of wartime resilience.

Several reinforcing factors contributed to this transformation. Civic identity became a powerful unifying force. Shared determination, democratic values, and European orientation provided a common framework through which the war was perceived as a struggle for political freedom and national survival. Social cohesion and patriotism intensified under external pressure, as solidarity, national unity, and willingness to sacrifice increased significantly with the escalation of Russian aggression.

***Ukrainian society became more resilient not because it felt secure, but because the perception of danger was clearly recognized and collectively interpreted as an existential challenge.***

Institutional trust also strengthened. While confidence in government had previously been problematic, the experience of war and visible coordination between national and regional levels [increased](#) trust in political leadership and state institutions, especially the president and armed forces. At the same time, psychological and

cognitive factors proved decisive. Rising threat awareness, combined with morale, hope, and the will to fight, converted identity and solidarity into practical resistance. Ukrainian society became more resilient not because it felt secure, but because the perception of danger was clearly recognized and collectively interpreted as an existential challenge.

These dynamics created a reinforcing feedback loop between identity and resilience. Identity strengthened collective determination, while a successful collective experience of resistance further deepened national identity. The survival instinct, activated in response to the full-scale invasion in 2022, mobilized this accumulated societal capacity and transformed it into mass mobilization, while international support facilitated the tools for protracted defense arrangements. The main body of [knowledge](#) on resilience in defense and security, as well as NATO's core [approach](#), clearly underscores that one indispensable component of resilience-building is preparedness and advanced planning.

Ukraine's case is a practical proof of this. Its remarkable performance in 2022 was rooted in a significantly higher level of preparedness developed over the preceding years. Preparedness emerged as a central driver of resilience, alongside will to fight, morale, and a clear sense of danger. This preparedness was [facilitated](#) to a large extent by sustained international support from 2014 to 2022, which strengthened Ukraine's defense capabilities and societal awareness.

The materials in the [study](#) quoted above show that resilience grew as danger was clearly recognized, collectively interpreted, and translated into action. By 2022, will to fight, morale, and especially preparedness were all markedly stronger than before, demonstrating that Ukraine's resilience was practical and mobilizational, and strongly enabled by external support.

## Georgia's Case: Institutional Vulnerability and Cognitive Pressure

***While Georgian society broadly maintained pro-Western orientations and democratic aspirations, democratic resilience gradually collapsed under sustained Russian influence operations.***

Georgia's trajectory since 2008 followed a markedly different [path](#). While Georgian society broadly maintained pro-Western orientations and democratic aspirations, democratic resilience gradually collapsed under sustained Russian influence operations. Political developments, including the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, [state capture](#) dynamics, and oligarchic influence, degraded the ability of state institutions to act as barriers against external [pressure](#). Instead, elements of the political system became channels through which external influence could penetrate the state.

***At the societal level, civil society organizations and non-governmental actors in Georgia remained strongly pro-Western and actively engaged in defending democratic values. Over time, however, sustained pressure from Russia, combined with insufficient and inconsistent support from Western partners, contributed to the gradual consolidation of a Russian-style authoritarian governing model.***

At the societal level, civil society organizations and non-governmental actors in Georgia remained strongly pro-Western and actively engaged in defending democratic values. Over time, however, sustained pressure from Russia, combined with

insufficient and inconsistent [support](#) from Western partners, contributed to the gradual consolidation of a Russian-style authoritarian governing model. This trajectory culminated in a de facto state capture by the ruling party, Georgian Dream, which extended its control over key sources of power, including political institutions, media space, and economic levers. As a result, the strong pro-democracy and pro-Western orientation of society did not translate into policy outcomes or national resilience. Instead, a widening gap emerged between public preferences and state behavior, as the concentration of power constrained the ability of civil society and public opinion to influence decision-making. These dynamics generated structural vulnerabilities within the national resilience system, particularly by weakening accountability mechanisms, distorting information space, and limiting institutional responsiveness to societal demands.

In Georgia's case, the cognitive domain emerged as the decisive battlefield shaping the country's overall resilience. [Coordinated](#) anti-Western narratives originating from the Kremlin were actively amplified and localized by the Georgian Dream, embedding them into domestic political discourse. Among the most consequential were war-related narratives portraying closer alignment with the West, or a change in political leadership, as likely to trigger a spillover of the war in Ukraine into Georgia. These messages deliberately exploited societal trauma from the 2008 war and cultivated fear as a political instrument.

As a result, a society that remained overwhelmingly pro-Western became deeply polarized and unable to consolidate around common national interests. Persistent disinformation and psychological operations blurred the line between fact and manipulation. Authoritarian consolidation eroded trust in institutions and further fragmented public space. This was reinforced by structural enablers: economic [dependence](#) on Russia through trade, tourism, and remittances; political influence exercised via elite

networks and informal governance channels; and the influx of Russian citizens following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which added both economic leverage and social pressure points, particularly in urban centers like Tbilisi and Batumi.

At the same time, ambiguous and inconsistent international signaling and inaction regarding Georgia's democratic backsliding further deepened uncertainty. In this volatile environment, internal polarization intensified, institutions weakened, and dissenting voices were increasingly repressed. The cumulative effect was a collapse of the national resilience: despite strong pro-democratic and pro-Western attitudes at the societal level, confusion, fear, and narrative manipulation prevented collective action and undermined the translation of public will into policy. External influence proved most effective through this interaction between political leadership and the information environment, rather than through direct military means; although the occupation of Georgia's territories and aggressive political and economic pressure played a significant role in preparing the ground for cognitive warfare.

## National Resilience in an International Context

Developments at the international and national levels of resilience are tightly interdependent. For small states in particular, national resilience is not only a product of internal cohesion or institutional capacity; it is also shaped by the credibility of the international system, including its rules and norms, and by the consistency of external support. When that credibility is undermined or signals of weakness are perceived, authoritarian and revisionist actors gain confidence to act. "The nuclear weapon of small states is international law," as [noted](#) by the late Estonian President Lennart Meri during the post-Soviet turbulences.

The trajectories of Ukraine and Georgia illustrate this dynamic with clarity. In Ukraine's case, strong, unequivocal political support and sustained international material assistance, especially before and after 2022, significantly reinforced national resilience. It strengthened defense capabilities, bolstered institutional legitimacy, and enabled large-scale societal mobilization around a shared civic identity. At the same time, Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion points to the limits and weaknesses of the rules-based system. As Jens Stoltenberg has reflected, signals of insufficient deterrence and perceived lack of resolve from the international community contributed to Moscow's calculation that such aggression would be tolerated. In this sense, weaknesses in the international system created the permissive conditions for the invasion, while subsequent strong support helped Ukraine consolidate its resilience.

***The limited and inconsistent international response to Russia's 2008 invasion failed to impose meaningful constraints on Moscow's behavior and failed to help Georgia strengthen its defenses in the face of continued Russian aggression.***

Georgia's trajectory demonstrates a similar pattern over a longer timeframe. The limited and inconsistent international response to Russia's 2008 invasion failed to impose meaningful constraints on Moscow's behavior and failed to help Georgia strengthen its defenses in the face of continued Russian aggression. This not only weakened Georgia's external security environment but also contributed to a broader perception that violations of sovereignty would not be decisively challenged. These dynamics carried forward into Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. In Georgia itself, the delayed and insufficient support for its democratic and Western trajectory created space for Russia to expand its influence. Over time, this

facilitated the erosion of institutional resilience and enabled the consolidation of governance practices that aligned more closely with Russian interests.

These cases demonstrate that the resilience of small states is closely tied to the credibility and consistency of the international system. When external support is strong and sustained, it reinforces domestic capacity to resist and adapt. When it is weak, delayed, or inconsistent, it creates opportunities for authoritarian powers such as Russia to exploit vulnerabilities, shape internal trajectories, and undermine national resilience.

