

Primum Non Nocere: Visa-Free Travel for Georgians

Nearly a decade after [granting](#) Georgian citizens visa-free access to the Schengen Area, the European Union faces an uncomfortable dilemma. Democratic backsliding in Georgia has prompted Brussels to consider activating one of its strongest remaining instruments of political pressure, the suspension of visa-free travel. Legally, the grounds for doing so are becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss. Politically, however, the consequences are far less straightforward.

The question is no longer whether Georgia has regressed in meeting many of the commitments underpinning visa liberalization. The European Commission has repeatedly concluded that it has. The more difficult question is whether suspending visa-free travel would achieve its intended objective or would primarily affect those Georgians who continue to see Europe as their country's political, cultural, and civilizational home.

The ancient medical principle *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm) offers a useful lens through

which to assess this debate. The European Union has every reason to respond to Georgia's democratic regression and growing divergence from European values. Yet not every available instrument is necessarily the most effective one. Before transforming one of the EU's greatest foreign policy successes into a tool of political pressure, Brussels should carefully consider whether the remedy risks harming those it seeks to protect.

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For most Georgians, the significance of visa-free travel extends well beyond tourism. Since visa-free travel entered into force in 2017, more than a [million](#) Georgians have traveled to the European Union and the Schengen Area without visas.



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For [thousands](#) of patients every year, it has provided access to medical treatment unavailable in Georgia. It has [enabled](#) students to participate in academic exchanges, entrepreneurs to establish business contacts, and civil society representatives to engage more actively with their European counterparts. For human rights defenders working in an increasingly hostile domestic environment, the ability to travel freely has become not only a professional necessity but, at times, an important safety mechanism.

Visa liberalization has also carried a less visible but equally important socio-economic dimension. Although reliable statistics are scarce, it is widely acknowledged that many Georgians, particularly from economically vulnerable regions, use visa-free travel to [undertake](#) short-term seasonal work in Europe. Their earnings support families through remittances and help alleviate the economic hardship that continues to affect large parts of the country. Research consistently shows that emigration remains deeply embedded in Georgian society: approximately [three](#) out of four families report

having a close relative living abroad, while one in five households receives remittances.

From Bridge to Political Conditionality

Ironically, one of the European Union's most successful instruments of soft power is increasingly being viewed as a potential instrument of political pressure.

As relations between Brussels and Tbilisi continue to deteriorate, absent a consensus on other restrictive measures, visa liberalization has emerged as one of the few areas where the European Union retains meaningful leverage over the Georgian authorities. The [revised](#) Visa Suspension Mechanism, adopted in 2025, has considerably broadened the political and legal grounds on which visa-free travel may be suspended. While migration-related indicators remain relevant, the mechanism now places far greater emphasis on democratic governance, respect for fundamental rights, alignment with the EU's

foreign and visa policies, and broader considerations relating to the Union's external relations.

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In light of this modified approach, the European Commission has steadily increased its warnings to Georgia. Its [eighth](#) Visa Suspension Report, published in December 2025, concluded that Georgia had continued to regress in key areas of governance, democracy and fundamental rights. The report reiterated that respect for these principles was one of the core conditions agreed during Georgia's visa liberalization dialogue and warned that the revised mechanism should be considered if the country's trajectory remains unchanged.

The political message soon translated into concrete action. In March 2026, the European Union [suspended](#) visa-free travel for holders of Georgian diplomatic, service and official passports for an initial period of one year, with the possibility of extension. Although largely symbolic in practical terms, the decision carried a much broader political significance. For the first time, Brussels demonstrated that suspension was no longer merely a theoretical possibility.

Since then, the debate has moved to a far more consequential question: should the suspension

eventually be extended to ordinary Georgian citizens?

That question lies at the heart of the current debate. Legally, the revised mechanism provides the European Union with considerably greater room for maneuver than before. Politically, however, the decision is considerably more complex. Before taking such a step, it is worth examining whether Georgia's overall record actually justifies extending the suspension beyond diplomatic passport holders.

Does Georgia's Mixed Record Meet the Test?

Whether the European Union should extend the suspension of visa-free travel ultimately depends on a straightforward question: does Georgia meet the conditions set out in the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism? The answer is neither a simple yes nor a simple no.

The mechanism, substantially revised in 2025, reflects the changing nature of the EU's neighborhood policy. Originally conceived primarily as a safeguard against irregular migration, it now also incorporates broader political considerations. In addition to migration-related indicators, such as asylum applications, irregular stays and readmission cooperation, the revised regulation places considerable emphasis on democratic governance, respect for fundamental rights, alignment with the EU's visa and foreign policy, and developments that may affect the Union's external relations and internal security.

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Assessing Georgia against these criteria reveals a considerably more nuanced picture than the current political debate often suggests. While the country's

democratic record has deteriorated sharply, several of the traditional migration indicators have moved in the opposite direction.

