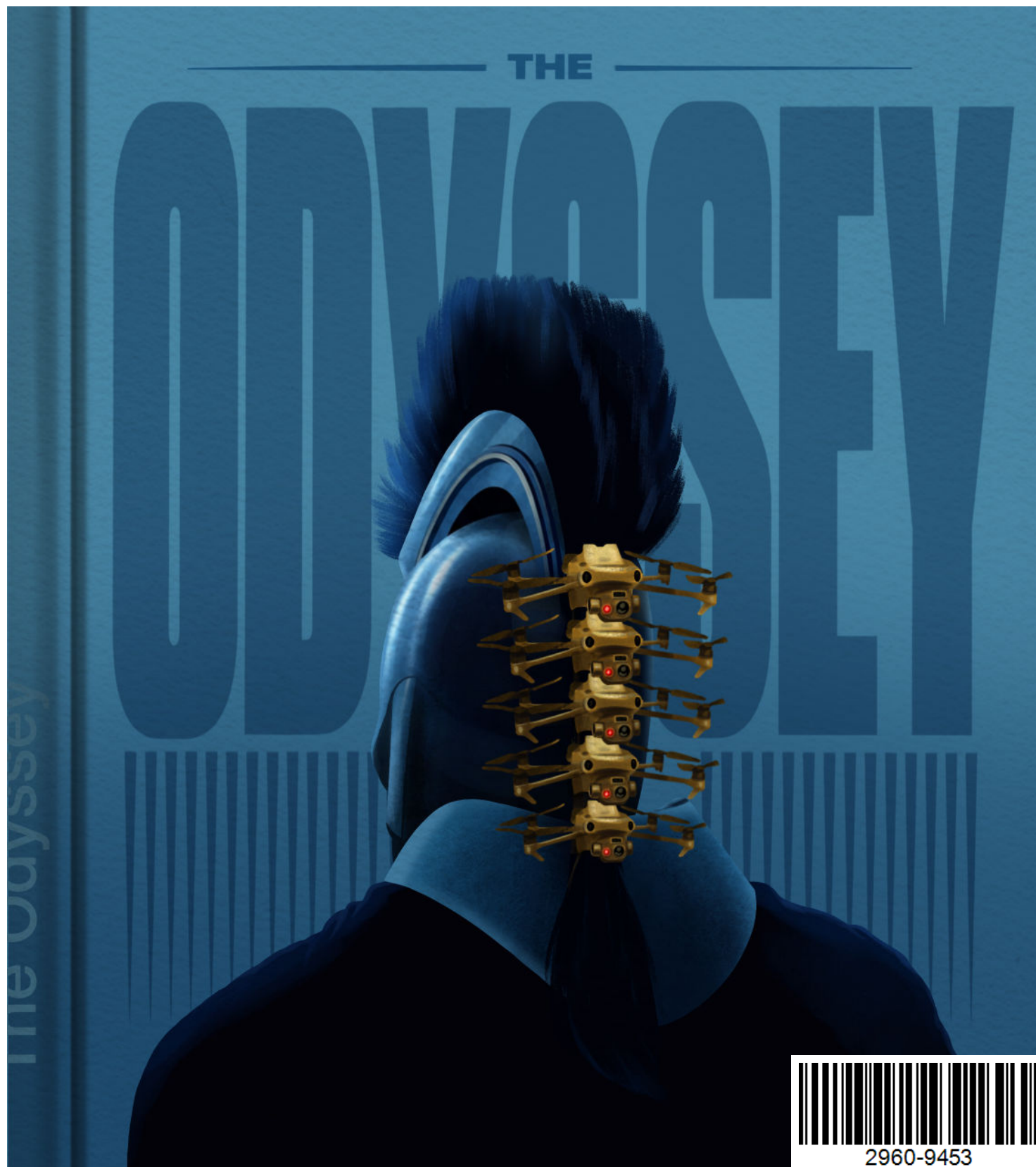

GEO POLITICS

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Our Mission

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

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

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

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Like Odysseus, We Need to Learn How to Win Different Battles

This issue of *GEOPolitics* echoes the current excitement around the *Odyssey*, not just a blockbuster, but a great book and one of humanity's most enduring stories, a story that still has something useful to teach us about strategy. Odysseus survives a succession of dangers because he understands that battles are won in different ways. A method that succeeds once may fail completely when the adversary, terrain, or nature of the threat changes. Experience matters, but it becomes an advantage only when accompanied by judgment and adaptation.

In Odysseus's world, previous success offers no guarantee of the next victory. The method used to defeat Polyphemus is useless against the Sirens and is in turn useless against the Laestrygonians. Contemporary war follows the same logic: superiority once secured through tanks, aircraft, or artillery no longer automatically confers an advantage in an environment where drones, sensors, electronic warfare, and permanent surveillance have changed the rules of the battlefield. The principle extends beyond war. Democratic resilience, critical infrastructure, information security, territorial integrity, EU enlargement, and European development policy are all being tested by threats that have changed faster than the institutions designed to confront them. As always, *GEOPolitics* examines these consequential battles and events, asking whether the instruments available to Ukraine, Georgia, and Europe remain suited to the challenges they now face.

Thornike Gordadze opens the issue with Ukraine's democratic paradox. Ukrainian society has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to restrain political power, from the Orange Revolution and Maidan to wartime protests that forced President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to reverse decisions affecting independent anti-corruption institutions. Yet the recurring need for street intervention exposes the weakness of Parliament, political parties, courts, and oversight bodies. Protest provides a powerful democratic veto, but it cannot substitute permanently for elections or institutional accountability. Ukraine's central postwar task, Gordadze argues, will be to embed society's democratic courage in institutions capable of constraining any president, resisting informal networks, and turning peaceful transfers of power into ordinary politics.

Lesia Bidochko examines how Ukraine is compensating for Russia's advantages in manpower, industrial depth, and conventional firepower. Ukraine's emerging model expends machines to preserve people: FPV drones, interceptors, unmanned vessels, and ground robots now conduct strikes, deliveries, reconnaissance, and casualty evacuation. Its real advantage lies in the rapid cycle connecting frontline operators, engineers, workshops, manufacturers, and procurement officers. The same logic underpins Ukraine's "long-range sanctions," which force Russia to defend airfields, refineries, railways, ports, and logistics hubs at disproportionate cost. These systems do not replace conventional forces or Western support,

but they offer smaller states a practical model for generating military mass, accelerating innovation, and making a larger adversary pay more for every movement.