## Resilience During Fragmented Hyperconnectivity

Russia has pushed the rules-based international system to its limits through open revisionism and the use of force, yet current geopolitical trends point to a broader and more systemic erosion of post-Cold War norms. The weakening of international law is no longer driven by a single actor. It reflects a wider pattern in which major powers increasingly justify the use of military force, or the threat of it, through expansive interpretations of national security. This trend is particularly dangerous because it lowers the threshold for coercion and normalizes exceptional behavior as routine state practice.

Recent developments across multiple regions illustrate this shift. In the Western Hemisphere, the United States [operation](#) to capture Nicolás Maduro in Caracas was [framed](#) as a law enforcement action against narcoterrorism, despite involving military force on sovereign territory. Similarly, expanding anti-narcotics operations have increasingly relied on military tools, including lethal force against suspected trafficking networks. These cases blur the boundary between law enforcement and armed conflict, creating a legal grey zone where the use of force is justified by security imperatives rather than constrained by established norms. In the Middle East, the approach taken by the United

States and Israel toward Iran reflects a similar logic. Threats targeting infrastructure, such as energy systems and transport networks, have been justified on the grounds of dual use and deterrence, even

as they raise serious [concerns](#) under the principles governing the conduct of hostilities.

The growing reliance on national security justifications for the use or threat of force represents a structural shift with far-reaching consequences. When states increasingly define security in expansive and unilateral terms, the distinction between defensive necessity and coercive pressure becomes blurred. This adds to the already existing precedents of Russia's revisionist policies and aggressive strategies in Ukraine and Georgia, further weakening the credibility of international rules and encouraging escalation across different regions.

This dynamic is reinforced by rising transatlantic tensions, which further destabilize the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Disagreements between the United States and its European allies over crisis management, multilateral coordination, and the interpretation of international obligations have become more pronounced. Episodes such as [threats](#) around potential control over Greenland have raised fundamental questions about respect for sovereignty even within the Alliance. At the same time, divergences over the handling of conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as disputes within international institutions, have weakened the cohesion that traditionally underpinned transatlantic security cooperation.

These developments are tightly interconnected with broader global conflicts. The war in Ukraine, conflict with Iran, and security operations in the Western Hemisphere are part of a single strategic environment shaped by major-power competition. Legal flexibility in one theatre influences behavior in another, while political and military actions generate ripple effects across regions. As a result, instability

is no longer contained but spreads across interconnected security spaces.

The cumulative effect is systemic atrophy of the post-Cold War order. International law remains formally intact, yet its application has become increasingly conditional and contested. Norms are interpreted selectively, institutions are under strain, and alliances face internal divisions. Under these conditions, global and regional security architectures are exposed to sustained pressure, and the overall stability of international dynamics becomes more fragile and unpredictable.

***The lessons from Georgia and Ukraine must therefore be interpreted within the broader transformation of the international system. If the erosion of international norms continues and global politics becomes increasingly defined by spheres of influence and hard power competition, the meaning of resilience for small countries may change fundamentally.***

The lessons from Georgia and Ukraine must therefore be interpreted within the broader transformation of the international system. If the erosion of international norms continues and global politics becomes increasingly defined by spheres of influence and hard power competition, the meaning of resilience for small countries may change fundamentally. In such an environment, smaller states may be forced to reassess the foundations of their security strategies. Value-based choices become more difficult for societies exposed to existential threats. This places countries like Ukraine and Georgia in an increasingly difficult position. Their long-term resilience might depend less on normative alignment with democratic partners and more on their ability to balance interests between larger powers in a fragmented international system.

The Ukrainian and Georgian cases, therefore, underscore that resilience in the information age is fundamentally shaped in the cognitive domain. Identity, collective memory, shared values, and the interpretation of external threats and perception of potential partnerships determine how societies respond to crises.

***If states increasingly sleepwalk into a world defined primarily by hard power and spheres of influence while neglecting the cognitive and psychological foundations of resilience, they risk overlooking the main drivers of societal determinations in the digital era.***

Ignoring this reality carries significant risks. If states increasingly sleepwalk into a world defined primarily by hard power and spheres of influence while neglecting the cognitive and psychological foundations of resilience, they risk overlooking the main drivers of societal determinations in the digital era. In contemporary information societies, the struggle for resilience is fought not only through military power, economic leverage, or diplomacy, but also in the realm of perception, identity, and collective belief. Failing to recognize this dynamic will likely generate deeper tensions, instability, and persistent geopolitical friction ■

# The OSCE Moscow Mechanism: A Paper or a Paper Knife?

**T**here was a time when the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mattered for Georgia. In the OSCE, Tbilisi could talk with other European capitals and expose Russia's hostile intentions, believing that international organizations could somehow constrain Russia. OSCE was used to inform the partners, uphold diplomatic ties in a multilateral format, and amplify Georgia's position in the Euro-Atlantic space. That time is long gone.

The decline did not happen overnight. It was gradual and, after 2008, irreversible. By the early 2000s, the OSCE had already begun to lose its political weight, whereas previously it had played a crucial role in Georgia's international legal standing. OSCE Summits in [Budapest](#) (1994), [Lisbon](#) (1996), and [Istanbul](#) (1999) produced important documents for Georgia. First two effectively recognized the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia, whereas the Istanbul Summit was instrumental in obliging Russia to withdraw its long overdue military bases from all of Georgia, including the occupied Abkhazia.

***With Vladimir Putin's assent, the OSCE began to crumble.***

But with Vladimir Putin's assent, the OSCE began to crumble. Since the 2002 Porto Ministerial, the OSCE has failed to produce the agreed-upon ministerial statements. The consensus rules, once designed as a confidence-building tool, became a veto instrument in Russia's hands. The organization's ability to act was slowly hollowed out, turning it into a forum for statements rather than a mechanism for outcomes. For Georgia, however, three pillars of engagement still made the OSCE relevant - at least for a time.

The first was conflict management. Georgia saw the OSCE as a platform to address its territorial conflicts over Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region, and, by extension, Russia. Yet even this was constrained. Abkhazia fell under the UN framework, leaving South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region as the primary OSCE domain. But there, too, effectiveness was limited.



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The OSCE Mission to Georgia faced constant obstruction, including restrictions on access to conflict zones. Long before its formal closure in 2008, it had already become a diminished presence, with only a handful of monitors able to enter and operate in the conflict zone.

The decisive moment came after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. In 2009, Russia blocked the extension of the OSCE mission's mandate, which expired on December 31, 2008. The organization simply disappeared from Georgia, even if it remained engaged in the Geneva International Discussions as a co-chair. From that moment on, the OSCE ceased to be a meaningful actor in Georgia's conflict landscape. The very dimension that had justified its presence - managing and monitoring the consequences of occupation - was gone.

The second pillar was arms control, particularly through the adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). For years, this framework had been central to European security and directly relevant for Georgia, especially given the issue

of Russian military bases on its territory. The Adapted CFE Treaty negotiations stalled in part because Russia failed to fulfill its Istanbul commitments, including its withdrawal from Georgia. But after 2008, the entire arms control architecture began to unravel. Russia "[suspended](#)" its participation in the CFE Treaty in 2007, later ceased cooperation entirely, and by 2023 [formally withdrew](#). NATO states followed suit by suspending their own participation. What had once been a core pillar of European security and a lever for Georgia collapsed into irrelevance and dysfunction.

The organization briefly regained some relevance after 2014, when it [deployed](#) the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine after Russia's aggression in Eastern Ukraine and prior illegal annexation of Crimea. For a moment, it appeared that the OSCE could reinvent itself as a crisis management tool. But this proved illusory. After Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the SMM was forced to withdraw. Once again, the OSCE demonstrated that it could operate only where Russia allowed it to - and nowhere else.

The third pillar that Georgia cared about was the human dimension. For Georgia, this had always been important—not only domestically, but also in highlighting human rights violations in the occupied regions. Tbilisi consistently aligned itself with EU statements and used OSCE mechanisms to raise concerns about abuses in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region. The organization provided a platform, and Georgia utilized it. There was a time when the ODIHR and the High Commissioner on National Minorities were continuously nudged by the Georgian authorities to engage in the human rights monitoring in the Russia-controlled regions.