One of the strongest arguments historically used to justify closer scrutiny of visa-free regimes has been the risk of irregular migration and unfounded asylum applications. Yet, paradoxically, this is one area where Georgia's performance has steadily improved.

The number of asylum applications lodged by Georgian citizens in the European Union has [fallen](#) significantly—from 24,350 in 2023 to 14,530 in 2024. The same trend is evident in the principal destination countries. In Germany, applications [declined](#) from almost 9,400 to approximately 3,500 over the same period, while in France they fell from nearly 7,200 to around 4,400. Recognition rates have remained consistently low, at around 7%, suggesting that the overwhelming majority of applications continue to be rejected.

A similar pattern can be observed in return procedures. The number of return decisions issued to Georgian nationals [decreased](#) from more than 20,000 in 2023 to approximately 17,900 in 2024. Equally important, Georgia has maintained a high level of cooperation with EU Member States in implementing [readmission](#) agreements. Of the 4,196 readmission requests received in 2024, only 0.55% were rejected by the Georgian authorities.

These indicators suggest that the migration-related concerns that originally shaped the visa suspension debate are less relevant for Georgia. If the discussion were based solely on asylum trends, irregular migration, and readmission cooperation, Georgia would present a relatively reassuring picture.

The concerns emerging in Brussels, therefore, lie elsewhere.

One of the European Commission's principal concerns is Georgia's growing divergence from the EU's visa policy. Countries benefiting from visa-free

travel are expected to progressively align their visa regimes with those of the European Union, particularly for neighboring states that may serve as transit routes for irregular migration.

Georgia has made virtually no progress in this regard.

According to the Visa Suspension Mechanism [Report](#), Georgia continues to maintain visa-free regimes with twenty-six countries whose nationals still require visas to enter the European Union. The list includes, among others, China, Russia, Iran, Belarus, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and several Central Asian states. From Brussels' perspective, the decision to [introduce](#) visa-free travel for Chinese citizens in September 2023 further widened the gap between Georgia's visa policy and the EU's.

European institutions increasingly associate this divergence with broader security concerns. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, approximately 160,000 [Russian](#) citizens relocated to Georgia. While the vast majority arrived for legitimate reasons, European officials have [expressed](#) growing concern that Russia's expanding presence may increase opportunities for sanctions circumvention, foreign influence operations, and other hybrid threats. Similar concerns have also been raised regarding the simplified acquisition of Georgian citizenship by Russian nationals, particularly where such decisions may have implications for access to the Schengen area.

Yet even these issues are not the primary reason why Georgia's visa-free regime has come under unprecedented scrutiny.

Real Concerns

Democratic governance has become one of the most significant new criteria under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism. The Commission argues that continued compliance with reforms implemented under the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP)

is now an integral element in maintaining visa-free travel. This represents a profound shift in the European Union's approach. Whereas earlier assessments focused largely on migration management and border security, the revised mechanism explicitly links visa liberalization to continued compliance with the political reforms undertaken during the implementation of the VLAP.

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It is in this area that Georgia has experienced its most serious regression.

Over the past two years, the European Commission has repeatedly concluded that Georgia has failed to address the recommendations contained in successive Visa Suspension Reports. Instead, it has identified further deterioration in democratic governance, judicial independence and the protection of fundamental rights.

Particular concern has been expressed over the [legislative package](#) on so-called Family Values and the Protection of Minors, which Brussels considers incompatible with fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and the right to privacy. Equally troubling for the European Union has been the adoption of legislation [targeting](#) civil society organizations and independent media. These laws have been widely viewed as undermining the democratic commitments that originally underpinned Georgia's visa liberalization dialogue.

Additional concerns arise from the security dimension. [Europol](#) continues to identify Georgian

organized criminal groups among the most active transnational networks involved in organized property crime and trafficking in human beings across Europe. National statistics reinforce these concerns. In Poland, for example, Georgian nationals were responsible for [approximately](#) 17% of all crimes committed by foreigners in Warsaw during 2024.

Punishing the Wrong Target?

The revised Visa Suspension Mechanism undoubtedly gives the European Union greater legal reason to suspend visa-free travel. Yet the existence of a legal instrument does not automatically make its use strategically wise. The central question now is not whether Georgia's regressions are sufficient to trigger visa suspension, but whether removing visa-free travel for Georgian citizens would achieve the political objectives behind such a move.

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In Georgia's case, there are strong reasons to question whether extending the suspension to ordinary citizens would produce the intended outcome.