The battlefield leads directly to the systems that keep states functioning under pressure. Temuri Yakobashvili argues that critical infrastructure can no longer be understood in terms of power plants, bridges, ports, pipelines, and government buildings. Essential services now depend on software, data, satellites, cloud platforms, communications, private operators, supply chains, and specialized personnel. Ukraine has become a laboratory under attack, demonstrating the importance of distributed systems, redundancy, repair capacity, spare equipment, and rapid recovery. For Georgia, resilience means identifying the functions that must survive, mapping their dependencies, reducing single points of failure, and becoming a reliable part of wider European energy, transport, digital, and security networks.

Sergi Kapanadze introduces “domesticated FIMI,” a condition in which foreign propaganda has been absorbed into domestic politics and no longer requires foreign instructions or financing. Georgian Dream has adopted Kremlin narratives about foreign agents, color revolutions, Western decadence, and the alleged choice between peace and war, while local officials and captured broadcasters produce and distribute them through Georgian institutions and commercial markets. European tools often miss this system because they search for an attributable Russian sponsor or concentrate on debunking individual falsehoods. Kapanadze urges the EU to treat media capture as an information-security threat, focus sanctions on coordinated deceptive conduct, scrutinize commercial enablers, and support independent Georgian media as democratic infrastructure whose survival is now at stake.

Shota Gvineria questions the celebration of Nauru’s withdrawal of recognition of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia when Georgian Dream is

simultaneously dismantling the legal foundations of Georgia’s non-recognition policy. That policy rested on the international finding that Russia committed aggression and continues to occupy Georgian territory, reinforced by Western diplomatic pressure. By assigning responsibility for the 2008 war to the former Georgian government and placing that narrative in an official parliamentary record, Georgian Dream has strengthened Moscow’s case against Georgia itself. As Russia moves from cultivating recognition toward possible territorial absorption, Gvineria calls for an anti-annexation strategy based on predetermined costs, coordination with Western partners and Ukraine, stronger security guarantees, and support for constituencies inside the occupied regions that oppose incorporation into Russia.

For Vano Chkhikvadze, EU enlargement has been revived by geopolitical urgency without an equivalent transformation inside the Union. Candidate countries remain subject to detailed conditions, while the EU has yet to define or assess its own absorption capacity. Ukraine brings the unresolved questions into sharp focus: voting weight, agricultural and cohesion spending, reconstruction, security commitments, and accession under continuing occupation. Staged integration and temporary limits on new members’ veto rights may facilitate progress, but vague arrangements risk institutionalizing second-class membership. Enlargement and internal reform must therefore advance together, with clear rules and timelines. Delay is already creating space for Russia, China, and anti-European forces to undermine confidence in the process.

Jaba Devdariani closes the issue by placing Georgia within Europe’s changing development paradigm. The closure of USAID, shrinking aid budgets, rising defense expenditure, and geopolitical competition are shifting European assistance from grants and democratization toward loans, investment, infrastructure, and strategic connectivity. The proposed Global Europe instrument consolidates accession,

neighborhood, Ukraine, and global funding under a more flexible, interest-driven framework. Georgia may still attract European financing for Black Sea energy, transport, and digital projects, even as its accession prospects deteriorate. This creates the possibility of a country connected to Europe's infrastructure while detached from its political community. Devdariani warns that a policy increasingly focused on measurable outputs and geopolitical utility may lose the transformative ambition that once made European engagement distinctive.

The contributions to this issue point to a common policy imperative. Ukraine needs institutions equal

to the courage of its society and a defense system equal to the speed of technological change. Georgia needs resilient infrastructure, independent media, and a territorial strategy grounded in international law and credible alliances. The European Union must match its geopolitical ambitions with timely institutional reform and preserve the connection between investment, democratic transformation, and membership. Across all these fields, delay carries strategic costs. Threats evolve, dependencies deepen, and temporary setbacks acquire permanence. Effective policy begins with recognizing that the environment has changed—and acting before the opportunity to shape it disappears ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

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Ukraine's Society Can Defend Democracy, But Can It Build Institutions?

During Ukraine's 2004 presidential election crisis, I was among the many OSCE observers who witnessed the events that culminated in the Orange Revolution. As the protests gathered momentum, a joke circulated widely among the demonstrators: "How do you say 'first round' in Ukrainian? *Pershyi tur*. And 'second round'? *Druhyi tur*. And the third? *Maidan*."

Today, Ukraine's streets appear far stronger than its institutions when it comes to defending democracy.

The protests that forced President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to reconsider recent controversial decisions demonstrate the resilience of Ukrainian society. They also reveal a deeper weakness: the institutions that should check presidential power remain fragile. Today, Ukraine's streets appear far stronger than its institutions when it comes to defending democracy.

Ukraine's political crises of the past year have produced a paradox. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has accumulated extraordinary power during Russia's full-scale invasion. Elections have been postponed, Parliament operates under wartime conditions, political parties have been restricted, and the presidency has become the central focus of national political authority. Yet when Zelenskyy has appeared to cross important political red lines, Ukrainian society has demonstrated that it can still force him to retreat.

The most striking example came in July 2025, when Zelenskyy [signed](#) legislation that weakened the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO). Public protests [erupted](#), including the first significant demonstrations against the government since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Under pressure, Zelenskyy backed down, and Parliament [restored](#) the independence of the two institutions.



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This illustration is inspired by Ilya Repin's Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks (1880–1891).

A similar dynamic emerged a year later around the [dismissal](#) of popular, reform-minded Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov, credited with advancing technological innovations in Ukraine's war effort in 2026. Fedorov's removal sparked public [opposition](#), while subsequent political developments and calls for accountability turned his dismissal into a broader debate about the government's direction. On August 18, Fedorov [called](#) for wartime elections, arguing that Ukraine was experiencing a crisis of governance and needed renewed democratic legitimacy.

At first glance, these episodes might seem like evidence that Ukrainian democracy is remarkably healthy. A president takes a controversial decision; citizens protest; the government retreats. What could be more democratic?

But that interpretation is too comfortable: Ukraine's recent political crises reveal something more complicated and potentially more consequential: Ukrainian society has retained an impressive

capacity to constrain presidential power, but the country's formal political institutions have not developed an equally strong capacity to do so. Parliament, political parties and, above all, the judiciary do not yet constitute sufficiently autonomous counterweights to the presidency. Instead, when institutional checks prove inadequate, Ukrainian citizens themselves increasingly become the check.