Moreover, Georgia also cared about the OSCE's electoral observation missions. No matter how critical the ODIHR reports were, consecutive governments, whether during 3rd President Mikheil Saakashvili's tenure (2003–2012), or during the first years of Bidzina Ivanishvili's and his Georgian Dream's (GD) rule, invited ODIHR to monitor Georgian elections. The reports by the OSCE monitoring missions were also taken seriously, and follow-up on the election-related recommendations was always a priority, even in the early years of Ivanishvili's rule. But today that has changed, too, and the current foreign policy of the Georgian Dream couldn't care less about international institutions. As we have [argued](#) before on the pages of *GEOpolitics*, Georgia's foreign policy has become isolationist, minimalist, and damaging, leaving no room for ambitions within international organizations.

## The Reversal

Since 2022, the Georgian Dream government has reversed its foreign policy not only vis-à-vis the EU, Russia, and the U.S., but also in relation to international organizations. Instead of leveraging the OSCE to advance human rights concerns in the occupied regions or promote domestic human rights achievements, it has increasingly treated the organization as an obstacle.

***The reversal of the foreign policy course has had predictable consequences in the OSCE framework. Election observation missions—once seen as a tool for validation and external legitimacy—have become a source of tension.***

The reversal of the foreign policy course has had predictable consequences in the OSCE framework. Election observation missions—once seen as a tool for validation and external legitimacy—have become a source of tension. Georgia has not yet followed Russia in banning international observers outright, but it has systematically undermined their effectiveness. In 2020 and 2021, the number of ODIHR observers was limited, mainly due to COVID. In 2024, the mission was present and [issued](#) a critical assessment, pointing to systemic irregularities and an uneven playing field. Yet the carefully calibrated diplomatic language allowed the government to selectively [quote](#) the report, presenting it domestically as an endorsement rather than a warning. In the 2025 local elections, the OSCE was not present at all because the Georgian Dream deliberately invited it late, which, as ODIHR [noted](#), made “meaningful observation impossible.”

## The Moscow Mechanism

Today, only one OSCE instrument remains relevant for Georgia, and it is used against Georgia, not by Georgia. This is the [Moscow Mechanism](#).

Established in 1991, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the Moscow Mechanism was designed as an emergency tool to address serious human dimension concerns within the OSCE space. It was built on a simple yet powerful idea: when a state fails to uphold its commitments, other participating states should be able to trigger an independent investigation, even without the state's consent.

Unlike most OSCE instruments, the mechanism bypasses the consensus rule. A group of at least six participating states can invoke it and appoint independent experts (rapporteurs) to investigate alleged violations. These experts are mandated to collect information, engage with stakeholders, and produce a public report. The state under scrutiny may cooperate or refuse to cooperate (Georgia did not appoint a co-rapporteur, but cooperated with the rapporteur). The mechanism proceeds regardless.

Over time, this has made the Moscow Mechanism one of the few remaining OSCE tools capable of generating authoritative, internationally recognized findings. It does not impose sanctions or enforce compliance, but it establishes facts, and in today's geopolitical environment, that is often the most powerful step toward accountability.

When the OSCE adopted the Moscow Mechanism in 1991, it was responding to a very specific fear of the post-Cold War moment: that newly independent or transitioning states might relapse into repression while the international community remained procedurally paralyzed.

In its early uses, across the wars of the former Yugoslavia and later in places like Chechnya, the mechanism functioned as a documentation tool in high-intensity crises. It recorded atrocities, created a shared evidentiary baseline, and fed into broader international responses, including UN processes and, eventually, possibly, international criminal justice.

By the 2000s and 2010s, as overt interstate conflicts receded, the mechanism evolved into something else: an accountability instrument for authoritarian repression. Its use against Belarus in 2011, 2020, and 2023, and against Russia in the Chechnya LGBT persecution case (2018), reflected this shift. The goal was no longer to document war crimes alone, but to expose systematic violations of human rights, electoral fraud, and state-sponsored repression.

A third phase emerged after 2022, when the mechanism was repeatedly invoked in relation to Russia's war against Ukraine. Here, it became part of a broader accountability ecosystem, complementing European investigations and feeding into legal and sanctions regimes.

***the Moscow mechanism was never an end in itself. It was part of a broader strategy—whether to build a legal case, justify sanctions, or consolidate international pressure.***

In all these cases, the Moscow mechanism was never an end in itself. It was part of a broader strategy—whether to build a legal case, justify sanctions, or consolidate international pressure.

The recent use of the Moscow Mechanism against Georgia has one peculiarity. For the first time, a country that once saw the OSCE as an ally and cared about the platform has become the subject of one of its most intrusive accountability tools. In 2007-2008, Georgia was the country that actively used the OSCE instruments to protect its national interest. The activation of the Vienna and Bucharest mechanisms in 2008 was considered diplomatically groundbreaking, as OSCE tools were turned against Russia, with Georgia as the primary user. From 2014, when the OSCE instruments were once again used against Russia, Georgia was silent and sidelined, as it preferred not to upset a militant neighbor because of Ukraine. In 2026, the OSCE instruments are now used against Georgia. Even this pattern shows how far the Georgian democracy and diplomacy have fallen in the last 15 years.

The Moscow Mechanism was [triggered](#) against Georgia in 2026 by a coalition of 23 participating states, predominantly EU members and like-minded partners. The formal rationale was related to the concerns over democratic backsliding, repression of opposition, and violations of fundamental freedoms.

The procedure followed the established script—an independent expert from Poland was appointed, hundreds of pages of evidence were collected, and a report was produced.

## The Importance

The [report](#) provided one of the most comprehensive international assessments of Georgia's political trajectory in recent years, effectively confirming what we have [called](#) on the pages of this journal, “five minutes from dictatorship.” Its central conclusion stated that since the spring of 2024, Georgia had experienced “marked democratic backsliding.” The report relied on a consistent body of evidence and presented, as Amnesty International [noted](#), a “damning” verdict on the Georgian Dream's political system as a whole. The report identified a pattern linking the treatment of protesters, opposition leaders, journalists, and civil society actors. The use of force by authorities was attested across different cases, with some incidents reaching the threshold of what was described as torture and inhuman treatment. These actions took place in an environment characterized by a lack of accountability, in which violations were not effectively investigated, and those responsible were not held to account, thus indicating the systemic nature of oppression.

The report documented the gradual restriction of fundamental freedoms scrupulously. It described how freedom of expression, assembly, and association had been limited through legislative changes, administrative measures, and criminal proceedings. Laws targeting civil society organizations, independent media, and marginalized groups were used to silence the opponents, while administrative penalties, including fines and detention, as well as criminal cases against government critics, contributed to an environment in which dissent was increasingly constrained and criminalized.

The report further examined attempts to ban key opposition parties and assessed them as devel-

opments that threatened meaningful political competition, characteristic of authoritarian systems. It described an atmosphere in which actors independent of the government faced hostility, shaped in part by rhetoric from officials and accompanied by acts of violence carried out by unidentified groups. The report once again confirmed the politicization of the judiciary. It raised concerns about fair trial standards, judicial independence, and the use of legal mechanisms against individuals engaged in dissent. The judiciary appeared within the report as an institution that no longer provided sufficient guarantees of impartiality, raising concerns about the availability of effective remedies for those affected by state actions.

The report's recommendations are probably the most problematic for the Georgian Dream. They addressed structural issues across multiple sectors. The report called for the immediate and unconditional release of individuals detained for political reasons, including opposition figures and journalists, and for the withdrawal of ongoing efforts to ban political parties. It recommended independent investigations into election irregularities and the implementation of the ODIHR recommendations following the 2024 parliamentary elections. It also called for inviting international observers to future elections.

The report recommended repealing several laws it considered incompatible with Georgia's international obligations. These included legislation on foreign agents and influence, restrictions on foreign funding for media and civil society, provisions affecting broadcast content, and laws affecting LGBTQ+ individuals. On issues related to human rights and the rule of law, it called for an end to the disproportionate use of force, independent investigations into allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and measures to ensure judicial independence and fair trial guarantees.

