

# GEO POLITICS

№31 | June 2026

*The Unbearable Lightness  
of Being*

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# **GEO POLITICS**

**Issue Nº31**

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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.

# Contributors

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### **Gabrielius Landsbergis** Guest Contributor

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# The Unbearable Lightness of Being Freed from Russia

**A**rmenia's recent parliamentary elections produced a renewed mandate for Nikol Pashinyan and his effort to reduce the country's dependence on Moscow. For much of the post-Soviet period, Armenia was regarded as Russia's most reliable ally in the region, bound to it by security arrangements, a military presence, economic dependence, and the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Today, that relationship is being fundamentally reassessed. The process remains fragile and contested, but it is a testament to a broader shift across the former Soviet space as Russia's ability to shape outcomes beyond its borders steadily erodes. In many ways, Armenia is now confronting what Milan Kundera once described as the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*: the uncertainty, responsibility, and risks that come with suddenly having greater control over one's own destiny.

The significance of this moment extends far beyond Armenia. Ukraine continues to bear the enormous human cost of resisting Russian aggression while reshaping Europe's security architecture. Azerbaijan has positioned itself at the center of emerging Eurasian connectivity networks. Georgia, meanwhile, is moving in a profoundly different direction. While discussions on reengagement between Tbilisi and Washington have resumed, democratic backsliding, political repression, and growing alignment with authoritarian powers continue to deepen. This issue of *GEOPOLITICS* explores these developments through a collection of articles examining

Armenia's geopolitical transformation, the future of Ukraine and European enlargement, Georgia's strategic trajectory, and the wider struggle to shape the post-Russian order now emerging across Eurasia.

Gabrielius Landsbergis opens this issue by reflecting on one of the most striking geopolitical reversals in the post-Soviet space. Only a few years ago, Georgia appeared firmly anchored on a Western trajectory while Armenia seemed trapped within Russia's geopolitical orbit. Today, the picture looks very different. Landsbergis argues that Armenia's gradual but determined turn away from Russia demonstrates both the limits of Russian power and the enduring attraction of the European project. Tracing Yerevan's difficult choices after the Nagorno-Karabakh wars, Russia's failure to uphold its security commitments, and Armenia's efforts to diversify its partnerships, he contends that genuine sovereignty is strengthened through democratic transformation and engagement with Europe. The contrasting experiences of Armenia and Georgia, meanwhile, show how rapidly strategic trajectories can diverge. For Landsbergis, Armenia's experience demonstrates that countries are not condemned to remain within Moscow's sphere of influence and that democratic change remains one of the most powerful geopolitical forces in Europe's eastern neighborhood.

Thornike Gordadze takes the argument further by treating Armenia's post-election moment not as a completed break with Russia, but as the opening of a much harder strategic contest. Pashinyan's victory gave Yerevan a renewed mandate to continue its

westward realignment, yet the article makes clear that leaving Moscow's orbit is not an act of simple political will. It carries costs, vulnerabilities, and risks of retaliation. Russia's military leverage over Armenia has weakened, especially after the failure of the CSTO, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, the erosion of Moscow's credibility as a security guarantor, and Russia's own overstretch in Ukraine. But this does not mean that Russia has disappeared from Armenia's strategic equation. Gordadze shows that Moscow is likely to rely more heavily on the instruments that remain available: economic coercion, market restrictions, gas pricing, control over strategic infrastructure, disinformation, support for destabilizing political forces, and attempts to revive regional formats that exclude the West. Armenia, therefore, finds itself in a rare but dangerous position. It has more room for maneuver than at any point since independence, but it is trying to exit a geopolitical order before an alternative one has fully formed. The article's central warning is sharp: Pashinyan has won the political argument for now, but the real test will be whether Armenia can survive the pressure that comes after choosing a direction.

Jaba Devdariani shifts the focus from Armenia's choice to Europe's capacity to respond. Pashinyan's victory, he argues, was less a decisive pro-Western mandate than a cautious decision to keep Armenia's options open while reducing dependence on Moscow. Strategic balancing remains a product of geography, economic ties, and security realities. For Devdariani, the EU has a significant opportunity in Armenia, but symbolism, summit diplomacy, and emergency aid cannot substitute for the harder work of strengthening institutions, supporting reforms, addressing security vulnerabilities, and countering Russian influence. Drawing lessons from Georgia, he warns that Europe must avoid both complacency toward democratic shortcomings and naivety about the methods Moscow uses to preserve leverage. Armenia may be ready for a closer partnership with Europe, but Europe must demonstrate that it can offer more than political encouragement.

Temuri Yakobashvili zooms out from Armenia to the broader transformation of the post-Soviet space. He argues that Russia's declining dominance has triggered a new race for influence, connectivity, and strategic relevance across Eurasia, accelerated by the war in Ukraine. Ukraine and Azerbaijan emerge as the principal beneficiaries of this shift: Ukraine as a pillar of European security and Azerbaijan as a central actor in the continent's emerging connectivity architecture. At the same time, Türkiye, China, and Central Asian powers are expanding their influence, while post-Soviet states increasingly act as strategic agents rather than objects of great-power competition. For Georgia, this should have been a historic opportunity. Instead, Yakobashvili argues, state capture, authoritarian drift, and deteriorating relations with the West are leaving the country increasingly sidelined in a race it was once well positioned to lead.

Shota Gvineria brings the regional argument back to Georgia and to the limits of Washington's attempted reengagement with Georgian Dream. He argues that any serious American strategy for the South Caucasus, including the TRIPP and the Middle Corridor, depends on a stable, reliable, and Western-oriented democratic Georgia. As the only South Caucasus country with Black Sea access and the infrastructure to connect Azerbaijan, Armenia, Türkiye, and Central Asia to Europe, Georgia remains strategically indispensable; however, geography cannot compensate for state capture and authoritarian rule. Gvineria contends that the Georgian Dream wants the appearance of a "clean slate" with Washington without changing the authoritarian and anti-Western conduct. Business optics, Trump-branded real estate, lobbying channels, and softer diplomatic tone cannot reset the underlying problem: Georgia's security services, judiciary, electoral system, infrastructure-related decisions, and foreign alignment are increasingly shaped by a regime whose survival depends on Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran. For Washington, the choice is therefore between engagement that tests the regime and engagement that the

regime absorbs into its propaganda. A real reset would require that political prisoners be released, repressive laws be repealed, party bans be revoked, and an electoral environment be restored. Anything less gives Georgian Dream legitimacy while leaving the United States without a dependable partner.

Vano Chkhikvadze examines Germany's proposal for Ukraine's "associate membership" in the European Union and the broader debate over gradual integration. While Berlin sees it as a way to keep enlargement moving despite political and financial constraints, Kyiv fears it could become another waiting room rather than a bridge to full membership. Chkhikvadze argues that any such model can only succeed if it is clearly time-bound, linked to accelerated accession negotiations, backed by meaningful access to EU funds and the single market, and supported by credible security arrangements. The debate extends far beyond Ukraine. Moldova, the Western Balkans, and Georgia will judge the proposal through the lens of their own European aspirations, while anti-European actors may use its ambiguities to argue that the EU is preparing a second-class status for its eastern partners. For the author, gradual integration is useful only if it speeds up enlargement rather than postponing it.

Sergi Kapanadze closes the issue by arguing that Georgia must not become a forgotten file in the European security order that follows the

Russia-Ukraine war. Europe, he warns, will repeat the mistake of 2008 if it addresses Ukraine while allowing Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and Transnistria to fade into the background. Distinguishing between Georgia's current government and Georgia's strategic importance, he calls for an active EU anti-annexation policy, stronger monitoring of the occupied territories, targeted sanctions, status-neutral engagement with local populations, and a framework that prevents Russia from using occupation as a veto over European integration. The article also places Georgia within future European arms-control discussions and argues that Russian FIMI operations should be treated as a security threat rather than a communications challenge. Its central message is that a durable European security architecture cannot be built around Ukraine alone while earlier Russian occupations are left unresolved.

Perhaps this is the real meaning of the unbearable lightness of being freed from Russia. Freedom creates opportunities, but it also removes excuses. Armenia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Europe itself are entering a period in which old certainties are disappearing faster than new ones are formed. The future is more open than it was only a few years ago, but it is also more uncertain. How the region responds to that uncertainty may determine the shape of Eurasian politics for decades to come ■

With Respect,  
Editorial Team

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# Armenia's Break From Russia

**W**hen I first [visited](#) the South Caucasus in 2021, the geopolitics of the region looked entirely different. In the short time since my visit, many winds have changed, and many tides have turned.

Back then, Georgia was a pro-Western frontrunner with a track record of reforms. The Georgian Dream government was still pursuing a strategy of apparent determination to move the country towards Western alliances, pulling its institutions out of the swamp of corrupt Russian influences.

Armenia, on the other hand, seemed firmly gripped in Russia's fist and frozen in a conflict with its neighbors. Russian troops were supposedly maintaining the fragile peace, but were in effect enforcing Armenia's subjugation and preventing any change of orbit. Armenia appeared hopelessly dependent on Russian energy sources and investment, and it seemed as if that would remain the case for a very long time.

Nevertheless, I [used](#) my visit to Armenia to underline the strategic benefit of reaching out to Europe. As Lithuania's Minister of Foreign Affairs, my overall

strategy was to support democratic forces wherever and whenever they needed a friend. Lithuania would be that friend. As a smaller state with few military options, I navigated a values-based, pro-democracy path, consistently defending the principle of the rule of law, whatever it took. I also chose to recommend this strategy to other small states in similar predicaments with large, aggressive neighbors.

And so I made the case in Yerevan: Europe can provide more stability and prosperity. During a tête-à-tête meeting with the Prime Minister, I suggested reaching out to Brussels to request a European border mission to help patrol parts of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

And with that mission, a gradual realignment process began. Five years after my visit to offer assistance in a "hopeless" situation — Armenia's pivot to the West is no longer talked about in whispers. The work is progressing and gathering pace. I am convinced that this process can only strengthen Armenia and will certainly allow Armenians more freedom to flourish than Russia will ever provide to those who choose "partnership" with Moscow.



**GABRIELIUS LANDSBERGIS**  
Guest Contributor

Gabrielius Landsbergis is the Bernard and Susan Liautaud Visiting Fellow at Stanford University and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, a post he held from 2020 to 2024. He previously chaired the Homeland Union party and served in the Lithuanian Parliament, the European Parliament, and as a career diplomat in Lithuania's foreign ministry. As foreign minister, he was a leading supporter of Ukraine and an advocate of a firmer European policy toward Russia. He holds an MA in International Relations from Vilnius University.



***The illusion of safety that an imperialistic oppressor attempts to sell to its smaller neighbors is not only a lie but also very fragile.***

I am also certain that Armenia's break with Russia is succeeding because, fundamentally, alignment with democratic values provides any country with more sustainable security and stability than other, more autocratic systems can offer. The illusion of safety that an imperialistic oppressor attempts to sell to its smaller neighbors is not only a lie but also very fragile.

## Escaping the Spider's Web

Many might have thought that the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was choosing a risky path in trying to settle the decades-long conflict with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Indeed, the risks were considerable, but in such conflicts, all paths are risky. When faced with unavoidable risk, he chose the path with the most reliable long-term mitigation strategy, even when easier short-term avoidance tactics were available.

Many would have expected a lengthy military conflagration after war broke out once again in 2020, but instead, Pashinyan chose to de-escalate, signing the ceasefire that ended the war. Far from a show of weakness, this decision to hold a steady course must have taken great strength. It is difficult decisions like these that build the foundations for future progress.

When Azerbaijan moved against Nagorno-Karabakh again in 2023, and Armenians were forced to leave their homes in droves, many experts were again expecting an escalation. Pashinyan chose to de-escalate on that occasion, too. Again, he avoided the paths that would lead back to square one, regardless of how convenient they might have appeared.

The fragile lie of Russian "protection" was cracked and exposed when Russia decided not to intervene.

It did not matter that Armenia and Russia were in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It did not matter that Russia had pledged security guarantees. Any "agreements" made with an autocrat can be ignored or torn up at any time by the autocrat — this is the feature of autocracy that autocrats find the most attractive. That is the main reason for a smaller state to choose the risky path of democracy: its risks are still smaller than the almost certain dangers of being a fly in a spider's web.

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Russia, the spider, was perhaps too busy trying to catch another fly in Ukraine to notice Armenia beginning to wriggle free. The decision to keep wriggling came at a high political cost, but it now appears to be paying dividends. As Russia increasingly defaulted on its promises, Armenia gained room to cultivate ties with more reliable partners. The supposedly safe options proved unsafe, while the supposedly easy options grew harder with each passing year. And when a smaller state demonstrates persistence and a willingness to take risks for freedom, others take notice.

After a long and strained relationship, Türkiye is now extending a stabilizing hand to Armenia. Earlier this year, Turkish Airlines [launched](#) direct Istanbul-Yerevan flights, followed by high-level government [meetings](#) and [renewed efforts](#) to restore railway links between the two countries. These steps are gradually rebuilding bilateral ties, strengthening Türkiye's role in the region while providing Armenia with greater geopolitical options.

For years, Russia exploited Armenia's diplomatic and economic isolation, presenting itself as an inevitable partner, a destiny, and the only rope keeping Armenia afloat. But when the moment came, that rope

snapped. Moscow failed to deliver on its promises, exposing the fragility of the dependence it had spent decades cultivating. Once the rope broke, everyone could see that it had never been as strong as it appeared.

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Indeed, Russia thrives only in a geopolitically unstable environment, where neighboring countries are forced to seek its assistance. That means Russia has a vested interest in prolonging instability to remain relevant. This is why reducing diplomatic tensions in the region is already diminishing Russia's influence there. Or, to put it simply, the farther away the Russians are, the calmer the region becomes. And that is very much in the interest of both Türkiye and Armenia.

## When Europe Gets It Right

Despite many observers, myself included, expressing frustration with European passivity and ineffectiveness, there are also important success stories. Europe's powerful potential is sometimes put to good use. The European mission on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border provided stability and reliability at a moment when both were badly needed. Yet that mission is only a small example of a much larger reality.

***Europe has the instruments to achieve and sustain rapid progress for millions of people when it finds the political will.***

When Europe commits itself to a country's transformation, the results can be remarkable. The experience of the Baltic States demonstrates this

clearly. In little more than two decades, countries that emerged from Soviet occupation and economic hardship have become prosperous, stable, and secure members of the European family. Democratic institutions were strengthened, economies modernized, and living standards transformed. Europe has the instruments to achieve and sustain rapid progress for millions of people when it finds the political will.

That success carries lessons far beyond the Baltic region. Armenia's gradual realignment towards Europe is taking place because the European project still offers something Russia cannot: a pathway to greater sovereignty, prosperity, and stability. The attraction of Europe does not rest on coercion. It rests on results.

***Vladimir Putin felt far more threatened by this explosion of European democratic prosperity than by NATO's enlargement. He found himself confronted not by a military threat but by an ideological embarrassment.***

It is often said, and I would broadly agree, that Vladimir Putin felt far more threatened by this explosion of European democratic prosperity than by NATO's enlargement. He found himself confronted not by a military threat but by an ideological embarrassment. The supposedly "decadent" West was dramatically outperforming his attempts to revive the geopolitical influence and imagined prestige of the Soviet past. The success of countries that escaped Moscow's orbit posed an uncomfortable question for those still trapped within it.

This helps explain why the Kremlin has invested so much effort in preventing others from following the same path. If democratic transformation could succeed in the Baltics, why not in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, or Armenia? If countries on Russia's periphery could become more prosperous, more secure, and more democratic without Moscow's

guidance, the entire foundation of Russia's regional influence would begin to erode.

**Even threatening the world with nuclear weapons has not always produced the capitulation Moscow expected.**

Yet despite being labeled a “Great Power,” Russia has enjoyed only mixed success in its attempts to stop that process. Some countries have remained trapped. Others have broken free. It turns out that even great powers struggle to force determined nations to bend the knee permanently. Even threatening the world with nuclear weapons has not always produced the capitulation Moscow expected.

Armenia's ongoing transformation is a reminder of that reality. The country is still navigating immense challenges, but its trajectory demonstrates that geography is not destiny. Countries are not condemned to remain forever within somebody else's sphere of influence. Sometimes the web tears and the rope breaks.

## The Power of Example

Yet Russia has not failed everywhere. Russia had more success recently in Georgia. The Georgian government has been deliberately drifting towards Russia. A former candidate to join the European Union and NATO, the Georgian government [refused](#) to pursue the European integration path, converted its country into a major hub for Russian sanction avoidance, and a refuge for Russians fleeing the war. I had the privilege of [participating](#) in one of the pro-European rallies in 2024. Addressing the crowd, I said that the European Union is not a threat to any government. We have been and remain ready to help Georgia on the path to Europe. Unfortunately, the Georgian government kept choosing the other path. The Kremlin hasn't won over the free people of Georgia, but its influence has successfully turned the government back towards the East.

**The government might try to deceive itself that there is some third way possible, while the reality is very binary – if you are not on a track to Europe, you are on a track to Russia.**

The region has changed dramatically, and the examples of Georgia and Armenia illustrate the two very different paths a smaller state can take. Despite ongoing and remarkable protests in Tbilisi, Georgia is no longer on an EU and NATO integration track. The government might try to deceive itself that there is some third way possible, while the reality is very binary – if you are not on a track to Europe, you are on a track to Russia.

The more you hold steady on the path westward, the further you will move away from Moscow. Armenia has democratically chosen the right path, and that has already made the country more independent and, therefore, more secure. Prosperity always flows from there eventually.

Yet Armenia's progress should not lead us to romanticize Europe or overlook its shortcomings.

As I mentioned above, it is unfortunately true that Europe is far from operating at its full capacity to assist, defend, and nurture democracies and those striving to become new allies aligned with the West. To cynics, it can easily seem that the European Dream is no less a mirage than the Russian one, and that betting on alliances with democratic countries can appear naïve or even a surrender of sovereignty.

