

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

There 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 ■