More importantly, the report also included a recommendation addressed to the international community, noting that states parties to the Rome Statute could consider referring the situation in Georgia to the International Criminal Court. This reflected the report's assessment that patterns of political persecution and inhumane acts had broader implications under international law.

## The Propaganda Response

That the Moscow Mechanism report did not pose serious imminent problems for the Georgian Dream is evident from the reactions to it. The propaganda machinery used the report to further demonize the West and argue that the Georgian Dream was a victim of baseless attacks from the “deep state”. One propaganda line of attack [argued](#) that the majority of OSCE member states opposed the invocation of the Moscow Mechanism. This false narrative ignored the fact that the Moscow Mechanism rules do not require approval by all participating states, nor does the OSCE Permanent Council need to approve the expert mission's final report.

Another propaganda line [argued](#) that the rapporteur on Georgia, Polish professor Patrycja Grzebyk, had a conflict of interest because she allegedly had ties to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that her work was unprofessional. The third line of attack was about the impartiality of the report, with propaganda arguing that the report was drafted by foreign-controlled Georgian NGOs and that the information provided to the rapporteur was biased. Former Ombudsman Ucha Nanuashvili was even [questioned](#) by the State Security Service.

In short, nothing new for those who have been following the propaganda and disinformation that the Georgian Dream has engaged in during the last few years, which we have [documented](#) on the pages of this journal on [several occasions](#).

## A Paper, or a Paper Knife?

The attempts by the Georgian Dream to portray the Moscow Mechanism report as a piece of paper with no value might actually prove true, unless those who instigated the mechanism develop a follow-up strategy.

***The history of the Moscow Mechanism shows that its real impact emerges only when its findings are operationalized.***

The history of the Moscow Mechanism shows that its real impact emerges only when its findings are operationalized. In the case of Belarus, the 2020 Moscow Mechanism report documented torture, electoral fraud, and systemic repression. These findings were subsequently referenced—sometimes [explicitly](#), more often implicitly—in EU [political declarations](#) and fed into the legal reasoning behind sanctions adopted under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The report did not trigger sanctions on its own, but it provided the evidentiary backbone that made them legally defensible.

A similar dynamic has been visible in the response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Moscow Mechanism reports documenting war crimes and deportations have been used alongside UN and NGO findings to support sanctions packages, justify listings, and inform international criminal proceedings. Again, the mechanism did not act alone, but it became part of a cumulative evidentiary structure.

Thus, the European Union institutions and Member States have repeatedly referred to OSCE Moscow Mechanism findings in official statements and diplomatic documents, which subsequently informed the legal and political justification for sanctions against Belarus and Russia.

***If the follow-up steps are designed to act upon the report, the Moscow Mechanism document can serve as a basis for targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for repression.***

For Georgia, this pathway remains open but unrealized. If the EU member states consider this report as *fait accompli*, after which nothing else can be done, then the report will remain a piece of paper. However, if the follow-up steps are designed to act upon the report, the Moscow Mechanism document can serve as a basis for targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for repression, under frameworks [grounded](#) in Article 29 TEU and Article 215 TFEU. Now that the Hungarian veto in the EU is gone, following Viktor Orbán's electoral loss, the EU can revert to discussing sanctions, using the OSCE Moscow Document as a reference. The report could also serve as a justification for coordinated restrictive measures within coalitions of like-minded states, even beyond formal EU action. And, more importantly, the Moscow Mechanism report can become a foundation for legal proceedings, including the use of universal jurisdiction by national prosecutors in countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, where serious human rights violations can be investigated extraterritorially.

***The Moscow Mechanism report can become a foundation for legal proceedings, including the use of universal jurisdiction by national prosecutors in countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, where serious human rights violations can be investigated extraterritorially.***

Without such steps, the report risks remaining what many OSCE outputs have become: a well-documented account of failure, rather than a catalyst

for change. How the next steps will be taken will also determine whether the invocation of the Moscow Mechanism was justifiable and whether the effort invested in it was worth it, and whether those member states that invoked it had clear objectives, or were just grasping the lowest hanging fruit, a non-EU-based, non-consensual mechanism, with limited influence.

If the mechanism's objective was to name and shame, the timing raises questions. By 2026, the Georgian Dream government had already crossed multiple red lines. Political opponents had been arrested. Plans to ban major opposition parties were underway. Freedom of expression and assembly had been systematically curtailed. Civil society space had been all but closed. In such a context, a reputational instrument like the Moscow Mechanism arrived late. It would not shame a government that has already embraced the costs of authoritarian consolidation.

***The Moscow Mechanism is not designed to impose costs. It produces findings, not consequences, and the venue, where these findings are discussed, is diplomatic, not legal. Without a follow-up strategy, it risks becoming an exercise in documentation rather than a tool of influence.***

If the objective was deterrence, the same problem applies. The Moscow Mechanism is not designed to impose costs. It produces findings, not consequences, and the venue, where these findings are discussed, is diplomatic, not legal. Without a follow-up strategy, it risks becoming an exercise in documentation rather than a tool of influence. Used earlier, at the onset of democratic backsliding in early 2025, when Georgians were actively protesting in the streets, and the Georgian Dream had not yet introduced even half of the draconian laws, it might have had a different effect, signaling international

resolve before the point of no return. Used now, it records what has already happened.

If the objective was merely to exert diplomatic pressure, the pathway remains unclear as well. Pressure requires leverage. The Moscow Mechanism, on its own, does not create it.

What can create pressure, however, is a clearly elaborated basket of sticks and carrots, along with a high-level pressure channel for discussing them with the Georgian Dream leadership. In such a basket, the Moscow Mechanism can become one of the levers, turning from a simple paper to a paper knife ■

# Iceland's EU Referendum: A Turning Point for Europe's Next Enlargement Wave?

In November 2024, a new coalition government composed of the Social Democratic Alliance, the Reform Party, and the People's Party came to power in Iceland. One of its key campaign promises was to hold a national referendum on whether the country should resume accession negotiations with the European Union. The coalition pledged that such a vote would take place no later than the end of 2027.

On March 6, 2026, the Icelandic government [approved](#) a parliamentary resolution formally scheduling the referendum. Icelanders will go to the polls on August 26, 2026, to decide whether their country should reopen negotiations on EU membership.

With four months remaining before the vote, Icelandic society appears deeply divided on the question

of Europe. A recent Gallup poll [shows](#) that voters are almost evenly split on whether to resume EU accession negotiations, with 52% in favor and 48% opposed, a gap well within the margin of error. This near parity is [mirrored](#) in broader attitudes toward membership itself: 47% oppose joining the European Union, 40% support it, and 13% remain undecided, with opposition rising to 54% when only those expressing a clear view are counted. Political divisions further reinforce this split, with overwhelming majorities of supporters of the Independence, Progressive, and Center parties opposing membership, while voters aligned with liberal and social democratic parties are largely in favor.

At first glance, this referendum concerns only Iceland's domestic political trajectory. Yet the implications extend far beyond the island state.



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The outcome could significantly influence the future direction of the EU enlargement policy, the geopolitical dynamics of Northern Europe, and the broader narrative surrounding the European Union's attractiveness.

Recent geopolitical developments have added an unexpected dimension to the debate. Statements by the U.S. President Donald Trump regarding the possibility of [asserting](#) control over Greenland, including suggestions that such control could be achieved through military means, have triggered renewed discussions about security in the Arctic region. Paradoxically, these developments have also strengthened arguments in favor of deeper European integration and revived debates about a potential "Northern enlargement" of the European Union.

The Icelandic referendum could therefore become a pivotal moment. A positive outcome might

demonstrate that renewed enlargement is feasible and politically viable. It could inject new momentum into a process that has largely stagnated since the EU's last enlargement in 2013. Furthermore, Iceland's accession could stimulate discussions about EU membership in neighboring countries, particularly Norway, and potentially reopen debates in Greenland about renewed cooperation with the European Union.