Even well-established EU members express concerns about the centralization of power in Brussels; one member even left the Union entirely. Populist politicians in all countries have won votes and seats by whipping up suspicions of “unelected bureaucrats” and many, much darker conspiracies. Of course, such politicians have their popularity boosted by enthusiastic support from Kremlin propagandists,

and sometimes by the same direct collaboration and corruption that recaptured Georgia and almost fully subjugated Hungary.

Yet despite these imperfections, there are reasons why countries on Europe's eastern frontier continue to place their faith in the European project.

I can understand those who are cautious about the long-term prospects of aligning with the West and integrating into imperfect European institutions. However, as a representative of a Baltic State, I point to our own history in this struggle. We stood up for our own democratic freedom, against the same mammoth enemy, even when we were told not to, even when we were assured it was hopeless. Since regaining that freedom, we have been tireless advocates for all those who also seek it, and I would argue that great progress has been made.

That experience shapes how we view the choices now facing countries such as Armenia. Contrary to the desk research by Western analysts, we on the Eastern Flank have lived experience and understand the nature of existential threats; we are familiar with those who threaten us. We are best positioned to understand the current predicament of those in the South Caucasus. We also share the same interests – more democratic countries mean more democratic allies to protect all our democracies.

The Baltic States are ideally placed to advocate for a closer relationship and more assistance to Armenia. Our history, struggle for freedom, and shared geopolitical heritage provide us with ample understanding. The Baltics are the best example of a successful

transition from Soviet occupation to a modern European society. Nowhere else is it as clear what the Western strategic direction, democratic reforms, and embrace of a market economy can do to a region.

European countries feel overwhelmed by the return of risky geopolitics. Not so long ago, the European continent seemed at peace – with Russia placated, the U.S. offering security, it seemed as if history had truly ended. The Baltic States, on the other hand, have consistently warned of the looming geopolitical dangers. Today, the Baltics could (and should) best explain what leaving aspiring European Union members outside the Union would mean for their security.

***Today, the Baltics could (and should) best explain what leaving aspiring European Union members outside the Union would mean for their security.***

That is precisely why Armenia's current trajectory matters far beyond Armenia itself.

Armenia is a shining example to the region, showing that a country can choose sovereignty even when threatened. When Armenians make that choice, Georgians are given an additional reason to believe that the pull towards Moscow is not inevitable. The world is watching, and each country is calculating and recalculating its own shifts. Leading by example is the strongest and most inspiring form of leadership, and Armenia will certainly benefit from its decision to take this long, risky, and difficult path rather than the shortcut to disaster ■

# The Price of Leaving Moscow's Orbit: Armenia's Geopolitical Gamble After Pashinyan's Victory

A couple of weeks ago, Armenia had its first genuinely “geopolitical” elections in modern history. Virtually every major domestic political actor espoused a clearly defined geopolitical orientation. The government has embraced a strategy of closer alignment with the West, while the principal opposition parties and alliances advocated restoring closer ties with Russia. External actors were also playing a more visible role than in previous electoral cycles. The European Union, the United States, Russia, and even Azerbaijan and Türkiye, not so long ago Armenia's arch-enemies, each had clear strategic preferences and were, to varying degrees, seeking to bolster the political forces most closely aligned with their respective visions of the regional future.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract (CC) party [won](#) with just under 50 percent of the vote, securing a clear and consequential victory. While not a landslide on the scale of Pashinyan's post-revolutionary triumph in 2018, the result was

nevertheless a commanding endorsement of his leadership and left the opposition far from power. CC secured enough seats to govern alone, avoiding the need for coalition negotiations and reaffirming Pashinyan's dominance of Armenian politics.

The result is particularly striking given that Pashinyan has been in power since 2018 and has carried the inevitable burdens of incumbency, compounded by persistent criticism over Armenia's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Some supporters of the ruling party even argue that the victory could have been more decisive had Pashinyan been less confrontational, more conciliatory, and more attentive to the sentiments and pride of the average Armenian voter.

Yet this, too, cuts both ways. While some of his personal traits alienated parts of the electorate, those same characteristics broadened his appeal, particularly among voters in rural areas and small towns, who have traditionally been less receptive to pro-European or liberal platforms.



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

By portraying himself as a challenger to oligarchs, corrupt elites, and entrenched business interests, Pashinyan successfully framed the election as a contest between ordinary citizens and the established powers—and emerged victorious.

Yet the scale of his victory should not obscure the opposition's considerable score. Taken together, the principal pro-Russian opposition forces [garnered](#) nearly 40% of the vote, a far-from-insignificant showing. With the CC polling at 49.7% and no constitutional majority in the National Assembly, there are growing concerns that the referendum on the new constitution, which is necessary to conclude a peace agreement with Azerbaijan and advance the reform agenda, will not be a mere formality for the ruling party. Instead, it may prove a challenging, closely contested battle, even if some observers argue that many dissatisfied voters cast their ballots primarily as a protest against the Prime Minister and that anti-Western, pro-Russian sentiment remains well below half the population.

The opposition's ability to mobilize a substantial share of the electorate was due in large measure to a well-oiled, sophisticated propaganda apparatus that made extensive use of AI and social media, and to the effective [dissemination](#) of powerful political narratives that resonated with a significant segment of Armenian society. As a result, although the opposition was defeated, it was by no means crushed. Rather, the election underscored the persistence of deep political polarization.

Paradoxically, this lowers the likelihood of direct Russian military intervention in Armenia, which was already complicated by the lack of a shared border and by Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine. It may, however, encourage the Kremlin to rely more heavily on political destabilization, supporting continuous opposition-led obstruction, recurring protests, and institutional paralysis. Such a climate of seemingly endless political crisis, coupled with the array of

economic pressure tools that Russia could deploy against Armenia and the persistent cognitive warfare waged through disinformation campaigns, will aim at exhausting the authorities and creating favorable conditions for a popular uprising or the downfall of the regime.

## Russia's Next Move

But so far, whatever one may say, the defeat of the openly pro-Russian opposition represents another setback for Moscow's influence in Armenia. The majority appears to have accepted Pashinyan's argument that Russia failed to safeguard Armenian interests during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and can no longer be relied upon as the country's security guarantor. The result, therefore, strengthens Yerevan's ongoing rapprochement with the EU and the U.S.

***The majority appears to have accepted Pashinyan's argument that Russia failed to safeguard Armenian interests during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and can no longer be relied upon as the country's security guarantor.***

Pashinyan's [visit](#) to Moscow on April 1, just two months before Armenia's parliamentary elections and one month ahead of the European Political Community summit scheduled for Yerevan, provided a revealing snapshot of the current state of Armenian-Russian relations. The public exchanges between Vladimir Putin and Nikol Pashinyan offered a relatively clear illustration of the Kremlin's growing frustration with Yerevan's gradual rapprochement with Western actors, particularly the European Union and, to a lesser extent, the United States, whose interest in the South Caucasus has expanded in connection with strategic initiatives such as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) corridor.

## When, Not Whether: Armenia and the EAEU-CSTO Endgame

If it were solely up to Yerevan, Armenia would have avoided a complete and immediate rupture with Russia. Economic ties remain substantial, and geography limits Armenia's strategic options. Ideally, Pashinyan would have preferred to keep his balancing strategy: reducing dependence on Moscow while avoiding a direct confrontation that could damage Armenia's economic and security interests.

***Russia appears increasingly determined to exert maximum pressure on Armenia in an effort to force it to clarify its strategic and economic orientation. Trade, in Moscow's view, is also essentially a geopolitical instrument.***

But Russia appears increasingly determined to exert maximum pressure on Armenia in an effort to force it to clarify its strategic and economic orientation. Trade, in Moscow's view, is also essentially a geopolitical instrument. Russia is therefore threatening to push Yerevan out of both Russia-dominated blocs, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), without delay.

To this end, Moscow has been [sending](#) increasingly firm signals while seeking to raise the political and economic costs of Armenia's growing rapprochement with the EU. Russia's calculation appears to be that fears of exclusion from existing economic and security structures, before Armenia has secured any credible pathway into Western economic or security institutions, will ultimately outweigh the appeal of Pashinyan's westward ambitions.

Russia remains Armenia's largest [trading partner](#), and significant sectors of the Armenian economy, particularly exporters of food products, mineral water, and alcohol, continue to depend heavily on

access to the Russian market. By fueling concerns among these economic stakeholders, Moscow hopes to generate domestic tensions in Yerevan and weaken the political consensus behind the country's European opening.

This strategy was on full display at the EAEU [summit](#) in Astana in May 2026. Russia reportedly sought to secure a resolution from fellow member states, explicitly [demanding](#) that Armenia make an immediate choice between deepening ties with Brussels and remaining within the Eurasian bloc. Yet the demand is fundamentally political. Armenia is not a member of the EU, has not signed a free trade agreement with it, and does not participate in either the EU single market or the customs union. The issue, therefore, is less about legal or economic incompatibilities than about the country's broader geopolitical trajectory.

While several of Moscow's partners supported the initiative, subsequent developments suggested that not all EAEU members shared Russia's position. [Kazakhstan](#) and [Kyrgyzstan](#), in particular, were quick to congratulate Nikol Pashinyan on his electoral victory immediately after the summit ended, reflecting a more pragmatic and nuanced approach than Moscow and its closest ally, Belarus, adopted.

Moreover, any attempt to expel Armenia from the EAEU would face significant legal and institutional hurdles. Major decisions within the organization are based on the principle of consensus, and a measure as consequential as expulsion would require the unanimous consent of all member states. Armenia, therefore, retains considerable room for maneuver within the institution.

A similar logic applies to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Yerevan has [frozen](#) its participation in CSTO activities but has so far stopped short of formally withdrawing from the alliance. For the time being, Armenian leaders appear inclined to maintain this policy of suspension

rather than pursue a definitive exit. Preserving this intermediate status for as long as possible provides Armenia with an argument, though by no means a guarantee, against the prospect of Russian military action. An armed attack by one member state against another within the same defensive alliance would fundamentally undermine the organization's credibility. Such a move would inevitably alarm the remaining members and prompt them to question the value and rationale of their continued membership.

Finally, it is worth recalling that Armenia is not merely a member of these organizations but also one of their founding states. This fact gives any potential expulsion particular political and legal significance. Such a move would require a level of consensus that currently appears out of reach and would set a far-reaching precedent for the entire Eurasian institutional architecture.

## The Erosion of Russia's Security Leverage

Since the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and Yerevan's subsequent decisions to freeze its participation in the CSTO and drastically [reduce](#) its purchases of Russian weaponry, Moscow's influence over Armenia has become increasingly economic rather than security-based. Armenia still hosts Russia's military base in Gyumri, and although Russian border guards have withdrawn from Zvartnots International Airport and from the southern border crossing with Iran at Agarak, they remain deployed along the Turkish frontier. Yet Russia's security leverage has weakened considerably and appears far less reliable as an instrument of influence than it once was.

Several factors explain this decline. First, Russia's protracted war in Ukraine has significantly reduced its capacity for regional power projection. Second, reductions in personnel at the Gyumri base have diminished its operational relevance. Finally, the ongoing negotiations between Armenia and

Azerbaijan, together with the prospect of normalization with Türkiye, have structurally reduced Armenia's dependence on Russian security guarantees.

***For years, Russia's principal source of influence in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute was neither Yerevan nor Baku, but the conflict itself, and, to some extent, the political and military elites of Nagorno-Karabakh.***

For years, Russia's principal source of influence in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute was neither Yerevan nor Baku, but the conflict itself, and, to some extent, the political and military elites of Nagorno-Karabakh. The disappearance of that leverage, following the definitive end of the territory's disputed status, represents a profound strategic shift. At the same time, Armenia's diversification of arms suppliers, with India and France increasingly replacing Russia, and the gradual reform of its defense sector along lines broadly compatible with NATO standards, have further reduced Moscow's ability to shape Armenian security policy. The dismissal, marginalization, or prosecution of several security officials perceived as close to Russia has further narrowed the Kremlin's room for maneuver.

## Does Ukraine's Shadow Loom Over Armenia?

In what increasingly appeared to be a desperate attempt to shape the outcome of Armenia's elections and raise the political stakes ahead of the vote, Moscow repeatedly invoked parallels between Armenia and Ukraine. The comparison was first introduced by Vladimir Putin himself, who, in an [interview](#) on May 29, recalled that Ukraine's crisis had begun when the government in Kyiv decided to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. The allusion was unmistakable: that decision ultimately led to war.

***For pro-Russian political forces, which have traditionally framed Russia as Armenia's indispensable protector, the notion that the principal threat could come from that very protector created an obvious conceptual dilemma.***

Since then, the argument has been echoed by senior Russian officials and amplified by pro-Russian commentators in Armenia. Yet the narrative carried an inherent contradiction. Pashinyan has sought to present himself as a leader of peace, having secured a settlement with Azerbaijan and pursued a gradual normalization of relations with Türkiye. By drawing comparisons with Ukraine, however, Moscow implicitly suggested that Armenia now faced a renewed risk of war, this time emanating from Russia itself, a country that has long portrayed itself as Armenia's security guarantor. For pro-Russian political forces, which have traditionally framed Russia as Armenia's indispensable protector, the notion that the principal threat could come from that very protector created an obvious conceptual dilemma.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin appears to have concluded that such messaging was worth pursuing, perhaps because references to Ukraine and the specter of war were perceived as politically effective during Georgia's 2024 elections. Moscow thus attempted to replicate a similar strategy in Armenia.

In fact, the parallels between Armenia and Ukraine are neither new nor entirely artificial. They date back at least to 2013, when, in the run-up to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, Putin's Russia [exerted](#) intense pressure on both Viktor Yanukovich's Ukraine and Serzh Sargsyan's Armenia. After years of negotiations with Brussels, both countries had prepared Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) with the European Union. Yet, under sustained Russian pressure and coercion, both governments ultimately reversed course.

Some accounts suggest that Russian officials directly threatened Yanukovich with physical elimination. In Armenia's case, the pressure appears to have had both personal and national security dimensions. According to several sources, Moscow warned that it could facilitate the return to Azerbaijan of Armenian-controlled territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh should Yerevan persist in its European course.

The parallel did not end there. In Ukraine, Russia's intervention triggered the Maidan Revolution almost immediately. In Armenia, the 2018 Velvet Revolution can likewise be understood, at least in part, as a delayed response to years of Russian coercion and political pressure. Public frustration had been building since 2013, erupting periodically through protests such as Electric Yerevan in the summer of 2015 and subsequent demonstrations in 2016 before culminating in the mass mobilization that brought about political change in 2018.

Yet the prospect of direct Russian military intervention in Armenia remains relatively unlikely and may not constitute Moscow's preferred instrument of influence. Unlike in Ukraine, Russia can hardly claim a moral duty to defend discriminated Russian speakers, and, logistically, such an operation would be far from straightforward. The Russian military presence at the Gyumri base has been reduced as resources have been diverted to the war in Ukraine, while Russian peacekeepers have also withdrawn from Nagorno-Karabakh. Any substantial deployment of additional forces to Armenia would require transit through Georgia, a step that would necessitate the consent of the Georgian authorities. While such a scenario cannot be entirely ruled out, given Tbilisi's current disposition toward Moscow, it would pose significant political risks for Ivanishvili and could trigger serious domestic unrest.

This reality also helps explain Yerevan's cautious approach toward Georgia's ruling authorities. The Armenian government has gone out of its way to avoid confrontation with Tbilisi, adopting

an accommodating posture and, at times, even [offering](#) mediation to restore dialogue between Georgia and the EU.

***Ultimately, Moscow's attempt to weaponize the Ukrainian precedent appears to have yielded few tangible results in Armenia. If anything, it may have produced the opposite effect, further eroding Russia's standing among the Armenian public.***

Ultimately, Moscow's attempt to weaponize the Ukrainian precedent appears to have yielded few tangible results in Armenia. If anything, it may have produced the opposite effect, further eroding Russia's standing among the Armenian public. The episode suggests that the Kremlin is becoming less concerned with maintaining a positive image in Armenia than with preserving influence through intimidation.

Russian security influence in Armenia has by no means vanished. Yet it appears to be in structural decline, and efforts to activate the remaining levers of influence now carry growing political risks for Moscow. This is particularly true given that several attempts to destabilize Armenia since 2020 have failed to produce the desired outcome.

Against this backdrop in the security domain, it is hardly surprising that the Kremlin increasingly views economic pressure as its most effective remaining instrument of influence.

## Russia's Growing Reliance on Economic Leverage

Russia remains Armenia's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade [reaching](#) approximately USD 6.7 billion in 2025, nearly one-third of Armenia's total foreign trade. Moscow continues to exercise direct or indirect [control](#) over several strategic sectors

of the Armenian economy, including the railway network, operated under a concession granted to Russian Railways until 2038. The country's gas infrastructure, from pipelines to distribution, also remains under Gazprom's [control](#), and the nuclear energy sector is controlled by Rosatom. Russia's presence is significant in banking and telecommunications, even if the influence of Russian firms has recently diminished following the withdrawal of [Beeline](#) and [MTS](#).

Armenia remains heavily dependent on Russia in several key areas. Beyond Moscow's influence over strategic sectors, the country continues to rely on Russian energy imports and essential commodities. Financial ties are equally significant, with remittances from Russia remaining an important source of income for many households. In addition, the influx of Russian citizens since 2022 has provided a noticeable boost to sectors ranging from information technology to real estate, further deepening the economic interdependence between the two countries.

Perhaps the most striking economic development of recent years has been the dramatic expansion of Armenian-Russian trade following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Western sanctions had the paradoxical effect of strengthening Armenia's role as a logistical and re-export hub, enabling Russia to circumvent certain restrictions, particularly regarding dual-use goods such as semiconductors. Bilateral trade doubled in 2022 and tripled in 2023 compared with pre-war levels, [peaking](#) at USD 12 billion in 2024, equivalent to nearly 45% of Armenia's external trade. This trend was partially reversed in 2025 due to Western pressure and measures adopted by the Armenian government to avoid exposure to secondary sanctions.

