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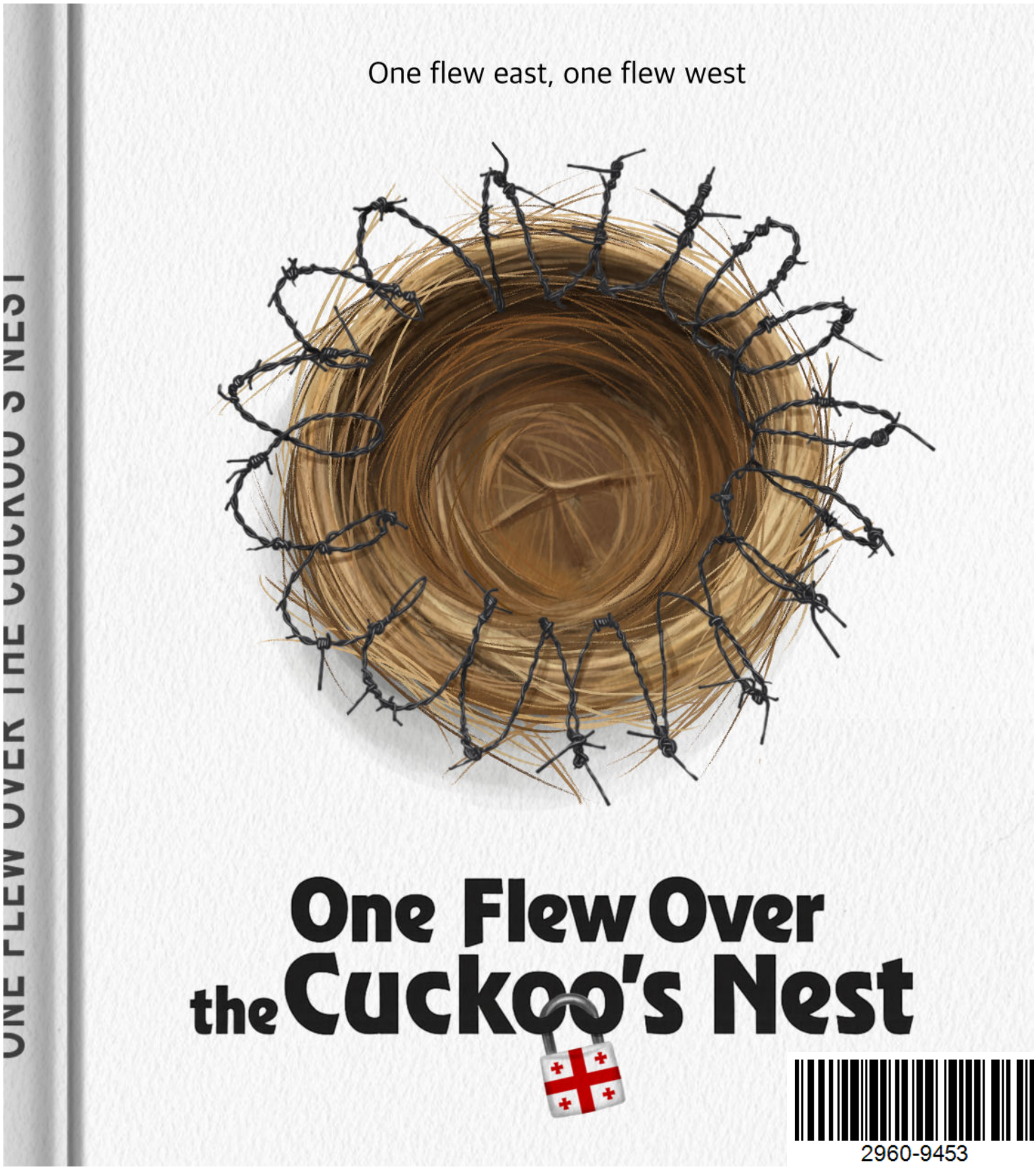

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Our Mission

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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.

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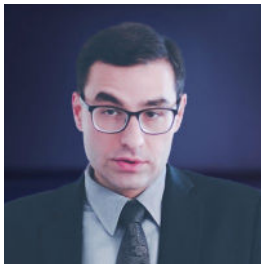

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Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading 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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While Neighbors Fly East and West, Georgia Turns Into a Cuckoo's Nest

May 2026 produced an unusual image of the South Caucasus. Plane after plane carrying presidents, prime ministers, and diplomats landed in Yerevan, Armenia, for the European Political Community Summit and a series of related meetings. On its own, this would have been routine diplomatic choreography. Yet for Georgia, the symbolism was painful and hard to ignore, as aircraft crossed Georgian airspace only to land elsewhere, repeating the trajectory of political attention, economic expectations, and diplomatic gravity – away from Georgia and on Armenia. The cover of this issue borrows from Ken Kesey's seminal *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with the metaphor capturing geography, but more importantly, the movement and vector: who is being visited, who is being connected, who is becoming central, who is flying West, and who is increasingly at risk of being flown over. The bedlam taking place in Georgia in recent years leaves the once-regional-leader state focused on domestic issues, increasing authoritarianism, and disenfranchising its citizens.

The uncomfortable reality is that countries rarely become isolated overnight. They are gradually bypassed with investments, high-level meetings, diplomatic and political energy, and transport routes moving and concentrating elsewhere. For nearly two decades, Georgia occupied a unique place in regional imagination as a democratic outlier, a reformer, and a strategic bridge between Europe and its neighborhood. Today, however, the region around Georgia is moving rapidly. Armenia is experimenting with new geopolitical openings, embracing a historically important June parliamentary election; Europe is increasingly speaking the language of interests rather than values; and the South Caucasus itself is being reorganized around new calculations of connectivity, security, power, and peace. The issue is therefore not whether others are moving, but whether Georgia itself risks becoming increasingly stationary and immovable while the region's political traffic slowly changes direction.

Sergi Kapanadze opens this issue of *GEOpolitics* by arguing that Georgia's democratic crisis is about the disenfranchisement of political citizenship. While previous election-related concerns centered on unequal competition, misuse of administrative resources, and procedural irregularities, the article demonstrates that Georgian Dream has increasingly shifted from influencing outcomes to reshaping the political field altogether by narrowing who may vote, who may run, who may organize, and who may meaningfully participate in public life. Through legal restrictions targeting civil society professionals, the practical elimination of voting opportunities for the diaspora, pressure on opposition parties, criminal proceedings against political leaders, and the growing costs associated with protest and civic activity, political participation itself is increasingly conditional rather than universal. The result is not just an uneven playing field, to use Western political lingua, but a tilted field whose boundaries are increasingly determined by those already in power.

Shota Gvineria follows by turning from the mechanics of disenfranchisement to the question that now

confronts Georgia's democratic forces: how illiberal regimes actually end. Drawing lessons from Moldova's oligarchic Plahotniuc system and Hungary's Orbán regime, he argues that authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems rarely collapse simply because they become corrupt, unpopular, or subject to external criticism; they fall when internal vulnerabilities, credible opposition leadership, and coordinated external pressure converge at the decisive moment. The Moldovan case shows the fragility of a purely transactional system once international legitimacy is withdrawn from all sides, while the Hungarian case demonstrates that even an ideologically entrenched regime can be defeated when an opposition figure breaks through to the electorate on material concerns, through regional outreach, and by leveraging insider credibility. Applying these lessons to Georgia, the article stresses that Ivanishvili's system combines elements of both models but is more consolidated, more repressive, and more institutionally captured than either precedent. This makes fragmentation among democratic forces especially costly. The article concludes that Georgia's opposition needs not only moral clarity and pro-European values, but a unifying figure, a message that reaches beyond Tbilisi, a material argument about people's lives, and Western partners willing to isolate the regime rather than normalize it.

Jaba Devdariani then shifts the lens from Georgia's domestic opposition dilemma to the European Union's own crisis of leverage, asking why the EU so often finances, manages, and normalizes the very illiberal systems it claims to transform. Starting from the public disagreement inside the European Commission over Serbia's Growth Plan disbursements, Devdariani dissects the structural weakness of enlargement policy: a machinery built around money, absorption capacity, bureaucratic reform, and procedural compliance, but often unable to respond politically when candidate governments hollow out democracy while still speaking the language of Europe. Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić becomes the central case of this malfunction — a regime that has used EU-generated credibility and financing to consolidate patronage, attract unconditional non-democratic investment, and reduce Brussels' leverage over time. The article argues that Georgia's rulers are watching this model closely, hoping that selective gestures, prisoner releases, or cosmetic legal pauses may eventually allow the Georgian Dream to return from isolation into a Serbia-style transactional relationship with the EU. Yet Devdariani warns that the comparison also exposes Georgia's weakness: unlike Serbia, Georgia has little strategic value to offer Brussels in exchange for political indulgence.

Thornike Gordadze brings the issue's central metaphor into sharp regional focus by examining Armenia as the country over which others no longer simply fly, but to which they increasingly fly. His article reads Armenia's June 2026 elections as a struggle over the country's strategic soul: whether it continues the difficult course of normalization with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, diversification away from Russia, and gradual opening toward Europe, or retreats into the familiar security mythology of Moscow-centered dependence. Gordadze portrays Nikol Pashinyan as an unusual post-Soviet leader — theatrical, chaotic, physically present among voters, and willing to challenge some of the deepest pillars of Armenian national ideology, from Karabakh-centered identity to Russia as guarantor. Yet the article is not romantic: it shows that Pashinyan's advantage rests not only on vision but also on administrative resources, material improvements, the political value of peace, and the visible validation provided by European and American engagement, especially the May high-levels in Yerevan. At the same time, Armenia remains fragile, divided, fatigued, and exposed to Russian interference, oligarchic opposition, nationalist backlash, and the hard compromises that will follow any election victory.

Vano Chkhikvadze continues the Armenian thread by examining visa liberalization as a test of Armenia's state capacity, reform momentum, and geopolitical

realignment. He shows how the Visa Liberalization Action Plan handed to Yerevan in November 2025 has opened a realistic path toward visa-free travel to the EU and Schengen Area, but only if Armenia can meet demanding benchmarks on document security, border management, migration and asylum, public order, fundamental rights, and data protection. The article stresses that Brussels will judge Armenia not only by legislative adoption, but by implementation, migration indicators, asylum patterns, organized crime risks, and the country's ability to assume sovereign control over its own borders, including the gradual reduction of Russian border-guard involvement. Chkhikvadze also highlights the domestic political sensitivity of reforms on anti-discrimination, domestic violence, refugee integration, and visa-policy alignment with the EU, all of which will test Armenia's post-election leadership.

Temuri Yakobashvili closes the issue by broadening the conversation beyond elections and geopolitics into a domain that is increasingly shaping both: artificial intelligence as the new architecture of power. He argues that while governments have always sought control, AI dramatically expands the scale, speed, and sophistication through which that objective can be pursued. From China's surveillance ecosystem and Russia's AI-enabled information warfare to predictive policing and biometric systems in democratic states, Yakobashvili traces how artificial intelligence is transforming surveillance, censorship, political manipulation, and state authority worldwide. Yet the article's most immediate concern lies closer to home. Georgia is increasingly exhibiting many of the early symptoms of this trend through expanding surveillance infrastructure, facial recognition technologies, social media monitoring, and the potential fusion of data systems in a political environment where institutional safeguards are weakening. The danger, he argues, is not simply that citizens may be watched after taking political action, but that future technologies may allow governments to anticipate, deter, and suppress political behavior before it fully emerges.

The bottom line of this issue is that Georgia's problem today is larger than democratic backsliding or regional competition taken separately. Political systems that increasingly close themselves internally often become less relevant externally as well. While neighbors open new routes, diversify partnerships, attract diplomatic attention, and reposition themselves to embrace new opportunities, Georgia risks directing more energy toward narrowing political space than expanding strategic opportunities. Geography does not change, but political gravity does. Countries seldom disappear from maps, yet they can often disappear from calculations, routes, and attention. And by the time a state realizes that the traffic around it has begun moving elsewhere and they have become a "cuckoo's nest" to be flown over, it is often too late ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

Content

Georgia Disenfranchised

On May 21, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's Monitoring Committee warned that the conditions for holding genuinely democratic elections do not currently exist in Georgia. This was not the first critical assessment of Georgia's democratic trajectory, nor was it the first warning about deteriorating political conditions. For years, observers raised concerns about the use of administrative resources, pressure on opposition parties, selective justice, voter intimidation, media imbalance, and weaknesses in electoral administration. Recently published OSCE/ODIHR's Moscow Mechanism Report on Georgia had similar findings, with a set of dozens of recommendations on how to backtrack Georgia's authoritarian turn. Those concerns remain valid and will affect Georgia's political landscape for the next few months and years. Yet focusing only on these familiar problems increasingly risks missing the scale of what has taken place over the last two years.

The nature of the problem has changed. Previous elections in Georgia were primarily associated with the manipulation of electoral outcomes. In 2020, debates centered on voter carousels and alleged irregularities in vote counting. In 2024, the focus shifted toward violations of vote secrecy, extensive use of state institutions for electoral mobilization, and allegations regarding the use of migrant identities and passports. Those practices represented serious distortions of democratic competition. However, they still operated within an assumption that the core architecture of political participation remained intact. The expectation was that elections were fundamentally competitive but were being unfairly managed.

That assumption is no longer sustainable.

The current million-dollar question is whether elections continue to preserve their democratic meaning. Elections derive legitimacy not merely from the existence of ballot boxes or formal procedures. Their legitimacy rests on an underlying principle that political participation remains open and accessible. Citizens must have a realistic possibility to vote, to organize, to compete, to criticize, and to seek public office.

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> ***Rather than simply seeking advantages within democratic competition, the Georgian Dream government has gradually acquired greater influence over determining who may participate in politics altogether.***

Recent developments illustrate that Georgian Dream (GD) has increasingly moved beyond influencing electoral outcomes toward reshaping the electorate and the political field itself. Rather than simply seeking advantages within democratic competition, the Georgian Dream government has gradually acquired greater influence over determining who may participate in politics altogether. Political rights are now conditional rather than universal. Certain categories of citizens face growing barriers to entering politics, voting in practice, organizing collectively, financing political activities, or remaining politically active without legal consequences.

This transformation has affected both dimensions of democratic representation. On one side stand citizens as voters. On the other side stand citizens as candidates, political leaders, and representatives. Both sides are being disenfranchised. Citizens living abroad have been stripped of their voting rights. Civil society professionals and reform-oriented experts face legal barriers to parliamentary participation. Political parties face potential elimination through constitutional procedures. Opposition leaders increasingly operate under conditions of permanent legal pressure and the shadow of jail. Public protest has become associated with growing financial and personal risks. Civic activism increasingly risks being interpreted as political activity requiring state scrutiny and regulation.

Elections remain critically important for Georgia. No sustainable political change can occur without them. Georgia's next government will ultimately derive its legitimacy from a public mandate rather than from permanent protest movements, external intervention, informal political arrangements, or even revolution. The international community, Georgian political actors, and society at large increasingly face a difficult reality that requires recognition. The problems that defined previous elections are no longer sufficient for understanding the current moment.

Georgia is no longer confronting only an uneven playing field. Increasingly, it is confronting a situation where the field itself has been tilted heavily in favor of one side.