***The Icelandic referendum could therefore become a pivotal moment. A positive outcome might demonstrate that renewed enlargement is feasible and politically viable. It could inject new momentum into a process that has largely stagnated since the EU's last enlargement in 2013.***

Conversely, a negative outcome could reinforce skepticism toward enlargement across Europe. Opponents of European integration might use such a result to strengthen the narrative that EU membership undermines national sovereignty and that the Union's appeal is waning.

The stakes, therefore, extend far beyond Iceland itself.

## A Second Attempt at Membership

With a [population](#) of roughly 394,000 people, Iceland is one of Europe's smallest states. Yet despite its modest size, the country ranks among the world's most advanced democracies and most prosperous economies.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2025 Democracy [Index](#), Iceland ranks fourth globally, surpassed among EU countries only by Sweden. Economically, the country also performs exceptionally well. Iceland [has](#) a GDP per capita of approximately EUR 86,000, placing it behind only Luxembourg and Ireland in the broader European economic space.

Iceland is also an important supplier of key industrial materials. The country is a significant producer of low-carbon aluminum, benefiting from abundant geothermal and hydropower resources. Today, Iceland [accounts](#) for approximately 7.3% of the European Union's aluminum imports, making it the EU's fourth-largest supplier after Norway, China, and Türkiye.

Despite not being a member of the European Union, Iceland has long been deeply integrated into European structures. The country is part of the Schengen Area, is a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), and participates in numerous EU programs and agencies. As a result, much of Icelandic legislation is already aligned with EU law.

Iceland first applied for EU membership in 2009, following the country's dramatic financial crisis. The [collapse](#) of Iceland's three largest banks and the subsequent 50% depreciation of the national currency, the Krona, severely destabilized the economy. At the time, many Icelandic political leaders viewed EU membership as a potential anchor of institutional and financial stability.

Because Iceland had already complied with much of EU legislation through its EEA membership, accession negotiations progressed rapidly. Within just three years, Iceland [had opened](#) 27 negotiation chapters and provisionally closed 11 out of 35.

However, the momentum was short-lived. Following the 2013 parliamentary elections, a Eurosceptic center-right coalition led by the Independence Party and the Progressive Party came to power. The new government opposed the EU membership and formally [suspended](#) accession negotiations. In 2015, Iceland's foreign minister [sent](#) an official letter to Brussels requesting that Iceland no longer be considered an EU candidate country.

Several factors contributed to this decision. First, Iceland's economy [recovered](#) more quickly than expected from the financial crisis, reducing the perceived need for EU membership. Second, concerns about national sovereignty gained [prominence](#) in domestic political debates. Many Icelanders feared that joining the EU would require abandoning the national currency and transferring greater authority to European institutions.

Most importantly, concerns centered on control over [fisheries](#), one of Iceland's key industries.

## Fisheries: The Core Sovereignty Issue

Fishing is not merely another economic sector in Iceland; it is a central component of the country's national identity and economic structure.

The fishing industry [accounts](#) for approximately 12% of Iceland's GDP, employs around 5% of the workforce, and represents close to 40% of the total value of exported goods.

For centuries, access to marine resources has shaped Iceland's economic development, political priorities, and cultural traditions. Unsurprisingly, any policy perceived as limiting Iceland's control over its fishing grounds quickly becomes politically sensitive.

This is where the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy ([CFP](#)) becomes highly controversial.

***While the policy aims to ensure long-term environmental sustainability and fair distribution of fishing opportunities among EU members, it also requires states to share decision-making authority over their maritime resources.***

The CFP is designed to manage fish stocks collectively among EU member states. It establishes shared quotas, regulates access to fishing waters, and sets sustainability rules intended to prevent overfishing. While the policy aims to ensure long-term environmental sustainability and fair distribution of fishing opportunities among EU members, it also requires states to share decision-making authority over their maritime resources.

For many Icelanders, this raises fundamental questions of sovereignty.

Iceland currently [exercises](#) exclusive control over its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone, one of the richest fishing areas in the North Atlantic. Moreover, the standard of 200 nautical miles for the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is largely based on Iceland's unilateral practice, which led to the infamous "cod wars" with the UK. Under EU

membership, Iceland would need to negotiate how its fishing resources would be incorporated into the broader CFP framework. This could allow vessels from other EU countries to access Icelandic waters, subject to negotiated quotas and arrangements.

Critics argue that such an outcome could undermine Iceland's long-standing fisheries management system, which is widely regarded as one of the most efficient and sustainable in the world.

Supporters of EU membership, however, claim that these concerns may be overstated. They note that EU fisheries policy has evolved significantly in recent years and that special arrangements could be negotiated to protect Iceland's interests. Furthermore, Iceland's advanced fisheries management expertise could actually strengthen EU-wide sustainability policies. In any case, fisheries remain the single most politically sensitive issue in Iceland's EU debate. Any future accession negotiations would almost certainly hinge on finding a compromise acceptable to both Icelandic voters and EU member states.

## Changed Geopolitical Environment

The global environment that Iceland faces today differs significantly from the one that existed when accession negotiations were suspended in 2015.

The international system is increasingly characterized by intensifying geopolitical competition, shifting power balances, and growing uncertainty. For small states such as Iceland, navigating this environment requires careful consideration of both economic and security partnerships.

Although Iceland is a founding member of NATO, the country does not maintain a standing military. Instead, its defense relies heavily on alliances and bilateral agreements, particularly with the United States.

Recent [controversies](#) around Greenland and NATO have raised questions about the future reliability of these arrangements. Statements by Donald Trump questioning NATO's relevance and suggesting the possibility of a U.S. [withdrawal](#) from the alliance have unsettled many European partners. Even more controversial were remarks regarding Greenland. Trump suggested that the U.S. control of the territory could be necessary for national security, raising concerns across the Nordic region.

***Iceland, together with Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, responded by emphasizing that Arctic security must be based on respect for international law and the territorial integrity of Greenland within the Kingdom of Denmark.***

Iceland, together with Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, [responded](#) by emphasizing that Arctic security must be based on respect for international law and the territorial integrity of Greenland within the Kingdom of Denmark.

For many Icelandic policymakers, these developments have reinforced the importance of deeper cooperation with the European partners. EU membership is increasingly seen by some as a way to strengthen economic resilience and broaden the country's security partnerships.

Economic factors also play a role. Iceland has experienced rising inflation in recent years, [reaching](#) 5.4% in March 2026. Higher inflation has contributed to rising interest rates, reduced housing affordability, and increased living costs.

These economic pressures have revived debates about whether closer integration with European markets and institutions could provide greater long-term stability.

## Northern Enlargement Returns to the Agenda

The Icelandic referendum has also revived broader discussions about the future geography of EU enlargement.

The European Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package [suggested](#) that Montenegro could conclude accession negotiations by 2026 and Albania by 2027. EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos [expressed](#) optimism that Montenegro might join the Union by 2028, followed by Albania in 2029.

However, Iceland's potential return to the accession process could reshape this timeline.

Because Iceland already participates in the EEA and the Schengen area, its legal and regulatory systems are largely aligned with EU standards. Combined with strong democratic institutions and high income levels, this could enable Iceland to make progress in negotiations relatively quickly if talks resume.

In such a scenario, Iceland could advance more quickly than the current frontrunners among candidate countries.

This development would inevitably attract attention across Northern Europe.

Norway, which rejected EU membership in referenda in 1972 and 1994, might find itself as the only Nordic country outside the Union if Iceland were to join. Although political parties in Norway remain cautious about reopening the membership debate, public opinion appears to be evolving.

Recent [polls](#) suggest that 63% of Norwegians support holding another referendum, while support for EU membership itself increased from 23% in 2023 to 41% in 2025.

Greenland represents another important dimension of the debate. The self-governing territory withdrew from the European Economic Community in 1985, largely due to disputes over fisheries policy. However, renewed geopolitical competition in the Arctic and increasing interest from global powers have prompted discussions in Nuuk about strengthening ties with Europe.