Armenia's strong economic performance since 2022, with [growth rates](#) of 12.6% in 2022, 8.3% in 2023, 5.9% in 2024, and 7.1% in 2025, has been closely linked to these developments. Yet this very success

has also increased the country's vulnerability to economic pressure from Moscow.

## The Instruments of Economic Coercion

Based on this, Russia possesses a broad arsenal of coercive economic tools: manipulation of gas prices, trade restrictions, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, limitations on migrant labor flows, and obstacles to financial transfers. Such instruments have been deployed repeatedly against other post-Soviet states, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, though they yielded little in terms of achieving these states' geopolitical orientation. Armenia has already received a foretaste of these measures. In 2023, Russian authorities [suspended](#) Armenian drivers' licenses for professional and commercial driving activities in Russia and tightened [controls](#) on Armenian agricultural exports (strawberries, apricots), flowers, fish, mineral waters (Jermuk), and brandy known throughout much of the former Soviet Union as Armenian cognac.

The signals delivered by Moscow during Pashinyan's meeting with Putin, who repeatedly [stressed](#) the incompatibility between EAEU membership and deep economic integration with the European Union. These warnings were made even more explicit the following day, when Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk elaborated on them in an [interview](#) with TASS on April 2, 2026. Armenia's efforts to align its regulatory framework with the European Union's are seen in Moscow as a fundamentally geopolitical choice.

Moscow has also increasingly [hinted](#) at possible higher gas prices (currently well below prevailing European levels), the [introduction](#) of visa requirements for Armenian citizens, deportations of migrant workers, [restrictions](#) on access to the Russian market, and even limitations on air connections and financial transfers. All of these instruments have been employed by Russia against other post-Soviet states at various points over the past two decades.

Tensions have also emerged around specific investment disputes. Armenian authorities have sought to reassert control over strategic infrastructure, including the electricity distribution network, formerly owned by the Tashir Group of Samvel Karapetyan, Russia's favorite candidate in the June 7 elections. Existing concession agreements, particularly in the railway sector, have also come under increasing scrutiny. Moscow interprets these developments as political signals of disengagement and believes that Russian interests are being unfairly marginalized.

The nuclear sector provides another source of friction. Russian officials have openly criticized Armenia's growing willingness to engage Western partners in sensitive strategic industries. Rosatom, long regarded as the dominant external player in Armenia's nuclear sector, now faces potential competition as Yerevan [explores](#) future cooperation with American, French, and South Korean firms.

Russian rhetoric continues to emphasize that they use "purely economic arguments". Kremlin officials routinely question the commercial viability of Western-backed projects, highlight the limited capacity of European markets to absorb Armenian agricultural exports, and point to the perceived lack of employment generated by high-profile Western investments, including those associated with technology companies such as Nvidia. These arguments are intended to shape Armenian public opinion by portraying the government's strategic choices as economically misguided.

The relationship between Russia and Armenia cannot, therefore, be described as a strategic partnership, but rather as a model characterized by coercive conditionality. While Moscow presents its regional integration projects as pillars of stability and prosperity, it simultaneously suggests that any weakening of Russia's role could produce instability and economic disruption. As we mentioned above, Armenia's attempt to maintain balanced relations

with both Russia and the European Union clashes with a Russian worldview that views movement towards the EU as inherently adversarial. At its core, Russia fears a gradual erosion of its influence in the South Caucasus. The further Armenia moves beyond Moscow's orbit, the more willing the Kremlin appears to be to recalibrate its commitments.

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## Armenia's Expanding Room for Maneuver

Despite these pressures, Armenia today enjoys considerably greater room for maneuver than it did in 2013, when President Serzh Sargsyan [abandoned](#) an Association Agreement with the European Union under intense Russian pressure.

The geopolitical environment has changed dramatically. A strategic partnership with the United States, [formalized](#) in January 2025; deepening [engagement](#) with the European Union; growing defense [cooperation](#) with India; ongoing negotiations with Azerbaijan; and the [normalization](#) process with Türkiye have all strengthened Yerevan's position vis-à-vis Moscow.

Moreover, some Russian retaliatory measures could prove costly for Russia itself.

Suspending air links would affect not only Armenians but also thousands of Russian citizens who use Armenia as a transit and commercial hub. Any

interruption in gas supplies could prompt Yerevan to explore alternatives, including imports from Azerbaijan or more radical measures, such as nationalizing Gazprom-owned infrastructure.

The railway sector illustrates these tensions particularly clearly. Armenian officials argue that Russian Railways has failed to meet key investment commitments under its concession agreement. Constrained by Western sanctions, cut off from external financing, and unable to access certain equipment, the company is in no position to participate in the reconstruction of the 43-kilometer railway segment associated with the TRIPP corridor project. As a result, Yerevan has begun [exploring](#) alternatives, including the possibility of replacing Russian Railway with a Kazakh operator. A European alternative remains unlikely given the technical specificities of Armenia's Soviet-era rail infrastructure.

***Moscow no longer exercises meaningful control over regional transport infrastructure.***

For Moscow, however, the railway issue extends far beyond commercial considerations. Control over Armenia's rail network would ensure Russia a seat at the negotiating table throughout the broader regional connectivity and transport corridor discussions. There is a profound difference between a transit corridor through Nakhchivan managed by Russia and a scenario in which Moscow no longer exercises meaningful control over regional transport infrastructure. This helps explain the unusually direct and explicit warnings emanating from Russian officials, who appear determined to prevent such an outcome from materializing.

## Managing Losses: Moscow's 3+3 Strategy

However, Moscow's approach may yet evolve in a more pragmatic direction as the political landscape becomes clearer. Should Russian policymakers

conclude that an opposition already defeated at the ballot box lacks the capacity to challenge the incumbent government, the Kremlin may opt to limit further escalation and reopen channels of dialogue with Pashinyan's administration. Such a shift would reflect less a strategic rapprochement than an effort to manage losses and preserve whatever influence Russia retains in Armenia amid an increasingly unfavorable political environment.

Russian diplomacy is fully capable of combining pressure on Armenia with efforts to preserve influence through less confrontational means. Indeed, the first signs of such a strategy are already emerging. They were reflected in recent [talks](#) between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan, which highlighted a parallel Russian track aimed at securing Turkish support for maintaining Russia's role in the South Caucasus.

Moscow understands that Türkiye requires support on several strategic issues beyond the Caucasus, particularly in the Middle East. Ankara's tensions with Israel over Syria and its opposition to any U.S.-Israeli military campaign against Iran create opportunities for cooperation with Russia. Although Russia and Türkiye remain competitors in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, Moscow may still prove a useful partner for Ankara in other theatres.

In return, Russia appears to be promoting a revival of the so-called "3+3" format. First proposed several years ago, the initiative brings together Russia, Türkiye, Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. From Moscow's perspective, its main attraction lies in the exclusion of Western actors, particularly the European Union and the United States.

Faced with Armenia's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russia, declining Russian influence in Azerbaijan, and growing European and American engagement through the TRIPP project, the Kremlin may once again seek to place the initiative on the diplomatic agenda. The proposal may also appeal to

some Turkish interests, which helps explain Russia's efforts to secure Ankara's backing. Iranian support would likely be easier to obtain.

Beyond broader geopolitical considerations, Moscow is also pursuing more concrete objectives. One concerns the future of the Russian railway concession operating Armenia's rail network. Yerevan has signaled its intention to transfer the concession to a non-Russian operator. For Moscow, retaining control of this strategic asset would enable it to remain connected to the TRIPP initiative and preserve a foothold in the region's emerging transport architecture. This may also help explain Russia's unusually supportive stance towards Turkish-Armenian reconciliation following the Lavrov-Fidan meeting.

Yet it remains unclear whether Türkiye is prepared to align itself with Moscow's preferences. Historically, the "3+3" format has never enjoyed genuine consensus among its participants.

Previously, Georgia was the principal obstacle. Under the 3rd President, Mikheil Saakashvili, Tbilisi firmly opposed any arrangement that excluded Western powers. Today, Georgia's leadership may prove more receptive, even though Tbilisi has so far respectfully declined to participate.

Azerbaijan is unlikely to support any mechanism that could strengthen Russian or Iranian influence in the South Caucasus. Baku's foreign policy is firmly rooted in the assertion of national sovereignty and shows little interest in facilitating the return of external tutelage. Azerbaijan remains satisfied with its strategic partnership with Türkiye and would generally prefer to see Russian and Iranian influence diminish rather than expand.

Armenia, too, may resist such a framework. In recent years, Yerevan has sought to reduce its dependence on Moscow, a trend likely to accelerate following Pashinyan's renewed mandate and strengthened domestic legitimacy.

***Moscow is no longer relying solely on coercive instruments. Alongside pressure tactics, it is increasingly pursuing a strategy to preserve its regional position through negotiation, transactional diplomacy, and carefully calibrated compromises.***

The central question, therefore, is whether Türkiye will be willing to champion Russia's proposal and use its influence over Azerbaijan to facilitate its implementation. At present, that outcome appears far from certain. What is clear, however, is that Moscow is no longer relying solely on coercive instruments. Alongside pressure tactics, it is increasingly pursuing a strategy to preserve its regional position through negotiation, transactional diplomacy, and carefully calibrated compromises.

## **Between Opportunity and Uncertainty**

Pashinyan's victory provides a renewed mandate to continue Armenia's gradual reorientation toward the West and reduce the country's long-standing dependence on Russia. More than that, Armenia has entered a period unlike any in its post-Soviet history.

Yet the coming years are likely to be defined by a paradox. Armenia has never possessed greater freedom of maneuver than it does today. Russia's military leverage has weakened, new international partnerships have emerged, and the prospect of peace with Azerbaijan and normalization with Türkiye offers opportunities that would have seemed

unimaginable only a few years ago. At the same time, Armenia has rarely faced such profound uncertainty. It is attempting to leave a geopolitical order that still shapes much of its economy before a viable alternative security and economic architecture has fully materialized.

For Moscow, the election represents another stage in the gradual erosion of Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Yet decline does not necessarily imply withdrawal. The Kremlin retains significant economic instruments, political networks, and diplomatic assets. The question is no longer whether Russia can restore the dominant position it once enjoyed in Armenia. It is whether it can preserve enough influence to remain an indispensable actor in the region's future.

Much will depend on factors that lie beyond Yerevan's control. The durability of Western engagement, the success of Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization, the evolution of Turkish-Armenian relations, the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, and the internal political stability of Georgia and Iran will all shape the strategic environment in which Armenian leaders must operate. But the success of this transformation will also depend on whether Pashinyan and his team can convert electoral success into a durable and resilient political settlement and reverse the gradual erosion of their political legitimacy.

The election may therefore be remembered less as the end of a political contest than as the beginning of a far more consequential strategic test. Armenia has chosen a direction. The far more difficult question is whether it can successfully manage the journey ■

# Armenia Keeps Its Options Open, But What Can Europe Deliver?

In crucial parliamentary elections, almost half of the Armenians – 49.7% to be precise – voted to let the risky experiment of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continue, [granting him](#) 64 mandates in the 105-seat parliament. The International Election Observation Mission [said](#) voters “were offered a genuine choice,” but lamented the “unprecedented and worrying” pressure and threats from Russian authorities.

Behind the headline-grabbing news (“Armenia’s pro-West government wins election despite Russian pressure,” as the BBC), a more complex reality lurks.

With turnout full 10 percentage points above the previous elections, many of the mobilized voters seem to have broken towards the opposition, which performed stronger than the polls predicted. The two opposition parties that will take up seats are not precisely led by pro-Western figures: tycoon Samvel Karapetyan, embedded in Russian networks,

leads Strong Armenia (23.31%, 29 seats), and Armenia Alliance (9.95%, 12 mandates) is led by former [Putin-friendly](#) president, Robert Kocharyan. Pashinyan will have to face highly hostile opposition without an absolute majority.

Could Pashinyan transform Armenia [as he promised](#)? Would he take note of the significant but not majoritarian support for his campaign and rein in his instinct to steamroll the opposition while he still can? Only the future will tell.

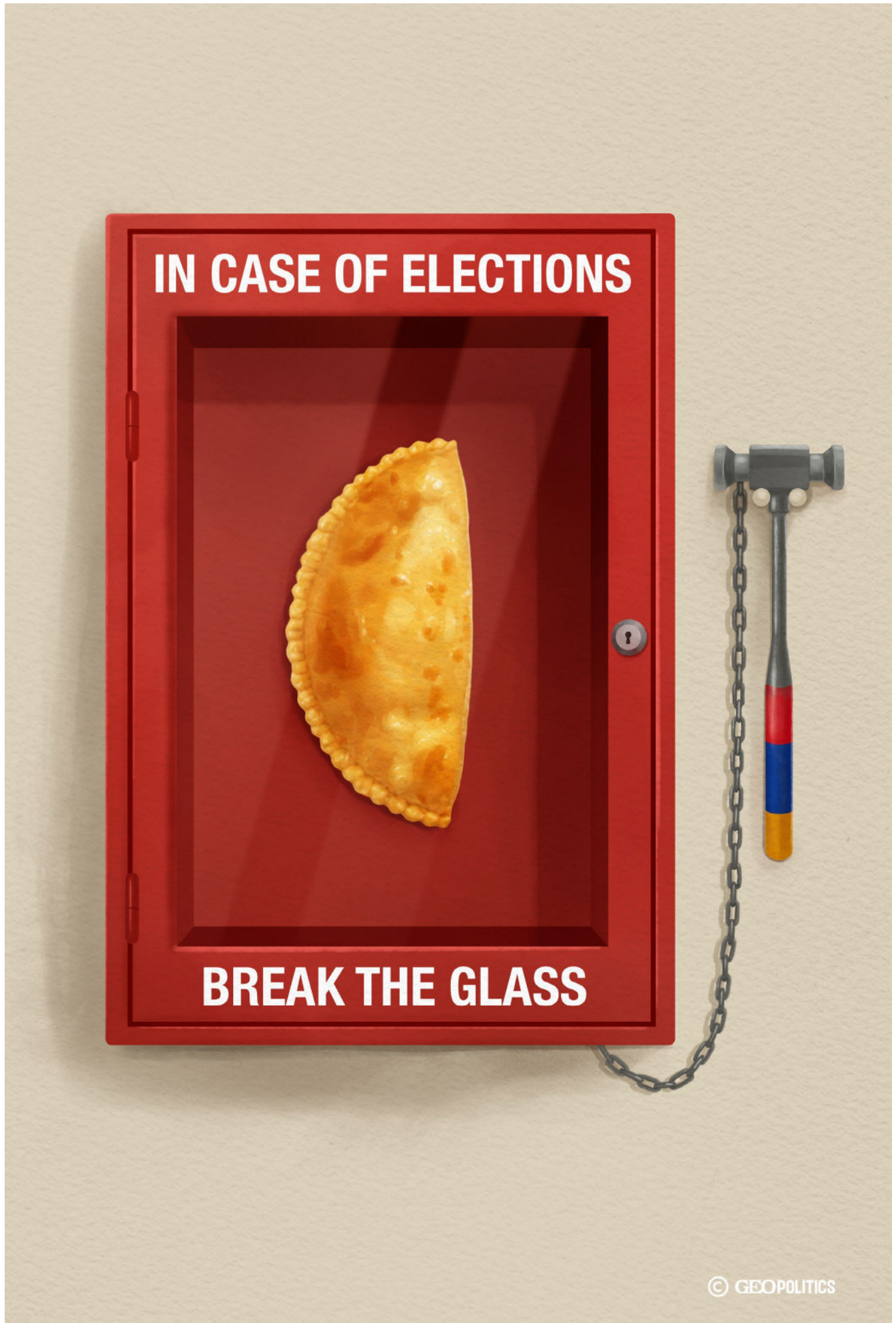
***The Armenians decided to keep the option of drifting away from the Kremlin’s toxic embrace, despite the pressure.***

What is clear is that the Armenians decided to keep the option of drifting away from the Kremlin’s toxic embrace, despite the pressure. The real question is whether and how Europe could channel that cautious optimism.



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## Slow and Curious

Despite its small size, Armenia offers Brussels an opportunity for a striking diplomatic victory: persuading one of Russia's most loyal strategic partners, historically aligned by regional conflict and shared adversity, to move closer to the EU.

***In this troubled region, small states are used to the fact that their fate depends on the vicissitudes of geopolitics, which affect the attention span of their larger allies (and enemies).***

For sure, this extraordinary situation is of Russia's own making. Armenians are not going to forget that Moscow left their distress call to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) fall flat. But in this troubled region, small states are used to the fact that their fate depends on the vicissitudes of geopolitics, which affect the attention span of their larger allies (and enemies). More than betrayal, Russia's insistence on staying stuck in the Ukrainian quagmire is compelling Armenia to keep its options open.

Despite international headlines, Armenia is not likely to move quickly toward the West. After voting, Pashinyan [affirmed](#) his wish to bring Armenia to "European standards" while also emphasizing the need to boost "strategic partnership" with China and maintain relations with Russia. His main point was that the nation's established "strategic balancing" policy will persist. Analyst Richard Giragosian [noted](#) that Pashinyan's first trip as re-elected prime minister might be to Moscow, to persuade the Kremlin to relax restrictions on Armenian trade.

That may shock some opposition enthusiasts and CSO types in Georgia, who [rushed to](#) Yerevan on the election eve to retrieve (at least partially and emotionally) their pro-Western *paradise lost* in the home country. But the geopolitical level-headedness may come as a relief in Brussels and the European Capitals.