That is a strength, but also a vulnerability. The central question for Ukraine's democracy is therefore not simply whether people can protest. They clearly can. The more important question is whether Ukrainians can eventually move from a system in which citizens must periodically take to the streets to stop presidential overreach to one in which Parliament, courts, political parties, independent agencies and electoral competition make such intervention unnecessary.

This distinction matters particularly because Ukraine is fighting a war. Martial law has postponed

national elections, and there is a compelling practical and legal case for not holding them while the country remains under invasion. Ukraine's Constitution provides for the continuation of parliamentary powers during martial law, while Ukrainian law [prohibits](#) national elections during that period. But the absence of elections inevitably changes the nature of political accountability.

Zelenskyy is still accountable to Ukrainian society. He is not, however, currently accountable through the ordinary mechanism by which democratic legitimacy is periodically renewed or withdrawn: the ballot box. That creates a peculiar political equilibrium. The president possesses extraordinary wartime authority, but his authority remains contingent on public consent. The people can discipline him through protests and declining approval. What they cannot currently do is replace him.

The result is a democracy that works, but works in an abnormal way.

The Street as Ukraine's Democratic Veto

Ukraine has a long tradition of popular resistance to political power. During the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14, citizens took to the streets after concluding that the government had violated fundamental political rights and choices.

Russia's invasions in 2014 and 2022 brought the same capacity for collective action into the military sphere. Drivers, workers, students, football supporters and farmers formed territorial defense units, organized supplies and joined the armed resistance. During the opening stages of each invasion, some of these volunteer formations operated more effectively than regular army battalions.

Ukrainian society has repeatedly intervened when state institutions failed to resolve a national

crisis. That instinct remains central to the country's resistance. Ukrainians are defending their language, identity, independence and internationally recognized borders. They are also defending themselves against the political order embodied by Vladimir Putin's Russia: a system of unchecked power, pervasive propaganda, extinguished civil liberties and almost complete subordination of society to the state.

For many Ukrainians, defending the country includes preserving the democratic order they are fighting for. Reproducing arbitrary government at home would undermine the purpose of resisting Russian authoritarianism.

The protests of 2025 and 2026 took place during an existential war and reflected the same understanding of national survival. For many Ukrainians, defending the country includes preserving the democratic order they are fighting for. Reproducing arbitrary government at home would undermine the purpose of resisting Russian authoritarianism.

This capacity for civic mobilization is among Ukraine's greatest democratic strengths, though its frequent necessity points to institutional weakness. In a consolidated democracy, Parliament, the courts, political parties and independent oversight bodies should restrain executive overreach before public protest becomes necessary. Ukrainian citizens have repeatedly forced their government to reverse course. Their success demonstrates the strength of society; the recurring need for such intervention shows that the institutions meant to channel and protect that strength remain unfinished.

The Cossack Legacy

Deeper historical reasons may explain why Ukrainian society has developed such a strong repertoire of collective resistance. The Cossack political

tradition is sometimes invoked to explain this. This argument should be used carefully, because the Cossack Hetmanate was not a liberal democracy in the modern sense. Political participation was highly unequal, social hierarchy was significant, and Cossack political institutions evolved toward greater concentration of power.

Nevertheless, the historical analogy contains something important. The Hetmanate combined strong military leadership with institutions through which the political community could participate in political decisions. The General Military Council (Heneralna viiskova rada), for example, could [elect](#) the hetman and debate political, military and administrative affairs. Its authority frequently overlapped and competed with that of the hetman and the Council of Officers.

Hetmans were elected, in principle for life, but their authority was not absolute. Historians specializing in this matter note that their powers varied according to their personalities and were limited or overlapped by the General Military Council and the Council of Officers.

The famous “Chorna rada”, or Black Council, offers an even more striking example. In 1663, thousands of Cossacks and other participants gathered near [Nizhyn](#) to elect a hetman. The event demonstrated both the participatory possibilities and the dangers of mass political mobilization: popular and elite interests collided, and the political outcome was extraordinarily violent.

Ukrainian history contains a political repertoire in which authority is legitimate but conditional, leaders are expected to remain answerable to the political community, and collective action against rulers can be considered legitimate when established political mechanisms fail.

It would therefore be too simplistic to say that Ukrainians protest today because of their Cossack ancestors. A better argument is that Ukrainian history contains a political repertoire in which authority is legitimate but conditional, leaders are expected to remain answerable to the political community, and collective action against rulers can be considered legitimate when established political mechanisms fail. This legacy is transferred to new generations through socialization and history textbooks as an important part of national history, keeping this repertoire of action legitimate and valuable.

This is the striking difference with Russian highly centralized absolutism: a blend of the Mongol ruthless autocracy inherited from the Golden Horde and Byzantine Imperial messianism. Even more significant is the contemporary Russian state's glorification, through propaganda and education, of Stalinist totalitarianism and of the notion that citizens owe unquestioning loyalty and self-sacrifice to the ruler and the state.

The connection between this tradition and modern Ukraine should be treated as cultural continuity, not direct causation. The Cossack democratic legacy is a powerful political myth that can be invoked in contemporary circumstances to establish continuity with the past and, in doing so, reinforce and legitimize political mobilization in the present. The Orange Revolution and Maidan were products of modern circumstances: electoral fraud, corruption, European integration, authoritarian tendencies, civil society, and geopolitical conflict.

Revolutions Change Governments, Not the Power

The two revolutions changed governments, but did not completely transform Ukraine's political system. This is partly because it has historically been shaped not only by presidents and citizens, but by powerful economic networks.

For much of the post-Soviet period, oligarchs exercised influence through business, political parties, media ownership, lobbying and relationships with state institutions. Their power was based less on a single ideology than on flexibility. In brief, Ukrainian oligarchs are too flexible and too rich to fail.

This flexibility helped them survive Ukraine's political upheavals. The oligarchs did not always need to oppose revolutions. They needed to survive them. When an incumbent president became too powerful, an oligarch could support political forces challenging him. When a new president emerged, the same oligarch could negotiate with the new administration. When political alliances changed, media assets and financial networks could be redirected.

This adaptability helps explain why Ukraine's revolutions repeatedly produced political transformation without fully dismantling the underlying networks of influence. The political regime could change faster than the power structure.