***If Iceland were to negotiate favorable terms within the EU's fisheries framework successfully, this could serve as a precedent or model for Greenland should it ever consider returning to the European Union.***

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## **Enlargement, Competition, and the “Mini Big Bang” Scenario**

Iceland's accession could also have implications for enlargement in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Some analysts have suggested the possibility of a smaller enlargement wave – sometimes described as a “mini big bang.” Such a scenario could involve several countries joining the EU simultaneously from different geographical regions. For example, Iceland could be joined by Montenegro, Albania, and Moldova, whose combined population would be roughly 6 million.

Such an approach could revitalize the enlargement agenda while avoiding the political complexities of admitting larger or more geopolitically sensitive candidates, such as Ukraine. It would demonstrate that enlargement remains a merit-based process, rewarding countries that have successfully implemented reforms.

***Internal EU reforms remain a crucial factor. Germany and France have repeatedly emphasized that institutional reforms must accompany further enlargement to ensure the Union remains effective and capable of decision-making.***

At the same time, internal EU reforms remain a crucial factor. Germany and France have repeatedly emphasized that institutional reforms must accompany further enlargement to ensure the Union remains effective and capable of decision-making.

The European Commission is therefore expected to present proposals under the [initiative](#) “An EU Fit for Enlargement: Policy Reviews and Reforms.”

## **The Referendum and the Battle of Narratives**

Beyond institutional and geopolitical implications, the Icelandic referendum could also become a focal point in the broader information and narrative contest surrounding the European Union.

If Iceland were to join the EU alone, without other candidate countries progressing simultaneously, critics might portray this as evidence that the Union favors wealthy and economically advanced states while leaving poorer countries waiting indefinitely. Such narratives could feed into existing disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining EU credibility in candidate countries, particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Anti-EU actors could promote several key messages. One narrative might claim that the enlargement process is politically biased rather than merit-based, suggesting that wealthy countries receive preferential treatment while others remain permanently stuck in the waiting room.

Another argument could portray EU membership as incompatible with national sovereignty. Opponents might highlight Iceland's debates over fisheries policy or currency sovereignty as proof that joining the EU requires surrendering control over vital national interests.

Disinformation campaigns might also attempt to frame the EU as a declining project. By selectively highlighting internal disagreements or economic challenges, such narratives could suggest that even prosperous countries like Iceland remain uncertain about the benefits of membership.

Conversely, a negative referendum outcome could also be exploited.

***If Icelandic voters reject reopening accession negotiations, Eurosceptic actors across Europe might present the result as evidence that even one of Europe's most prosperous democracies sees little value in joining the Union.***

If Icelandic voters reject reopening accession negotiations, Eurosceptic actors across Europe might present the result as evidence that even one of Europe's most prosperous democracies sees little value in joining the Union.

Such messaging could reinforce "enlargement fatigue" within EU member states and weaken reform momentum in candidate countries.

In short, the referendum will not only be a political decision for Iceland but also a symbolic event within Europe's broader ideological debate about the future of integration.

## A Small Referendum with Large Consequences

The Icelandic referendum scheduled for 26 August 2026 may appear at first glance to be a domestic political decision within a small North Atlantic nation. Yet its implications could resonate far beyond Iceland's shores.

A positive vote could reopen accession negotiations and potentially place Iceland among the frontrunners in the EU enlargement process. Given the country's existing integration with European institutions and its high level of economic development, Iceland could advance rapidly through negotiations.

Such a development might inject new momentum into a policy area that has stagnated for more than a decade. It could also stimulate renewed debates about EU membership in neighboring countries such as Norway and encourage Greenland to reconsider its relationship with European institutions.

At the same time, Iceland's accession could reshape the political dynamics of enlargement by demonstrating that progress remains possible for countries that meet the necessary criteria.

However, the path forward would not be without challenges. Fisheries policy, monetary sovereignty, and domestic political divisions will continue to shape the debate. Negotiating a solution that satisfies both Icelandic voters and EU member states will require careful diplomacy and political compromise.

Equally important is the broader narrative dimension. The referendum will inevitably be interpreted and instrumentalized by different political actors across Europe and beyond. Whether the result is positive or negative, it will likely become a reference point in debates about the future of European integration.

***Iceland's referendum represents more than a policy choice about accession negotiations. It reflects deeper questions about Europe's geopolitical positioning, the resilience of the European project, and the credibility of the enlargement process itself.***

In this sense, Iceland's referendum represents more than a policy choice about accession negotiations. It reflects deeper questions about Europe's geopolitical positioning, the resilience of the European project, and the credibility of the enlargement process itself.

If enlargement is to remain one of the EU's most powerful tools for promoting stability, prosperity, and democratic governance across the continent, the outcome of the Icelandic vote will matter.

The decision made by fewer than 400,000 Icelanders could therefore influence not only their own country's trajectory but also the future shape of Europe's political and institutional landscape ■

# How to Run After Iran

**S**o far, the war in Iran and its consequences still pose many more questions than answers. While the guessing game has become a favorite activity for media, analysts, and online commentators, there is consensus that world politics will never be the same. In this cacophony of opinions and predictions, it's worth adding some extra questions or highlighting several not-so-obvious dimensions of the consequences of this war.

## Future of Shia Islam

Iran has long served as the political and ideological heart of Twelver Shia Islam, exporting its revolutionary model through the “Axis of Resistance,” involving Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and support for Assad’s regime in Syria. The 1979 Islamic Revolution fused Shia theology with governance under the Velayat-e faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), positioning Iran as a vanguard against perceived Sunni dominance and Western influence. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s [death](#) and the degradation of Iranian military capabilities, including ballistic missiles and proxy networks, represent a severe blow to this model.

***The war has accelerated a potential decline in Shia political ascendancy in the Middle East. Decades of gains, bolstered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and Iranian funding, now face reversal.***

The war has accelerated a potential decline in Shia political ascendancy in the Middle East. Decades of gains, bolstered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and Iranian funding, now face reversal. Hezbollah has suffered setbacks, Iraqi Shia factions are fragmented, and the “Shia Crescent” arc of influence appears fractured. Sunni Arab states, many of which quietly or overtly supported efforts to weaken Iran, may capitalize on this vacuum, intensifying sectarian rivalries. In Iraq, longstanding tensions between Shia communities and the central government could intensify without Iranian backing.

Religiously, the conflict challenges the fusion of Shia faith and state power. The Islamic Republic’s theocratic experiment, already strained by domestic protests and economic woes, risks being viewed



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as a historical failure if the regime collapses or becomes a weakened pariah. This could prompt a redefinition of global Shiism, shifting toward more decentralized, apolitical, or quietist interpretations favored by some clerics in Najaf or Qom. Twelver eschatology, which some Iranian hardliners tied to hastening the Mahdi's return through chaos and confrontation with "infidels," may lose appeal amid visible setbacks.

Iran's revolutionary model fused clerical authority with militia networks (Hezbollah, the IRGC's foreign proxies, and various Iraqi and Syrian militias). The war could decouple social-religious identity from militarized political practice in two possible directions. In one, trauma and sectarian targeting could entrench militias as community defenders, accelerating the local militarization of Shia politics and perpetuating cycles of violence. Conversely, prolonged conflict and international pressure could delegitimize armed non-state actors, catalyzing movements within Shia communities pushing for demilitarization, political pluralism, and reinvestment in social welfare and religious scholarship rather than armed outreach.

***War often generates theological reflection. The experience of violence, authoritarianism, and state failure might prompt internal critiques of clerical rule among Shia intellectuals and laity.***

War often generates theological reflection. The experience of violence, authoritarianism, and state failure might prompt internal critiques of clerical rule among Shia intellectuals and laity. Movements advocating separation of mosque and state, reinterpretations of religious authority, and rights-based discourses (women's rights, minority protections) could gain traction, particularly among younger, urban Shia populations exposed to global information flows. Alternatively, existential threats could

strengthen conservative, security-first interpretations of religion, emphasizing loyalty, sacrifice, and resistance.