## Help, But Not a Rescue

If anything, Europe has delivered on symbolism ahead of the Armenia vote, giving a material "feel" to the Europe vs. Russia buzz. The [summit](#) of the European Political Community, where top politicians rubbed shoulders and paced the streets of Yerevan with Pashinyan, and the back-to-back EU-Armenia Summit could be seen as both a demonstration of support and a classic "show of flag" operation addressed to the patron in the Kremlin.

***Europe has delivered on symbolism ahead of the Armenia vote, giving a material "feel" to the Europe vs. Russia buzz.***

That was undoubtedly noticed: Moscow has deployed the pressure instruments very familiar to Georgia: [restrictions](#) on agricultural produce, alcohol, and mineral waters, citing "phytosanitary" reasons. If continued, these may shave 2% off GDP, the Central Bank [warned](#). In a tit-for-tat, Brussels [rushed](#) EUR 50 million in financial aid to counteract the immediate effects and promised more.

This aid, as with the [deployment](#) of the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), provides top-level support and advice to the authorities on foreign information manipulation, cyberattacks, and illicit financial flows, which are hallmarks of the EU's modality of assistance.

It is symbolically significant. It is focused on providing immediate relief. The CSDP format means Brussels keeps the strategic significance in mind. But at this stage, it is not rushing into big decisions either. One can argue that the arrangement may fit both sides. But it also reflects the realities.

## Ready When You Are

PM Pashinyan is right when he says the country needs reforms to catch up to the EU standards.

In 2013, under severe pressure from Russia, Yerevan refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU – [a rapid U-turn](#), followed by a period of adaptation. The resulting Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has been applied since 2018.

Even though it is perceived as the “Association Agreement Light,” CEPA retains its crucial structural element – approximation to the EU *acquis*. Also, the Commission prepares, and the EU Council adopts the Partnership Implementation [Report](#) for Armenia, a lighter, but structurally similar document to that adopted for the Associated and Candidate States. When taken together, these two elements can ensure deeper EU-compatible reforms and clearer monitoring of the degree of approximation.

But the reality is that the balancing act, combined with existential security threats, has distracted Armenia from pursuing EU-compatible structural reforms. Even though some steps have been taken to improve the rule of law and anti-corruption bodies, public administration reform, strategic planning, and public finance management – areas where the EU likes to see rapid progress before committing – are still [considerably behind](#) many benchmarks for EU enlargement candidates. Still, on the other indicators, Armenia is faring well, especially considering its security fragility.

Europe could provide financial and expert support to help the country move closer to European standards and adopt and implement more of the *acquis*. The problems this would likely encounter in Armenia include the considerable need to build civil service capacity and to attract educated youth. While the task is objectively complicated in a very small country, this obstacle is not insurmountable given the political will.

But the real challenge for the EU is not about technicalities; it is about the context of governance.

## How Fundamentally Sound?

As Moldova and Ukraine [opened](#) their membership negotiations last week, they, along with all other prospective candidates, will first face scrutiny of so-called “fundamentals” – democratic governance, the rule of law, transparency – all the elements that make a state compatible with the Copenhagen Criteria and the EU treaties.

While international election observation missions gave past elections a broad “thumbs up,” concerns about Pashinyan’s personalistic government style in European capitals are palpable. These were not allayed by the post-election news.

Pashinyan [reiterated](#) that the leaders of the main opposition forces, Robert Kocharyan (Armenia Alliance), Gagik Tsarukyan (Prosperous Armenia Party), and Samvel Karapetyan (Strong Armenia), should be imprisoned for alleged vote-buying and fraud.

Prosecutors [reportedly](#) brought charges against Russia-linked oligarch Tsarukyan, whose Prosperous Armenia fell short of the 4% threshold by a couple of dozen votes (its partisans say through electoral machinations). He was banned from leaving the country, and his property was also [reportedly](#) seized as part of the investigation. The prosecutors also reportedly [asked](#) the Central Election Commission to authorize a criminal investigation against Kocharyan. Karapetyan sat out the election campaign while being under house arrest. All three are framed as pro-Russian politicians, while the two clearly have considerable business interests and capital in that country.

These developments put the EU in an important dilemma: let things take their course through the courts and risk accusations of favoring Pashinyan and relaxing rule-of-law standards out of geopolitical interest, or call for restraint and risk strengthening Russia’s hand?

An example of Georgia next door does not offer straightforward answers but should be a source of plenty of anxiety in Brussels. European politicians have been criticized for letting the pro-European Mikheil Saakashvili's administration get away with personalist rule and restrictions on the opposition, let alone rule-of-law abuses. Yet, the rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili was once hailed as an example of an orderly democratic transition, but it has also shown the corrosive influence that Russia-linked oligarchs can have on the fragile political system. It has been an embarrassment that Georgia was hailed as one of the top pupils in the EU association right before it plunged into the abyss of anti-Western conspiracies and brutal repression of fundamental freedoms.

***The rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili was once hailed as an example of an orderly democratic transition, but it has also shown the corrosive influence that Russia-linked oligarchs can have on the fragile political system.***

Pashinyan's Civil Contract is not the only force in the new parliament, but it enjoys a comfortable majority, and even 3/5 of the votes necessary to pass constitutional laws. He can form the government and advance reforms without the opposition's support. Yet this approach is likely to further consolidate the personalistic management style. EU's success in Armenia – as perceived both inside the country, and wider in Europe – hinges on the support of a transformative, popular leader, not an autocrat.

## **Squaring the Circle: What Europe Wants**

Leadership shown by Europe – and led by Paris – in hosting the EPC summit in Yerevan is a good example of the proper approach to take. To succeed in Armenia without compromising its values or, indeed, Armenia's security, Europe should act as a team, uniting the EU institutions and capitals. Naming an experienced head of the EU delegation

in Yerevan and ensuring coordination with a lead country spearheading the Team Europe approach could offer a flexible, focused strategic setup.

On specifics, some lessons from Georgia are applicable.

The work to strengthen Armenia's *administrative capacities* is a decisive element in expanding compatibility with the European legal space. Political opposition is not the only counterweight to the strong executive: before matters reach the judicial system, there is the independent, professional civil service, committed to Constitutional principles and protected from political overreach. The EU should invest its political capital and expertise in implementing public administration reform in a way that is mindful of its implications for the distribution of power.

Both of these reforms should be seen as benefiting citizens directly. Armenia has advanced in *service delivery and digitalization*, and these reforms could move forward quickly, as the examples of Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate.

The EU should show that it could be tough on crime, strict on justice, and politically fair. A toxic influence of the Russia-linked tycoons on national politics needs to be countered, but within the framework of the rule of law. Backing judicial reform and encouraging and supporting the independence of the courts can and should coexist with the acknowledgment that these individuals – even as opposition politicians – could indeed act as conduits of Kremlin influence. Once again, PM Pashinyan should be nudged (but also given the means to) convince Armenian citizens that the eventual prosecutions are about law, applied fairly.

***The Georgian experience should teach the EU that some reforms are only feasible if security issues are addressed simultaneously and effectively.***

The Georgian experience should teach the EU that some reforms are only feasible if security issues are addressed simultaneously and effectively. The EU can bring its considerable economic and political weight to bear on this equation, creating incentives for both Baku and Ankara to open the borders. Some of these incentives could include supporting cross-border economic projects, for example, through the Global Gateway scheme.

And finally, since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the European capitals have traveled a considerable way towards understanding the crucial and continued relevance of hard security. The dissolution of Armenia's partnership with Russia has left a significant capacity gap in its military, security, and infrastructure capabilities. If not the EU, then individual European capitals could try to help Yerevan fill its gap and thus assuage the real security fears of the Armenian population.

## Hold the Door

Armenia's elections create an opening for European actors to strengthen their foothold in a strategically crucial region, where fundamental security interests intersect with trade and migration concerns and opportunities. The European Union has the appropriate tools at its disposal to take advantage of this opening in the interests of stability and to defuse one of the region's more intractable knots in conflict.

The geopolitical situation in and around Armenia is in a state of fundamental flux. Two of the regional powers – Russia and Iran – are weakened by wars economically and are in a precarious political position. The precise consequences of the U.S-Iran accord and a potential peace deal with Russia are, at this stage, impossible to predict. It is therefore in Europe's fundamental political and economic interest to maintain a foothold in the South Caucasus, uphold stability, and keep trade links there open for business. It is good news for everyone in

the region that, at least on this point, the interests of the U.S. administration, with its TRIPP regional connectivity project, and Europe seem to coincide.

To turn challenges into opportunities, and opportunities into realities, Europe requires a flexible and adaptive presence in Armenia. The EU has not, traditionally, excelled at adaptability, but as crises multiply, Brussels is slowly learning to equip itself and master the financial and political tools.

In the medium term, over the next two to three years, it would be plausible for Armenia to benefit from various CSDP facilities and eventually secure a full-fledged Association Agreement with the EU. The key sticking point here is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which could benefit Armenia the most, especially if trade with Türkiye opens. Yet, concluding such an agreement would mean withdrawal from the Russia-led Customs Union and thus would need to make economic sense to compensate for losses. In contrast to Georgia, Armenia has not constructed a political project based on the historical narrative of its affiliation with Europe. EU candidacy or membership is therefore rather more controversial. Yet, the EU and Yerevan can still build a close neighborhood partnership.

In terms of security, crucial for Armenia, it is for the national capitals to take a substantial role. Paris has built the closest relations in this field and already consolidated them by [signing](#) a “strategic partnership” accord with Yerevan in May 2026. If it chooses to, France, as a major European military power, has the capacity to become the guarantor of Armenian sovereignty and to ensure that European interests are heard in strained talks with Ankara and Baku.

Putting these tools to good use could be a test for “geopolitical Europe” and serve as a powerful example of Europe's capacity to encourage positive change in Armenia's neighbors ■

# A New Race in the Post-Soviet Space

**T**he collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created one of the most profound geopolitical transformations of the modern era, spanning two continents: Europe and Asia. The end of the Cold War had a profound effect on global politics, but the transformation within the former empire proved to be a more painful and open-ended endeavor. Moscow inherited the Soviet Union's seat on the United Nations Security Council, the bulk of its military power, its nuclear arsenal, and much of its economic infrastructure. For a time, it appeared that the newly independent republics would continue to orbit around Russia, bound by historical ties, economic dependence, and security arrangements.

Three decades later, however, the era in which Russia served as the uncontested center of gravity across Eurasia is coming to an end. The region is no longer defined solely by Russia's influence. Instead, it is becoming a more fragmented, dynamic, and competitive geopolitical landscape, marked by the rise

of new regional powers, the growing role of local actors, and the increasing involvement of China, Türkiye, the European Union, the United States, and the Gulf states.

***The most important question is no longer whether Russia's dominance is declining. It is who is benefiting from that decline.***

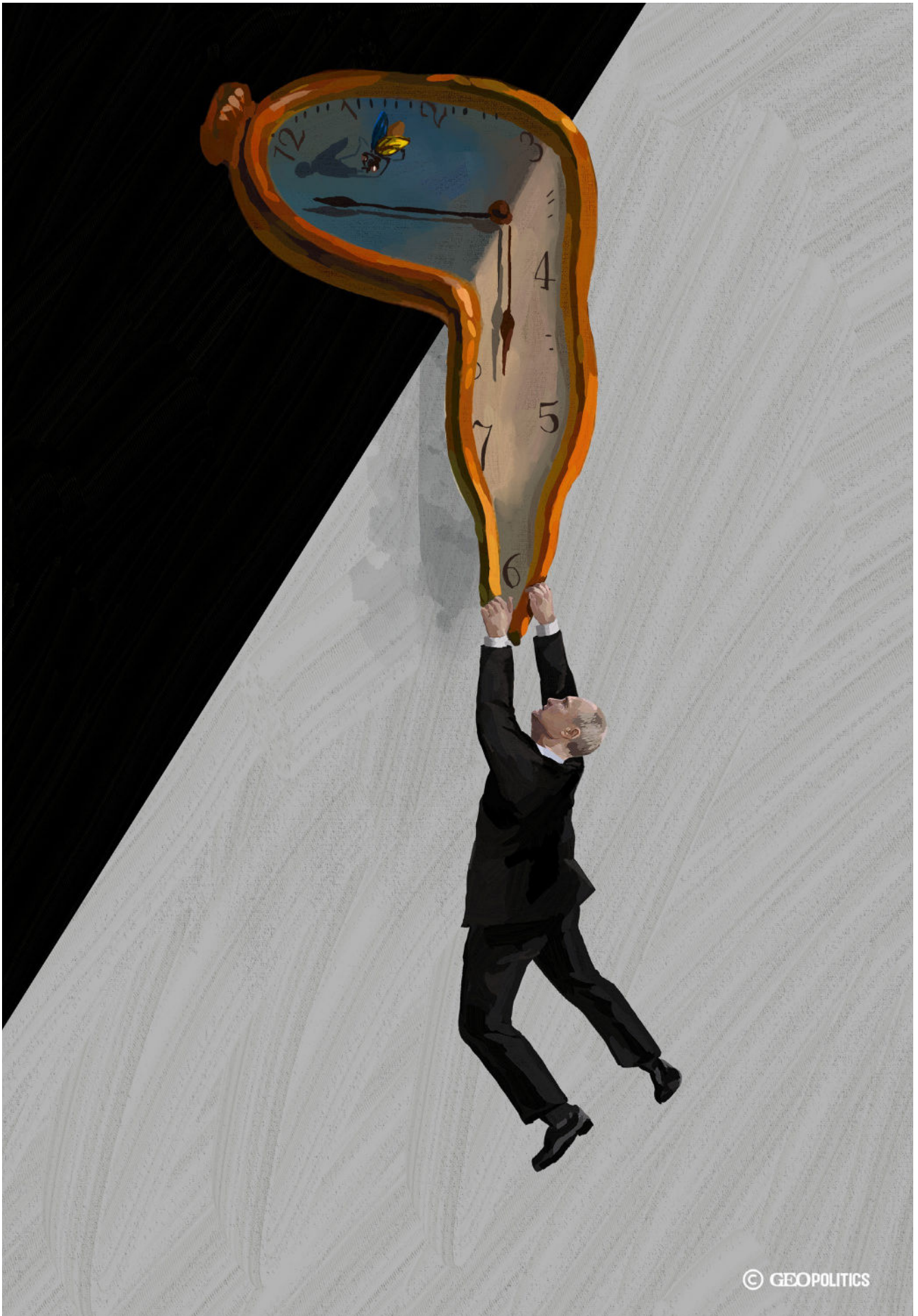
Yet the most important question is no longer whether Russia's dominance is declining. It is who is benefiting from that decline. Across the former Soviet space, a new geopolitical race is underway. States are competing to position themselves as indispensable actors in emerging transportation corridors, energy networks, security arrangements, and economic partnerships.

Some have adapted remarkably well. Ukraine has shattered the myth of Russian invincibility and emerged as a critical pillar of European security.



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*This illustration is inspired by Salvador Dalí's The Persistence of Memory (1931).*

Azerbaijan has leveraged its military success, strategic geography, partnership with Türkiye, and energy resources to become a key player in the South Caucasus and a critical link in emerging Eurasian connectivity projects. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are pursuing increasingly sophisticated multi-vector foreign policies, while Türkiye and China have expanded their influence across large parts of Eurasia.

Georgia occupies a unique place in this competition. Strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, with access to the Black Sea and a long-established role as a transit corridor, it should be among the principal beneficiaries of the new Eurasian order. Yet while its neighbors are successfully repositioning themselves in response to the changing geopolitical environment, Georgia is underperforming relative to its potential. Understanding why requires examining how Russia's dominance has eroded, who is emerging as the winner of the new Eurasian competition, and what this means for the future balance of power across the former Soviet space.

## Russia's Post-Soviet Dominance and Its Limitations

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to preserve its influence through a combination of military power, economic integration, energy dependency, and political leverage. It attempted to institutionalize its leadership through organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and later the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Russia maintained military bases across the region and positioned itself as the primary security guarantor for many former Soviet republics. It introduced the concept of the "Near Abroad," reflecting a view that the former Soviet space represented a privileged zone of Russian interests. Energy exports at discounted rates, trade relations, threats, and actual embargoes, as well as frozen conflicts, provided

Moscow with additional tools to influence neighboring states and shape political outcomes.

Yet Russia's influence was never as absolute as it appeared. The Baltic states rapidly integrated into NATO and the European Union. Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova increasingly sought closer ties with Western institutions. Central Asian countries diversified their foreign and economic relations while carefully balancing their partnerships with Moscow.

The limitations of Russian power became increasingly visible throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Russia possessed substantial coercive capabilities but lacked an attractive political and economic model capable of inspiring neighboring societies. Unlike NATO, it could not offer a credible security framework. Unlike the European Union, it could not offer prosperity through integration. Unlike China, it could not provide large-scale investment and infrastructure financing. And it failed to recreate a "Russkii Mir" capable of superseding or even competing with local nationalist narratives. Instead, Moscow increasingly relied on pressure, coercion, and the preservation of unresolved conflicts to maintain its influence.

This approach generated growing resistance among neighboring states and accelerated efforts to reduce dependence on Russia. However, despite these limitations, Moscow remained the dominant geopolitical actor across much of the former Soviet space. The war against Ukraine has fundamentally altered that reality.

## The Ukraine War as the Great Accelerator

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in the transformation of the post-Soviet space. More than any other event since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it challenged assumptions that had shaped the behavior of regional states for three decades.

The war exposed significant weaknesses in Russian military capabilities and challenged perceptions of Russian invincibility. States that had long viewed Russia as the region's dominant security provider began reassessing long-held assumptions. The image of Russia as the indispensable arbiter of political and security developments across Eurasia was weakened by its inability to achieve a decisive victory over a neighbor it had expected to defeat within weeks.

The war consumed enormous Russian military, economic, and political resources. Moscow increasingly found itself forced to prioritize Ukraine above all other foreign policy objectives. This reduced its capacity to project influence elsewhere and created new opportunities for regional actors to pursue more independent policies.