The result was a peculiar political equilibrium: civil society could be strong enough to challenge presidents, while institutions remained too weak to routinely constrain political and economic elites.

This is particularly important because oligarchic influence and institutional weakness are historically interconnected. Powerful business groups benefited from weak courts, personalized politics, opaque state institutions, and political parties that were often dependent on personalities and financial networks. It was in their utmost interest to keep institutions weak and not autonomous. The result was a peculiar political equilibrium: civil society could be strong enough to challenge presidents, while institutions remained too weak to routinely constrain political and economic elites.

Thus, powerful oligarchic groups have been one of the principal reasons for the weakness of Ukraine's democratic institutions. With their disproportionate financial resources, oligarchs could exert influence over courts, members of parliament, political parties, journalists, and even law-enforcement agencies. Through informal deals, patronage networks, and personal relationships, they could circumvent formal institutions and perpetuate a system in which political and economic power operated largely through informal arrangements.

Russia's full-scale invasion dramatically altered, but not eliminated, the oligarchic dimension of Ukrainian politics. The traditional oligarchic clans have lost much of the political influence they accumulated during the post-Soviet period. The war-state concentrated an unprecedented amount of power in the hands of the President and his office, and the oligarchs' ability to challenge them diminished considerably. The destruction or occupation of industrial assets, the weakening of oligarch-controlled media, the absence of elections, and the growing power of the wartime state have deprived oligarchs of several mechanisms through which wealth was converted into political influence.

Yet the decline of the old oligarchic system should not be confused with the disappearance of oligarchic practices. Informal networks, personalized access to state power and the concentration of economic opportunities remain important features of Ukrainian political economy. Moreover, the enormous reconstruction effort that will follow the war could create new opportunities to accumulate economic and political influence.

So politically, the old oligarchic model is weaker. But economically, the story is much more complicated. A fascinating recent Carnegie [analysis](#) ("Imagining Ukraine's Political System After the War," by Petro Burkovskyi and Olexiy Haran) of Ukraine's postwar political system argues that although traditional oligarchic clans have declined, members

of the political establishment around Zelenskyy have been [accused](#) of taking over some of the old mechanisms of personal enrichment and informal influence. That doesn't mean that Zelenskyy's circle is an oligarchy in the old sense. It means something subtler: the networks can disappear while the political culture and mechanisms of informal power survive.

The war created a new class of economic winners. War is not simply about destroying wealth, but it is about redistributing economic power. Defense production, energy, infrastructure, logistics, reconstruction, technology, drones, and military procurement have become strategically important sectors.

In addition, the war created a new class of economic winners. War is not simply about destroying wealth, but it is about redistributing economic power. Defense production, energy, infrastructure, logistics, reconstruction, technology, drones, and military procurement have become strategically important sectors. The people who become powerful in these sectors may not resemble the traditional oligarchs. They could be defense entrepreneurs, technology companies, infrastructure firms, energy businesses, foreign investors partnering with Ukrainian companies, or veterans entering politics. So the postwar political economy could produce new elites rather than simply resurrecting the old oligarchs.

The central question, therefore, is not whether Ukraine will return to its pre-2022 oligarchic system, but whether the postwar state will succeed in replacing personalized networks with transparent, competitive and institutionally accountable forms of economic and political power.

But the decline of oligarchs does not automatically solve Ukraine's institutional problem. De-oligarchization is not the same as democratization. Vladimir

Putin also pursued a form of de-oligarchization in Russia. Rather than dismantling oligarchic power in favor of independent institutions, he crushed, or in some cases, physically eliminated, oligarchs who challenged his authority, while bringing the remaining ones firmly under the Kremlin's control. The result was what came to be known as the "vertical of power": a hierarchical system in which economic elites retained their wealth and privileges in exchange for political loyalty and obedience.

Thus, weak oligarchic networks could be replaced by stronger presidential power without necessarily producing stronger democratic institutions. That is why the struggle over NABU and SAPO matters so much. The issue is not simply whether one group of elites controls another. It is whether Ukraine can create institutions sufficiently autonomous that neither oligarchs nor presidents can easily capture them.

Zelenskyy's Paradoxical Legitimacy

Zelenskyy is an unusual political figure because his legitimacy comes from both electoral democracy and direct identification with the Ukrainian nation at war. In 2019, he [won](#) the presidential election with 73.2 percent of the second-round vote in an election international observers considered competitive and [credible](#). His political appeal was based partly on rejecting the old political class and promising to break with Ukraine's oligarchic past.

That promise was inherently populist in the broad sense: Zelenskyy presented himself as a direct representative of ordinary Ukrainians rather than as the product of traditional political institutions.

His wartime leadership intensified that relationship. Since February 2022, Zelenskyy has become the international face of Ukraine's resistance. His authority is therefore not simply constitutional. It is also symbolic. With his anthological "I don't need a ride, but ammunition!" [addressed](#) to the

U.S. government or with his self-made, famous [video](#) from the streets of Kyiv during the night that followed Russia's full-scale invasion, he entered history and built himself a monument. Zelenskyy thus emerged as a Churchillian figure of resistance to the Absolute Evil, when almost everyone was ready to give up.

The question is therefore not whether Zelenskyy is personally democratic or authoritarian, but whether Ukrainian institutions are strong enough to constrain any president.

This created a paradox. The same personal legitimacy that has helped Ukraine survive the war can also make institutional checks more difficult. A president with enormous personal legitimacy can easily become the political center around which parties, Parliament, and government institutions revolve. The question is therefore not whether Zelenskyy is personally democratic or authoritarian, but whether Ukrainian institutions are strong enough to constrain any president. That is the ultimate institutional test.

Civil Society and “the People”

Ukraine's suspension of elections needs to be understood in the context of war. Martial law prohibits national elections. Holding nationwide elections under current conditions would present extraordinary practical problems: millions of Ukrainians are displaced, millions live abroad, soldiers are serving at the front, territories are occupied, and Russian attacks and interference would create enormous security challenges. Ukrainian law therefore postpones elections while martial law remains in force.

It would be unfair to equate this situation with an ordinary authoritarian decision to cancel elections. But it would be equally mistaken to say that the absence of elections has no consequences for democracy. It does. The ballot box provides a unique

form of accountability, because it gives every citizen an equal formal opportunity to reward or punish political leaders. Protest does not.