However, Shia Islam as a faith is unlikely to disappear. Communities in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Pakistan, and the diaspora have independent vitality, with flourishing mosques and institutions even without Iranian subsidies. A weakened Iran might paradoxically foster resilience, encouraging Shia thinkers to separate religious identity from failed political projects. In the long term, the future could see a more pluralistic Shiism - less centralized around Tehran, more focused on cultural and spiritual dimensions - but with heightened Sunni-Shia fault lines in the short term, potentially fueling instability in multi-sectarian states.

## Future of Kurds

In the last couple of decades, the Kurdish ethnos worldwide has successfully managed to shift its victimhood narratives (oppressed by Turks, Iraqis, Iranians, and Syrians) to more hopeful, yet fragmented success stories. A window of opportunity opened with Iraqi Kurdistan, which not only survived Saddam's regime but became a significant player in post-Saddam Iraq. The war with ISIS further elevated the Kurdish role not only in Iraq but in Syria as well, and the recent collapse of Assad's regime opened different avenues for Syrian Kurds, even though under the watchful eye of Türkiye. It looks like Kurds may have yet another opening - this time in Iran.

Iran's Kurdish population, concentrated in the northwest and [estimated](#) at 8-10 million, has long faced marginalization under both the Shah and the Islamic Republic. The war has thrust Iranian Kurds into a pivotal, risky role. Kurdish opposition groups, including the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and others based partly in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, have coordinated politically and signaled

readiness for action, with some forces reportedly moving across borders. Speculation about U.S. or Israeli encouragement of a Kurdish uprising, framed as a “Kurdish card” to pressure Tehran, has circulated, though Washington has been [cautious](#) to avoid signaling full endorsement. Regionally, strengthened Iranian Kurds could inspire or link with Kurds in Iraq, Türkiye, and Syria, complicating those states’ policies.

Kurdish political movements are ideologically diverse, ranging from ethno-nationalist to leftist and Islamist factions. The war in Iran could drive diaspora mobilization, fundraising, and recruitment, but also deepen schisms among Kurdish groups pursuing divergent strategies (armed struggle vs. political negotiation). Transnational Kurdish networks might exploit state weakness to consolidate control over borderlands, but the risk of factional violence and fragmentation would be high. International actors may instrumentalize Kurdish actors for their own aims, but this could result in fleeting gains followed by punitive measures once interests diverge.

***The war highlights Kurds’ perennial role as both victims and potential kingmakers in Middle Eastern power struggles.***

While durable Kurdish statehood remains unlikely without major shifts in the strategic calculations of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and decisive international support, the war highlights Kurds’ perennial role as both victims and potential kingmakers in Middle Eastern power struggles. Their future hinges on the conflict’s endgame: a weakened central authority might grant concessions to prevent disintegration, while regime survival could mean intensified repression. Either way, Kurdish aspirations for self-determination are likely to gain visibility, though at the cost of heightened volatility.

## **Future of the Abraham Accords – An Abrahamic Alliance?**

The [Abraham Accords](#), signed in 2020 under the first Trump administration, normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan), driven by shared concerns over Iran, economic opportunities, and U.S. incentives. The 2026 war, by severely degrading Iran’s conventional and proxy threats, has the potential to accelerate the expansion of these accords rather than undermine them. A weakened Iran reduces the primary security rationale for Arab hesitation toward Israel, particularly for Saudi Arabia, whose normalization talks were previously stalled.

Gulf states have already cooperated tacitly or actively in defending against Iranian missiles and drones, fostering de facto security ties with Israel. The conflict’s demonstration of Israeli (and the U.S.) military effectiveness against a common foe could forge deeper integration, evolving the Accords from bilateral normalizations into a broader regional security and economic architecture - an “Abrahamic Alliance” against residual threats. Economic diversification away from oil, tech cooperation, and tourism could flourish in a lower-threat environment.

***Yet, the strategic logic favors consolidation: Arab states see value in aligning with a strong Israel and U.S. patronage when Iran is diminished.***

Challenges remain, though. Public opinion in Arab streets, inflamed by images of destruction in Iran and civilian casualties, could complicate formal Saudi or other expansions. Palestinian issues, sidelined in the original Accords, might resurface if the war’s fallout includes renewed focus on Gaza or Lebanon. Israeli domestic politics, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s position, also factor in. Yet, the strategic logic favors consolidation:

Arab states see value in aligning with a strong Israel and U.S. patronage when Iran is diminished.

In the longer term, a post-war Middle East with a chastened Iran could see the Accords as the foundation for a new order—less ideological, more pragmatic, and prosperity-oriented. If regime change or fundamental reform occurs in Tehran, even limited Iranian reintegration might be possible, though unlikely in the near term. The war may thus “forge the next Abraham Accords” through necessity and shared victory, expanding normalization under fire.

## Rethinking Alliances

The conflicts with Iran, spanning the 2024 direct exchanges, the June 2025 [Twelve-Day War](#), and the February–March 2026 U.S.-Israeli Operation [Epic Fury](#) (and related operations), have forced a profound rethinking of alliances across the Middle East and globally. These engagements highlighted the strengths of integrated, like-minded coalitions in delivering air and missile defense, precision strikes, and intelligence sharing, while exposing the fragility of authoritarian “axes,” the risks of entanglement for great powers, and the limits of hedging strategies for smaller states.

***The wars validated the value of interoperable, multi-domain partnerships. The most striking lesson was the operational success of U.S.-Israeli coordination, augmented by contributions from the UK, France, Jordan, and others. Joint interception of Iranian missile and drone salvos reached high success rates through shared early warning, layered defenses, and fighter intercepts.***

From a military and strategic perspective, the wars validated the value of interoperable, multi-do-

main partnerships. The most striking lesson was the operational success of U.S.-Israeli coordination, [augmented](#) by contributions from the UK, France, Jordan, and others. Joint interception of Iranian missile and drone salvos reached high success rates through shared early warning, layered defenses, and fighter intercepts. This went beyond ad hoc cooperation into something approaching structural integration: real-time intelligence fusion, synchronized strikes on Iranian air defenses and nuclear/missile sites, and burden-sharing in sustainment. Israel’s ability to conduct deep strikes despite distance, combined with U.S. bunker-busters and naval support, degraded Iranian capabilities significantly. Gulf states (even if publicly cautious) hosted U.S. assets and benefited from defensive coverage, turning informal partnerships into a functional “operating system” during a crisis. This model of shared threat assessment plus interoperability proved far more effective than Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” whose proxies ( Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis) were largely degraded or sidelined earlier, offering little meaningful relief or assistance to Tehran.

Meanwhile, Iran’s partnerships with Russia delivered rhetorical support, dual-use components, satellite imagery, drone technology tweaks, and some intelligence, but no direct military intervention. Russian S-300 missile systems underperformed or were neutralized; Chinese-enabled missiles and navigation helped volume, but not a decisive effect. Moscow and Beijing [condemned](#) U.S./Israeli actions but prioritized their own interests. This “alliance” proved transactional, but limited and dysfunctional. Iran faced relative isolation on the battlefield, with external backers providing sustainment support rather than serious, decisive military or financial aid. The wars underscored that authoritarian alignments often prioritize self-preservation over collective defense, especially when escalation risks high costs (e.g., Chinese economic ties to Gulf states or Russian resource constraints).

***This situation will surely prompt significant rethinking within NATO, but it is less likely to lead to NATO's disappearance.***

At the same time, the war in Iran found NATO in a classical “out of area crisis,” and a number of European members [showed](#) limited enthusiasm for direct involvement in “not our war,” with some allies (e.g., Spain) restricting base access and others focusing on defensive measures (intercepts over Türkiye, naval escorts for Strait of Hormuz). This situation will surely prompt significant rethinking within NATO, but it is less likely to lead to NATO's disappearance.

Future high-end warfare will likely reward the alliances built on trust, compatible systems, joint exercises, and political will for mutual defense. Loose coalitions of democracies (or democratic-leaning partners) can achieve effects that authoritarian groupings struggle to match due to mismatched incentives and lower interoperability.