Hidden Electoral and the Narrowing of Political Citizenship

One of the most significant developments behind Georgia's democratic deterioration has received relatively little public attention because it does not look like a traditional restriction of political rights. There were no constitutional amendments explicitly prohibiting certain citizens from seeking office. No law explicitly declared that specific social groups cannot become members of parliament. Instead, a more sophisticated mechanism emerged, one that formally preserves rights while quietly removing the practical means through which those rights can be exercised.

A detailed legal analysis prepared by Tamar Ketsbaia for Gnomon Wise describes this process as the creation of "hidden electoral qualifications." Recent legislative amendments fundamentally altered Georgian citizens' access to political parties, which are the only vehicle for political change in a proportional electoral system. The new Election Code, adopted in late 2025, prohibits political parties from placing non-party members on electoral lists. This change already reduces opportunities for independent experts, civic leaders, academics, or public figures to enter politics through party structures without formal party membership. The significance of this amendment is more evident when combined with another legislative change.

In March 2026, amendments to the Law on Political Unions prohibited individuals who had received income through employment contracts from organizations classified as entities carrying "foreign interests" from becoming party members for eight years after receiving such income. The cumulative effect of these two measures creates a restriction that avoids openly prohibiting parliamentary participation while, in practice, producing exactly that outcome. A citizen employed by a civil society organization, watchdog institution, donor-funded policy initiative, independent media outlet, election monitoring organization, or advocacy group may now face restrictions on their ability to join political parties. Since parliamentary participation is entirely dependent on party lists and party membership, access to parliament itself becomes effectively closed.

The significance of these laws lies not only in their legal construction but also in the social groups they affect. These restrictions do not target individuals convicted of anti-constitutional crimes or acts that threaten the democratic order. They apply to people whose professional biographies include work with organizations engaged in democratic reforms, governance projects, anti-corruption efforts, public policy analysis, media activities, or civil society initiatives. In many democratic systems, such experience would be regarded as valuable preparation for public service. In Georgia's evolving authoritarian legal framework, it increasingly becomes a basis for political persecution.

Political Quarantine and the Logic of Permanent Suspicion

The eight-year restriction itself creates an additional set of problems that extend beyond electoral access and move into broader constitutional territory. Georgian Dream justified the measure as a necessary "cooling-off period," arguing that financial relationships with organizations designated as carrying foreign interests pose risks of political influence that require time to disappear, and thus the "revolving door" principle, which many democracies take pride in, should be outlawed in Georgia.

Traditional cooling-off mechanisms are based on identifiable risks. A former regulator may be prevented from immediately joining industries that he or she previously supervised because of concerns involving insider information, institutional influence, or conflicts of interest. The restriction is linked to a specific function and a specific risk. It aims to prevent concrete abuses rather than hypothetical future loyalties.

The Georgian version rests on a much broader assumption. It effectively presumes that lawful employment itself creates political contamination. Receiving a salary from an organization receiving foreign funding becomes treated as sufficient evidence of possible political influence, regardless of the nature of the work performed, the amount received, the person's role within the organization, or any demonstrated conduct against Georgian interests.

The practical implications are almost impossible to reconcile with constitutional logic. Technical employees, researchers, translators, project coordinators, accountants, or support staff can all be subject to the same restrictions regardless of their actual activities. The law leaves little room for individual assessment. Political risk is therefore attached not to actions but to professional biographies, which is unconstitutional. In the country where the Constitutional Court is controlled by an oligarch, nothing can be done about it.

This unconstitutional tool, in the hands of the Georgian Dream, is further sharpened through the principle of retroactivity. Prior to the introduction of legislation regulating organizations allegedly pursuing foreign interests, individuals working for NGOs, media institutions, or policy organizations had no reason to expect that lawful employment relationships might later become grounds for

political exclusion. If prior legal employment now has new political consequences, the state effectively imposes penalties for conduct that carried no such consequences at the time it occurred.

> ***Georgia's modern reform-oriented professional class, which has largely developed through civil society institutions, donor-supported programs, policy organizations, governance initiatives, independent media, and democratic advocacy projects, is fully disenfranchised of its political rights.***

The broader consequence of this law is that Georgia's modern reform-oriented professional class, which has largely developed through civil society institutions, donor-supported programs, think tanks, policy organizations, governance initiatives, independent media, and democratic advocacy projects, is fully disenfranchised of its political rights. By creating legal disincentives to engaging in these sectors, Georgian Dream narrowed the pool of future political actors capable of entering public life. This is, in turn, exploited by government propaganda, which dubs all opposition actors as "old faces" and "remnants of the UNM regime."

Removing Voters Without Removing Voting Rights

The narrowing of political participation does not affect only citizens seeking office. The same logic increasingly appears on the other side of democratic representation, among citizens acting as voters themselves. Recent legal changes affecting Georgian citizens abroad have made it practically impossible for them to exercise their electoral rights.

> ***Rights that require significant financial means and logistical capacity are no longer universally accessible rights.***

In December 2025, Georgian Dream adopted a new Election Code under which polling stations for parliamentary elections would be opened only inside Georgia. Georgian citizens residing abroad formally retained their constitutional right to vote, but could exercise it only by physically returning to Georgia on election day. Requiring hundreds of thousands of emigrants scattered across Europe, North America, and elsewhere to purchase flights, take leave from work, arrange documentation, and return to Georgia for a single day of voting effectively transforms participation into a resource-dependent privilege. Rights that require significant financial means and logistical capacity are no longer universally accessible rights.

During the 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream reportedly received only around 13% of votes cast abroad, compared with approximately 54% in the official nationwide result. The Georgian diaspora has consistently exhibited political preferences that differ significantly from domestic patterns and has generally shown stronger support for opposition parties and European integration policies. Against this background, the elimination of practical voting opportunities abroad is nothing but a targeted restructuring of the electorate for the next national elections.

The measure also carries a deeper political message. Georgia's migrant population occupies a unique position within the country's economic and social landscape. For years, remittances sent from abroad have supported thousands of households and represented an important component of economic stability. Citizens who left Georgia because of unemployment, economic insecurity, or limited opportunities remained connected to the country financially and socially. They contributed economically while maintaining political interests in Georgia's future. Yet the current approach suggests a distinction between economic usefulness and political legitimacy – a phenomenon that we have explored on these pages before.

Eliminating Political Alternatives Through Constitutional Mechanisms

Restrictions on passive electoral rights and the practical narrowing of voting rights abroad affect individual citizens. However, a parallel process targeting political organizations is just as, if not more, concerning. In October 2025, Georgian Dream initiated a constitutional lawsuit seeking to prohibit the United National Movement, the Coalition for Change, and Lelo–Strong Georgia. Following the formation of a broad Opposition Alliance comprising seven political parties, Georgian Dream announced that it had added the Federalists to the list of to-be-banned parties.

The GD representatives justify this move by invoking the concept of "defensive democracy," arguing that these parties pose threats to the constitutional order and democratic institutions. Indeed, democratic systems do recognize this concept; in European constitutional traditions, political party bans are primarily intended to prevent political actors from using democratic institutions to destroy democracy itself. Political parties advocating violence, undermining constitutional order, promoting war, or actively seeking to dismantle democratic institutions may become subject to prohibition procedures. The threshold, however, has traditionally been intentionally high because banning political parties directly interferes with pluralism and political representation. In the Georgian Dream's case, the threshold (and a very low one) was set by an unconstitutional Parliamentary Commission, which this journal has written about in detail.

The implications of a possible party ban are substantial because the parties targeted in these proceedings are not marginal organizations operating at the fringes of political life, as is often the case in other European countries. According to the official 2024 election results, the parties affected by the looming prohibition collectively accounted for a significant share of Georgian voters and parliamentary seats. Eliminating them would therefore not merely affect party structures. It would directly affect hundreds of thousands of citizens whose political preferences would lose organized representation.

The Rising Cost of Political Leadership

The narrowing of electoral rights and political alternatives has been accompanied by another development that is increasingly reshaping Georgia's political landscape: the growing personal risks associated with political leadership itself. Democratic systems assume that political competition involves reputational costs, electoral losses, and public scrutiny. In normal circumstances, opposition leaders challenge governments, and governments challenge opposition leaders. Yet democratic competition begins to change character once legal pressure, criminal prosecution, and imprisonment become recurring features of political participation. And this has now become a typical trait of Georgian politics.

The most internationally visible case remains that of Mikheil Saakashvili, founder of United National Movement (UNM) and the 3rd President of Georgia. Already serving sentences linked to earlier convictions involving abuse of office, illegal border crossing, and embezzlement allegations, Saakashvili last year faced additional proceedings involving accusations of attempting to undermine constitutional order and broader charges connected to alleged destabilization efforts. Regardless of public attitudes toward Saakashvili himself, his case is only one element of a much wider pattern. A Chairman of the UNM's political council, Levan Khabeishvili, was arrested following public calls for mobilization around the October 4, 2025, demonstrations and after promising financial compensation to police officers or special task personnel who refused illegal orders or disclosed information. Authorities used these statements to charge him with bribery and later linked them to broader allegations involving sabotage and anti-state activity. On May 21, 2026,

Khabeishvili received a prison sentence of two years and six months.

Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy the Builder was sentenced to prison after refusing to testify before the parliamentary investigative commission established by Georgian Dream. Later, he became one of several opposition figures facing broader accusations involving sabotage and assistance to foreign actors. Nika Gvaramia, Zurab Japaridze, and Nika Melia, three leaders of the Coalition for Change, also received prison sentences for refusing to cooperate with the same commission and subsequently became associated with additional proceedings for sabotage against the state. Nika Melia's prison stay was then extended because of alleged contempt of court. Helen Khoshtaria, also from the Coalition for Change was imprisoned and sentenced for damaging the ruling party's campaign materials.

Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze of Lelo-Strong Georgia also received prison sentences and temporary prohibitions on holding public office following similar refusals to participate in commission proceedings. They were sentenced in 2022, as well, though not jailed.

> ***Citizens considering political careers increasingly confront a landscape in which political leadership may entail not only electoral risks but also legal issues, repeated summons, financial penalties, detention, asset restrictions, or criminal proceedings that extend over several years.***

Again, the significance lies less in individual legal cases than in the overall political environment these cases collectively create. Citizens considering political careers increasingly confront a landscape in which political leadership may entail not only electoral risks but also legal issues, repeated summons, financial penalties, detention, asset restrictions, or criminal proceedings that extend over several years.

As is known, political systems shape behavior through incentives. If entering politics becomes associated with increasing legal vulnerability, the effect extends beyond existing opposition leaders. Potential future leaders also observe these developments. Professionals, academics, civic activists, business figures, and younger generations considering public life begin calculating not only the political costs of participation but also the personal consequences attached to it.

The cumulative effect resembles a form of political deterrence. Formal restrictions on candidacy remove some actors from the field. Restrictions on voting remove others. Pressure against political parties narrows organizational alternatives. Criminal proceedings against visible leaders increase the cost of participation for those who remain. And together, this is the disenfranchisement - Georgian style.

Turning Civil Society into a Political Suspect

The architecture of political exclusion in Georgia increasingly extends beyond voters, candidates, parties, and political leaders. Civil society organizations, independent media, election observers, advocacy groups, think tanks and policy organizations constitute the connective tissue between citizens and political institutions. Weakening these actors does not simply affect NGOs as organizations, but society's overall ability to participate politically.

Over the past two years, Georgian Dream has increasingly blurred the distinction between civic activity and party-political activity. The practical consequence of this shift has been devastating for the public sphere. Activities that previously clearly fell within the sphere of civic engagement are now increasingly viewed through a political lens, making

organizations and activists vulnerable to regulatory scrutiny, investigations, financial restrictions, and legal sanctions.

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The process became visible before the broader legislative packages of 2025–2026. In September 2024, the Anti-Corruption Bureau classified prominent civil society actors, including Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia), its Executive Director Eka Gigauri, and the civic initiative Vote for Europe, as organizations with a "declared electoral objective," effectively subjecting them to legal provisions designed for political actors rather than civil society organizations. Officially, the decision was justified by allegations that these organizations had become involved in electoral processes.

The significance of this decision extended far beyond the organizations directly affected. It effectively introduced a new practical principle: civic activity that produces political consequences may increasingly be treated as political activity itself. With this approach, election observation, human rights advocacy, anti-corruption investigations, public criticism of government policies, voter mobilization campaigns, and open support for Georgia's European integration can shape political behavior and influence political outcomes. Once influence itself becomes a sufficient criterion, almost any meaningful civic activity could be subject to state intervention.

The legislative changes adopted in 2026 expanded this logic considerably. The restrictive package introduced by Georgian Dream in 2026 tightened foreign funding regulations, expanded state oversight mechanisms, imposed restrictions on external lobbying activities, and broadened state authority over political participation. International organizations and rights groups warned that the package increasingly treated ordinary civic activities as potential political or security threats. Human Rights Watch argued that these changes risked criminalizing activities traditionally regarded as core elements of civic participation, including advocacy work, public campaigning, and policy engagement. Similarly, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights warned that the package was built upon earlier restrictive legislation adopted since 2024 and contributed to a progressively shrinking civic space in Georgia.

> ***Repression does not necessarily require mass arrests or the formal closure of organizations. Legal uncertainty itself can become a highly effective mechanism of control.***

The chilling effect may ultimately become the most significant consequence of these laws. Repression does not necessarily require mass arrests or the formal closure of organizations. Legal uncertainty itself can become a highly effective mechanism of control. Citizens and organizations may increasingly avoid advocacy work not because it has been explicitly prohibited, but because the legal and personal costs associated with such activities become uncertain and potentially severe.

Criminalizing Protest and Hollowing Out Freedom of Expression and Assembly

The process of political disenfranchisement in Georgia extends beyond voting rights, candidate eligibility, party restrictions, and pressure on civil

society. It increasingly reaches one of the most fundamental elements of democratic participation itself: the ability of citizens to express political views publicly, gather collectively, and challenge power between elections. In democratic systems, elections do not constitute the entirety of political participation. Citizens cast ballots periodically, but democratic life functions continuously through speech, criticism, mobilization, assembly, and protest. Demonstrations, rallies, public gatherings, and symbolic acts of dissent are not peripheral elements of democracy; they are integral mechanisms through which citizens communicate political demands and influence public debate.

> ***Rather than banning protests outright, the government has pursued a strategy of gradually increasing the costs of political participation and de facto abolishing these freedoms.***

Over the past two years, Georgian Dream has also targeted this sphere. Rather than banning protests outright, the government has pursued a strategy of gradually increasing the costs of political participation and *de facto* abolishing these freedoms. Through successive amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations, the Administrative Offenses Code, and the Criminal Code, the state has transformed ordinary protest activity into conduct that carries significant financial and legal risks.

The first substantial wave of changes emerged following the large-scale demonstrations against the foreign influence legislation and later anti-government mobilization campaigns. Amendments adopted in late 2024 and early 2025 significantly increased penalties for a broad range of protest-related activities. International organizations expressed concern regarding both the substance and proportionality of these measures. The Venice Commission noted that the amendments substantially increased sanctions and administrative penalties related to assemblies and demonstrations. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights similarly expressed concern regarding the use of administrative detention for assembly-related activities and recommended substantial reductions in financial penalties.