**Perhaps most importantly, the invasion accelerated a process of political emancipation across the former Soviet space.**

Perhaps most importantly, the invasion accelerated a process of political emancipation across the former Soviet space. Governments throughout Eurasia intensified efforts to diversify their diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships. Armenia began questioning the value of its traditional security arrangements with Russia. Central Asian states pursued increasingly confident multi-vector foreign policies. Azerbaijan expanded its regional influence and further reduced Moscow's role in the South Caucasus.

Ukraine became the principal catalyst of this transformation. By resisting Russian aggression, it demonstrated that Russia's power had limits. For many countries across the former Soviet space, this realization proved as important as any battlefield development. The aura of inevitability that had surrounded Russian influence for decades began to erode.

Moreover, Russia's weakening created a vacuum, allowing regional middle powers capable of shaping events independently of Moscow to step in and fill it.

Türkiye has become one of the most significant beneficiaries of Russia's relative decline. Through a combination of economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, military cooperation, and strategic investments, Ankara has strengthened its position across the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated Türkiye's growing role. Its support for Azerbaijan significantly contributed to Baku's military success and altered the regional balance of power, further weakening Russia. Türkiye subsequently expanded its influence through transportation projects, energy corridors, and defense cooperation.

The Organization of Turkic States has emerged as an increasingly important platform linking Türkiye with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although not a military alliance, it reflects a growing sense of political and cultural connectivity among Turkic-speaking nations and is increasingly serving as a rival geopolitical project in the post-Soviet space. Türkiye's influence is particularly significant because it offers regional states an alternative partnership model that does not require alignment with either Russia or the West.

China has also exploited Russia's weakness as it stepped up to capture the role of the most important economic actor in many parts of Central Asia. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested heavily in transportation infrastructure, logistics networks, energy projects, and digital connectivity.

Unlike Russia, China approaches the region primarily through economics rather than ideology or military pressure. In return, Central Asian governments view Chinese investment as an opportunity to modernize infrastructure and diversify economic relationships.

***Ironically, due to the war in Ukraine, Russia itself became heavily dependent on the Chinese market and Chinese goods.***

Ironically, due to the war in Ukraine, Russia itself became [heavily dependent](#) on the Chinese market and Chinese goods, including dual-use technologies, without which Russia's ability to continue the war would be significantly limited.

This trend is likely to continue, particularly as trade routes connecting Asia and Europe gain strategic importance.

Central Asian middle powers, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are also increasingly acting as independent regional players rather than passive objects of great-power competition. Despite sharing a long border with Russia, Kazakhstan has resisted pressure to align fully with Moscow's geopolitical agenda. Uzbekistan, under a reform-oriented leadership, has emerged as an increasingly influential force in Central Asia. Its economic opening, diplomatic activism, and demographic weight position it as a future regional leader.

## The Rise of Local Agency

Another important transformation is the rise of local agency. For much of the post-Soviet period, analysts viewed regional states primarily through the lens of great-power competition. The countries of the region were often portrayed as objects of Russian, Western, Chinese, or Turkish influence rather than as actors capable of shaping events themselves. This perspective reflected the realities of the 1990s and much of the 2000s, when Russia remained the dominant security actor, China was only beginning its economic expansion, and many newly independent states were still focused on state-building. Today, however, this approach is increasingly outdated. Local actors are no longer merely reacting to decisions taken in Moscow, Washington, Brussels,

Beijing, or Ankara. They are increasingly shaping events themselves, pursuing their own interests, creating new formats of cooperation, and using competition among larger powers to expand their room for maneuver.

This shift is evident in several areas.

First, national identities have strengthened considerably. New generations have grown up without direct experience of the Soviet Union. Their political outlooks are shaped more by national interests than by post-Soviet nostalgia. More than three decades after the collapse of the USSR, a growing share of the population across the region has no personal memory of Soviet life. In many countries, national identity has become the primary organizing principle of politics, foreign policy, and public discourse.

This trend is visible throughout Eurasia. Kazakhstan has accelerated its [transition](#) from Cyrillic to Latin script and is increasingly emphasizing a distinct Kazakh national narrative. Uzbekistan's reform agenda has been accompanied by a renewed emphasis on national development and regional leadership. Armenia's domestic debate increasingly revolves around how to secure the country's future as an independent European state (the [Real Armenia](#)) rather than as a traditional Russian ally. Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh further strengthened confidence in an independent national course. Even in countries that remain closely connected to Russia, younger generations increasingly define their political and economic aspirations through national rather than post-Soviet frameworks.

***Russia's invasion was intended, at least in part, to deny the legitimacy of a distinct Ukrainian national identity. Instead, it produced the opposite effect.***

The war in Ukraine has reinforced these trends. Russia's invasion was intended, at least in part, to deny the legitimacy of a distinct Ukrainian national

identity. Instead, it produced the opposite effect. Ukraine emerged not only as a military actor but also as a powerful symbol of national self-determination. Across the post-Soviet space, governments and societies have drawn lessons from Ukraine's experience, recognizing both the importance of sovereignty and the risks associated with excessive dependence on larger powers. Even in occupied regions, like Abkhazia, pressure on national identity often causes a push back and proliferates irritation with Russian dominance.

Second, governments are pursuing independent foreign policies tailored to their specific circumstances. Rather than choosing between Russia and the West, many states seek flexible partnerships with multiple actors simultaneously. These new partnerships extend to India, Pakistan, the Gulf states, Israel, Japan, and South Korea.

This trend is particularly visible in Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have expanded relations with virtually every major global and regional actor while carefully avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner. The growing number of "Central Asia Plus" formats illustrates this approach. Today, the region maintains institutionalized dialogue not only with Russia and China, but also with the European Union, the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and other partners.

The pace of this diversification has accelerated noticeably in recent years. The first European Union-Central Asia Summit in Samarkand in April 2025 marked an important milestone, demonstrating that the five Central Asian states increasingly engage external powers as a region rather than solely as individual countries. The summit [elevated](#) relations with the European Union to a strategic partnership and highlighted the growing geopolitical significance of Central Asia. The Gulf states have also expanded their presence through investment, infrastructure projects, and political engagement. India has intensified its Central Asia dialogue while

promoting alternative trade and transport routes through Iran and the International North-South Transport Corridor. Japan and South Korea have both strengthened their political, economic, and technological engagement with the region. The United States has also renewed its attention to Central Asia through the C5+1 framework, culminating in [high-level meetings](#) with the region's leaders and reinforcing the growing importance of Central Asia in Washington's Eurasian strategy.

What makes these developments particularly important is that they are being driven not by external actors but by regional governments themselves. Unlike in previous decades, when foreign policy often revolved around balancing relations with Moscow, many governments are now actively constructing diversified diplomatic portfolios designed to maximize economic opportunities, political flexibility, and strategic autonomy.

Armenia offers another example of this transformation. Following growing disappointment with Russia's security guarantees, Yerevan has expanded relations with the European Union, France, India, and the United States. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [campaigns](#) and [won](#) on a nationalist narrative built around the notion of resisting Moscow. Azerbaijan has simultaneously deepened ties with Türkiye, Europe, Central Asia, Israel, and the Gulf states while maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia and China. These policies reflect not geopolitical indecision but increasingly sophisticated efforts to avoid overdependence on any single external actor.

Third, regional cooperation is becoming more important. Central Asian countries have expanded dialogue and coordination among themselves, and the region is experiencing what may be described as a strategic renaissance. For much of the post-Soviet era, Central Asia was often viewed as peripheral. Today, it occupies a central place in emerging Eurasian connectivity networks.

***One of the most remarkable developments of recent years has been the growing willingness of Central Asian governments to engage directly with one another. Since 2018, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have established regular consultative meetings without external sponsorship.***

One of the most remarkable developments of recent years has been the growing willingness of Central Asian governments to engage directly with one another. Since 2018, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have established regular consultative meetings without external sponsorship. The [adoption](#) of the Central Asia-2040 vision in 2024 reflected a shared recognition that the region's future prosperity depends increasingly on regional cooperation rather than external patronage.

This shift has practical consequences. Cooperation on trade, transport, border management, energy, and water resources has expanded. Long-standing disputes that once hindered regional integration have become more manageable. The region increasingly presents itself as a coherent economic and geopolitical space capable of attracting investment and engaging major powers collectively.

A similar logic is emerging in the South Caucasus. Armenia and Azerbaijan increasingly recognize the economic benefits of connectivity and regional trade despite many remaining obstacles. The prospect of new transport corridors linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe has significantly increased the strategic importance of regional cooperation. The American-inspired TRIPP initiative adds another dimension to this process by strengthening links between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and European markets while further reducing dependence on traditional Russian-controlled routes.

The broader significance of these developments extends beyond economics. Transport corridors, energy infrastructure, logistics hubs, and digital connectivity projects have become instruments of geopolitical influence. Countries are increasingly competing not only for military power or diplomatic influence but also for their place within emerging Eurasian networks. This competition rewards initiative, flexibility, and strategic vision rather than simple geographic location.

This growing local agency reduces external powers' ability to dictate outcomes unilaterally. Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and Türkiye all remain influential actors. Yet none of them can exercise the degree of dominance that Moscow once sought to maintain across the former Soviet space. Regional governments have become more confident, more diversified in their partnerships, and more capable of advancing their own interests.

The post-Soviet space is therefore increasingly shaped not only by competition among great powers but also by the ambitions, choices, and initiatives of the states within it. This may prove to be one of the most important consequences of Russia's declining dominance. The region is no longer simply a chessboard upon which larger powers move pieces. Increasingly, the pieces move themselves.

## **The Emerging Eurasian Order**

The future of the post-Soviet space will likely be shaped by several interconnected trends.

First, multipolarity will inevitably deepen. No single power is likely to replace Russia as the dominant regional actor. Instead, multiple centers of influence, including the U.S., China, Türkiye, the European Union, and regional states themselves, will coexist and compete.

Second, connectivity will become increasingly important. Transportation corridors, digital

infrastructure, energy routes, and trade networks will shape geopolitical influence as much as military power.

Third, regional states will continue pursuing strategic autonomy. Most governments prefer diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignments.

Fourth, the local agency will remain a defining feature. Domestic politics, national identities, and regional initiatives will increasingly determine outcomes.

This transformation marks the end of one historical chapter and the beginning of another. The region that once existed on the periphery of global affairs is increasingly becoming a central arena where the future balance of power across Eurasia will be determined.

***The United States, should take this into account when formulating their strategies for the region or for individual states within it. The weakening of Russia is a good thing for the region, and it should be exploited to ensure that Moscow's destabilizing influence is checked and contained.***

Great powers, like the United States, should take this into account when formulating their strategies for the region or for individual states within it. The weakening of Russia is a good thing for the region, and it should be exploited to ensure that Moscow's destabilizing influence is checked and contained. A stronger U.S. presence in the region will only make the region more stable, prosperous, and peaceful.

## **The Ukraine-Azerbaijan Nexus and a New Race for Eurasia**

Among the many actors benefiting from the transformation of the post-Soviet space, Ukraine and

Azerbaijan stand out as particularly influential: Different in geography, size, political systems, and immediate priorities, they nevertheless share one important characteristic. Both have fundamentally altered regional dynamics and challenged assumptions that the post-Soviet space must revolve around Moscow. Through military success, strategic resilience, energy diplomacy, connectivity projects, technological innovation, and geopolitical initiative, both countries have acquired influence that extends far beyond their borders.

No country has had a greater impact on the transformation of the post-Soviet space than Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has become far more than a state defending its sovereignty. It has evolved into a symbol of resistance against imperial revisionism and a catalyst for geopolitical change throughout Eurasia.

The ability of Ukrainian forces to halt and reverse Russian advances demonstrated that Russia's power was not insurmountable. This realization resonated across the post-Soviet space. Countries that had long adjusted their policies to accommodate Russian preferences began reassessing their strategic assumptions. The aura of Russian invincibility was replaced by a more sober assessment of Moscow's capabilities.

Ukraine's contribution to this transformation is indispensable. The country has become a center of military innovation, technological adaptation, and institutional resilience. It is redefining modern warfare in real time. Ukrainian experience with drone warfare, distributed command structures, battlefield adaptation, and the integration of civilian and military technologies is being studied not only in Europe but across Eurasia.

Ukraine has also become an important political and moral force. It has successfully framed its struggle as a defense of sovereignty, independence, and national self-determination. This message resonates

strongly among post-Soviet states that have historically faced pressure from larger neighbors. For many governments across Eurasia, Ukraine's resistance has become proof that geopolitical realities are not immutable and that smaller states possess greater agency than previously assumed.

If Ukraine has transformed the security landscape of Eurasia, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the principal architects of its new connectivity architecture.

Over the past two decades, Baku has systematically translated energy wealth into military modernization, diplomatic influence, and regional connectivity. The turning point came with Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the subsequent restoration of sovereignty over its internationally recognized territories. This achievement dramatically altered regional power balances and challenged long-standing assumptions regarding Russia's role as the ultimate arbiter of regional conflicts.

The significance of Azerbaijan's rise extends beyond military success. At a moment when Europe was seeking alternatives to Russian energy supplies, Azerbaijan offers a reliable energy partnership. Through the Southern Gas Corridor and related infrastructure projects, Baku [strengthened](#) its economic and political ties with European partners while reinforcing its own strategic importance.

Even more significant is Azerbaijan's role as a transportation and logistics hub. The country occupies a unique geographic position connecting Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe. As the geopolitical importance of East-West connectivity continues to grow, Azerbaijan has become an indispensable link in emerging Eurasian trade networks.

The Middle Corridor, together with newer connectivity initiatives linking Central Asia and Europe, represents far more than a transportation route. It is a testament to a broader shift away from traditional Russian-controlled transit networks. Azerbaijan has

positioned itself at the center of this transformation through investments in ports, railways, logistics centers, and regional infrastructure.

Although Ukraine and Azerbaijan operate in different regions and face different challenges, their combined impact is reshaping the post-Soviet landscape in several important ways.

First, both countries have demonstrated the growing importance of national agency. Rather than accepting externally imposed realities, they have actively pursued strategies designed to reshape their environments. Their success illustrates a broader maturation of post-Soviet states as independent geopolitical actors.

Second, both have contributed directly to the erosion of Russia's monopoly on regional influence. Ukraine has weakened Russia's military and political standing. Azerbaijan has reduced Moscow's ability to dominate developments in the South Caucasus. Together, they have accelerated the transition toward a more multipolar Eurasian order.

***Ukraine is increasingly becoming a pillar of European security. Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming a pillar of Eurasian connectivity. One shapes the strategic balance of power. The other shapes the continent's economic geography.***

Third, both countries have become central to the two most important dimensions of the emerging regional architecture: security and connectivity. Ukraine is increasingly becoming a pillar of European security. Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming a pillar of Eurasian connectivity. One shapes the strategic balance of power. The other shapes the continent's economic geography.

Together, they constitute the two most consequential success stories of the post-Russian Eurasia now beginning to emerge.

## Georgia at Risk of Falling Behind

Both Azerbaijan and Ukraine belong to a regional grouping that was once intellectually and politically led by Georgia. GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) was established to advance precisely the kind of strategic autonomy, connectivity, and diversification that now define the region. Ironically, as these ideas finally gain traction, Georgia increasingly finds itself on the margins of the process.

Georgia is no longer keeping pace with the very transformation it once helped champion. This is particularly striking because Georgia should be among the principal beneficiaries of the emerging regional order. No other country in the South Caucasus has access to the Black Sea and borders Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the South Caucasus Gas Corridor, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the growing importance of East-West connectivity all reinforce Georgia's natural role as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Yet while its neighbors are expanding their strategic relevance, Georgia increasingly risks becoming a spectator rather than a driver of regional developments. The problem is not a lack of opportunities but rather a failure to capitalize on them.

Georgia's most significant shortcoming is the absence of a coherent long-term strategic vision. At a time when regional states are repositioning themselves in response to shifting realities, Georgia's political leadership appears increasingly preoccupied with consolidating domestic power, further polarizing society, and alienating traditional friends. [State capture](#) and oligarchic governance weaken institutions, destroy national unity, and divert attention away from strategic planning and national development.

The consequences are increasingly visible. For nearly two decades, Georgia's greatest geopolitical asset was its reputation. The country was widely viewed as a reform-oriented democracy firmly committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, but also enjoying good relations with the regional actors. Today, that reputation is being eroded. Growing tensions and daily feuds with the European Union, alienation of the United States, increasing influence of Iran, dramatic democratic backsliding, and uncertainty surrounding Georgia's foreign policy direction have weakened one of the country's most important competitive advantages.

The contrast with other regional actors is increasingly difficult to ignore. While Kazakhstan is expanding its diplomacy, Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a critical energy and connectivity hub, Armenia is attracting European and American political and economic attention, and Ukraine is becoming a central pillar of European security, Georgia is increasingly consumed by internal political struggles and strategic ambiguity, showcasing that it is unstable, turning into a one-party dictatorship, which is impossible to rely on in terms of stability, commitments and values.

This is ironic, because Georgia's shortcomings are not rooted in geography, resources, or human capital. The country remains one of the most strategically located states in Eurasia, but the geography alone does not generate influence. Political vision, institutional resilience, strategic leadership, and trusted partnerships matter just as much, if not more.

The emerging Eurasian order will create winners and losers. Geography suggests that Georgia should be among the winners. Politics increasingly suggests otherwise ■

# Georgia's Clean Slate with the U.S., and What Cannot Be Reset

**O**n June 7, 2026, voters in Armenia delivered Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract (CC) party a renewed mandate despite what European election observers described as direct Russian interference aimed at reversing the country's westward turn. Two days later, the U.S. House of Representatives [passed](#) legislation ordering a classified assessment of Russian and Chinese penetration of Georgia's security services. Tbilisi's response came within hours: on June 9, Mikheil Kavelashvili and Xi Jinping [announced](#) the elevation of Georgian-Chinese relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," while Irakli Kobakhidze [dismissed](#) Congressman Joe Wilson, the legislation's architect, as "not serious." A few days later, it [became known](#) that the court cases against the Georgian opposition leaders had accelerated, now scheduled twice a week, while a new wave of political prisoners [received](#) prison sentences of up to seven years for offenses that, in a normal country, would at most warrant an administrative penalty.