## **Strait of Hormuz and the South Caucasus – a Chance for the Region**

Hormuz closure has given the South Caucasus a geostrategic edge, making it an important energy and logistics hub amid global supply shocks. The Middle Corridor and Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity ([TRIPP](#)) have moved from aspirational to near-essential, reshaping Eurasian connectivity away from vulnerable southern routes. Long-term success depends on infrastructure investment, conflict de-escalation, and balanced diplomacy to mitigate new dependencies in an already volatile region. The episode reinforces that in an era of contested chokepoints, diversified overland networks through stable transit zones like the South Caucasus offer strategic insurance for global trade and energy security.

The Strait of Hormuz closure has transformed the Middle Corridor from a niche alternative (previously overshadowed by Russian Northern or Iranian Southern routes) into a strategic imperative. Disruptions to Iranian airspace, ports, and the International North-South Transport Corridor have funneled aviation, freight, and energy flows through Azerbaijan and Georgia.

It is truly a massive operational momentum: logistics operators report surging interest in the Trans-Caspian route for China-Europe trade, with Central Asian goods moving via Caspian ferries and ports into the South Caucasus.

Airlines avoiding Iranian and Russian airspace have [increased](#) east-west flights over Azerbaijani and Georgian territory, boosting overflight revenues and highlighting the region's role as a narrow but vital air bridge.

***TRIPP—the U.S.-managed corridor through southern Armenia—and other Middle Corridor projects gain urgency. It could plug gaps in the Middle Corridor, enabling smoother flows between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye while bypassing Iranian routes.***

TRIPP—the U.S.-managed corridor through southern Armenia—and other Middle Corridor projects gain urgency. It could plug gaps in the Middle Corridor, enabling smoother flows between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye while bypassing Iranian routes. Progress on TRIPP, including Azerbaijani fuel shipments to Armenia and eased transit rules, has been facilitated by the crisis.

Against this background, it looks like the Georgian regime continues to “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” The [halted](#) Port of

Anaklia project was supposed to gain momentum, but so far, concrete progress remains elusive due to ongoing anti-Western rhetoric and the substitution of Western investors with Chinese ones. The recent rerouting of air traffic “due to interference with scientific studies” [runs](#) counter to national interests. While Ukraine is being [rediscovered](#) by the Gulf countries as a security provider and bilateral contracts measure in billions of dollars, the Georgian regime remains not only anti-Western but also

anti-Ukrainian. Georgian ports are still allegedly used for the transportation of sanctioned Russian goods, instead of developing more strategic ties with Central Asian countries.

Unlike the Georgian spotted trout, which swims against the stream to reach spawning grounds or lay eggs, it looks like the Georgian regime is swimming against the stream and putting its eggs in the wrong basket, again ■

# 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.



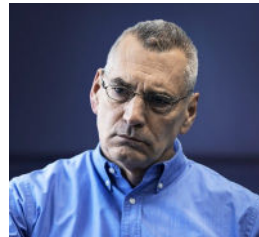
## Zaur Shiriyev

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.



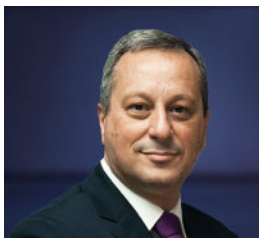
## Mitat Çelikpala

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.



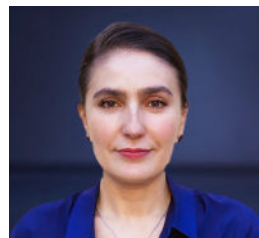
## Richard Giragosian

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.



## 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.



## Teona Giuashvili

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Denis Cenusă 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.



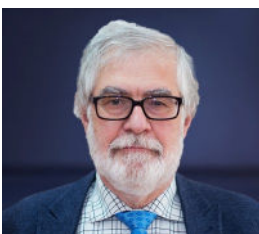
## Volodymyr Yermolenko

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.



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## Hugues Mingarelli

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### 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.



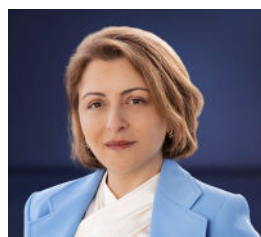
### Tamara Kovziridze

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.



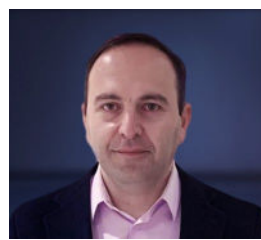
### Eka Tkeshelashvili

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.



### 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.



### Arsen Kharatyan

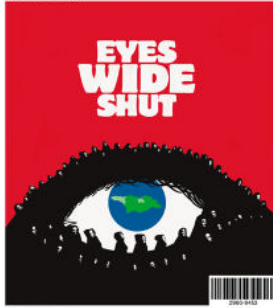
Arsen Kharatyan is the founder and editor-in-chief of Aliq Media. He advised Armenia's Prime Minister on foreign policy after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, worked at Voice of America and GIZ, and holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic, with studies in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason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

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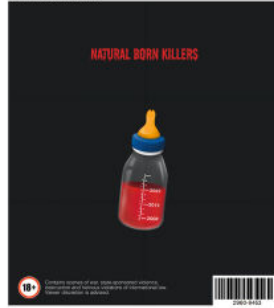
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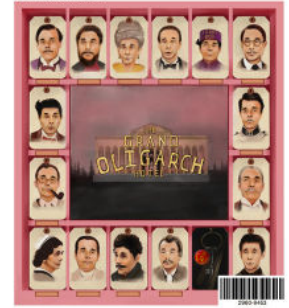
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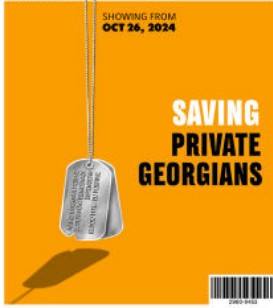
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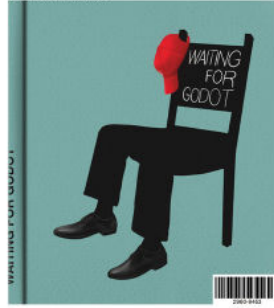
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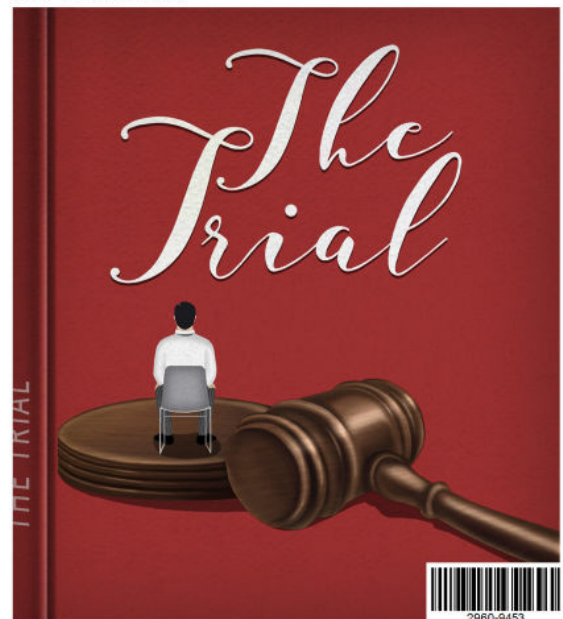
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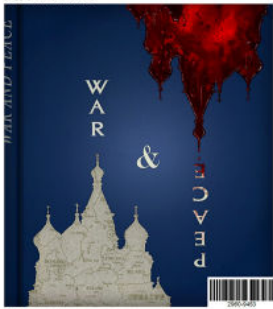


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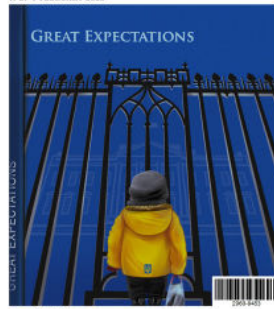
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