The practical impact of these changes is already considerable. Administrative fines for violations of assembly rules increased dramatically. Fines for certain protest-related activities increased from GEL 500 to GEL 5,000, while administrative detention of up to 15 days remained available across a broad range of conduct associated with demonstrations. Restrictions were also expanded regarding the use of temporary structures, the blocking of entrances, the use of various protest objects, and other activities routinely observed during public demonstrations. The October 2025 legislative package intensified the crackdown. Georgian Dream introduced additional amendments to both the Administrative Offenses Code and the Criminal Code, expanding detention powers and introducing criminal consequences for repeated administrative violations. Perhaps the most draconian, yet symbolic, illustration emerged in relation to sidewalk protests. Following earlier restrictions concerning road blockages, demonstrators adapted their tactics by moving protests onto pavements and pedestrian areas. Authorities responded by changing the legal framework once again. By May 2026, several dozen peaceful demonstrators received administrative detention sentences after participating in protests on sidewalks.

Paradoxically, Elections Still Matter

Elections, nonetheless, remain essential. No meaningful political change in Georgia can realistically emerge outside an electoral process. The October 4 2025 shenanigans clearly demonstrated that change in Georgia can only happen through elections, not revolution, just as the last two years of incessant protests demonstrated that change can-

not happen through peaceful street protests. But how can you win the elections when the playing field is uneven, and the football pitch is tilted in favor of the incumbent?

This question is currently impossible to answer, even though possible opposition strategies and the examples of Hungary and Moldova suggest certain contours, and this journal has extensively covered it beforecovered it before, while Shota Gvineria addresses the topic in the current edition.

What is clear, however, is that domestically, opposition parties face a strategic dilemma. They must decide whether participating in future elections under current conditions would legitimize an unfair process and dictatorial-leaning, yet isolated regime, or whether refusing to participate risks further marginalization and annihilates any chance of peaceful democratic transition. So far, opposition actors have increasingly framed participation not as an unconditional decision but as one dependent on the restoration of basic democratic conditions. Opposition actors have publicly argued that meaningful participation requires the release of political prisoners, the end of politically motivated prosecutions, the restoration of a competitive political environment, and the creation of conditions for genuine electoral competition. Notably, these demands no longer concern technical election administration. They concern the broader political environment preceding the elections themselves.

The international community has also increasingly recognized that the challenge extends beyond election day procedures. Nearly all major demands raised by international partners ultimately concern the electoral environment and the broader democratic framework surrounding it. The Moscow Mechanism's report encapsulates this broad consensus in the best possible way. This is why the findings of the Moscow Mechanism report should be incorporated into a broader pressure framework on Georgian Dream. Recognition, normalization, diplomatic engagement, or political rehabilitation should not become detached from democratic conditions on the ground.

This convergence of messages from inside and abroad creates an important momentum. Domestic and international pressure on Georgian Dream increasingly needs to focus on the conditions under which future elections are conducted, whenever they take place. And the conditionalities that the West possesses, or may possess, especially after the removal of the Hungarian veto in Brussels, need to focus on this topic.

Any meaningful normalization of relations with the GD from the West, or internally, should come only after the reversal of the legal and political measures that increasingly disenfranchise large segments of Georgian society. The draconian legislation restricting political participation should be repealed. Political prisoners should be released. Opposition parties should remain free to operate without threat of prohibition. Electoral legislation should be reformed to restore meaningful competition.

These conditions reflect what this journal previously described as the four Rs: Refusal to ban parties, Repeal of the laws, Release of the prisoners, and Reform of the Electoral legislation. Without them, future elections may preserve the appearance of democratic procedure while increasingly losing the substance that gives elections meaning in the first place. And this can only be achieved if internal and external pressure on the authoritarian rulers concentrates on these four Rs ■

How Illiberal Regimes End: Lessons from Moldova and Hungary for Georgia

Two of Europe's most entrenched illiberal systems have now collapsed within living political memory. Vladimir Plahotniuc's capture of the Moldovan state ended in June 2019, when a regime that controlled the judiciary, the prosecutor's office, the central bank, and the majority of the country's media landscape dissolved in a matter of days. Viktor Orbán's sixteen-year consolidation of Hungary ended on April 12, 2026, when Peter Magyar's Tisza party won a parliamentary supermajority that Orbán's own electoral architecture had been designed to make impossible.

Both failures were the product of specific conditions that the regime's architects had systematically worked to prevent. Understanding what those conditions were, how they materialized, and what role external and internal actors played in bringing them about, on top of being an exercise in historical curiosity, is also a practical necessity for anyone concerned with Georgia.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (GD) has constructed a system of control that shares the essential load-bearing features of both precedents: state capture, massive levels of corruption, prosecutorial weaponization, media subordination, and the systematic elimination of organized alternatives.

This article examines the Plahotniuc and Orbán systems through five analytical lenses: the pillars that sustained each regime, the tools deployed to maintain control, the structural weaknesses each system carried, the decisive blow that proved fatal, and the actions of opposing forces that made that blow land. It then maps those findings onto Georgia's specific conditions and closes with concrete lessons for Georgia's democratic forces and their Western partners.

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The Plahotniuc System: Capture Without Ideology

Vladimir Plahotniuc never held a leading state position. His titles were always secondary, his public profile deliberately understated. Nicknamed "the puppet master" and "the man in the shadows," he was not a politician in any conventional sense. He was a fixer, a deal-maker, and an organizer of financial dependency. What he built was a vertical of monetary control that made formal institutional authority largely irrelevant to whoever nominally held it.

> ***Plahotniuc's system rested on a single organizing principle: money as the universal solvent of political loyalty.***

Plahotniuc's system rested on a single organizing principle: money as the universal solvent of political loyalty. He entered the political arena by financing a nominally pro-European coalition and gradually redirected its institutional authority toward his own party, transforming a broad governing alliance into what became, in effect, a one-party financial machine. Over time, he hollowed out the opposition, purchasing influence across the political spectrum, including among his nominal adversaries, with the explicit strategic objective of being the only viable force in the room.

> ***Elections in Moldova, despite manipulations, remained largely competitive. Plahotniuc did not control the central electoral commission and could not reliably alter results at scale.***

His control over law enforcement, prosecutors, and the judiciary followed the same logic. These institutions did not serve him out of ideological conviction or personal loyalty. They served whoever held legitimate power and whoever was in charge. This is the first critical distinction from the Georgian case. His institutional control was only transactional, not political. It was a management instrument for running a corrupt system of governance, not a repressive architecture for manufacturing electoral outcomes. Elections in Moldova, despite manipulations, remained largely competitive. Plahotniuc did not control the central electoral commission and could not reliably alter results at scale.

The most documented instrument of control was the direct cash transfer. The so-called "Kuliok case" produced evidence of Plahotniuc delivering a bag of cash to Igor Dodon, then the leader of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, with reporting implicating Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin as well. This single incident crystallized the operating logic of the entire system: ideological opponents, including those openly aligned with Moscow, were managed through financial incentives rather than confronted or eliminated.

His media empire reinforced this logic. Plahotniuc did not control the full information space, but he commanded sufficient media weight to keep his narrative anchored in Moldova's public discourse, projecting a pro-European identity that was simply a narrative for his actual governance.

> ***Corruption that functions as a control mechanism carries an inherent vulnerability: it scales. As Plahotniuc's system expanded, so did its exposure.***

Corruption that functions as a control mechanism carries an inherent vulnerability: it scales. As Plahotniuc's system expanded, so did its exposure. A Moldovan court subsequently found him guilty of creating and leading a criminal organization that committed fraud and money laundering, specifically the theft of financial resources from three Moldovan banks in coordination with oligarch Ilan Shor and others. The stolen sum amounted to approximately one billion dollars, equivalent to roughly 12%

of Moldova's annual GDP at the time, in a scandal that became known as "the theft of the century."

The scandal triggered mass protests and prompted both the IMF and the European Union to suspend financial assistance to Moldova. The pro-European identity Plahotniuc had been selling as his central political credential became impossible to sustain in light of that evidentiary backdrop.

The second and ultimately fatal weakness was geopolitical. Despite sustained effort, Plahotniuc failed to secure durable trust from either Moscow or the West. Russia regarded him as unreliable. Western governments and institutions grew progressively unwilling to treat him as a credible partner. This left him without a strategic foothold at the moment of maximum pressure.

The 2019 parliamentary elections produced a majority distributed between the pro-Russian Socialist Party and the pro-Western ACUM bloc, two forces with opposing geopolitical orientations but a convergent interest in removing Plahotniuc. He refused to concede, deploying his leverage over the Constitutional Court to contest the transfer of power. On top, what dissolved his resistance was the simultaneous withdrawal of external legitimacy from every direction. The European Union, the United States, and Russia each refused to recognize his continued claim to authority. Facing isolation from all international actors at once, a configuration with no precedent in post-Soviet Moldovan politics, his institutional leverage collapsed within days. He fled the country on June 14, 2019. He was subsequently extradited from Greece in September 2025 and sentenced to nineteen years in prison in April 2026.

Maia Sandu and the ACUM bloc had constructed a singular political offer: credible, uncompromised pro-European commitment at a moment when Plahotniuc's version of that commitment had been exposed as fraudulent. The border coalition with pro-Russian socialists was ideologically incoherent, but it was coherent on the one axis that mattered: the removal of Plahotniuc. That tactical unity, combined with the complete withdrawal of international support for the incumbent, was what made the final blow land.

The Moldovan case establishes a template worth carrying into the next analysis. A system built entirely on financial incentives is structurally exposed without some degree of international legitimacy.

The Orbán System: Ideology as Infrastructure

Viktor Orbán was, from the beginning, a political animal. Unlike Plahotniuc, who arrived in politics from business to expand financial power, or Ivanishvili, who entered it to protect what he had already accumulated, Orbán wanted money and institutional control in the service of political dominance. That distinction shaped everything about how his system was built and, ultimately, how it fell.

> ***Unlike Plahotniuc, who arrived in politics from business to expand financial power, or Ivanishvili, who entered it to protect what he had already accumulated, Orbán wanted money and institutional control in the service of political dominance.***

Orbán's foundation was built on a genuine reservoir of popular discontent with the previous Socialist administration, whose mismanagement and documented corruption had left deep wounds in Hungarian public life. He systematically exploited that legacy, maintaining the previous government as the reference point for every subsequent failure, regardless of how much time had passed. This backward-pointing blame architecture gave him durable political cover in the early years.

> ***His anti-immigration policy was not mere populism. It was a precise calibration of what a large portion of the Hungarian electorate genuinely feared and wanted addressed.***

What sustained him beyond that initial advantage was a more sophisticated capacity: the ability to read and feed the cultural pulse of the Hungarian majority. His anti-immigration policy was not mere populism. It was a precise calibration of what a large portion of the Hungarian electorate genuinely feared and wanted addressed. He sensed the anxieties that other politicians either ignored or dismissed as uncomfortable, and he built policy and narrative around them with consistency. His relationship with Russia followed the same logic. Open ties with Moscow were reframed not as dependence or ideological alignment but as a pragmatic national interest, a sovereign decision to manage energy and economic relations on Hungary's own terms. That reframing held for a remarkably long time.

His personal charisma and his cultivation of strong external partnerships, within the European far-right and with the Trump-aligned MAGA movement in the United States, reinforced his domestic image as a leader of consequence operating on a global stage.

Orbán understood early that parliamentary control alone was insufficient to guarantee durable power. He moved systematically to consolidate authority over the media, the judiciary, and the executive apparatus, reaching a point of effective control over all major institutional levers. Checks and balances were architecturally dismantled and replaced with structures of accountability that ran vertically toward his office.

The information space was the decisive long-term instrument. Over sixteen years, he succeeded in shifting the center of gravity of Hungary's media landscape from a liberal-leaning baseline toward his own far-right framing, establishing narrative dominance that shaped how millions of Hungarians perceived political reality. This was not accomplished through a single dramatic intervention but through sustained, incremental pressure on ownership structures, licensing, and editorial independence.
Two weaknesses proved fatal, and they compounded each other. The first was that Orbán never secured the personal loyalty of law enforcement. Security forces obeyed the orders of legitimate political leadership, as institutional logic dictates, but they carried no ideological commitment to Fidesz and no personal allegiance to Orbán. The projection of strength was real and effective for years, but it rested on institutional compliance rather than genuine loyalty, a distinction that matters at the moment of crisis.

The second weakness was overreach. Orbán's system grew too large, looted too visibly, and drifted too far from the material conditions of ordinary Hungarian life. The corruption that had once been managed at a distance from public view became impossible to ignore. Consequent economic stagnation and rising living costs eroded the social contract that his early years had established. He lost the pulse of his own electorate, and when that happened, the cultural attunement that had been his greatest political asset became, in its absence, his most damaging liability.

The 2024 scandal related to the pardon of the regime's loyalist involved in the child abuse case served as a springboard for Peter Magyar to escalate protests; later, the triggering event arrived in February 2026, when the Orbán camp attempted to discredit Magyar using a sex tape, a tactic Magyar publicly characterized as Russian-style and a moral failure of the moralizing regime. The operation backfired completely. Rather than turning against Magyar, the public turned against the system that had deployed the tactic, and Magyar's support consolidated around the perception of a regime willing to use intelligence-style tools against a political opponent.

The decision to invite the U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance to campaign on Orbán's behalf in the days before the April 12 election further compounded the damage. Vance was a figure with negligible popularity among Hungarian voters outside Fidesz's shrinking base, and the intervention read as a demonstration of how far Orbán had drifted from his own people's concerns and how dependent he had become on external validation.

Critically, when the result came in, Orbán accepted it. He had lost before, in 2002, stepped down, and returned stronger in 2010. He was not completely disconnected from reality, and he did not attempt to hold power through institutional manipulation at the scale that Plahotniuc had tried in 2019. He conceded a painful defeat and announced that Fidesz would serve from the opposition.

Peter Magyar's campaign succeeded for reasons that are analytically transferable. He spent the campaign in smaller cities and rural areas, and made a direct material argument: that he understood what people needed on the ground and could deliver it. He did not campaign on foreign policy abstractions. He campaigned on highways, schools, healthcare, and the cost of living. His victory, securing nearly 70% of parliamentary seats, was built on the turnout of nearly 80% of eligible voters, a figure that reflected the breadth of the trust he had assembled.

His personal credibility among traditional Fidesz supporters rested on a specific kind of insider legitimacy. He had been part of the Orbán world, understood it from within, and had reached a visible breaking point over its corruption.

The Hungarian case adds a dimension that the Moldovan case lacks. Orbán's system was ideologically constructed and internationally networked. Its collapse required an opponent who could match it on the terrain of popular legitimacy, not just institutional maneuvering. Magyar won because he out-competed Orbán on Orbán's own ground: the claim to speak for ordinary Hungarians.

Three Systems, Three Verdicts: A Comparative Analysis

The most structurally significant similarity between Plahotniuc and Ivanishvili is one that is easy to understate: both entered politics wearing a pro-European mask they had no intention of keeping. Plahotniuc financed and led a nominally pro-European coalition while running a system of pure transactional capture beneath it. Ivanishvili entered Georgian politics in 2011 with promises of democratic renewal, framing his mission as a necessary intervention to save Georgia from autocratic rule. Both sustained that image through controlled media, non-transparent operations, and the patient construction of a perception that they were the only viable governing alternative. Both then used that initial coalition to consolidate toward a monolithic, fully controlled, self-serving political structure.