Those who demonstrate in Kyiv are self-selecting. They may be younger, more urban, more educated or more politically active than the population as a whole. Older people, rural communities, soldiers, displaced citizens, people living abroad and citizens exhausted by war may have different priorities without participating in street politics.

This produces a crucial distinction: protests provide voice while elections provide representation. Ukraine currently has an unusually powerful form of the first and lacks the second. This makes public opinion more important, but also potentially less representative.

This changes Zelenskyy's political incentives and makes him more responsive to visible political mobilization. An elected president approaching an election must worry about voters. A president who cannot be challenged electorally must worry about legitimacy, which conceptually cannot be reduced to elections alone; it can be broader. He cannot currently say, in effect, “I have a fresh electoral mandate; you can judge me at the next election.” Nor can citizens say, “We will replace you at the ballot box.”

Instead, legitimacy is negotiated continuously through public approval. This may make Zelenskyy more responsive to visible public mobilization than an elected president with several years remaining on his mandate might otherwise be. He therefore has to maintain legitimacy through other means: military performance, public approval, international support, civil society and political responsiveness. But responsiveness is not a substitute for representation and it is not necessarily a healthy substitute for elections. It can produce a form of politics in which the president watches the street, measures public sentiment and adjusts accordingly, while institutions remain secondary.

The ballot box has a different democratic logic. It gives every eligible citizen an equal formal opportunity to express a preference, regardless of whether they are young or old, urban or rural, politically active or politically passive. That distinction should be kept firmly in mind when evaluating the recent protests. They demonstrate voice, not necessarily representation.

Would Elections Make Zelenskyy Less Responsive?

Perhaps. But that argument should be treated cautiously. In 1968, France was shaken by massive demonstrations that have since become known as the events of “May 1968.” Hundreds of thousands of young French citizens—students, young professionals, and workers— took to the streets, occupied public buildings, universities, and factories, disrupted transportation, and organized strikes across the country. At the end of May, as the unrest continued, General de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly and called snap parliamentary elections, held in two rounds in June. The result was striking: the left-wing parties that had largely supported or benefited from the protest movement suffered a decisive defeat, while the Gaullists secured a commanding parliamentary majority. Again, this episode of recent French history illustrates that protests are visible, but they do not always reflect the opinions of the majority.

That many urban young and educated Ukrainians are dissatisfied with some of the president’s decisions does not mean that, if elections were to be called, their new champion, Mykhailo Fedorov, would [win](#). And if Zelenskyy wins again and his mandate is renewed, he might feel more secure and less responsive to protests.

Elections give governments a period of authority in which they can implement policies without responding to every fluctuation in public opinion. But democratic legitimacy is not simply

responsiveness to immediate popularity. A government elected by a majority can legitimately make unpopular decisions. It can also lose elections precisely because citizens disagree with those decisions.

The problem with the current Ukrainian model is that the feedback mechanism is distorted. Protesters can be extremely influential, while citizens who do not protest have no equivalent immediate channel. This raises the question of whose preferences the government is responding to. If Zelenskyy reverses a decision because thousands of people demonstrate, that is evidence of accountability. But if millions of people who do not demonstrate have different preferences, the reversal may not represent democratic majoritarianism.

Churchill’s Britain: A Useful Comparison

Many compare Zelenskyy to Churchill, as I also did above. There are indeed striking similarities, but the comparison is also relevant when reflecting on the differences.

Britain did not hold a general election during the Second World War. The previous general election took place in November 1935, and the next was not held until July 1945. Parliament repeatedly passed legislation extending the life of the wartime Parliament. Churchill became prime minister in May 1940 and remained in office until July 1945. But the important point is that Britain did not suspend political accountability simply because it suspended elections.

Churchill was not directly elected prime minister by the British people in 1940, as Zelenskyy was. He was appointed after Neville Chamberlain’s resignation because he could form a government capable of commanding parliamentary support. The wartime government was a coalition. Parliament continued to operate. Political parties remained important. The opposition was incorporated into the national unity government, but it did not cease to exist.

The British system therefore retained strong institutional substitutes for electoral accountability. This distinction matters enormously. Churchill governed without an election, but he did not govern without Parliament. Indeed, the ultimate demonstration of the strength of Britain's institutions came immediately after the war.

The July 1945 election was the first British general election since 1935. Labour won a landslide, Clement Attlee became prime minister, and Churchill became leader of the opposition. The British electorate effectively said something profound: Winning the war did not give Churchill the right to decide what Britain should become after the war.

This is the lesson Ukraine should consider. The comparison does not imply that Ukraine should hold elections during an ongoing invasion. The circumstances are entirely different. It implies something more subtle: suspending elections is less democratically dangerous when strong institutions continue to provide alternative mechanisms of accountability, and Churchill's Britain had them.

Weakness of Ukraine's Institutions Makes a Difference

The Verkhovna Rada's limited capacity to act as a counterweight to executive power was demonstrated when it first approved the presidential decision to reduce NABU's autonomy (July 22, 2025) and nine days later (July 31) to [restore](#) it. The second decision was more the result of Zelenskyy's U-turn and revealed the weakness of parliamentary autonomy.

The same applies to political parties. Ukraine's parties have historically been highly personalized and frequently dependent on individual leaders rather than deeply rooted ideological or organizational structures. Zelenskyy's SN party (Sluha Narodu – Servant of the People) is a particularly clear example of this personalization.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, SN won 254 seats and an outright [majority](#), the first time a Ukrainian party had achieved such a majority since independence. But electoral success did not necessarily translate into a strong, autonomous party organization capable of routinely checking the president.

The judiciary presents an even greater problem. Ukraine has undertaken significant judicial reforms, but courts remain vulnerable to politicization and institutional weakness. Freedom House [notes](#) continuing problems with judicial independence, staffing, and citizens' ability to obtain justice. It also identifies corruption as a serious problem and notes that the political will to fight it has been inconsistent.

This matters because courts are precisely the institutions that should protect citizens and state agencies from executive overreach. If Parliament, parties and courts are weak, the burden falls on society. And society has repeatedly demonstrated that it is willing to carry it.

NABU and Fedorov Dismissal Crises

For this reason, the NABU crisis was a test of the system, and it deserves to be seen as more than a dispute over anticorruption policy. NABU and SAPO represent something larger: the attempt to construct autonomous institutions capable of operating independently of political power. When the government moved to weaken their independence, protesters saw the issue as a democratic red line. European governments also [warned](#) that the move could undermine Ukraine's reform trajectory and European integration.