This is the context in which the current U.S. engagement with Tbilisi is taking place. For the first time since Washington [suspended](#) the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter in 2024, citing the Georgian government's democratic backsliding and anti-democratic actions, contacts with Georgian Dream resumed in early 2026. These included a State Department [visit](#) in March, the first ministerial-level [phone call](#) in years, the [announcement](#) of a 70-story Trump-branded tower in Tbilisi in April, and [visits](#) by two senior State Department officials in May.

Yet the developments that prompted the suspension of relations have not improved. On the contrary, by most objective measures, they have deteriorated further. Democratic institutions have weakened, political repression has intensified, and relations with Georgia's traditional Western partners have become increasingly strained.



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*This illustration is drawn in the style peculiar to the anonymous 21st century British street artist Banksy.*

Against this backdrop, the renewed engagement has generated significant debate within Georgia's overwhelmingly pro-Western and pro-American society. Many are asking what Washington hopes to achieve through this reengagement, what concessions it expects from Georgian Dream, and whether renewed contacts reflect a broader strategic recalibration or simply a pragmatic attempt to preserve channels of communication in an increasingly volatile region.

***The only way Georgian Dream can become useful to American interests is if structural conditions on the ground change and the regime is forced to reconsider its calculus and authoritarian alignment.***

Washington has likely reengaged with Georgia because it recognizes that a Georgia controlled by Russia, China, or Iran severely disrupts its interests and initiatives in the region. It must also reckon with the fact that Georgia under Georgian Dream cannot be a reliable partner. The only way Georgian Dream can become useful to American interests is if structural conditions on the ground change and the regime is forced to reconsider its calculus and authoritarian alignment. Until now, its survival has been politically and economically linked with Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran, which means it cannot align with American interests without upsetting America's adversaries.

***Georgia is now ruled by the family of autocratic, Russian-style laws - rule by law instead of the rule of law.***

The gloomy reality is that the Georgian Dream [disenfranchised](#) a significant portion of the Georgian population, leaving them outside the political process through repression and the weaponization of legislation. Georgia is now ruled by the family of autocratic, Russian-style laws - rule by law instead of

the rule of law. Georgian Dream holds power exclusively through coercion and manipulation rather than legitimacy, making it permanently vulnerable to instability. It cannot deliver the domestic stability that President Trump's regional vision requires, and its leadership cannot be expected to make decisions based on Georgia's national or even their own [egoistic interests](#). They will have to do what their authoritarian club requires.

***The United States must draft a strategic policy vision towards Georgia based on these realities and use available instruments to enforce it.***

The United States must draft a strategic policy vision towards Georgia based on these realities and use available instruments to enforce it. By reactivating the [MEGOBARI Act](#) and building credible, believable threats against Ivanishvili personally and his financial network, Washington should explicitly articulate the conditions under which the restrictive measures would not be carried to their full conclusion.

Those conditions can only be defined by a simple framework if Georgia is to remain stable in the short to medium run: the release of all political prisoners, the revocation of the party bans, the repeal of the repressive legislative package that produced them, and an electoral system and legal environment restoring the rights of its citizens and capable of producing political change. Anything short of this will fit into Georgian Dream's "legitimacy" propaganda narrative without serving American interests in the region.

## **The Corridor's Only Western Exit**

For more than three decades, the South Caucasus functioned as a set of closed loops, and Russia maintained an interest in keeping it that way. Armenia and Azerbaijan remained at war, or in a frozen confrontation over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1992

onward, and Türkiye closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in solidarity with Baku.

For Moscow, the unresolved conflict kept Armenia dependent on Russian security guarantees through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), justified a Russian [military base](#) in Gyumri and a border guard [presence](#) on Armenia's frontiers with Türkiye and Iran and in the Zvartnots airport, and, after 2020, [placed](#) roughly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers inside Nagorno-Karabakh under the 2020 ceasefire. On the western side of the South Caucasus region, Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, consolidated after the 2008 war, performed a similar fragmenting function.

Since Armenia shares no border with Russia, the only land route between the two passes through Georgia, which made Georgia both a target of this fragmentation and one of its load-bearing elements, the corridor through which Russia's relationship with its most dependent regional ally had to run.

The defeat of Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, and Azerbaijan's final operation in 2023, which ended Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto autonomy and the Russian peacekeeping presence, removed the dispute that had underwritten this arrangement. By 2023, Russia's military and diplomatic capacity was absorbed by Ukraine, and the peacekeeping force it had deployed did not act to prevent the conflict's resolution on Azerbaijani terms. Baku read the moment correctly and acted. At a White House summit in August 2025, Presidents Trump, Aliyev, and Pashinyan [agreed](#) to the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), a corridor through Armenia's Syunik province linking Azerbaijan to its disjointed Nakhchivan region and onward to Türkiye. For the first time since independence, Azerbaijan gained a route to its own exclave that does not depend on Iranian transit, and Türkiye gained direct overland access to Azerbaijan and Central Asia without crossing Iran or Russia.



Source: Caspian Policy Center ([CPC](#))

TRIPP, however, resolves only half of the region's connectivity problem. A corridor connecting Central Asia to Türkiye through Armenia and Azerbaijan still does not reach Europe. That leg is the Middle Corridor, the Trans-Caspian route carrying cargo from China and Central Asia across the Caspian to Baku, overland through Georgia, and out through the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi. Since 2022, as Western governments and shippers have sought alternatives to Russian transit routes, traffic on this route has grown substantially. Azerbaijan has no Black Sea coastline. Armenia has no coastline at all. Georgia is the cheapest and shortest route in the South Caucasus with the existing infrastructure to move cargo to the Black Sea, bypassing Russia and Iran.

**Washington's investment in TRIPP assumes that regional transit routes remain open, reliable, and interconnected, and the Armenia–Azerbaijan settlement alone cannot guarantee that.**

TRIPP and the Middle Corridor are therefore two pieces of the same architecture. Cargo entering the South Caucasus from the Caspian can reach Europe either through Armenia and Türkiye or through Georgia. Yet the western exit through Georgia remains irreplaceable. Washington's investment in TRIPP assumes that regional transit routes remain open, reliable, and interconnected, and the Armenia–Azerbaijan settlement alone cannot guarantee that.

What makes this more than a routing question is Georgia's geography. It is the only South Caucasus state bordering Russia, Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and it provides access to the Black Sea. Decades of investment in the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the ports of Poti and Batumi have created infrastructure that no alternative route could quickly replicate. Whoever "controls" Georgia holds the key to the region.

This is why Georgia matters more to Moscow than ever. Russia's influence elsewhere in the South Caucasus has declined sharply. Armenia has [frozen](#) its participation in the CSTO and is deepening ties with the United States. The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, long Russia's main source of regional leverage, has effectively disappeared. Azerbaijan was never dependent on Moscow and is now a partner in a U.S.-brokered corridor initiative. Georgia is the exception. A government aligned with Moscow, Beijing, or Tehran would allow Russia to preserve significant influence over the region's future despite the loss of its other levers of influence. What Georgian Dream seeks from its engagement with Washington, and what the United States is prepared to accept in return, should be viewed in that context.

## What Cannot Be Reset

What Washington needs from Georgia is a government whose security services, foreign alignment, and infrastructure decisions make it a reliable anchor for a corridor in which the United States has invested significant political and financial capital. The Countering China's Control of the Caucasus Act [reflects](#) this concern by requiring an assessment of Russian and Chinese penetration of Georgia's security services. Whatever else renewed U.S. engagement with Tbilisi produces, the key question remains who controls the institutions [responsible](#) for protecting a multibillion-dollar transit corridor.

Georgian Dream's objectives are far narrower. Since December 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the ultimate decision-maker in Georgia, has been under U.S. [sanctions](#) for conduct benefiting Russia at Georgia's expense, although a general license still allows American businesses to engage with most of his holdings. Irakli Kobakhidze has denounced the MEGOBARI Act as a hostile measure and welcomed its stalling in the Senate as proof that Georgia's position was justified.

What Georgian Dream seeks from a clean slate is not a change in U.S. policy toward Georgia. It seeks

relief from personal and financial pressure, continued access to what the current sanctions regime still permits, and a diplomatic narrative that feeds its [propaganda](#), claiming that relations have been repaired. This reflects the stabilization-normalization gap at the heart of the engagement. Stabilization, meaning lower tensions, fewer sanctions, and better headlines, is actively pursued. Normalization, a change in the institutions and foreign alignment that made the relationship adversarial in the first place, is not.

***While Georgian Dream promotes these projects as evidence of normalized ties with Washington, Anaklia, the port that would truly define Georgia's strategic role in the Middle Corridor, is being negotiated away to Beijing.***

To sustain this narrative, Georgian Dream is using business ties with the United States to create the appearance of an improving bilateral relationship. Frontera Resources illustrates the lobbying side of this strategy: its executive, Steve Nicandros, has lobbied Congress [against](#) the MEGOBARI Act and [in support of](#) Georgian Dream while the company remains locked in a dispute with the Georgian state over a USD 15.4 million debt. Trump Tower Tbilisi [represents](#) the visible side. Developed in part by Archi Group, led by former Georgian Dream MP Iliia Tsulaia, on land partly owned by Uta Ivanishvili (also under [U.S. sanctions](#)), the project attaches a prominent American brand and investment figure to the Georgian government without changing the underlying political reality. While Georgian Dream promotes these projects as evidence of normalized ties with Washington, Anaklia, the port that would truly define Georgia's strategic role in the Middle Corridor, is being [negotiated](#) away to Beijing.

This is where the chronology becomes revealing. In May 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [asked](#) Ambassador Robin Dunnigan to deliver

a message directly to Ivanishvili outlining steps Georgia could take to reset the relationship. Ivanishvili refused the meeting and instead described the sanctions against him as personal blackmail, citing funds from a Credit Suisse settlement he could not access. A year later, the same government [was telling](#) visiting State Department officials that it wanted to restart the partnership from a clean slate. The pattern is clear. When Washington asks for something concrete, the conversation ends. When Georgia can signal goodwill without changing anything, the conversation goes on.

Georgian Dream's reaction to the House passing legislation requiring a review of Russian and Chinese penetration of Georgia's security services was equally revealing. Rather than distancing itself from Beijing, it [announced](#) a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. If the clean-slate policy reflected a genuine reorientation, this is where it would have paused. Instead, it accelerated. The message was loud and clear: American pressure would not alter the Georgian Dream's strategic alignment, either in the eyes of its domestic audience or of Moscow and Beijing.

***A clean slate built around business deals and diplomatic optics costs Ivanishvili nothing. One that touches the institutions Washington cares about could cost him everything.***

This is not a failure of diplomacy that better engagement could fix. Genuine normalization, as Washington understands it, would require Georgian Dream to loosen its grip on the security services, the judiciary, and the electoral system - the very institutions that secure Ivanishvili's position at home and [preserve his value](#) to Moscow. Such a shift would expose him on two fronts. Domestically, it would weaken the mechanisms that keep opponents marginalized and under pressure. Internationally, it would raise doubts in Moscow about the reliability of

a partner whose value rests on political alignment. A clean slate built around business deals and diplomatic optics costs Ivanishvili nothing. One that touches the institutions Washington cares about could cost him everything.

The issue, therefore, is not whether engagement with Tbilisi is worthwhile. It is that the current approach is being absorbed into Georgian Dream's strategy rather than being tested. The real question for Washington is not how to improve the diplomacy, but what would need to change in Ivanishvili's calculations for genuine normalization to become possible.

***Georgian Dream remains in power through control, but no system built primarily on force has proved permanently stable.***

There is also a second problem. Ivanishvili has polarized Georgia to the point that a large share of the population no longer feels represented in the political system. Continuous protests since the November 2024 elections, sustained despite repression, arrests, and an extensive propaganda campaign, are not signs of political vitality or stability. They are signs of a governing arrangement that increasingly relies on coercion rather than consent. Georgian Dream remains in power through control, but no system built primarily on force has proved permanently stable.

For Washington, this carries a strategic risk. President Trump's regional vision requires a stable Georgia and a government capable of delivering on its commitments. Georgian Dream offers neither. Its survival increasingly depends on support from Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow, limiting its ability to act as a reliable U.S. partner. Engagement under these conditions is unlikely to advance American interests and risks reinforcing a status quo that alienates Georgia's pro-democracy constituency - the very actors that are Washington's strongest strategic allies in the

country. Genuine normalization cannot occur while those actors are being harassed, prosecuted, and excluded by the same government that Washington would be treating as a normal partner. Georgia is not a problem to be accommodated within the current arrangement. It is a strategic opportunity, provided Washington is willing to apply the pressure necessary to secure the dependable partner its regional ambitions require.

## What a Clean Slate Would Require

There is a comprehensive, internationally recognized framework for what a genuine return to Georgia's pro-democracy, pro-Western course requires. When the European Commission recommended candidate status for Georgia in November 2023, it [conditioned](#) nine areas of concern, covering the political environment, institutional independence, and civil liberties. Any government in Tbilisi that wants to credibly claim it is restoring normal relations with Georgia's Euro-Atlantic partners has to show real progress against these nine benchmarks. There is no other test that matters, and there is no silver bullet that substitutes for it.

Since 2023, Georgia has moved in the opposite direction on all nine. According to Freedom House's latest [count](#), 113 people are imprisoned or in pre-trial detention on charges related to political dissent. Civil society and media face both physical assault and legal coercion: journalist Mzia Amaglobeli was [sentenced](#) to two years while covering the 2024 election crackdown and was [awarded](#) the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize while still behind bars. The new broadcasting laws now allow the government [to impose](#) "coverage standards" on outlets and to bar them from foreign funding.

The political opposition has been largely dismantled. Party bans are before the Constitutional Court at Georgian Dream's request. The legislation adopted in 2025 [allows](#) the Constitutional Court

to ban any party deemed to “substantially repeat” a prohibited one, placing up to 10 parties at risk. Eight opposition leaders [have been jailed](#) for refusing to cooperate with a parliamentary commission widely seen as a tool for removing them from politics. Cases against most major opposition figures [were accelerated](#) in June, with verdicts expected in early autumn 2026. Helen Khoshtaria remains imprisoned for damage to a campaign poster, while her health [deteriorates](#).

At the same time, electoral competition has become largely meaningless. The December 2025 Election Code [abolished](#) voting from abroad and redrew municipal boundaries in ways monitors say distort representation. Georgian Dream then [won](#) all 64 municipalities in the October 2025 local elections amid boycotts, record-low turnout, and the absence of credible international observation. Restoring Georgia as a legitimate and dependable partner means reversing all of this, not merely softening its edges.

What Ivanishvili seeks is improved tone, not the deeper relationship that genuine normalization would require. He cannot afford that relationship. Moscow expects loyalty, not strategic ambiguity, and any serious move toward Washington would invite risks he has little incentive to take. Tone costs him nothing. Substance could cost him everything.

The EU’s nine criteria clarify what normalization would look like. What is missing is a mechanism capable of changing Ivanishvili’s calculation of personal costs and benefits of his geopolitical decisions. This is where EU conditionality failed: it described compliance without creating sufficient incentives and pressure to achieve it. Washington should not repeat that mistake.

The instrument already exists. The MEGOBARI Act [passed](#) the House with overwhelming bipartisan support (349-42) and remains available, though it is stuck in the Senate. Its sanctions and visa restrictions are not a new tool to be invented, but an existing one to be used. Moving it forward and signaling a willingness to target Ivanishvili and the networks around him requires a political decision. Georgian Dream has already demonstrated that it does not respond to anything less than that.

Any credible process should begin with three benchmarks. First, the release of all political prisoners. Second, the repeal of the laws that produced them, including the foreign agents law, party-ban provisions, assembly restrictions, and media controls. Third, an electoral framework that offers a realistic path to political change. Without all three, Georgian Dream can continue extracting the appearance of engagement while preserving the authoritarian system that made normalization impossible in the first place ■

# Associate Membership – A Hurdle or a Bridge?

In May 2026, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz introduced a new [concept](#) into the debate on Ukraine’s future in the European Union – associate membership. Presented as an intermediate step between candidate status and full membership, the proposal seeks to deepen Ukraine’s integration into EU institutions and policies while allowing the formal accession process to continue in parallel.

The initiative is a testament to the European Union’s continued view of enlargement as a strategic priority; however, it also underscores that, despite broad support for Ukraine’s European future, there is no consensus among all member states on the timing and conditions of its accession. Germany’s proposal attempts to bridge this gap by offering Ukraine tangible benefits before full membership becomes politically feasible, while also accelerating its accession.

For Kyiv, however, the proposal raises difficult questions. While it promises greater participation in EU affairs and enhanced security cooperation, it also risks creating a new “integration stage” that falls

short of full membership. The proposal, therefore, touches upon a longstanding dilemma in EU policy towards its eastern neighbors: how to deepen integration without creating permanent substitutes for accession.

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## Old Wine in New Wineskin?

The idea of offering ambitious EU neighbors something short of membership is not new. At the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2003, then-President of the European Commission Romano Prodi famously [proposed](#) offering the EU’s neighbors “everything but institutions.” The initiative was designed to deepen cooperation without committing the Union to further enlargement.



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For countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, however, that concept proved unsatisfactory. While the European Neighborhood Policy and, later, the Eastern Partnership expanded economic and political cooperation, neither offered a credible path towards membership. Critics often described these frameworks as a “waiting room” for countries whose ultimate goal was accession. This was further reinforced by the “Neighborhood Agreements” promise, which Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi despised, as they aspired for the Accession Agreements.