The second shared feature is the mode of control itself. Neither Plahotniuc nor Ivanishvili relied on ideology. However, both used ideologically charged narratives in massive disinformation and propaganda campaigns to control the narrative and the information ecosystems of countries. Both exercised shadow governance, maintaining formal distance from direct institutional responsibility while capturing every lever of state through informal financial incentives, elite corruption, and favoritism. Ivanishvili briefly held the Prime Minister's position; Plahotniuc never held a leading post at all. In both cases, the formal title was irrelevant. Control ran through personal financial networks, not through party doctrine or popular conviction.

The similarity with Orbán is of a different kind and equally instructive. Ivanishvili entered politics by blaming then-President Mikheil Saakashvili for authoritarian governance and presenting himself

as the antidote. Orbán also built his early dominance on the genuine failures of the previous administration. Both leaders understood that inherited grievance is a more durable foundation than a positive program, and both exploited it systematically, maintaining the previous government as the explanatory framework for every subsequent failure long past the point where that attribution was analytically defensible.

The sharpest contrast and the most important lesson concern the relationship with the international environment. Orbán's model was one of sustained multipolarity: he worked with Russia, China, and the United States simultaneously, playing each against the others to maintain strategic room and economic benefit. This gave him a geopolitical cushion that neither Plahotniuc nor Ivanishvili possesses or possessed. Plahotniuc failed to secure trust from any direction and was destroyed precisely by that universal isolation when the crisis came. Ivanishvili has made a one-sided bet on Russia, adopting an explicitly anti-Western platform while accusing Georgia's Western partners of interfering in the country's sovereignty. That bet exposes Georgia to the same structural vulnerability that destroyed Plahotniuc: the possibility of coordinated external isolation, without the ideological network that gave Orbán resilience.

> ***You can control what people think, but you cannot control what they feel when their living conditions deteriorate.***

The Hungarian case also carries a lesson about the limits of information control that applies directly to Georgia. Orbán managed the information space for sixteen years with considerable skill, but he could not ultimately override what people experienced in their daily lives. Economic stagnation and visible corruption at scale severed the connection between his narrative and the material reality of his electorate. The lesson, thus, is that you can control what people think, but you cannot control what they feel when their living conditions deteriorate. The Georgian Dream is also offering to its loyalists a new social contract in which social conditions are directly dependent on the degree of loyalty to the ruling party and come at the cost of individual freedoms and democratic institutions - an explicit abandonment of the social bargain that sustained its early electoral support. Consequently, the regime increasingly relies on intimidation, coercion, and repression of dissent. The complete state capture, including full institutional loyalty to Ivanishvili, combined with the total administrative, legal, and political control of the electoral system, sets Georgia apart from Moldova and Hungary and, despite many similarities, puts it in a different category of consolidated authoritarianism.

> ***The complete state capture, including full institutional loyalty to Ivanishvili, combined with the total administrative, legal, and political control of the electoral system, sets Georgia apart from Moldova and Hungary and, despite many similarities, puts it in a different category of consolidated authoritarianism.***

The most consequential absence in the Georgian case, when set against both comparators, is the lack of a leading force: a figure with universal credibility, cross-geographic reach, and a campaign anchored in material rather than geopolitical concerns. Sandu provided that in Moldova. Magyar provided it in Hungary. Georgia's democratic forces have not yet produced a consolidated alternative capable of carrying that argument to the parts of the electorate that Georgian Dream still controls.

The table below maps the five analytical dimensions across all three cases:

	Moldova / Plahotniuc	Hungary / Orbán	Georgia / Ivanishvili
Main pillars of power	Financial capture of entire political spectrum; money as substitute for ideology or legitimacy	Popular legitimacy built on cultural attunement; systematic institutional consolidation	Initial grand coalition built on Ivanishvili's personal resources and trust; monolithic consolidation of power
Strongest tools and tactics	Direct cash transfers, envelope politics, kompromat; media empire; buying opposition including pro-Russian forces	Control of information space; judicial capture; dismantling of checks and balances; nationalist narrative management	Judicial weaponization; media subordination; elite capture and buying influence through corruption; repression
Greatest weaknesses	No international support from any direction; visible mega-corruption; competitive elections	Lost popular pulse through overreach and visible corruption; limited institutional loyalty	One-sided bet and complete dependency on Russia; no genuine popular mandate after 2024; organized and resistant civil society
Decisive blow	Simultaneous withdrawal of external legitimacy; public corruption scandals	Massive public scandals over moral failure; unhelpful external intervention	N/A
Opposing forces	Consolidation of the opposition; credible European alternative	Consolidation of the opposition; cross-demographic coalition on bread-and-butter issues; reaching out to regimes supporters	N/A

Lessons for Georgia and Its Partners: Patterns That Travel and Patterns That Do Not

The comparative record of how Plahotniuc's system collapsed and how Orbán's endured for sixteen years before finally being dismantled carries specific, actionable lessons for Georgia.

The single most consistent finding across both cases is that fragmented opposition loses. What defeated Plahotniuc was a tactically unified front organized around a single axis - his removal. What defeated Orbán was not a broad ideological movement but one leader with a specific trajectory, cross-geographic reach, and the discipline to keep his message simple and material. Sandu in Moldova and Magyar in Hungary both were charismatic, telegenic, intelligent, and capable of projecting credibility to audiences that career opposition politicians had long since lost. Both understood that humility toward the electorate, an acknowledgment that the opposition had made mistakes, failed to connect, and needed to earn trust rather than demand it, was not a weakness but a precondition for being heard.

First, what Georgia needs is a unifying figure who can simultaneously consolidate the fractured opposition behind a single strategic direction and project credibility and legitimacy toward voters who have previously voted for the Georgian Dream. That second quality is the harder one to find and a very important one to have. Sandu and Magyar both possessed it. Their campaigns reached people who had never previously considered voting for the opposition, not because they preached to the converted but because they demonstrated genuine understanding of what those voters needed and genuine respect for their concerns. That is the standard Georgia's democratic forces must set for themselves in identifying and consolidating around their own candidate. Georgia's democratic opposition remains

fragmented, and fragmentation structurally benefits an incumbent with full institutional control. A grand coalition organized around the single objective of removing the Ivanishvili system is theoretically viable but, in practice, not functional. So far, the leding force that is capable of holding it together is nowhere in sight.

Second, the opposition's message must travel and resonate beyond Tbilisi. Magyar won because he left Budapest. Sandu won because she crafted a political offer that reached out to Moldovans who had never previously considered voting for a pro-European reformist. Georgia's civil society and opposition forces have done extraordinary work under conditions of severe repression, and that work deserves unambiguous recognition. At the same time, the honest assessment is that the center of gravity of Georgian civic mobilization has remained concentrated in Tbilisi and in the urban, intellectually curious, and internationally connected segments of Georgian society. There is more work to be done in extending that reach, in language, in emphasis, and in physical presence, to the communities across the country. There has been much talk in the regions, but there is a need for more understanding.

Third, it is about more than values, especially for people who struggle financially, lack exposure to complex analysis, and are terrified by security concerns. The opposition's message has been strongest on the terrain of values: rule of law, democratic institutions, European integration, and civil liberties. These are legitimate and important. They are also insufficient on their own. Orbán held power for sixteen years in part because he understood that voters make decisions based on what they feel in their daily lives, not only on what they believe in the abstract. He lost when the gap between his narrative and the material reality of Hungarian households became too wide to bridge. Magyar closed that gap by campaigning on highways, schools, and the cost of living, convincing people that he can actually solve those problems. Corruption matters to Georgian voters, and they understand concrete material consequences: why hospitals are underfunded, why young people leave the country, why prices rise while public services deteriorate. The argument from values and the argument from lived experience are not alternatives. They need to run together. However, the key missing variable is to convince people that there is an alternative force that can deliver on all this and change things for the better.
Fourth, polarization helps incumbents with state capture. Name-calling, maximalist rhetoric, and the perception of an opposition that speaks for one part of Georgian society rather than for Georgia as a whole are gifts to a regime whose primary survival tool is the claim that it alone represents the authentic Georgian nation. Plahotniuc was destroyed in part because his opponents built a coalition that deliberately crossed every ideological and geopolitical line to present a unified front. Magyar won in part because he refused to campaign on the issues that divided his potential electorate and focused relentlessly on the issues that united it. The unifying frame for Georgia's opposition is neither a party affiliation nor a foreign policy destination. It is Georgian identity itself: the claim that Georgia's history, culture, sovereignty, and future belong to all Georgians and are being held hostage by one man's political and financial interests. That claim is more powerful than any ideological label, and it is considerably harder for the Georgian Dream's propaganda apparatus to caricature as foreign-imposed.

> ***Isolation is a powerful instrument. Plahotniuc fell when Western partners of Moldova imposed painful sanctions and every external actor withdrew recognition simultaneously.***

And finally, a lesson for the pro-Democracy partners of Georgia: isolation is a powerful instrument. Plahotniuc fell when Western partners of Moldova imposed painful sanctions and every external actor withdrew recognition simultaneously. That configuration, unusual and deliberately engineered,

was the decisive structural condition of his removal. Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream is geopolitically more exposed than Orbán was, having made a one-sided bet on Russia at the cost of its relationships with the West, without Orbán's skill in maintaining simultaneous working relationships across multiple great powers. That exposure is a strategic vulnerability that Georgia's Western partners have not yet fully exploited.

> ***Effective Western policy toward Georgia must abandon the assumption that continued engagement with the Georgian Dream as a governing interlocutor serves Georgia's democratic interests.***

Effective Western policy toward Georgia must abandon the assumption that continued engagement with the Georgian Dream as a governing interlocutor serves Georgia's democratic interests. Georgia's partners should direct their engagement, their resources, and their political recognition toward Georgia's democratic forces, its civil society, and its people, and should coordinate that redirection with sufficient consistency and clarity. The comparative record shows clearly that, despite a more consolidated and aggressive nature of Georgia's regime, the window for a reversible democratic outcome in Georgia remains open, and the regime's aggression can even be turned into its vulnerability. Clearly, the pathway to success depends not only on winning the narrative and rhetoric but on the determination and hard work of a grand coalition of internal and international stakeholders ■

Quo Vadis, EU?

On May 4, an unusually open conflict erupted within a European family, usually conscious of its public image. The spokesperson of the European Commission, speaking on behalf of Ursula von der Leyen, contradicted the statement of Marta Kos, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, who said a day earlier that Serbia's disbursements under the Growth Plan – a cash-for-reforms instrument – have been suspended due to backsliding in the judiciary and insufficient alignment with the EU foreign policy. This unusual spat exposed the well-known reluctance to act upon the authoritarian tendencies of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić. During his 14 years in power, Vučić has brought Serbian media to heel; his party has captured state institutions, discredited the opposition, and ignored electoral schedules, calling for early elections at propitious times.

We have written before in this journal that authoritarian regimes tend to learn from one another, especially when it comes to the skills needed to subvert the European Union's machinery.

So how did Vučić do it? Is it something special that Serbia has (and others don't), or is there something amiss with the EU's own way of functioning that makes such flagrant abuse possible?

Money Moving

Serbia has been an EU candidate state since 2012, the same year Vučić came to power. As such, it benefits from the generous package of pre-accession support, known in EU jargon as IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). This is a large pot of money (the 2014-2020 tranche for Serbia constituted EUR 1,539 billion) that is intended to help Serbia's public institutions and policies adjust to the demands of integrating into the EU's internal regulatory and economic frameworks. Some of these funds are earmarked for specific programs, but the large chunk is up to Serbia's government to manage through its budget (while demonstrating progress towards certain general benchmarks). Without a doubt, this money fed into a complex system of patronage that Vučić has constructed around his party, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), and his political cronies.

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> ***The European Union's primary concern when beginning its painstaking journey towards membership is to ensure what is enigmatically called "the absorption capacity."***

It is true that so-called "fundamentals" – things like the rule of law, democracy, and human rights – represent the first chapter of the EU accession hurdles, and without meeting them, no state can hope to join the Union. But it is also true that the European Union's primary concern when beginning its painstaking journey towards membership is to ensure what is enigmatically called "the absorption capacity." Translated from *Bruxelloise* jargon, the term refers to the capacity of bureaucrats to manage vast amounts of EU money invested in infrastructure projects in a way that complies with EU financial management rules, supposedly in a less corrupt, more transparent way.

This is why one of the European Commission's (EC) primary considerations in a candidate or associate country is to redress how the country's finances, procurement, and audit institutions function, in compliance with the relevant standards (this is known as public finance management, or PFM). Not a bad thing in itself, granted.

> ***An uncomfortable truth: with all the talk about values, the EU is, first and foremost, about money and the economy.***

But the prioritization of these institutions reveals an uncomfortable truth: with all the talk about values, the EU is, first and foremost, about money and the economy. One can even say this is the part of the organization's atavistic DNA: after all, the organization formerly known as the European Community of Coal and Steel was built around the idea that economic interdependence would prevent wars. That "theory of change," to use the programmatic jargon, prevails to this day. But this is not the only fundamental assumption of EU programming.

The second one is about virtuous bureaucracies as opposed to dangerous and populist political leaders. As Mario Draghi – someone who probably knows the EU better than anyone else - has aptly observed in his recent speech, the EU bureaucracy is structured in a way to split and fracture seemingly intractable conflicts and "wrap them in layers of procedure that deprive them of their political charge." Yes, the process may be arcane, and the panoply of the European abbreviations may have generations of EU institution interns wake up in cold sweat at night, but most of the time, this torturous pipeline paved with A4 paper prevents disagreements from escalating into confrontation.

The push towards bureaucratic uniformity and efficiency is also characteristic of the EU efforts to prepare the prospective members, and in many cases, this brings tangible benefits to citizens, including improved access to services, reduced corruption, and, in some cases, clearer, less nepotistic ways to join civil service for young people and more meritocratic procedures for advancing within it. The European Principles of Public Administration – the bible for paper-pusher-fixers drafted by OECD/SIGMA, an official consultancy/think-tank – goes into very specific detail about participation, transparency, and service-orientation of bureaucracies. But fundamentally, the EU wants to see the bureaucracy that can "absorb" its IPA and infrastructural projects – simply put, to spend money in full and on time, while being able to show that, say, a bridge has actually been built.

Once conflicts ease and finances are (relatively) well managed, money starts moving, the economy whirs into action, delivering prosperity to citizens and stability to the continent. This model worked marvelously for Portugal, Spain, and Greece, all of which exited dictatorial or authoritarian rules to become,

in many ways, models of societal transition towards democracy and economic revival. But in Central and Eastern Europe, something broke.

First of all, there has been less money to go around in the EU-27, than before. Reunification of Germany cost the EU a significant chunk of its capacity to redistribute, and the economic crisis of the 1990s and then 2008 did the rest. Secondly, many countries have lacked the kind of genuine commitment to a democratic future that post-Franco Spain or post-Salazar Portugal may have exhibited. Thirdly, socialist systems made many Eastern Europeans deeply cynical about any kind of bureaucracy (and politics, for that matter).

> ***The EU was very slow to react to the likes of Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš diverting EU structural funds destined for the new members to build their financial empires and political bases.***

But more importantly, the EU was very slow to react to the likes of Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš diverting EU structural funds destined for the new members to build their financial empires and political bases. What mattered most was that the money got spent and bureaucracies seemed capable of managing growth for a while.