The strongest safeguard for NABU's independence proved to be neither the courts, nor Parliament acting in advance, nor a settled constitutional convention. It was public mobilization.

The government eventually reversed course. This was a democratic victory, but it was also an institutional warning. The strongest safeguard for NABU's independence proved to be neither the courts, nor Parliament acting in advance, nor a settled constitutional convention. It was public mobilization. This is precisely why the protests should not simply be celebrated as evidence that Ukrainian democracy is flourishing.

They show both resilience and fragility: resilience, because citizens can impose limits on the executive and fragility, because the limits are not always embedded in institutions.

The 2026 controversy surrounding Mykhailo Fedorov illustrates another aspect of the same problem. Fedorov had developed a public reputation as a reformer and as a representative of a technologically innovative approach to Ukraine's war effort. His dismissal therefore had significance beyond an ordinary cabinet reshuffle.

Public reaction turned the personnel decision into a broader political question. Fedorov's subsequent call for wartime elections is especially significant. His argument was not simply that he personally deserved political support. It was that Ukraine's wartime system needed renewed democratic legitimacy. Reuters [described](#) his intervention as the most significant domestic political challenge to Zelenskyy since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

This introduces a new variable. The longer elections are postponed, the more political actors may seek alternative forms of legitimacy. A popular minister can become a political figure without having contested an election. A military commander (e.g., Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Andrii Biletsky) can acquire political authority through battlefield reputation. A civil-society leader can become influential through public mobilization. The president retains formal constitutional authority, but competing sources of social legitimacy begin to emerge.

That could ultimately strengthen Ukrainian democracy, but it could also produce a politics of personalities rather than institutions. The challenge will be to translate these new forms of legitimacy into competitive political parties and accountable institutions once elections become possible.

After the War: From a Democracy of Resistance to a Democracy of Institutions

Can Ukraine transform society's capacity to resist power into institutions capable of constraining power routinely? That is the next stage of democratic development. The answer cannot simply be more protests. Nor can it simply be more elections. Ukraine will need both electoral competition and strong institutions.

But elections alone will not solve the institutional problem. If elections merely produce another charismatic president with a weak party, a dependent Parliament and vulnerable courts, the fundamental problem will remain. The objective should therefore be to institutionalize the very values for which Ukrainians have repeatedly taken to the streets.

NABU's independence should not depend on whether citizens are prepared to demonstrate. Parliamentary scrutiny should not depend on presidential popularity. Judicial independence should not depend on the personal integrity of individual judges. Political parties should not be vehicles created around individual personalities. And the peaceful transfer of power should become an ordinary political procedure rather than an extraordinary revolutionary achievement.

Ukraine's democratic resilience has been tested repeatedly during the war, but the decisive test may come afterward. During wartime, centralized authority has obvious advantages, as the state must make rapid decisions, and for these reasons elections may be impossible and political freedoms may legitimately be restricted.

The danger is that exceptional institutions become permanent political habits. Ukraine must therefore avoid the temptation to conclude that the wartime model is simply more efficient than ordinary democratic politics. The opposite lesson should be drawn. The war has demonstrated the importance of a capable state. It has not demonstrated that a capable state requires weak institutions.

Indeed, the strongest postwar Ukraine will be one in which the state is powerful enough to defend itself while institutions are strong enough to constrain whoever exercises state power. This is the real meaning of the recent protests.

Ukraine's Democratic Paradox

The history of Ukrainian politics can therefore be read as a continuing struggle between three forces: personalized political authority, informal networks of power, and societal resistance. The Cossack tradition offers a distant historical repertoire of conditional authority and collective political action. The post-Soviet period produced powerful oligarchic networks that learned to adapt to every new political order. The Orange Revolution and Revolution of Dignity demonstrated that society could overthrow governments when formal institutions failed.

Zelenskyy's presidency represents a different form of personalized authority: less oligarchic, more directly connected to popular legitimacy, and transformed by wartime conditions. The recent protests reveal the tension among these forces. The president remains powerful, the old oligarchs are weaker, the institutions remain incomplete, and society remains capable of intervention.

That is why Ukraine's democracy should not be described simply as "working" or "failing". It works through an unusual mechanism. When formal

checks weaken, society becomes the check. When elections disappear, public legitimacy becomes more important. When Parliament hesitates, the street acts. When parties are weak, personalities dominate. When oligarchic networks decline, presidential centralization becomes more consequential. And when the president retreats under public pressure, democracy demonstrates its resilience, but also exposes its institutional weakness.

Ukraine's challenge is incommensurate with those of other democracies in transition. Its war is not simply a conventional conflict between states. It is also a struggle over sovereignty, political identity and the kind of state Ukraine will become.

The ultimate measure of Ukraine's democratic success will therefore not be whether another president is forced to retreat after another protest. It will be whether, after the war, Ukrainians can build institutions that make such protests less necessary.

Ukraine has already demonstrated that its citizens can defend democracy. The next task is to make democracy less dependent on citizens having to defend it personally. The ultimate measure of Ukraine's democratic success will therefore not be whether another president is forced to retreat after another protest. It will be whether, after the war, Ukrainians can build institutions that make such protests less necessary.

Ukraine has a democratic veto. It now needs a democratic system capable of exercising that veto institutionally. That is the difference between a democracy that survives through civic courage and one that is sustained by institutions ■

Drones, Robots and the New Cost of War: A Smaller Army's Answer to Russia

In July 2026, Ukraine's 123rd brigade [announced](#) that an uncrewed surface vessel crossed to the Russian-held Kinburn Spit in the Black Sea carrying a machine-gun-equipped ground robot. It reached the shore, released the robot and withdrew. The ground vehicle then moved forward to carry out its mission. No Ukrainian soldier crossed the water. A machine carried another machine into battle, the first such operation on record.

In autumn 2025, a severely wounded [Ukrainian soldier lay pinned](#) at his position for thirty-three days. Seven ground robots were sent to retrieve him. Six were destroyed by mines, drones, or small-arms fire. The seventh was damaged too, but completed the sixty-four-kilometer journey and brought the soldier back alive. The platforms were expendable. The person was not.