The first argument is also the most fundamental. When the European Union granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023, it did so despite acknowledging that the government had failed to

fulfill many of the twelve priorities established by the European Commission. Brussels deliberately distinguished between the policies of the ruling authorities and the aspirations of Georgian society. Candidate status was widely presented as recognition of the Georgian people's consistently demonstrated commitment to European integration rather than an endorsement of government policy. That distinction remains equally relevant today. Public support for European Union membership remains among the highest in the region (up to 71%) despite the suspension of accession negotiations and the country's democratic backsliding. Suspending visa-free travel would inevitably blur the line the European Union has carefully sought to maintain between holding governments accountable and supporting societies that continue to embrace the European project.

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If candidate status represented a political message of confidence in Georgian society, withdrawing visa-free travel could easily be interpreted as the opposite.

Burning the Bridge vs Keeping It Open

Any decision taken in Brussels will be judged through the prism of political communication. For months, Georgian Dream has sought to portray the European Union as demanding that Georgia surrender its traditions, identity, and sovereignty in exchange for closer integration. Within this narrative, restrictive measures adopted by Brussels are presented not as responses to democratic backsliding, but as evidence of European hostility towards Georgia itself.

Given the European Union's persistent difficulty in communicating its policies effectively in Georgia, it should consider carefully whether a measure intended to pressure the government might instead strengthen one of the government's most effective political messages.

Suspending visa-free travel would hand this propaganda narrative a potent symbol. Whether the government's interpretation was accurate would become almost secondary, because political communication rarely turns on legal nuance. Images of Georgian citizens once again queuing for visas would almost certainly carry greater emotional force than detailed explanations of the Visa Suspension Mechanism or references to democratic benchmarks in European Commission reports. Given the European Union's persistent difficulty in communicating its policies effectively in Georgia, it should consider carefully whether a measure intended to pressure the government might instead strengthen one of the government's most effective political messages.

Visa liberalization was never intended merely to make travel more convenient. It has been one of the European Union's most successful instruments of soft power, encouraging personal contacts, academic exchanges, tourism, business cooperation and cultural interaction. In countries with a credible European perspective, these connections perform an even more important function: they keep societies connected to Europe when their governments begin moving in the opposite direction.

That bridge is especially valuable at a time when political relations between Brussels and Tbilisi are deteriorating. Preserving direct links between European societies and Georgian citizens may now be more important, not less. Restricting those links would risk weakening precisely the part of Georgian society that has remained most consistently committed to European integration.

Beyond the political calculations lies a more immediate human reality. Thousands of Georgians travel to European countries for specialized medical treatment that may not be available at home. Human rights defenders, investigative journalists and civil society representatives increasingly depend on the ability to leave the country quickly when security risks arise, or temporary respite becomes necessary. Students, researchers and young professionals benefit from exchanges that have gradually integrated Georgia into Europe's academic and professional networks.

Reintroducing visas would not make such travel impossible, but it would make it slower, more expensive, and less predictable. These burdens would fall not on the officials responsible for democratic regression, but often on those already experiencing its consequences.

The effectiveness of any restrictive measure should ultimately be assessed against a simple question: Is it likely to change the behavior it is intended to influence? In this case, the answer is far from clear. There is little reason to assume that suspending visa-free travel would fundamentally alter Georgian Dream's political calculations. On the contrary, it could reinforce the government's claim that the European Union has become an unreliable partner determined to punish Georgia regardless of domestic developments.

At the same time, suspension would almost certainly generate disappointment and frustration among citizens whose support for European integration has consistently exceeded that of the political leadership representing them. Conditionality works best when its costs fall primarily on those responsible for the decisions being challenged. Suspending visa-free travel risks reversing that logic: political leaders would retain their privileges and resources, while ordinary citizens would bear the most visible and immediate consequences.

There is also a longer-term danger. Although suspension would formally be temporary, such restrictions tend to acquire political permanence. Migration has become an increasingly sensitive issue in many EU Member States. Even if Georgia eventually returned to full compliance with the visa-liberalization benchmarks, restoring visa-free travel might prove politically more difficult than suspending it. The threshold for reinstatement could become considerably higher than the threshold for withdrawal.

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This makes the decision more consequential than it may initially appear. Visa-free travel is not merely a benefit that can be switched off and restored without lasting effects. It is a strategic connection between Georgian society and Europe. Weakening that connection would risk punishing the wrong people, strengthening anti-European propaganda and removing one of the EU's most effective means of maintaining influence in Georgia.

Brussels should therefore resist measures that blur the distinction it has repeatedly made between the Georgian government and the Georgian people. If the objective is to change the conduct of those in power, restrictions should be designed to affect decision-makers directly. The bridge connecting Georgian citizens to Europe should be preserved—especially as their government moves away from it.

The principle of *primum non nocere* was never intended to discourage action. Rather, it reminds us that before prescribing a remedy, one should first consider whom it is likely to harm. The European Union would do well to remember that principle when deciding the future of visa liberalization with Georgia ■