The (Failed) Membership Magic

There is another assumption lurking conspicuously in the EU treaties: that a country, once democratic and within the EU, would stay democratic. And while there is a provision for a country to leave the EU (see Brexit), there is no provision to expel it for the lack of compliance with the "fundamentals" of the treaty, and even the mechanisms to punish non-compliance – like the apparently failed attempt to halt Growth Plan disbursements to Serbia - are relatively recent.

Two components underpin that assumption of prevailing democracy. On the one hand, why would anyone leave the paradise of prosperity and stability that is the EU? Yes, Brexit has seriously undermined this point, but the grim economic aftermath in the UK has significantly cooled the radical fan clubs of other exit movements.

On the other hand, even if an elected political party were to preside over democratic backsliding, from the long-term perspective of the EC, election cycles would redress such accidents sooner or later, and a strong bureaucracy would keep things running in a relatively orderly fashion before elections did their magic.

The gradual installation of Orbán's regime in Hungary and, to a lesser extent, the Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland showed how these assumptions could be broken. Elected in free elections, both Fidesz and PiS had a democratic mandate to implement policy, and they used it to gradually undermine the checks and balances, and reduce civic space to the extent that it threatened the democratic nature of their countries - a relatively slow process that EC has proven incapable of stemming.

> ***Relatively slow erosion of the democratic system, "under the threshold" of the EC's regulatory reaction capability and the European Council's willingness to expend political capital, can go unpunished until it is too late.***

Having ignored the initial warnings from civil society and reacting weakly to further abuses, the EC gave the impression of impotence as Orbán began to hamper decision-making processes, almost with impunity. The lesson was clear: relatively slow erosion of the democratic system, "under the threshold" of the EC's regulatory reaction capability

and the European Council's willingness to expend political capital, can go unpunished until it is too late.

Candidates of Fortune

When it comes to the candidate states, the prospect of membership seems like an attractive enough 'carrot' to keep the EU-compliant reforms going, and should these fail, it is easy to use a 'stick' – freeze the membership process. Even an individual EU state may stop a candidate from acceding, either through a decision by its government, its parliament, or a referendum, depending on national rules.

> ***Leaders, like Vučić, people generally unencumbered by the ideals and sentiments, saw the opportunity to break that system and took it. Application to become an EU member in 2009 and getting the candidacy in 2012 has brought an economic boom to Serbia.***

But the leaders, like Vučić, people generally unencumbered by the ideals and sentiments, saw the opportunity to break that system and took it. Application to become an EU member in 2009 and getting the candidacy in 2012 has brought an economic boom to Serbia, whose economy has suffered after wars, NATO bombing, and economic sanctions, further aggravated by corruption and inefficiency. The initial EU-backed reforms to redress finances and bureaucracy, however imperfectly implemented, brought greater predictability for investors. Italian car giant FIAT took over and refurbished a massive Yugoslav-era car factory in Kragujevac, Italian and Austrian banks opened offices, and money started to flow into the economy.

But Vučić also used the upcoming prospect of joining the EU common market to court non-democratic sponsors. UAE's Etihad Airways bought a 49% stake in Serbia's flag carrier, and Abu Dhabi's flashy property developers started to reshape Belgrade. Chinese companies started fixing railways. All of these investments come without any conditions, and some – analysts argue – come with kickbacks and benefits for elites, while enhancing China's grip on strategic assets.

As a result, when the EU had equipped itself with appropriate instruments to punish democratic and rule-of-law shortfalls, and even political consensus started to crystallize, Serbia's Finance Minister could just shrug off the loss of EU loans and grants as insignificant to the overall budget.

People I spoke to in Serbia say this hijacking of EU-generated benefits to push non-democratic investors has objective economic reasons: EU growth has been suboptimal in the past decade, while the COVID-19 pandemic, the hydrocarbon shock from Russia sanctions, and the expansion of military spending made things worse. Those who try to justify the EU's lenience towards Vučić's authoritarian antics say keeping Serbia in the EU anteroom for too long has gradually reduced the attractiveness of the membership carrot.

Whatever the reason, Serbia's leadership seems to have faced down the massive public protests. If anything, the "mopping up" of the opposition movement got uglier, as witnessed by the dirty media campaign to blame the death of a student on protesters.

If we are to judge by the President of the Commission's chastising of Commissioner Kos, Brussels political top-dogs want Serbia in, rather than out.

Change We Can't Believe In

People like Georgia's oligarchic patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili, are keenly observing this situation. As we argued earlier, the Georgian Dream's (GD) initial incendiary tactics against the EU have resembled those of Vučić's SNS (and Orbán's Fidesz). Since late

2024, GD has been on the path of hardline repression, largely without the EU being able to oppose it in any real sense. Freezing of the accession process, a rather symbolic restriction of visa-free travel for GD officials, and occasional sermons were deemed sufficient.

But some feel that GD may be carefully exploring a reset. The government officials from Tbilisi engaged in conversations with the U.S. officials, mostly on economic matters so far. Yet, several meetings took place with the Council of Europe officials – guardians of the human rights convention that the EU relies on for the professional assessment of the state of the legislation and the judiciary. Rumors are circulating in Tbilisi that GD may offer a "gesture" of sorts, such as releasing more prisoners or putting some of the most repressive laws on ice. A couple of police officers have recently been prosecuted for beating journalists and politicians, but this belated move was accompanied by an official rejection that any systemic violence took place in 2024, when hundreds were beaten in a pattern that the public defender deemed torture.

Could Tbilisi count on the return to Serbia-level relations with the EU? Serbia has a couple of things going for it: it is in the heart of Europe and has maintained good relations with the Kremlin and China for more than a decade. It also holds the key to the Balkan regions' trouble spots: Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, rare-earth mining in Serbia is crucial to the independence of Europe's supply chain, as Ursula von der Leyen has stressed. Belgrade also has a formidable defense industry, which, apparently, has been quietly arming Ukraine. In other words, pragmatically, Brussels would rather have Belgrade in than out (although not all EU member states may feel the same).

In the meantime, two contradictory trends have taken place within the EU. The traumatic experience of obstruction by Orbán's Hungary has sharpened the EU's internal mechanisms to punish repeat offenders, and the accession rules put more emphasis on compliance. There has been talk about going further and partially suspending unanimity voting, and with Orbán gone, some adjustments may even materialize – in time for Serbia's accession. Concurrently, a type of "negative convergence" took place: some of the things that Orbán, Vučić (and Ivanishvili) said and did are no longer taboo in Brussels, largely due to the growing policy rapprochement between the extreme right and mainstream right (EPP) parties. Decisions taken against the Green Deal, EPP's insistence on continuing to investigate the EU-funded NGOs for corruption (despite the Court of Auditors' clean sheet), and the degree to which the talk of "values" is being dropped from the EU communications create a more welcoming ground for accommodating the parties and regimes that are less-than-savory if we go by the letter of the EU treaties.

> ***A real opportunity for the Georgian Dream to come back from the cold? The keyword here is interest and pragmatism. Brussels no longer projects itself as a starry-eyed idealist, perhaps. But acting as hard-nosed pragmatism requires an implicit and explicit transaction.***

A real opportunity for the Georgian Dream to come back from the cold? The keyword here is interest and pragmatism. Brussels no longer projects itself as a starry-eyed idealist, perhaps. But acting as hard-nosed pragmatism requires an implicit and explicit transaction. What Vučić has to offer is clear. What Mr. Ivanishvili may offer Brussels is much less obvious ■

Concrete, Facebook Lives, and Geopolitics: Inside Armenia's Battle for the Nation's Soul

Before my latest visit to Yerevan, as the electoral campaign was heating up, an old Armenian friend warned me: "Every Armenian taxi driver is simultaneously a geopolitical analyst, a military strategist, an economist, and an opposition leader." Yet even that did not prepare me for the very first driver who picked me up at Zvartnots Airport and drove me into the city center. When I asked him how the campaign was going, he replied: "You know, every Armenian mother has two fears: war and Nikol Pashinyan going live on Facebook again."

It was probably the best possible introduction to the peculiar style of Pashinyan's campaigning. Eight years after coming to power through the 2018 "Velvet Revolution," he still campaigns less like a conventional post-Soviet leader than like a permanently restless opposition activist, though with more bodyguards than then. He travels tirelessly across the country, holding endless meetings with voters in towns and villages, arguing with people in markets and cafés, live-streaming constantly from a bus while eating local food with his entourage, often accompanied by his close ally Alen Simonyan, the Speaker of Parliament, with whom he even founded a rock band called Varchaband (it's a pun, Varchapert meaning Prime Minister in Armenian).

Pashinyan genuinely seems to believe that politics still requires the same physical proximity to ordinary citizens that carried him to power in 2018, when he crossed Armenia on foot with a backpack and a protest movement behind him. He talks to virtually anyone. Many of these encounters are clearly not staged: people interrupt him, challenge him, insult him, sometimes shout at him, and he often shouts back. The exchanges can become emotional, chaotic, even theatrical. His wife leaves him in the middle of the campaign trail and then returns. The entire spectacle can appear exhausting, dramatic, messy, but also strangely authentic.

THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

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

This is what makes Pashinyan such an unusual figure in the post-Soviet space, especially in a conservative Caucasian society. Few leaders who have governed for eight years would still expose themselves so directly, so constantly, and so unpredictably to ordinary citizens. Few leaders would dare confront so many sacred pillars of their society at once, institutions and narratives placed so high in the pantheon of national identity as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the tragic-heroic mythology of Armenian history, and the deeply rooted belief in Russia as Armenia's ultimate security guarantor.

Having known the 3rd President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, personally, a man hardly lacking in audacity, charisma, political courage, or intellectual sophistication, shaped by some of the world's most prestigious Western universities, even he never went quite so far in openly challenging the foundational myths and emotional pillars of national ideology. And this despite the fact that Saakashvili transformed the machinery of the state far more radically and fought corruption with a level of intensity no post-Soviet leaders ever matched.

One may dislike Pashinyan intensely, disagree with his policies, or hold him responsible for national traumas. But it is difficult to argue that he does not try to engage everyone, or that he does not genuinely believe in what he says.

Geopolitical Alternative For the First Time

The parliamentary elections of June 2026 will take place in an Armenia profoundly transformed by the defeat in the 2020 war and the final loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Those events shattered long-standing certainties and redrew the country's political and emotional landscape.

The central question in Armenia's elections is about the country's strategic destiny, almost a cultural and civilizational choice. Should Armenia continue its

fragile opening toward the West, pursue normalization with Türkiye, and seek peace with Azerbaijan? Or should it retreat once again into the familiar security logic centered on Russia?

The first path is tied to an ambitious, but also controversial vision promoted by Pashinyan under the slogan of the "Real Armenia," a project that amounts to a genuine paradigm shift in Armenian political thinking. But PM's opponents frequently claim that if they fight against Pashinyan, the latter fights with reality. They are undoubtedly targeting his ambitious attempt to redefine Armenia's entire national imagination. This is the vision that rests on modernization, westernization, and a deliberate break with what he sees as the romantic illusions of the past.

He argues that Armenia must finally reconcile itself with the territory it actually controls, roughly 30,000 square kilometers, rather than remain trapped in the emotional and geopolitical fantasies of a "Greater Armenia," which he believes historically deepened the country's dependence on Russia and isolated it from major regional transit routes and economic transformations. The opposition calls it "folly" or "betrayal", depending on taste.

> ***Since independence, which for Armenia also began with a war against neighboring Azerbaijan, the country has never truly had a geopolitical choice. Living under Russia's shadow was not a preference, but the only viable option.***

Since independence, which for Armenia also began with a war against neighboring Azerbaijan, the country has never truly had a geopolitical choice. Living under Russia's shadow was not a preference, but the only viable option. For the first time in modern Armenian history, however, an alternative now appears conceivable, and the population is being asked to make a real strategic choice about the state's future.

Strategy Beyond Vision: How Idealists Learn to Win

A few weeks before the elections, Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract (CC) party remain comfortably ahead in nearly every opinion poll. Given the political alternatives currently on offer in Armenia, this is reassuring news for almost everyone, except Russia and its local networks, political clients, and old elites that still gravitate around its influence.

Paradoxically, Pashinyan is more contested inside Armenia than abroad. Yet even there, he appears far more confident than he did in 2021, before the last parliamentary elections, in the traumatic aftermath of military defeat and the failed attempts to force him from power. One could imagine that this resilience comes mainly from his ambitious promise to radically transform Armenia: to modernize it, Europeanize, make it more open, more civic rather than ethnically nationalist, more future-oriented, and less imprisoned by the grief and mythology of past catastrophes. But ideals alone are clearly not enough.

> ***We live in a world where shameless oligarchs, corrupt predators from the Soviet ruins, imperial servants of Putin, and powerful propaganda machines dominate much of political life.***

We live in a world where shameless oligarchs, corrupt predators from the Soviet ruins, imperial servants of Putin, and powerful propaganda machines dominate much of political life. In such a world, the most cynical politicians constantly wrap themselves in sacred words such as "motherland", "faith," "family," and "tradition," while emptying them of all meaning. In this part of the world, elections are rarely won by bright ideas or noble values alone.

Perhaps it is unpleasant to admit, but administrative resources, the promise of peace, and the

hope of material stability remain far more powerful electoral weapons in Armenia. And Pashinyan understands this perfectly well. The reality is that political programs and even political visions are not sufficient to contain the virus of disinformation and various sophisticated election meddling techniques supported by Russia. And, as with real viruses and epidemics, the most effective response often relies on administrative measures. It is difficult to imagine what would have happened in Moldova in 2024 if Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) had not been in power and in control of the levers of state. We also see the reverse in Georgia. The challenge, however, is to resist the temptation to curtail public freedoms in this struggle, and that is a very difficult line to hold, which Europeans should constantly call for.

> ***The reality is that political programs and even political visions are not sufficient to contain the virus of disinformation and various sophisticated election meddling techniques supported by Russia.***

The Civil Contract party enters the June elections with the strength of those who still control the machinery of the state, but also with the anxiety of a government that can feel the ground sometimes shifting beneath its feet, as is apparently the case in central Yerevan. On election day, as in so many former Soviet republics, politics is shaped not only by ideas or speeches but also by how power uses state resources. In Armenia, that old mechanism remains very much alive. It is probably less suffocating than in Russia, Belarus, or Azerbaijan, and less absolute than in Georgia during the 2024 elections, yet still more visible than in Moldova or pre-war Ukraine.

Pashinyan governs as much through concrete as through rhetoric. As elections approach, roads are built faster, hospitals are renovated, and gas pipelines stretch deeper into forgotten villages. Social benefits rise as well, reaching an ever larger share of the population. During his second term, social spending increased from 7 to 9% of GDP, while the number of beneficiaries grew dramatically.

This presence of the state is felt most strongly far from Yerevan, in poorer provincial towns and villages where every newly paved road, every gas connection, every additional welfare payment carries a deeply political meaning. There, power does not appear as an ideological abstraction. It arrives as a construction site, a paycheck, a monthly allowance, or a doctor who is finally available.