In March 2026, Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces [reported](#) that a fiber-optic FPV drone had downed a Russian Ka-52 attack helicopter near Pokrovsk. The unit valued the helicopter at about USD 16 million. A small, expendable aircraft had reached a platform designed to hunt tanks and infantry from a safe distance.

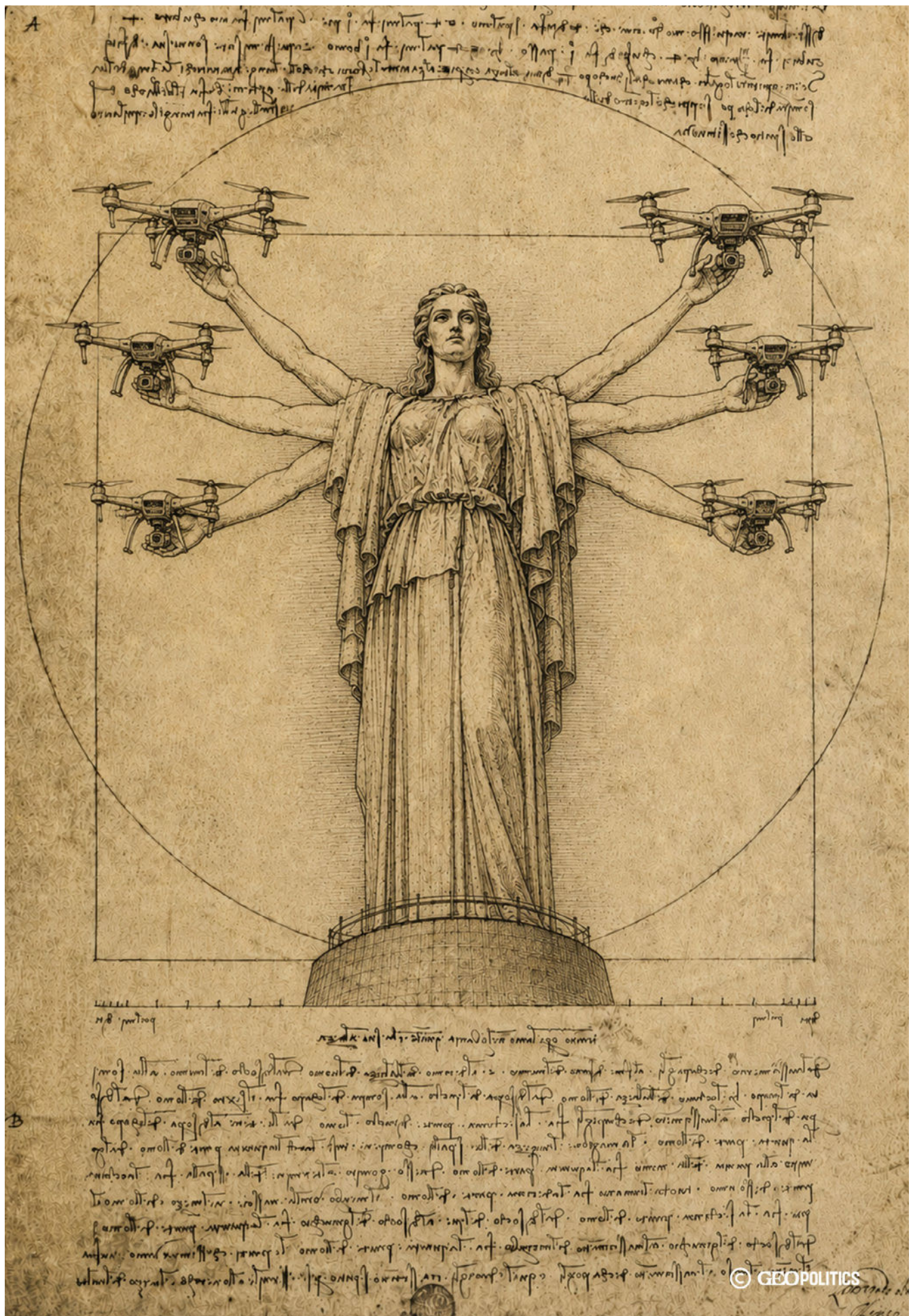
Ukraine is spending machines to save people it cannot replace and using that cost asymmetry to make Russia's larger force more expensive to move, protect and sustain.

These episodes capture the logic of Ukraine's emerging way of war. Ukraine is spending machines to save people it cannot replace and using that cost asymmetry to make Russia's larger force more expensive to move, protect and sustain.



LESIA BIDOCHKO
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This illustration draws on Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (c. 1490).

From the Frontline to the Workshop

Russia has the larger economy, more people, a deeper legacy defense-industrial base and greater capacity to absorb material losses. Ukraine's advantage lies in the unusually short loop between a frontline operator, an engineer, a workshop, a manufacturer and a procurement officer.

In a war where each innovation triggers a countermeasure, speed of learning becomes a form of military power.

Calling this a technology race misses the point. Neither side will win simply by possessing more drones or more advanced machines on paper. Russia is learning fast and copies successful Ukrainian solutions at scale. Ukraine's wager is that it can adapt faster than Russia can respond: change a frequency when electronic warfare renders it useless, alter a frame when it becomes too visible, redesign a payload after a mission fails, and move the revised system into production before the battlefield has changed again. In a war where each innovation triggers a countermeasure, speed of learning becomes a form of military power.

First-person-view (FPV) drones [became ubiquitous](#) in 2023, when artillery ammunition was scarce and conventional firepower could not cover every target. The months-long hold on American military assistance in 2024 reinforced the lesson. Ukraine could not base its survival exclusively on weapons that might arrive late, in insufficient quantities or with restrictions on their use. It needed a capability that could be assembled, adapted and replenished closer to the front.

Ukrainian FPV production [rose](#) from several thousand units in 2022 to projected five million in 2026. A cheap drone can destroy a vehicle, reach a trench, scout a route or force a unit to leave a position. Tasks that once demanded scarce artillery ammunition or

an aircraft sortie are now distributed among thousands of small crews.

Air defense [followed](#) the same logic. Russia's mass Shahed raids far exceeded Ukraine's supply of Western missiles, making a missile-for-drone exchange unsustainable. Ukrainian companies built cheap interceptors to thin the older propeller-driven swarms and preserve missiles for other threats. When Russia [introduced](#) jet-powered Shaheds, they responded with faster platforms and revised guidance, and are already reporting successful interceptions.