The experience of Türkiye further reinforces these concerns. For years, several major EU member states, most notably Germany and France, [promoted](#) the idea of a “privileged partnership” as an alternative to full Turkish membership. While supporters presented the concept as a realistic compromise that would provide deep economic and political integration without accession, Ankara consistently rejected it, arguing that the proposal effectively sought to

replace membership with a permanent second-tier status and amounted to moving the goalposts after Türkiye had already been recognized as a candidate country and had opened accession negotiations.

***Although associate membership would go considerably further than existing arrangements or previous similar ideas, many in Ukraine fear that it could become another intermediate status that delays rather than accelerates full accession.***

Germany’s current proposal inevitably invites comparison with the earlier initiatives. Although associate membership would go considerably further than existing arrangements or previous similar ideas, many in Ukraine fear that it could become another intermediate status that delays rather than accelerates full accession.

As the issue of EU enlargement becomes increasingly serious, Ukraine's accession is attracting considerable attention for several reasons. From a territorial perspective, it is larger than France or Germany. Rebuilding Ukraine's agriculture is expected to [cost](#) USD 56.1 billion, and demining will need an additional USD 32 billion. According to estimates, Ukraine's EU membership would cost EUR 96.5 billion in CAP payments over seven years, resulting in a 20% reduction in farm subsidies for existing Member States. All of this further complicates the consensus over Ukraine's EU membership and stirs the debate. Mertz knows this and wants to avoid the painful discussion over money, rehabilitation, and membership, or to postpone it until a better time appears. Kyiv, on the other hand, feels that the momentum is now not only on the battlefield but also in terms of enlargement. Miss it, and the next might never arise.

Mertz's proposal could also be seen through the prism of domestic consumption, where the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which opposes Ukraine's EU membership, gains [popularity](#) (29%), while Chancellor Merz's conservative CDU/CSU alliance slips to 20%. While this is logical from a German perspective, the Ukrainian domestic perspective differs. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, embattled domestically over corruption allegations against his team, knows that abandoning their membership dream might cost him dearly in political support from the peace-loving Ukrainian population.

## What Is In the Proposal?

Chancellor Mertz's proposal might be designed specifically for Ukraine, but it has serious implications for other accession states, even if not explicitly addressed.

Among the envisaged privileges of the associate membership are:

- Participation in meetings of the European Council and the Council of Ministers;

- The appointment of a Ukrainian Commissioner without a voting right;
- The presence of Ukrainian representatives in the European Parliament without voting rights;
- Participation in selected EU programmes and initiatives;
- Gradual application of EU legislation;
- Safeguard mechanisms in the event of democratic backsliding;
- Enhanced security and defense cooperation;
- A political commitment by EU member states to apply Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union.

According to Berlin, this arrangement would not replace accession but would complement it, allowing Ukraine to integrate more deeply while membership negotiations continue.

At first glance, the proposal appears attractive. It offers visible political recognition, practical cooperation, and a signal of long-term commitment. Yet many of its elements raise significant questions. Particularly when it comes to the legal basis of participation of Ukrainian officials in the work of EU institutions, applicability of article 42 (7) in the current reality when Ukraine is at war with Russia, or the past experience of signing the Budapest memorandum, which was supposed to provide security assurances (and never did) from Russia and the West.

## Explaining Ukraine's Cold Shoulder

President Zelenskyy responded swiftly and unequivocally to the idea of associate membership by all but rejecting it. Ukraine, he [argued](#), seeks "a complete, full and equal place" within the European Union. From Kyiv's perspective, the proposal arrived at a moment when momentum appeared to be shifting in favor of accession rather than alternative arrangements, especially in light of the

changed government in Hungary. For years, Viktor Orbán had been viewed as one of the principal obstacles to Ukraine's accession process. The removal of this obstacle strengthened Kyiv's expectations that negotiations could advance more rapidly.

Ukraine is also concerned that, rather than serving as a bridge to membership, associate membership risks creating an additional stage in the accession path. The concerns about creating a second-tier membership outweigh the benefit of gaining access to institutions without voting power. Participation without a say is unlikely to satisfy a country at war that views itself as making a major contribution to Europe's security and future.

***As it stands, the proposal's associate membership does not give Ukraine immediate access to the EU budget or increased funding for agriculture and the regions – two main financial benefits of the membership.***

And finally, as it stands, the proposal's associate membership does not give Ukraine immediate access to the EU budget or increased funding for agriculture and the regions – two main financial benefits of the membership. As proposed, funding will depend on Ukraine's progress in the accession negotiations, and Ukraine will not have access to EU coffers comparable to those of other EU members.

The most significant weakness of the proposal, however, lies in its legal foundations.

Although the concept of associate membership is politically innovative, it is not recognized by the EU treaties. The European Union is familiar with association agreements under [Article 217](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and with accession procedures under [Article 49](#) of the Treaty on European Union. Associate membership falls somewhere between these established categories and does not clearly belong to either.

This ambiguity also creates practical difficulties. Under existing legal interpretations, third countries [cannot](#) participate in the decision-making processes of the Council of the European Union or its preparatory bodies. While non-member states may be invited to meetings and consultations, they do not take part in deliberations or decision-making.

Even countries that are deeply integrated into the European single market, such as Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, do not participate in Council decision-making structures through the European Economic Area. The only notable exception concerns acceding states during the period between the signing of an Accession Treaty and its entry into force. But Ukraine is still far from reaching that stage.

The proposal also raises practical questions. At a time when Ukraine remains engaged in a full-scale war, expecting ministers, parliamentarians, and senior officials to devote substantial time to participation in EU institutions may prove difficult. The symbolic value of such participation could therefore exceed its practical utility. In peacetime, such an arrangement could have been more appealing.

## The Attraction and Limits of Article 42

Perhaps the most ambitious element of the proposal is the suggested political commitment by EU member states to apply [Article 42\(7\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union. Often described as the EU's mutual assistance clause and compared to NATO's Article 5, it states that if a member state becomes the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states are obliged to provide aid and assistance by all means in their power.

While this might sound like it is for the country at war, significant legal challenges should not be overlooked. First, Article 42(7) legally applies only to EU member states. Ukraine is not a member and therefore cannot automatically benefit from its protections. It will require a treaty

amendment to extend the mutual assistance clause to Ukraine. Before that, any commitment will be purely political, and Ukraine has had very bad experiences with political commitments rather than legal ones (the [Budapest Memorandum](#) of 1994).

Second, Ukraine knows that extending the clause to Ukraine while the war with Russia continues would raise profound political and legal questions inside the EU. In practice, it could imply direct involvement by EU member states in an ongoing armed conflict with a nuclear power. It is less likely that the EU member states would accept the proposal, and it is possible that, after further deliberation, this clause will be removed from the offer, thereby turning the associate membership into a long-term “waiting room.” It is also possible that, if this clause is activated, no other security guarantees will be given to Ukraine, undermining the integrity of any future peace deal with Russia and possibly even limiting the role of the United States.

Third, even if the offer survives the political skepticism of the member states, Article 42(7) does not specify the precise nature of the assistance to be provided. Unlike NATO’s collective defense commitments, Article 42(7) leaves considerable discretion to member states regarding how they fulfill their obligations. These ambiguities explain why Finland and Sweden ultimately chose to seek NATO membership despite already being members of the European Union.

For Ukraine, therefore, Article 42(7) may provide political reassurance, but it is unlikely to be seen as a substitute for stronger, more clearly defined security guarantees, which remain a top priority for the Ukrainian leadership and an essential component for any peace deal with Russia.

## Wider Implications of the Associate Membership

Although Chancellor Merz’s proposal is designed specifically for Ukraine, its implications extend far

beyond Kyiv. Any attempt to create an intermediate category between candidate status and full membership will inevitably be closely scrutinized by all enlargement countries, particularly Western Balkan states, Moldova, and even Georgia.

For countries genuinely committed to EU membership, this proposal will also generate hostility. Proposed tangible benefits, including greater access to EU funding, institutions, markets, and security cooperation, do not outweigh the political costs associated with the possibility of frozen accession negotiations and a stable sub-standard membership option. It is therefore highly unlikely that Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Moldova will embrace the idea of associate membership.

***The Georgian Dream party used the European discussions about gradual integration, differentiated membership, and institutional limitations within the EU to advance a domestic propaganda narrative that the EU treats Eastern European nations as second-tier and discriminates against them.***

This debate also carries special significance for Georgia, but from a different propaganda angle. The Georgian Dream (GD) party used the European discussions about gradual integration, differentiated membership, and institutional limitations within the EU to advance a domestic propaganda narrative that the EU treats Eastern European nations as second-tier and discriminates against them. This narrative fits well within the GD’s broader anti-European narrative and policy course characteristic of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s rule in recent years.

This immediate hostility among the candidate states creates an additional challenge for Brussels. Any future model of gradual integration must strike a delicate balance. It must provide candidate countries with meaningful benefits and visible progress

while simultaneously avoiding the perception that it is creating permanent substitutes for full membership. Otherwise, such proposals will inadvertently strengthen Eurosceptic narratives both inside candidate countries and within parts of the European Union itself, as Georgia has promptly shown.

## Making Associate Membership Work

The rejection of Chancellor Merz's proposal does not necessarily mean that the idea itself is doomed to fail. On the contrary, the debate reveals a growing demand for innovative approaches to reconcile two realities: Ukraine's legitimate expectation of full EU membership and the Union's institutional, financial, and political concerns about rapid enlargement. The challenge is therefore to design the accession process so that candidate countries perceive it as accelerating accession rather than replacing it.

***The first and perhaps most important modification concerns access to the EU budget. As currently envisioned, associate membership would provide political participation and institutional engagement but would offer only limited additional access to EU funds.***

The first and perhaps most important modification concerns access to the EU budget. As currently envisioned, associate membership would provide political participation and institutional engagement but would offer only limited additional access to EU funds. For Ukraine, this is a major problem. Membership in the European Union is not only about participating in institutions; it is also about benefiting from the Union's solidarity mechanisms, particularly the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy.

A more attractive model would allow associate members to gain progressive access to EU funding through a phased-in approach. The European Union has successfully applied similar mechanisms during previous enlargements. Following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, farmers in Central and Eastern European member states did not receive full payments under the Common Agricultural Policy immediately upon accession. Instead, direct payments were gradually increased over a transition period, beginning at lower levels and reaching full parity only after several years. Similar transitional arrangements were used for structural and cohesion funds, allowing both the new members and the Union to adapt gradually to the financial consequences of enlargement. A comparable approach could be applied to associate membership, enabling Ukraine to benefit from increasing levels of agricultural, regional development, and infrastructure funding long before full accession, while avoiding a sudden financial shock for the EU budget.

***Associate membership must be clearly time-bound. One of the principal reasons Ukraine rejected the proposal is the fear that it could become a permanent waiting room.***

Second, associate membership must be clearly time-bound. One of the principal reasons Ukraine rejected the proposal is the fear that it could become a permanent waiting room. The experiences of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, and, in particular, Türkiye's accession process demonstrate how intermediate arrangements can gradually become substitutes for membership. To avoid this perception, associate membership should be linked to a clearly defined timetable. While the European Union may not be able to commit to an exact accession date, it could commit to a maximum transition period, for example, ten years, after which associate members that have fulfilled the accession

criteria would automatically proceed to full membership. Such a commitment would fundamentally alter the political logic of the proposal. Rather than creating uncertainty, it would create predictability.

Third, associate membership should complement rather than slow down accession negotiations. One of Kyiv's primary concerns is that the proposal could reduce the European Union's political incentive to continue opening and closing negotiating chapters. This concern is not unfounded. The history of EU enlargement contains numerous examples of political blockages unrelated to the fulfillment of accession criteria. To gain credibility, any associate membership framework should be explicitly linked to an accelerated accession process. Negotiation clusters should continue to open and close according to merit, and the European Union should make it clear that progress depends primarily on reforms undertaken by candidate countries rather than on shifting political moods within individual member states. Associate membership should become an additional layer of integration rather than a substitute for accession negotiations.

A fourth element concerns participation in the Single Market. One of the strongest incentives for candidate countries has traditionally been access to the economic benefits of European integration. Associate members should therefore receive progressively expanding access to the four freedoms of the European Union, participation in key EU agen-

cies, and integration into sectors such as energy, digital services, transport, and telecommunications. Such an approach would produce tangible benefits for citizens and businesses while demonstrating that reforms generate concrete rewards.

### ***The security dimension requires greater clarity.***

Finally, the security dimension requires greater clarity. Political declarations regarding Article 42(7) are unlikely to reassure Ukraine unless accompanied by more concrete commitments. Rather than relying exclusively on an uncertain extension of the mutual assistance clause, the European Union and its member states could focus on deeper defense-industrial cooperation, long-term military assistance arrangements, participation in EU defense initiatives, and enhanced integration into the European security architecture. These measures would provide practical security benefits without immediately triggering the legal and political complications associated with extending mutual defense obligations to a non-member state.

If redesigned along these lines, associate membership could evolve from a controversial political proposal into a credible instrument of gradual integration. Most importantly, it would cease to be perceived as an alternative to membership and instead become what Berlin originally intended it to be: a bridge toward it ■

# Georgia After Russia-Ukraine War: The Security File Europe Must Not Ignore

**W**hatever form the end of the Russia-Ukraine war takes, it will not be the end of the Russian problem in Europe. It will only move the problem into a new phase. The future European security order will be shaped not only by the ceasefire lines in Ukraine, the security guarantees offered to Kyiv, or the sanctions that remain on Moscow, but also by what happens to the unresolved conflicts that Russia created before 2022. Georgia (and Moldova) belong in that discussion from day one.

There will be several possible endings to the war. In the best scenario, Russia will be strategically weakened, Ukraine will remain sovereign, armed, politically Western-oriented, and sufficiently protected from the next Russian assault, notwithstanding the territorial concessions. Such an outcome would damage the logic of accommodation with Moscow across the region. It would show that Russia can be resisted, contained, and made to pay a geopolitical price. For Georgia, this would matter

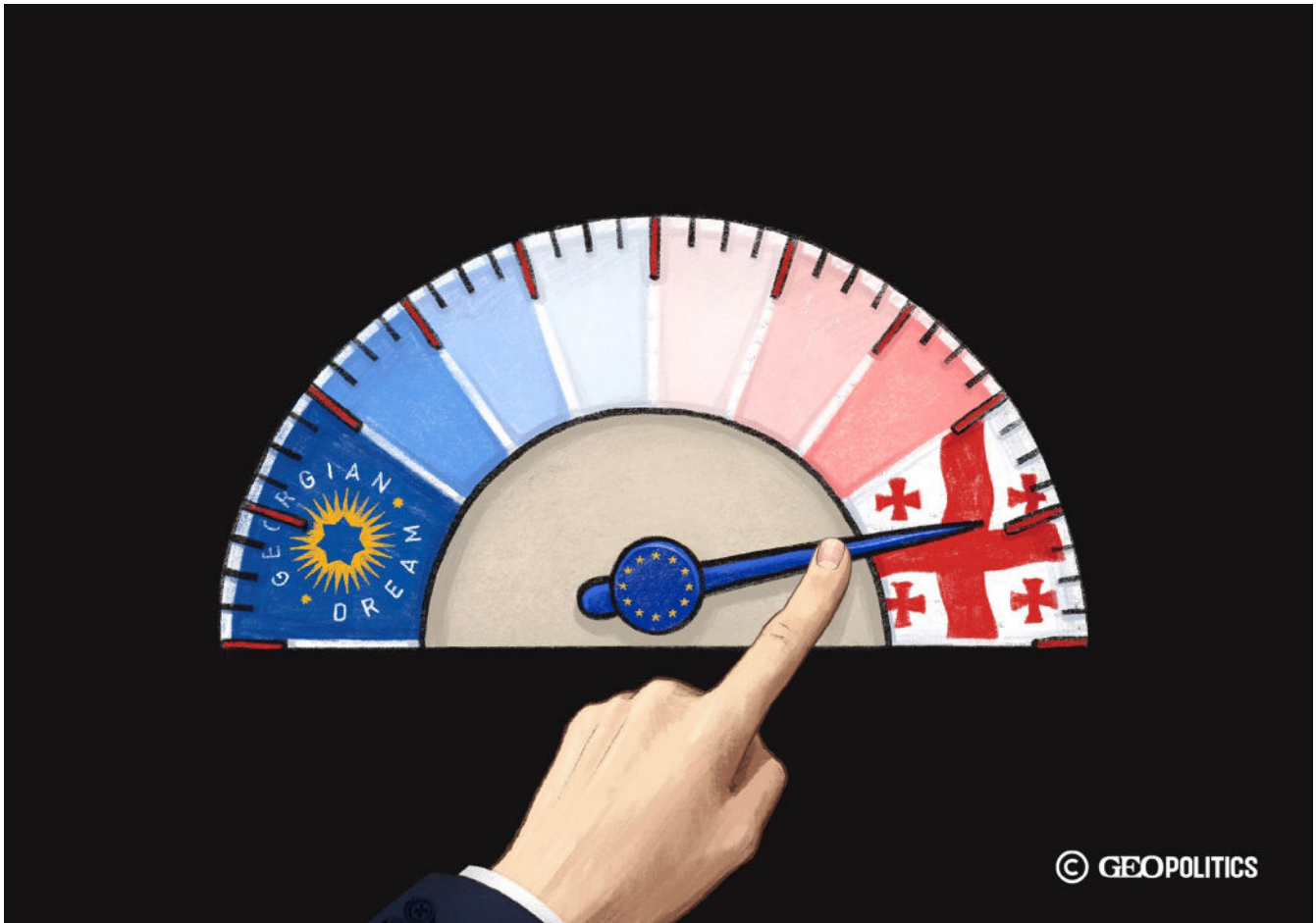
enormously. The central argument of the Georgian Dream (GD) government has been that Russia remains the decisive regional force and that Georgia must therefore avoid confrontation, avoid “provocation,” avoid war, and accept a narrower space for sovereignty. If Russia emerges weakened, that argument loses much of its force, even if it does not entirely disappear.