> ***For the past two years, not a single shot has been fired from the Azerbaijan side of the border, giving silence immense political value in a society shaped by decades of war.***

Yet it would be a serious mistake to believe that Civil Contract's dominant position rests solely on administrative resources and the loyalty of the state apparatus. At the heart of Nikol Pashinyan's political project lies another remarkably powerful argument: peace in Armenia is no longer an abstraction, but something ordinary people can physically feel in their daily lives. For the past two years, not a single shot has been fired from the Azerbaijan side of the border, giving silence immense political value in a society shaped by decades of war. Pashinyan has therefore managed to present himself as the "candidate of peace," while arguing that normalization with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, diversification away from Russia, and projects such as "Crossroads for Peace" can transform Armenia into a more connected, modern, and economically dynamic state rather than a permanently isolated and dependent one.

The Invested West and Allied Frenemies

As noted above, the support, or simply the benevolent attitude, of most international partners

currently works to the advantage of CC in the ongoing electoral contest.

The United States, particularly through the symbolic backing expressed during Vice President J. D. Vance's visit, and even more so the European Union, have both invested in strengthening Armenia's resilience against Russian pressure and in supporting its gradual turn toward Europe.

In Yerevan, this support is not perceived merely through diplomatic communiqués, but through a growing sense that Armenia is no longer entirely alone. The launch of talks on visa liberalization with the EU, European assistance programs, including the setting up of an EU-backed task force to combat disinformation and malign foreign interference in the electoral process, all reinforce the image of a country slowly being drawn into a different geopolitical orbit.

The decision to hold both the European Political Community and the EU-Armenia summits in Yerevan in May 2026 carried significance far beyond diplomatic protocol. For Armenia, it was more than a series of high-level meetings; it was a symbolic repositioning of the country on the political map of Europe. Only a few years earlier, the idea that dozens of European leaders would gather in Yerevan to discuss the future of the continent would have seemed improbable, almost surreal.

For Pashinyan, the summits represented a powerful validation of the strategic course he has pursued since the collapse of the old security order in the South Caucasus. Images of European presidents and prime ministers walking through Yerevan, speaking of partnership, connectivity, resilience, visa liberalization, investment, and democratic reforms, offered something Armenian politics has rarely possessed since independence: the feeling that the country was no longer standing alone at the edge of geopolitical isolation. The symbolism mattered enormously. In post-Soviet political culture, international recognition is deeply intertwined with domestic legitimacy.

Just as importantly, the meetings were accompanied by actionable promises and visible political gestures: discussions on visa liberalization with the European Union, financial support packages, infrastructure and connectivity projects, assistance against hybrid threats, and broader commitments to Armenia's economic resilience and institutional modernization. A joint declaration on strategic partnership was signed with France. In a society exhausted by war, insecurity, and decades of dependency, these promises of openness and development possess immense electoral weight.

> ***For many ordinary Armenians, Europe is not primarily an ideological abstraction. It represents mobility, stability, functioning institutions, educational opportunities for their children, protection from renewed isolation, and the hope of a more predictable future.***

For many ordinary Armenians, Europe is not primarily an ideological abstraction. It represents mobility, stability, functioning institutions, educational opportunities for their children, protection from renewed isolation, and the hope of a more predictable future. The sight of Armenia hosting a major European summit, therefore, reinforced one of Pashinyan's central political arguments: that his strategy of normalization, diversification, and gradual integration with the West is a real and tangible process already underway.

More indirectly, Türkiye and Azerbaijan also paradoxically strengthen Nikol Pashinyan's position. The cautiously benevolent attitude of both Ankara and Baku ahead of Armenia's 2026 elections reflects a broader regional preference for stability and predictability. Rumors continue to circulate about a partial opening of the Turkish-Armenian border and the gradual normalization of trade relations. For the first time in decades, Turkish exports can officially enter Armenia directly rather than through Georgia, reducing costs and easing economic ties.

Many in both Yerevan and Ankara believe Türkiye would move much faster toward normalization were it not for Azerbaijani caution, as Baku fears losing leverage in future peace negotiations.

The potential of Turkish-Armenian normalization, economic, political, and even strategic, is widely seen as enormous. Many Armenians perceive far fewer psychological barriers toward normalizing relations with Turks than with Azerbaijanis, where the trauma of war remains fresh. Even if a peace treaty with Azerbaijan eventually emerges, it will likely remain a cautious peace between governments long before it becomes reconciliation between societies. Still, after more than three decades of conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan have entered an unprecedented phase of direct dialogue focused on transport, transit routes, and regional connectivity, increasingly viewing Russia less as a guarantor of stability than as a source of instability itself. This convergence is visible both symbolically and concretely. The fact that two powerful oligarchs linked to Moscow, figures the Kremlin once hoped to use as central instruments of its regional influence, ended up imprisoned almost simultaneously, one in Armenia (Samuel Karapetyan) and the other in Azerbaijan (Ruben Vardanyan, the former state minister of Nagorno-Karabakh), carries deep political significance. In both cases, the message is that the Russian interference in domestic and regional affairs is no longer welcome.

> ***For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia now finds itself in simultaneous confrontation with both Baku and Yerevan.***

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia now finds itself in simultaneous confrontation with both Baku and Yerevan, through tensions surrounding the AZAL plane incident, pressure on the Azerbaijani diaspora, and attempts to destabilize Nikol Pashinyan's government. Instead of preserving its influence in the South Caucasus, Moscow is increasingly alienating both capitals. Particularly striking was Azerbaijan's public readiness to supply gas to Armenia amid Russia's economic coercion. Azerbaijan has also begun serving as a transit corridor for Armenian cargo from Central Asia, an almost unimaginable development only a few years ago.

Fatigue, Polarization, and the Limits of Transformation

For all its confidence, the ruling party in these elections is carrying deep vulnerabilities of its own. The atmosphere inside the CC is no longer one of revolutionary enthusiasm, but of cautious determination. Peace and relative stability have strengthened the government's position, yet the ideology at the center of Pashinyan's political project, the idea of a "Real Armenia", divides Armenian society almost as much as it inspires it.

To Pashinyan's supporters, it is a painful but necessary attempt to reconcile the country with reality, modernize the state, and escape the cycles of dependency and permanent historical trauma. To his opponents, however, it represents something close to ideological surrender.

The opposition attacks this concept relentlessly, portraying it as a betrayal of Armenia's historical identity and national mission. In their narrative, Pashinyan is the man who accepted the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, who effectively recognized Azerbaijani sovereignty over the territory, and who replaced national dignity with compromise. From this perspective, he is regularly depicted as submissive to Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, sometimes even accused of serving Turkish or Azerbaijani interests. Before that, the same political imagination had already branded him an "agent" of George Soros.

These accusations are accompanied by a constant flow of disinformation and political mythology: rumors that he secretly promised to build mosques

in Armenia at Türkiye's request, or that he intended to strip Karabakh war veterans of their medals and honors. Most of these stories collapse under scrutiny, yet they continue to resonate with a significant segment of society wounded by defeat, humiliation, and uncertainty.

At the same time, Pashinyan now faces the inevitable fatigue that comes with power itself. The revolutionary leader of 2018 has become an incumbent. The image of the outsider fighting a corrupt system has gradually faded. Eight years in office inevitably produce disappointment, routine, frustration, and accumulated grievances.

> ***The opposition seeks to transform him from a symbol of change into a symbol of exhaustion: no longer the man who challenged the system, but the man now associated with Armenia's hardships and painful compromises.***

The trauma of the 2020 war and the final loss of Nagorno-Karabakh accelerated this erosion dramatically. Even if Pashinyan's message of peace and normalization still appeals to many Armenians exhausted by conflict, a portion of his original electorate has grown disillusioned, some because reforms seem too slow, others because economic and social frustrations remain unresolved, and still others because they cannot emotionally accept the new geopolitical realities he is asking the country to embrace. The opposition seeks to transform him from a symbol of change into a symbol of exhaustion: no longer the man who challenged the system, but the man now associated with Armenia's hardships and painful compromises.

The government's difficulties are increasingly visible in Yerevan and among younger voters. While CC remains stronger in rural areas and among older populations, the capital has become far more contested, with the party now governing through coalition politics. The opposition also demonstrated its potential strength in Gyumri, where populist figure Vardan Ghukasyan won the mayoral election with broad opposition backing. Younger Armenians remain divided between frustration with slow reforms and rejection of Pashinyan's "Real Armenia" vision. In response, Nikol Pashinyan has embraced a highly personalized, social media-driven style of politics centered on accessibility, authenticity, and constant emotional proximity to society.

Another complex factor in the 2026 elections concerns the diaspora, refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, and the tense relationship between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church. Because Armenia does not allow voting abroad, a system that generally favors Nikol Pashinyan, the opposition reportedly hopes to mobilize Armenian citizens from Russia and Georgia, particularly Javakheti, alongside many of the roughly 100,000 Karabakh refugees, deeply hostile toward the government. Together, these groups could represent up to 5% of the electorate. Meanwhile, relations with the Church sharply deteriorated after the loss of Karabakh, with parts of the clergy openly accusing Pashinyan of betrayal. Although the government appears to have regained some ground, tensions remain deeply alive beneath the surface.

The Opposition of Old Elites and New Oligarchs

Perhaps Nikol Pashinyan's greatest advantage in the 2026 elections is not his own popularity, but the weakness and fragmentation of the opposition itself. Much of it remains associated in public memory with corruption, oligarchic privilege, political cynicism, and dependence on Russia, making even dissatisfied voters reluctant to support it. The opposition landscape resembles less a unified political force than a constellation of former elites, nationalist groups, oligarchic networks, and competing personalities united mainly by hostility toward the government and skepticism toward peace with Azerbaijan and

Türkiye. Many still believe Armenia's security ultimately depends on close alignment with Moscow. Alongside them exist several openly pro-European parties, such as Republic and For the Republic, but despite media visibility, they remain electorally marginal.

Within this fragmented landscape, one of the most revealing new phenomena is Strong Armenia, a party built less on ideology or organization than on money, visibility, and the figure of its founder, Samvel Karapetyan. Head of the Tashir Group and deeply embedded in Russian economic networks, Karapetyan long cultivated the image of a discreet benefactor, especially through support for the Armenian Apostolic Church, before openly calling for regime change and later being arrested over allegations linked to coup preparations. Many observers in Yerevan believe Moscow encouraged his political rise as a fresher alternative to discredited former elites such as Robert Kocharyan.

Ideologically, Strong Armenia firmly belongs to the pro-Russian camp, advocating restored ties with Moscow while presenting Karapetyan as an efficient "manager" capable of rebuilding state power. Backed by vast financial resources, aggressive digital campaigning, and support from Russian media figures such as Vladimir Solovyov, the movement has quickly become one of the most visible opposition forces. Yet its close association with Russia also remains its greatest weakness, particularly after Vladimir Putin publicly intervened in Karapetyan's favor. The ruling party constantly mocks his Russian ties, with Pashinyan himself frequently referring to him as "Kaluzhskii," a reference to the Russian city where the oligarch built much of his career.

Kocharyan and the Old Opposition

Among the more established opposition forces, the Armenia Alliance, led by former president Robert Kocharyan, remains a major actor. Closely aligned with nationalist forces such as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), the alliance promotes a hard line on Nagorno-Karabakh and strong strategic ties with Russia. Yet Kocharyan continues to suffer from his association with the 1998–2008 period, widely remembered for corruption, oligarchic rule, and dependence on Moscow, summarized by critics through the slogan: "Make Armenia 1998 Again."

Another weakened but still relevant figure is oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of Prosperous Armenia, once a major political force but significantly weakened after failing to gain entry to parliament in 2021. Meanwhile, even Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, historically associated with a more intellectual and balanced geopolitical line, has gradually drifted into the anti-Pashinyan camp. Altogether, the opposition retains genuine mobilization potential but remains weakened by fragmentation, competing ambitions, and the lack of a coherent alternative vision.

Participation, Fragmentation, and the Difficult Morning After

A little more than three weeks before the vote, all available polling, whether from independent organizations such as the International Republican Institute (IRI) or from respected Armenian institutes, points broadly in the same direction: the ruling party maintains a clear lead. A more recent (May) opinion poll showed an even wider gap between CC and its closest rival, Karapetyan's Strong Armenia.

> ***Armenia's electoral atmosphere is marked less by passion than by a strange political fatigue, a kind of quiet detachment that coexists with intense polarization within a relatively small but highly mobilized political minority.***

Yet this apparent advantage is obscured by an extraordinary level of uncertainty. In most surveys, nearly 40% of respondents either describe themselves as undecided or refuse to reveal their preference altogether. Armenia's electoral atmosphere is marked less by passion than by a strange political fatigue, a kind of quiet detachment that coexists with intense polarization within a relatively small but highly mobilized political minority.

In such conditions, turnout becomes the decisive variable. Participation stood at around 48-50% in the last two national elections. For a genuine transfer of power to become plausible, turnout would probably need to rise to at least 60 or even 65%. Otherwise, low mobilization mechanically favors the ruling party, whose organizational machinery remains far more disciplined and better able to bring its voters to the polls.

Under these circumstances, two elements appear essential if the opposition hopes to reverse the current dynamic. The first is a major surge in voter mobilization, which itself depends on whether opposition forces can offer something more convincing than anger alone, a coherent political alternative rather than a purely protest-driven campaign, especially on the central issue of peace, a terrain currently dominated by the government.

The second factor is unity. The opposition's chances depend heavily on its ability to overcome personal rivalries and form a broad coalition. That remains uncertain. Relations between Samvel Karapetyan and former president Robert Kocharyan are strained, with Karapetyan unwilling to inherit the political baggage associated with the old elite.

The opposition, despite significant financial resources, especially around Samvel Karapetyan, continues to suffer from a lack of administrative networks and local organizational depth, limiting its ability to mobilize undecided or apathetic voters.

This question is all the more important because Armenia's electoral system imposes a 4% threshold for parties running independently and 8% for coalitions, increasing the risk of wasted votes and parliamentary exclusion. In a fragmented political landscape, arithmetic can become decisive.

At this stage, a victory for the ruling party still appears the most probable outcome. Yet even such a victory would leave the deeper problem of legitimacy in a society marked more by fatigue than by enthusiasm unresolved. What has weakened is not the government's administrative authority, but its emotional connection with parts of society. Even if Civil Contract wins again, it will still face the challenge of rebuilding trust and giving clearer substance to the idea of "Real Armenia," which many citizens continue to perceive as abstract or divisive. Armenian politics also remembers well that the previous ruling elite won the 2017 elections comfortably, only to collapse one year later during the Velvet Revolution.

> ***Nothing will come automatically: neither peace, nor Europe, nor normalization, nor sovereignty. The elections may determine Armenia's direction, but the difficult part will begin the morning after.***

The period after the elections may prove even more difficult than the campaign itself. Azerbaijan and Türkiye could adopt firmer positions once the vote is over, while the European Union will expect concrete reforms in exchange for deeper integration and possible visa liberalization. At the same time, Russia is likely to intensify economic pressure, trade restrictions, hybrid operations, and disinformation campaigns. Nothing will come automatically: neither peace, nor Europe, nor normalization, nor sovereignty. The elections may determine Armenia's direction, but the difficult part will begin the morning after ■

Armenia's Road to Schengen: Reform, Security, and the Politics of Visa Liberalization

EU Regulation 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council divides third countries into two categories: those whose citizens are required to obtain visas when crossing the external borders of the EU and the Schengen Area, and those whose nationals are exempt from this requirement. At the time of writing, citizens of 102 countries still need visas to travel to the EU and Schengen states. Armenia is among them.

According to the Global Passport Index, Armenian citizens currently enjoy visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to 80 of the world's 198 countries. This places the Armenian passport below those of all its immediate neighbors: Georgian passport holders can travel without a visa to 131 countries, Turkish citizens to 121, and Azerbaijani nationals to 82. That picture, however, may gradually change. The South Caucasus country has now entered a process that could eventually grant its citizens visa-free travel to 29 EU and Schengen Area states.

In November 2025, as part of Armenia's deepening rapprochement with the European Union, Brussels handed the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) to the Armenian authorities. The document is structured around four thematic blocks - document security, integrated border management, migration and asylum, public order and security, and external relations and fundamental rights- and contains 74 benchmarks that Armenia must fulfill.

The VLAP divides the reform process into two phases: first, the adoption of the required legislation; second, an assessment of its implementation and enforcement. The EU has committed to supporting these reforms both technically and financially through the Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia.

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Brussels' Real Test: More Than VLAP Compliance

VLAP implementation is only one dimension of the EU's evaluation. In parallel, Brussels has established a broader set of criteria it will apply when assessing whether to abolish short-term visa requirements for Armenian citizens. These include the visa refusal rate for Armenian applicants in EU and Schengen member states; the number of Armenian nationals refused entry at EU external borders or found to be irregularly resident in the Union; the volume of return decisions and actual returns to Armenia; the number of asylum applications submitted by Armenian citizens in the EU; and an overall assessment of the potential migratory and security implications of future visa liberalization. Should the process conclude successfully, the EU would amend Regulation 2018/1806 by removing Armenia from the list of countries whose nationals are required to hold visas when crossing the external borders of EU member states.

Early Momentum, Structural Challenges

Six months after handing over the VLAP to Armenia, the European Commission published its first progress report on implementation on April 30. The document highlights substantial progress achieved by Armenian authorities in a relatively short period. In several areas, Armenia is already well advanced in fulfilling the benchmarks. Nevertheless, significant work still lies ahead not only in adopting legislation but also in strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring effective implementation.

Among the early achievements, Armenia has laid the legal foundation for a unified state population registry; completed the public tender for the issuance of biometric ID cards and passports, expected to begin in the second half of 2026; assumed full responsibility for border checks at official crossing points with Georgia and Iran and at the country's international airports; and updated the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code to incorporate revised definitions of human trafficking and exploitation.

Despite this progress, the report outlines 53 recommendations that Armenian authorities must still address. These are distributed across the four thematic blocks of the VLAP: eight under document security; 15 under integrated border management, migration, and asylum; 20 under public order and security; and 10 under external relations and fundamental rights.

Several of the remaining reform priorities deserve particular attention. On human trafficking, the U.S. State Department's 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIR) places Armenia in the Tier 2 category, indicating that while the government does not yet fully meet minimum standards for eliminating trafficking, it is making significant efforts to do so.

Armenia is also expected to adopt a Law on the Prevention of and Protection from Discrimination, a measure facing resistance from conservative groups within the country. The draft law designates the Human Rights Defender of Armenia as the principal equality body, which will require both institutional capacity-building and additional financial resources. Armenia has yet to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), another politically sensitive commitment likely to encounter domestic opposition.

In parallel, despite substantial efforts to support the integration of more than 115,000 displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, the long-term integration of this population remains a significant social and economic challenge. Armenia must also establish an independent national Data Protection Authority with a clear legal mandate, autonomous governance structures, and sufficient human, technical, and financial resources.

A notable asset in the process is the strong political will demonstrated by Armenia's executive branch. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has been designated as the principal body responsible for coordinating VLAP implementation. In this regard, Armenia has followed the model used by Western Balkan countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, where Ministries of Internal Affairs coordinated the reform process, rather than the more recent examples of Georgia and Moldova, where Ministries of Foreign Affairs led the efforts.

Border Management and the Russia Factor

One particularly sensitive issue concerns Armenia's border governance arrangements with Russia. Although Armenian border guards now exercise full responsibility at official border crossing points with Georgia, Iran, and the country's international airports, the situation along sections of Armenia's external borders remains more complex.

Under bilateral agreements dating back to the early post-Soviet period, Russian border guards continue to participate in the protection of Armenia's borders with Türkiye and Iran. Following the deterioration of Armenia-Russia relations after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and especially after 2022, Yerevan has gradually sought to reduce its dependence on Russian security structures. Nevertheless, Russian border guards still maintain a presence along segments of the Armenian - Turkish and Armenian - Iranian borders, including through joint patrol arrangements.

For the European Union, this issue goes beyond technical border management. Effective control over external borders is viewed as a core component of state sovereignty, institutional capacity, and security governance. In previous visa liberalization processes involving the Western Balkans, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, Brussels consistently emphasized that border management should be exercised fully by national authorities accountable to their own state institutions.

> ***The gradual transfer of border-management responsibilities from Russian to Armenian authorities is likely to become an increasingly important political and symbolic benchmark within the broader visa liberalization process.***

As a result, the gradual transfer of border-management responsibilities from Russian to Armenian authorities is likely to become an increasingly important political and symbolic benchmark within the broader visa liberalization process. While the EU is unlikely to demand abrupt changes that could destabilize Armenia's security environment, Brussels will nevertheless expect a clear long-term trajectory toward autonomous Armenian control over border governance.

Migration, Security, and the EU's Risk Calculus

Beyond VLAP compliance, the EU will closely scrutinize a broad range of statistical indicators before any visa-free decision is made.

The number of Armenian citizens applying for EU and Schengen visas increased tenfold between 2020 and 2024, rising from 10,017 applications in 2020 to 100,352 in 2024. At the same time, the visa refusal rate remained relatively stable at approximately 12–13%. The financial burden on Armenian applicants has also been considerable. In 2024 alone, Armenian citizens spent more than EUR 8 million on visa application fees, while cumulative expenditures between 2014 and 2024 are estimated at approximately EUR 50 million.

Another important indicator concerns refusals of entry at the EU's external borders. According to Eurostat, the numbers remain relatively low and continue to decline: 640 people in 2022, 470 in 2023, 395 in 2024, and 275 in 2025.

Armenian citizens are likewise not among the leading groups seeking asylum in the EU. Eurostat data demonstrates a broader downward trend in first-time asylum applications: 4,470 in 2022; 5,175 in 2023; 4,330 in 2024; and 2,865 in 2025.

Approximately 80% of these applications are concentrated in France and Germany, while the recognition rate stands at only 3%. Eight EU member states - Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, France, and the Netherlands - already classify Armenia as a safe country of origin.

One of the most common grounds cited by Armenian asylum seekers relates to healthcare access. This issue may gradually be mitigated through the introduction of Armenia's Universal Health Insurance system, launched in January 2026 and expected to cover the entire population by 2029.

A further issue concerns the possible alignment of Armenia's visa policy with that of the European Union. Brussels may eventually require Armenia to introduce visa requirements for nationals of countries currently exempt under Armenian law but subject to EU visa restrictions. At present, citizens of Belarus, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and several other states may enter Armenia without visas.

> ***Such alignment could have significant economic implications, particularly for Armenia's tourism sector. In 2025, Russian citizens accounted for approximately 40% of all tourists visiting the country, followed by visitors from Georgia and Iran.***

Such alignment could have significant economic implications, particularly for Armenia's tourism sector. In 2025, Russian citizens accounted for approximately 40% of all tourists visiting the country, followed by visitors from Georgia and Iran.

It might also affect foreign students from Iran and Russia pursuing their studies in Armenia.

Finally, the activity of Armenian organized criminal networks in several EU member states is likely to feature prominently in the EU's security assessment. This risk could be mitigated through enhanced cooperation with Eurojust, Europol, and Frontex, as well as through the deployment of police attachés in partner countries where such networks are particularly active.

The Political Window Is Open — But Not Indefinitely

There is clear political will on both sides of the process. The EU has provided Armenia with a roadmap, while Armenian authorities have demonstrated early momentum in implementing reforms. The central question is therefore no longer whether Armenia can eventually achieve visa-free travel with the EU, but rather, how quickly it can do so.

> ***Armenia's trajectory will depend not only on the pace of domestic reforms, but also on political dynamics within the European Union itself.***

The experience of other Eastern European countries demonstrates that timelines vary considerably. Moldova completed the process within three years, Georgia within four, and Ukraine within seven. Armenia's trajectory will depend not only on the pace of domestic reforms, but also on political dynamics within the European Union itself.

A key challenge is that many VLAP benchmarks remain broadly formulated, leaving room for differing interpretations. To avoid benchmarks becoming "moving targets," Armenian authorities should develop a detailed implementation roadmap with clear internal deadlines and maintain continuous coordination with EU institutions and member states.

Domestic politics will also matter. Following the June 2026 parliamentary elections, the new parliament will need to assume greater ownership of the process, particularly regarding politically sensitive reforms such as anti-discrimination legislation and ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

At the same time, Armenia's visa liberalization process will unfold against a changing political climate in Europe. The growing influence of anti-immigration and right-wing populist forces in several EU member states could complicate efforts to secure unanimous political support for visa-free travel. For that reason, Yerevan will need to engage not only with EU foreign ministries but also with interior ministries, which often view visa liberalization primarily through a security lens.

Armenia must also take into account the EU's institutional calendar and aim to complete the core phase of VLAP implementation before the mandates of the current European Commission and European Parliament expire.

> ***While Armenia must carry the political burden of the process alone, successful implementation of reforms could also allow it to advance independently, without waiting for others to move forward alongside it.***

Finally, Armenia's case remains unique. Unlike the Western Balkan countries or other Eastern Partnership states, Armenia is pursuing visa liberalization alone, without a broader regional enlargement framework or coordinated lobbying effort. This creates both risks and opportunities: while Armenia must carry the political burden of the process alone, successful implementation of reforms could also allow it to advance independently, without waiting for others to move forward alongside it ■

Artofficial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become one of the most powerful tools in the modern state's toolkit for governance, surveillance, and social control. It is among the most transformative developments in human history. Like the printing press, electricity, and the internet, AI is reshaping how societies communicate, govern, wage war, create wealth, and distribute power. Unlike earlier technological revolutions, however, AI has a distinctly political character: it can observe, predict, persuade, manipulate, and make decisions at an unprecedented scale. Governments and political leaders around the world are rapidly integrating AI into statecraft, administration, security, and political messaging. Although AI promises greater efficiency in public services, predictive analytics, and resource allocation, its use by governments often blurs the boundary between legitimate administration and authoritarian oversight. Examples from Asia, the Middle East, North America, Europe, and elsewhere reveal patterns of "digital authoritarianism," in which technology expands state power, often at the expense of privacy, civil liberties, and democratic processes.

Some doomsday scenarios predict the collapse of individual freedom, economic competitiveness, liberalism, and even democracy itself, culminating in the singularity - a hypothetical moment when artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence and triggers uncontrollable technological growth that irreversibly transforms civilization.

> ***While the AI revolution is undeniably real and already pervasive, governments and politicians are still pursuing an old objective with a new tool: preserving power and control.***

Yet while the AI revolution is undeniably real and already pervasive, governments and politicians are still pursuing an old objective with a new tool: preserving power and control.

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Out of the Box (and Control) Toolbox

The struggle to gain and retain power is as old as human history, but the tools enabled by AI are unprecedented. For that reason, they deserve closer examination.

Mass Surveillance: AI-powered monitoring systems that combine CCTV footage, facial recognition, and Wi-Fi sniffers can restrict free speech and assembly. These systems allow authorities to monitor large gatherings, track political opponents, and deepen the fear of a constant "watchful eye." As a result, AI surveillance speeds up the identification, deterrence, suppression, and punishment of dissent while reinforcing loyalty and preempting opposition.

Monitoring and manipulating social media: Governments collect vast amounts of social media data for intelligence, law enforcement, immigration control, and "situational awareness." Agencies often rely on third-party vendors for keyword searches, sentiment analysis, geolocation, network mapping, and predictive analytics. These tools scan public posts, hashtags, and social connections at scale. Instead of simply observing, the governments now shape online narratives through influence operations, disinformation campaigns, and information warfare. State-sponsored propaganda and troll farms are common. Russia's Internet Research Agency, China's "50 Cent Army" and United Front operations, Iran, and others use networks of accounts, bots, and state media to amplify messages, sow division, and support regime interests. Typical tactics include fake news, conspiracy theories, coordinated posting, and impersonation.

Disinformation and Information Control: Generative AI makes it easy to produce deepfakes, personalized propaganda, and synthetic media at scale, flooding elections, damaging candidates, and creating confusion. Deepfakes can spread false narratives, erode trust in institutions, deepen divisions, and weaken adversaries.

Internationally, Russia has circulated deepfakes of U.S. officials making false statements about Ukraine policy. Iran has produced waves of AI-generated videos during conflicts, showing fabricated strikes or events. China has integrated AI into broader influence campaigns.

Domestically, political actors also create fake content aimed at voters. Examples include audio deepfakes that mimic politicians and videos designed to smear candidates. In several elections, deepfakes have portrayed leaders rigging votes or making inflammatory statements. State-linked networks use such content to intensify polarization or promote preferred outcomes, weakening informed consent and electoral integrity.

> ***AI-driven repression has become a growing trend in which governments use technology to punish dissent and prevent collective political action before it gains momentum.***

Data Integration: Governments can combine vast datasets, including social media, surveillance feeds, public records, commercial data, and biometrics, with AI to enable sophisticated political manipulation, from predictive profiling and targeted influence to preemptive repression and narrative control. This merges surveillance with actionable insights and automated operations, amplifying both legitimate security uses and the risks of overreach or authoritarian control. AI-driven repression has become a growing trend in which governments use technology to punish dissent and prevent collective political action before it gains momentum. In this model, data integration becomes predictive and preventive: it identifies networks, maps activists, monitors communication patterns, and discourages mobilization through fear of exposure. Such measures leave opponents with little chance of replacing those in power through peaceful means such as free and fair elections.

The effects of these practices are already visible worldwide. They erode trust, chill speech, deepen inequalities, especially through bias against minorities, and consolidate power. Autocracies become more efficient at repression, while democracies risk drifting toward authoritarianism. Without transparency, accountability, and human oversight, algorithms can become unaccountable rulers. Although AI can improve safety and efficiency, the risks of abuse, suppressed dissent, manipulated elections, and stratified societies are clear and rather imminent.

What Can I Buy with AI?

Even a brief look at several major powers shows how strongly AI is enhancing the ability of governments and political elites to exercise control over their populations.

China is the most advanced and widely cited example of AI-enabled population control. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has integrated AI into a vast surveillance system that includes facial recognition, predictive analytics, and the Social Credit System (SCS). With more than 200 million surveillance cameras across the country, AI processes real-time data for identification, behavior scoring, and preemptive intervention. Actions such as traffic violations, financial defaults, or online criticism can lower a person's score, leading to restrictions on travel, loans, or employment. Political offenses, including petitioning officials, are heavily penalized. In regions such as Xinjiang, AI is used with particular intensity against Uyghur Muslims, flagging "suspicious" behavior, such as religious practice or certain contacts, for detention in re-education camps. AI analyzes phone data, social media activity, and camera feeds to predict and prevent unrest. It also automates censorship on platforms like WeChat, monitors inmates in prison, and forecasts demonstrations. Combined with the Great Firewall, AI helps create an information environment in which dissent is detected and suppressed algorithmically. This system not only controls the population but also shapes political loyalty by making surveillance constant and punishment predictable.