A second scenario is more ambiguous. War freezes. Ukraine survives, but under permanent military pressure, with parts of its territory occupied, political uncertainty inside the country, and fatigue among Western supporters. Russia neither wins nor loses clearly. This would be the most convenient outcome for the Georgian Dream’s propaganda machine. It would allow the ruling party to say that Ukraine was used, exhausted, and then abandoned by the West, while Georgia survived because it chose “peace.” The lesson would be false, but politically usable. And in Georgian Dream’s propaganda view, that is often enough.



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The third scenario is the most dangerous: Russia is perceived as victorious or at least enduring. This does not require Moscow to achieve all of its original war aims. It would be enough for Russia to keep significant occupied territories, secure sanctions relief, avoid accountability for war crimes, and return to international bargaining as if nothing fundamental had happened. In that case, GD would present its accommodation policy as vindicated and victorious. Anti-Western rhetoric would deepen. Quiet normalization with Moscow would accelerate. The EU's leverage would shrink to a minimum.

***What will matter is not only what happens on the battlefield, but how the outcome is interpreted in Tbilisi, Sukhumi, Tskhinvali, Yerevan, Baku, Brussels, and Moscow.***

However, what will matter is not only what happens on the battlefield, but how the outcome is interpreted in Tbilisi, Sukhumi, Tskhinvali, Yerevan,

Baku, Brussels, and Moscow. For Georgia, perception will shape politics. For the EU, perception will shape policy. If Europe treats Georgia as a secondary file after the war, Russia will read that message correctly. So will Georgian society. So will the occupied regions.

It is therefore imperative that the European Union begin developing a security strategy towards Georgia and the occupied regions in the medium to long run. This strategy should be developed now, regardless of who is in power in Tbilisi and regardless of the authoritarian trend.

## The Country, Not the Government

Much has already been written on the pages of this journal about Georgia's [democratic backsliding](#), [state capture](#), political repression, [authoritarian consolidation](#), and the deliberate dismantling of the country's European path by Georgian Dream. Those issues currently remain central. They should not be

minimized. But this article looks at Georgia through a different lens: not as a democracy-promotion case, but as a security unit in the European order. A billiard ball, to use the old realist language. Even under a bad government, Georgia still occupies the same geography, carries the same unresolved conflicts, hosts the same illegal Russian military presence on its occupied territories, and remains exposed to the same Russian instruments of coercion.

This is the uncomfortable part for Brussels and European capitals. Georgia is becoming less politically reliable at the exact moment when it is becoming more strategically important. Georgia is the Black Sea gateway of the South Caucasus and an indispensable part of the Middle Corridor. It is connected to Europe's future access to the Caspian basin and Central Asia. It matters for energy diversification, trade routes, sanctions enforcement, infrastructure security, and the political balance between Russia, Türkiye, Iran, China, and the EU in the wider region. Thus, there can be no serious European South Caucasus policy without Georgia.

There can also not be a serious European security policy that ignores the occupation of Georgia's territories.

Russia still [occupies](#) Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, exercising full effective control over these regions. Russian troops remain stationed there illegally in violation of international law and the bilateral obligations towards Georgia. Moscow has built military, security, customs, legal, and economic structures that bind the two regions to Russia, where the process has moved far beyond old-fashioned separatism. In both regions, Russia has integrated security structures, controlled border management, shaped customs and law enforcement, pushed legal harmonization, used passports as leverage, taken strategic property such as Bichvinta, and advanced its military position on the Black Sea coast, including around Ochamchire.

This is therefore not a local Georgian problem. It is a European arms-control problem that has implications for Black Sea security. It is also prone to becoming a sanctions-enforcement problem. But overall, it is a test of whether Europe's next security architecture will address all Russian occupations, or only the one that became too large to ignore.

***If the post-war settlement and new European security architecture address only Ukraine but leave Georgia and Moldova outside the frame, Europe will create a hierarchy of occupations.***

If the post-war settlement and new European security architecture address only Ukraine but leave Georgia and Moldova outside the frame, Europe will create a hierarchy of occupations. Russia will understand that some occupations are negotiable, tolerable, and can eventually be absorbed into the background noise of diplomacy. That would not be the peace that the European continents aspire to, but a surrender to a precedent that would ultimately undermine European security. And let's make no mistake, the reason why Russia became so emboldened in Ukraine, first in 2014 and then in 2022, was that it got away with snatching Georgian territories and paying zero price for it. 2008 might sound like ancient history, but for those of us who remember and were first-hand [witnesses](#), the application of the same rule of force to Crimea and further was just a matter of time.

## What Europe Should Not Do

The EU's first task is to avoid self-inflicted damage in the name of "doing something." Suspending Georgia's candidate status, as some European states are considering, would be a strategic mistake. It would punish the wrong side of the Georgian political divide and hand Georgian Dream the propaganda victory it wants. The oligarch's talking heads and his propaganda machinery would present such a decision as proof that Europe rejected Georgia, humiliated

its people, and never intended to accept the country anyway. That message would be repeated every day, on every loyal television channel, through every party-controlled platform, through every bot and troll in social media, and it would be hard to defeat because it would contain one visible fact: the “candidate status” was removed.

***Suspending Georgia’s candidate status, as some European states are considering, would be a strategic mistake. It would punish the wrong side of the Georgian political divide and hand Georgian Dream the propaganda victory it wants.***

The same applies to visa liberalization. Removing visa-free travel for Georgian citizens would hit precisely those people who still look to Europe as a political, educational, professional, and cultural space. It would not weaken the regime at all, but would rather strengthen it. Targeted sanctions against responsible officials, judges, propagandists, security officials, and oligarchic networks, who have undermined Georgian democracy, are a different matter and are legally and politically comprehensible if Europe so decides. But collective punishment of Georgian citizens would be strategically stupid, would serve no real purpose, and would actually strengthen Russia in the region, not weaken it.

***The EU also should not normalize authoritarian governance in Georgia in the name of regional pragmatism. Engagement with the Georgian government may remain necessary, especially on security, infrastructure, and occupied territories, but engagement must not become legitimization.***

The EU also should not normalize authoritarian governance in Georgia in the name of regional

pragmatism. Engagement with the Georgian government may remain necessary, especially on security, infrastructure, and occupied territories, but engagement must not become legitimization. The basic political demands should remain unchanged: political prisoners must be released, repressive laws must be repealed, political parties must not be banned, and a permissive environment for political competition must be restored. These are not decorative democracy clauses. They are the minimum conditions for Georgia to remain a credible European state. And any politician or party in Georgia should know that these are the EU’s non-negotiable demands, which, if unfulfilled, will lead to restrictive measures, the withholding of financial and economic benefits, and high-level diplomatic engagement.

But since this article’s subject is not democracy and EU conditionalities but a European security architecture, another “must not” matters even more. Europe must not allow Russia to convert occupation into a veto over Georgia’s future. If unresolved conflicts automatically block European integration or NATO accession, Russia has already won. It will not need to resolve anything. It will only need to maintain troops and the status quo.

## **What Europe Should Put on the Table**

The EU needs an anti-annexation policy toward Georgia once peace in Ukraine is established. It actually needed this policy a long time ago, but better late than never. Not another declaratory and a lowest common denominator non-recognition policy, but an active strategy designed to make Georgia harder to dismember, harder to coerce, and harder to absorb piece by piece. For Georgia, this means that the EU should treat Russia’s actions in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as part of its broader Russia policy, not as an old conflict-management issue parked in Geneva.

The August 12, 2008, ceasefire [agreement](#) should return to the center of EU-Russia discussions.

In fact, the EU should seek new commitments from Russia regarding the occupied regions – troop withdrawal, loosening control, status-related negotiations, and transparency and openness measures. Russia's withdrawal to pre-war positions, access for international organizations, and non-use of force arrangements should not be treated as archival material from another era. They are still the legal and political basis for reversing the consequences of the 2008 war. Any future normalization of relations with Russia should include Georgia and the topic of its occupied regions. Sanctions relief for Moscow should not move forward while Russia continues to occupy Georgian (and Moldovan) territory as if these were side issues.

***The August 12, 2008, ceasefire agreement should return to the center of EU-Russia discussions. In fact, the EU should seek new commitments from Russia regarding the occupied regions – troop withdrawal, loosening control, status-related negotiations, and transparency and openness measures.***

The EU should also create a sanctions regime connected specifically to the occupied regions of Georgia. This should target Russian officials, military commanders, business actors, legal architects, and companies involved in annexation by stealth: military integration, property seizures, legal harmonization, passport coercion, customs absorption, strategic infrastructure control, and Black Sea militarization. Bichvinta-type [transfers](#), Ochamchire-type military [projects](#), and the weaponization of Russian citizenship should carry a price. Currently, also because the attention is elsewhere, these actions cost Russia nothing.

At the same time, Europe should become more open toward the people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. The current reality traps many residents in a cycle of Russian passports,

isolation, and fear of political uncertainty. That serves Moscow. The EU should design a status-neutral engagement policy that does not recognize these regions, does not undermine Georgia's territorial integrity, and provides the residents of these regions with access to European education, better health-care, mobility, vocational training, youth exchanges, micro-grants, and, eventually, even status-neutral travel arrangements. The message to these residents should be that Russia is not their only option and that, as residents of the European continent, they can count on Europe, which is opening its doors to them. In fact, the central element of the anti-annexation policy should be to drive a wedge between the residents of the occupied regions and their occupier, and there is no better way to do so than to highlight the contrast between what Russia offers and what Europe offers.

This matters especially in Abkhazia, where dependence on Russia is deep, but the desire for outright incorporation into Russia is neither as natural nor as unanimous as Moscow pretends. Abkhaz society has resisted Russian property expansion, demographic pressure, and direct interference. Europe (and Georgia) has never seriously used that opening.

***The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), which has been on the ground since 2008, also needs a new, wider, and more political mandate. The mission has played an important stabilizing role, but it has become too limited for the new security environment.***

The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), which has been on the ground since 2008, also needs a new, wider, and more political mandate. The mission has played an important stabilizing role, but it has become too limited for the new security environment. It monitors what it can, reports what it sees, and maintains channels that help prevent incidents. That is useful, but not enough. The EU should transform

it into an EUMM-plus mission with satellite support, drone-monitoring capabilities, airspace surveillance, borderization tracking, cyber and hybrid-threat monitoring, and the ability to report early signs of military build-up or annexation-related moves. And its added value will only increase if these reports are publicly accessible and transparent. If Russia continues blocking access to the occupied territories, the EU should increase remote monitoring and raise the diplomatic cost of obstruction. But first of all, allowing this mission inside the occupied regions should become a major talking point with the post-Ukraine War Russia.

Georgia also belongs in any future European arms-control conversation. The adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) logic of Istanbul in 1999 should not be forgotten. Illegal Russian military bases in Georgia and Moldova are not marginal details. They might seem funny in comparison to hundreds of thousands of troops, machinery, and heavy artillery and scores of drones employed in the Ukrainian theater; however, at the legal level, Russian military presence in these occupied regions is just as unlawful as their presence in Crimea or Donbas. These military installations are part of the continental force posture, a remnant of the Soviet legacy that could become a precursor to future military problems years down the road. Any negotiations between the West and Russia on conventional forces, missile deployments, Black Sea security, transparency of armed forces, inspections, or confidence- and security-building measures must address the Russian military presence in Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and Transnistria.

***The EU should not make conflict resolution a formal condition of accession, as that would give Russia a veto.***

The EU also has to stop pretending that conflict resolution is separate from enlargement. The accession process for Eastern candidates has no serious

instrument for dealing with the occupied territories. That has to change. The EU should not make conflict resolution a formal condition of accession, as that would give Russia a veto. But it should create a conflict-monitoring annex to enlargement reports that covers human rights, military activity, borderization, Russian legal integration, demographic pressure, access for humanitarian actors, and restrictions on movement. It should also prepare a legal model for accession under partial territorial control, drawing on the Cyprus precedent, in which EU law applies only within the territory controlled by the recognized state until peaceful reintegration becomes possible. In addition, the EU could also draw on the mixed creative out-of-the-box experiences of Kosovo (not the recognition part), and Greenland (after all, it is a de jure part of the EU member state, but is not part of the EU), and draft the scenarios on how the occupied regions will be treated after the accession of the Eastern neighbors.

That approach would preserve Georgia's territorial integrity while denying Moscow a veto over its European future. It would also break with the self-defeating logic that has often guided Western thinking on unresolved conflicts: namely, that countries partially occupied by Russia are somehow unsuitable for integration. If accepted, that principle rewards aggression. It tells Moscow that every occupied district, every military base, and every frozen conflict can be transformed into a permanent obstacle to European integration. Europe should be doing the exact opposite.

The EU should also start treating Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as part of security policy, not as a public relations problem. Georgia has shown how Russian methods can be reproduced by local authoritarian actors: demonizing the EU as a war party, portraying civil society as foreign agents, presenting neutrality as prudence, and using fear of war to justify the shrinking of sovereignty and foreign policy options. A future EU strategy should include a dedicated FIMI

and sanctions-evasion monitoring mechanism for Georgia and the South Caucasus, with support for independent media, civil society, digital forensics, rapid attribution, platform monitoring, and public communication in Georgian, Abkhaz, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian languages.

The EU will not be able to do this alone through Brussels bureaucracy. It should build a coalition of willing states. Baltic and Nordic countries can lead on education, digital resilience, and civic technology. Poland, France, and Germany can provide political weight. Britain and Canada (it does not have to be the EU) can support Track 1.5 diplomacy and civil society engagement. Türkiye matters for trade, logistics, and Abkhazia's wider social connections. The point is not to create another ceremonial format. The point is to build a flexible ecosystem that can reach societies, not only governments. I deliberately do not mention the U.S. in this discussion, because Georgian security and de-occupation is first a Georgian and then a European problem. And only then is it American.

## The File Not to Be Parked Again

For too long, Georgia was treated as a warning that Europe had not fully absorbed. The August 2008 war was followed by civilian monitoring, common positions, track two and 1.5 formats, and cautious diplomacy, but not by a strategic correction. Russia learned from that. It learned that occupation could be normalized over time, that military facts could become “a new reality,” and that Western attention would move elsewhere.

Ukraine changed the scale, but not the nature, of the problem. Ukraine fought for its territories, independence, and freedom because it had military, human, and moral resources. Not all countries can afford that. However, it is erroneous to assume that the Russian occupation can only be resolved by force. Europe is not good at showing force, but it has an excellent track record of using its economic, financial, and soft-power magnetism to attract people's hearts and minds. And the residents of the occupied regions, believe it or not, also have hearts and minds. And many of them feel more European than Russian.

After the Russia-Ukraine war ends, Europe will face a choice. It can design a security architecture that addresses Russian revisionism as a whole, including Georgia and Moldova, or it can settle the largest war while leaving earlier occupations intact, hoping that old wounds will stay quiet. They will not.

***If Europe forgets Georgia again, even if the current reasons are legitimate, Russia will not.***

Georgia is not a side theatre. It is where the 2008 war remains unfinished, where Russia still holds military positions inside an EU candidate country, where the Black Sea meets the South Caucasus, where Europe's connectivity agenda passes through a politically captured state (a few kilometers from the illegal Russian military bases), and where the next contest between Russian coercion and European statecraft is already underway. If Europe forgets Georgia again, even if the current reasons are legitimate, Russia will not ■

# Pool of Our Experts



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



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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.



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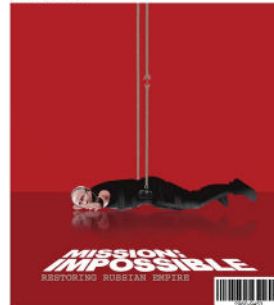
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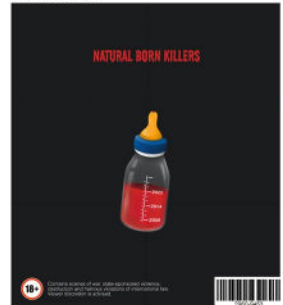
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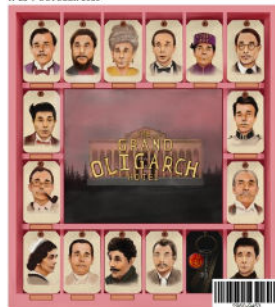
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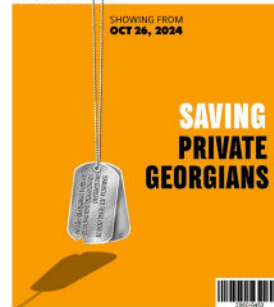
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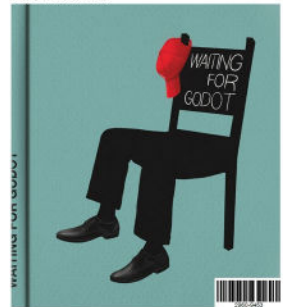
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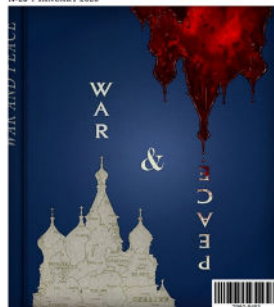
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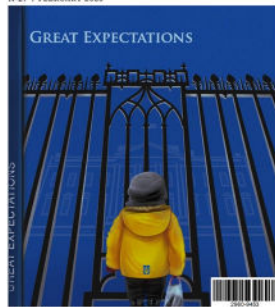
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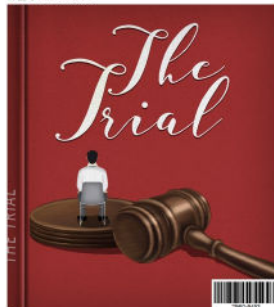
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One flew east, one flew west



One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest



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