As the world's largest democracy, India presents a hybrid case in which AI supports both welfare delivery and state control. Aadhaar, the world's largest biometric database, assigns each person a unique 12-digit ID linked to fingerprints, iris scans, and facial data. Although designed to promote inclusion and improve service delivery, it also enables extensive tracking when connected to other databases. Critics warn of "Aadhaar creep," in which biometric authentication spreads into welfare, banking, hotels, and other areas, expanding surveillance risks. Data breaches and private-sector access have further raised concerns about profiling and the exclusion of vulnerable groups.

Police have also deployed AI-powered facial recognition technology (FRT) and Automated Facial Recognition Systems (AFRS). During the 2020 anti-CAA protests, Delhi Police used FRT to identify and track demonstrators, raising constitutional concerns under Articles 19 and 21, which protect freedom of expression and privacy. Predictive policing tools analyze data to identify hotspots, sometimes disproportionately targeting minorities. Internet shutdowns in places such as Kashmir further reinforce digital control by limiting political mobilization.

Singapore's Smart Nation initiative uses AI, Internet of Things sensors, and predictive analytics to manage the city-state more efficiently and responsively. Cameras, lamppost sensors, and integrated data platforms track traffic, crowds, littering, and public behavior, while AI analyzes this information in real time to guide adjustments.

Although often praised for improving safety and convenience, this system also raises concerns about self-censorship in a highly monitored environment. Facial recognition and behavioral monitoring, combined with strict laws on speech and assembly, reinforce social control. Singapore has also exported

this "smart" authoritarian-lite model, pairing strong public trust in government with pervasive surveillance.

Authoritarian regimes across the Middle East are also rapidly adopting AI for preemptive control. In Egypt, AI is used to monitor social media for dissent-related keywords to head off protests following the Arab Spring. Iran uses AI to monitor internet traffic, enforce moral policing, and target activists, including those abroad, through hacking. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are investing heavily in facial recognition, predictive policing, and "Safe City" initiatives, integrating AI into broader security strategies and development agendas such as Vision 2030.

Bahrain and other states deploy spyware and AI-driven monitoring against opposition groups. Gulf countries also export these technologies, sometimes with indirect support from EU-funded programs, intensifying repression in Palestine and elsewhere through checkpoints and migration control. In the future, AI-based conflict forecasting could help regimes predict and suppress unrest before it begins, further entrenching their power.

Russia uses AI for both domestic surveillance and foreign influence. Facial recognition helps track anti-Putin protesters in Moscow, while AI monitors social media for criticism of the war in Ukraine or support for the opposition, often labeling such content "extremist."

Internationally, Russia is a leading user of AI-driven disinformation, employing generative tools for deepfakes, bots, and tailored propaganda to influence elections. These tactics sow division, intensify polarization, and undermine trust in democratic institutions without the use of direct military force.

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Even liberal democracies show troubling trends. In the United States, AI surveillance has expanded through contractors such as Palantir, which supports ICE by aggregating location and social media data for profiling, including that of protesters. Social media screening in visa decisions and programs like "Catch and Revoke" have also targeted political expression. Predictive policing systems such as PredPol in Los Angeles and the Strategic Subject List in Chicago have faced criticism for bias and disproportionate policing of minority communities, though some have since been discontinued.

AI and the New Architecture of Control in Georgia

The Georgian government's growing use of digital technologies against political dissent has become one of the most troubling indicators of the country's democratic deterioration. While surveillance and political monitoring are not new phenomena in Georgia, recent developments suggest a transition from traditional forms of observation toward more sophisticated systems that increasingly incorporate automated data processing and facial recognition technologies.

Georgian civil society organizations, journalists, and international watchdogs have documented growing concerns over the use of surveillance technologies during anti-government and pro-European demonstrations.

Over the past two years, Georgian civil society organizations, journalists, and international watchdogs have documented growing concerns over the use of surveillance technologies during anti-government and pro-European demonstrations. Human Rights Watch, in its assessments of democratic backsliding and state responses to protests in Georgia, has noted a broader deterioration of civic freedoms and an increase in pressure on protesters and critics of the government.

One of the clearest examples concerns the increasing use of AI-assisted surveillance cameras during mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Civic watchdog organizations and independent media investigations have reported substantial expansion of surveillance infrastructure around key protest locations and public gathering areas. According to the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), authorities have increasingly relied on facial recognition technologies and surveillance footage in cases against demonstrators, raising serious concerns about legality, privacy protections, and due process.

The concern extends beyond the existence of cameras themselves. Modern surveillance systems no longer merely record events, but also analyze them. Artificial intelligence allows authorities to automate identification processes, connect individuals across multiple data sources, and create behavioral profiles at a scale previously impossible. Such systems can identify patterns, social relationships, and repeated participation in political activities. The result is a shift from reactive policing to predictive and preventive monitoring.

International experience demonstrates where such developments can lead. In Russia, facial recognition systems have reportedly been used to identify opposition activists and anti-war demonstrators after protests ended. Human Rights Watch warned that such technologies create serious risks for freedom of assembly and privacy rights because individuals may avoid participating in protests if they know they can later be identified and punished. Similar concerns increasingly apply to Georgia, which seems to be on the Russian track of governance.

In Russia, facial recognition systems have reportedly been used to identify opposition activists and anti-war demonstrators after protests ended. Human Rights Watch warned that such technologies create serious risks for freedom of assembly and privacy rights because individuals may avoid participating in protests if they know they can later be identified and punished.

The lawyers representing protesters have argued that the use of facial recognition risks creating an environment where participation in political activity itself becomes associated with personal legal exposure. Individuals may face fines, administrative sanctions, detention, or criminal investigations not because of unlawful conduct but because of their identifiable presence in politically sensitive spaces. The psychological effect of such systems may be as important as their technical capability. Citizens who believe they are permanently watched may begin to self-censor before any formal action is taken against them.

A future and potentially even more troubling risk concerns the expanding relationship between governments and major artificial intelligence providers. Although there is no evidence, except for rumors, that the Georgian government has sought access to private conversations or prompts from platforms such as ChatGPT or Claude, the possibility raises significant concerns for democratic societies. AI companies maintain policies under which they may respond to legally binding requests from law enforcement authorities under certain conditions.

In an increasingly authoritarian political environment, one can imagine a scenario in which

governments attempt to broaden the scope of lawful information requests. Opposition activists, journalists, researchers, and political organizers increasingly use AI systems to organize their work, prepare legal arguments, plan campaigns, brainstorm political strategies, or simply explore controversial ideas privately. If governments were to gain legal access to such conversations through court orders or expanded legal authorities, AI interactions could become a new source of political intelligence.

The broader concern, therefore, extends beyond cameras in the streets or surveillance at protests. The deeper issue involves the emergence of an ecosystem of digital governance in which surveillance systems, biometric technologies, social media monitoring, and artificial intelligence become interconnected. In such a system, repression no longer begins when citizens take political action. It begins earlier - when they search, communicate, organize, or simply think.

Beginning of the End or End of the Beginning?

The apparent success of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in integrating AI into political life raises a legitimate question about the future of democracy and the liberal order. The answer is neither automatically optimistic nor inevitably dystopian. AI can strengthen liberal democracy by improving governance, expanding access to information, and increasing institutional efficiency. Yet it also magnifies existing vulnerabilities such as disinformation, polarization, and surveillance while creating new risks through automated manipulation and the concentration of power.

> ***The apparent success of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in integrating AI into political life raises a legitimate question about the future of democracy and the liberal order. The answer is neither automatically optimistic nor inevitably dystopian.***

The future will be shaped less by technology itself than by the institutions, laws, and political cultures that govern its use. AI significantly expands the state's ability to process information, monitor populations, automate decisions, and shape public discourse. Such concentration of informational power can undermine democratic checks and balances and challenge assumptions on which liberal systems were built.

> ***For decades, many believed that economic modernization would naturally lead to political liberalization. AI complicates that assumption.***

For decades, many believed that economic modernization would naturally lead to political liberalization. AI complicates that assumption. Technologically advanced states may now sustain economic growth while simultaneously strengthening authoritarian control. If authoritarian systems become more stable and efficient through AI, democratic governance may no longer appear universally superior.

Democracy also depends on citizens sharing a common understanding of reality. If political actors flood the information environment with convincing fabrications and synthetic content, trust in institutions and facts may erode. Some scholars describe this as "epistemic instability" — a breakdown of shared standards of truth necessary for democratic debate. When citizens increasingly inhabit separate informational worlds, political compromise becomes far more difficult.

Yet democratic societies retain one critical advantage: openness. Innovation thrives where there is academic freedom, free exchange of ideas, and tolerance for criticism and dissent. Authoritarian systems may deploy AI more aggressively in the short term,

but excessive censorship and conformity can eventually weaken the creativity needed for long-term technological leadership.

Ultimately, the survival of democracy in the AI era depends less on technological capability than on political philosophy. Liberal democracy was never designed to maximize efficiency alone; it rests on limiting concentrated power and preserving human autonomy. AI does not weaken the importance of these principles—it makes them even more essential. The future liberal order will undoubtedly evolve, but its survival will depend on whether democratic societies can adapt without abandoning the values that define them.

> ***The challenge for Georgia and others is not whether AI will enter political life (it already has!) but whether democratic institutions can establish sufficient safeguards before technological capabilities outpace political accountability.***

Georgia increasingly illustrates many of these broader dilemmas in practice. The country's recent democratic backsliding demonstrates how technologies intended for legitimate state functions can become politically sensitive in polarized environments with weak institutional safeguards. The expanding use of surveillance infrastructure during protests, concerns surrounding facial recognition systems, pressure on independent media and civil society, and broader attempts to control political narratives all raise questions about how emerging technologies may be used in the future. In a context where judicial independence and institutional trust are increasingly contested, AI-powered tools could further widen the imbalance between state authorities and political opponents. Georgia, like other increasingly authoritarian states, therefore, risks becoming a testing ground for how digital tools can strengthen political control in transitional democracies. The challenge for Georgia and others is not whether AI will enter political life (it already has!) but whether democratic institutions can establish sufficient safeguards before technological capabilities outpace political accountability ■

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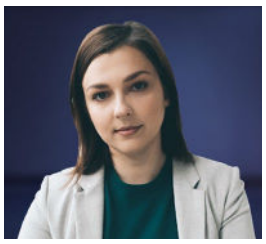

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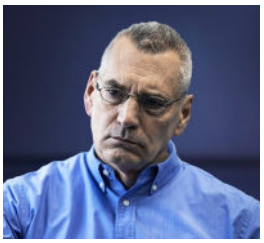

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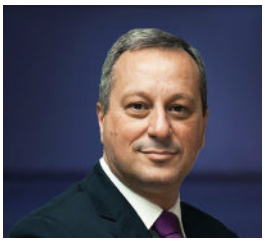
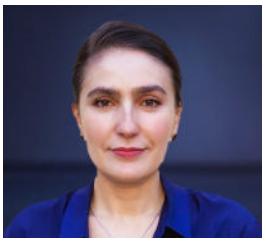


Mustafa Aydın

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

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

Khatia Kikalishvili

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

Denis Cenusa

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

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.

Natalie Sabanadze

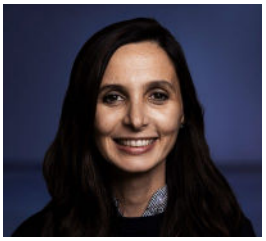
Natalie Sabanadze is Director for Political Affairs and External Relations at the Council of Europe and Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House. A former Georgian Ambassador to the EU and senior OSCE official, she holds a D.Phil from Oxford and has published widely on post-communist transition, nationalism, and Russian foreign policy.

Ghia Nodia

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

Hugues Mingarelli

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



Tefta Kelmendi

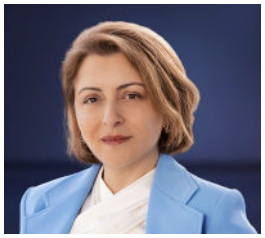
Tefta Kelmendi is Deputy Director for the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her research focuses on EU policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, particularly EU enlargement and democracy promotion.

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

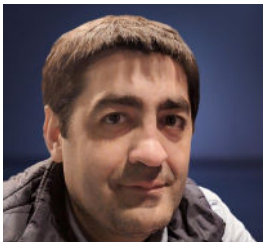
Galip Dalay is a senior fellow at Chatham House and a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on Türkiye, the Middle East, Russian foreign policy, and relations with the West. His work has been published in outlets like Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy.

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

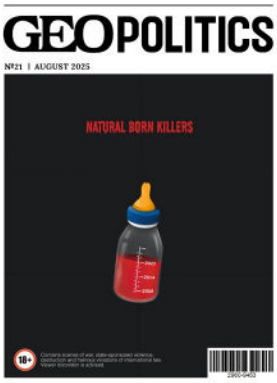
Hans Gutbrod is Professor at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, and former regional director of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers. He has observed elections in Georgia since 1999 and holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics.

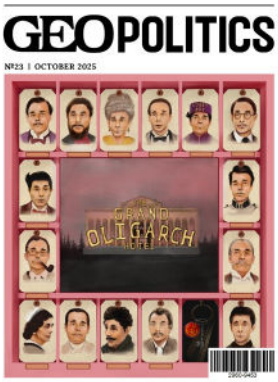


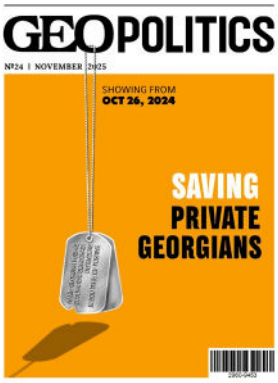
Arsen Kharatyan

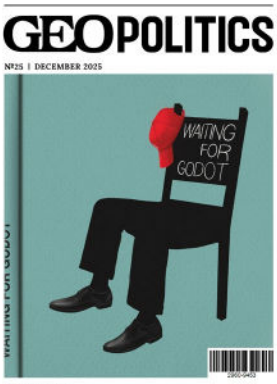
Arsen Kharatyan is the founder and editor-in-chief of Aliq Media. He advised Armenia's Prime Minister on foreign policy after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, worked at Voice of America and GIZ, and holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic, with studies in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason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

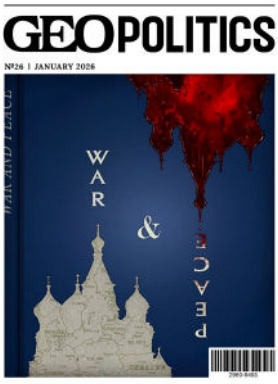
DIGITAL ARCHIVE

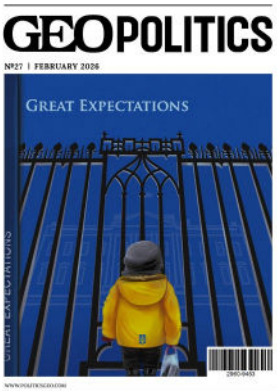


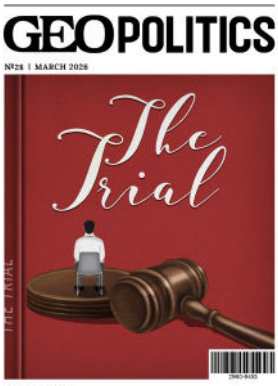












GEOPOLITICS

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