The systems still rely on [imported components](#), mainly Chinese, secure communications, trained operators, and protection from electronic warfare. They cannot replace artillery, air defense, or Western military support. Their importance lies in the options they create for a less resourceful smaller state. Building an FPV force does not require a fleet of combat aircraft or years of conventional procurement. It gives a smaller army a way to generate firepower at scale and to replenish it quickly.

The drone boom also changed the ground war behind the trenches. Persistent surveillance now covers roads, tree lines and supply routes that once lay beyond immediate danger. A pickup carrying ammunition, a medic crossing open ground or a group rotating into position can be detected and attacked within minutes. The final kilometers of a supply route [have become a combat zone](#).

[Ground robots](#) grew out of that problem. Armed platforms like the one used on Kinburn draw attention, but supply and casualty evacuation missions account for the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian UGV operations. In some of the most robotized formations, they [carry out](#) up to 90% of frontline supply runs. During the first half of 2026, Ukrainian forces [completed](#) more than 66,000 logistics and evacuation missions with ground robots.

Ukraine has shaped its systems around that calculation: cheap enough to risk, simple enough to repair, and useful enough to send out again. This changes the arithmetic of attrition.

These machines are slow and remotely controlled. They get stuck in mud, lose contact, strike mines, and sometimes fail before reaching their destination. Commanders nevertheless keep sending them forward because the alternative is a driver, medic, or infantryman traveling through the same kill zone. Ukraine has shaped its systems around that calculation: cheap enough to risk, simple enough to repair, and useful enough to send out again. This changes the arithmetic of attrition.

The same logic, distributed and attritable, is now being extended beyond the front to the infrastructure that sustains Russia's war.

Long-range Sanctions: Making Russia Defend its Rear

In June 2025, [Operation Spiderweb](#) used 117 FPV drones against Russian strategic aviation. Ukraine said the attack damaged or destroyed forty-one aircraft. At up to USD 1,000 per drone, the entire force cost roughly USD 117,000, an extreme mismatch with the value of the bombers and surveillance aircraft it reached. Cheap, adaptable systems had exposed assets Russia assumed were safely beyond reach.

Ukraine lacks Russia's ballistic-missile arsenal, strategic aviation and naval power. It built a dispersed strike architecture around drones, cruise missiles and increasingly capable medium-range systems. Some now reach [more than 2,000 kilometers](#) into Russian territory.

Ukraine targets railway junctions, oil pumping stations, depots, ports, airfields, transport hubs, repair facilities and air-defense positions – places that allow Russia to sustain combat power. A damaged

refinery can be repaired. A delayed train can eventually move. But repeated disruption forces Russia to spread its air defenses, divert repair capacity and protect an ever larger number of vulnerable sites.

At the front, Ukraine sends a ground robot along a route that has become too dangerous for a driver. Hundreds of kilometers away, it sends a drone into airspace Russia assumed was secure. Russia must spend more to defend its territory than Ukraine spends to threaten it. Every air-defense system reassigned to an oil refinery, a bridge or a logistics hub leaves fewer systems available to protect troops closer to the front.

These attacks are colloquially dubbed "[long-range sanctions](#)." Russia has to hold a vast perimeter – energy infrastructure, major cities, transport arteries, military bases, the Black and Azov Seas, the approaches to the Caucasus – and the campaign works through rhythm and repetition rather than through any single strike.

The relevant measure of success is not the number of strikes but Russia's ability to keep generating combat power. Ukraine's "long-range sanctions" seek to make each of these tasks more expensive, slower and less predictable.

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The Crimean Trap

Crimea concentrates this wider problem in one small territory. After 2014, Moscow turned the peninsula into a [heavily armed forward base](#). It deployed S-400 systems, expanded the airfields at Saky and Belbek, brought in submarines carrying cruise missiles and strengthened the ports at Sevastopol and Feodosiia.

When the full-scale invasion began, Crimea served as a launch pad for the advance towards Kherson and for missile and drone attacks on mainland Ukraine. The civilian economy became secondary.

That militarization created a dense concentration of targets. The underlying logic remains the same: expose a vulnerable link, strike it, and force Russia to spend more on protection than Ukraine spends on attack. Ukraine's operation MoLoCHKa ("Moscow will fall through Crimea"), launched on July 6, 2026, moved this method to sea. By July 30, Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces said they had struck [205 Russian tankers](#): 130 in the Sea of Azov and 75 in the Black Sea. The figure cannot be independently verified, yet the target choice is revealing. The campaign treats ordinary cargo traffic as a military vulnerability. Russian shipping does not stop, but it has to move more carefully, more slowly and under greater protection.

Ukrainian long-range drones have also targeted the M-14 route between Rostov-on-Don and Melitopol, one of the main arteries feeding the land corridor through occupied southern Ukraine. At the same time, the operation "[Crimean Switch-Off](#)" has struck substations and energy hubs. The aim is to degrade the power supply on which Russian logistics, bases and control systems in the occupied territories depend.

Crimea's logistics are concentrated enough for these layers to reinforce one another. Russia has several routes, the road and rail links through occupied southern Ukraine, the Kerch crossing and maritime traffic, but none is fully secure. Robert Brovdi, who commands Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces, has said that Ukrainian forces [are deliberately avoiding](#) the Kerch Bridge for now because it may be needed as an evacuation route. The target is Russia's ability to sustain combat on the peninsula.

Ukraine cannot [liberate Crimea](#) rapidly, and civilian hardship cannot be a measure of success. Yet repeated disruption alters the political terrain. Every

guarded tanker, fuel shortage, offline substation and air-defense redeployment shows that Russian control is conditional rather than permanent. This is what cognitive de-occupation looks like in material form: not the inconvenience itself, but the occupation made visible again – costly, vulnerable and unfinished.

Ukraine cannot liberate Crimea rapidly, and civilian hardship cannot be a measure of success. Yet repeated disruption alters the political terrain. Every guarded tanker, fuel shortage, offline substation and air-defense redeployment shows that Russian control is conditional rather than permanent.

From Arms Recipient to Security Provider

By 2026, after four years negotiating each Western delivery, Kyiv began [exporting its own weapons](#). Ukrainian officers often say that a small Soviet army cannot defeat a large Soviet army.

Ukraine will remain dependent on Western components, conventional air defense and military aid. Yet it has reduced the share of its security that depends on the next political decision made in a distant capital.

Ukraine will remain dependent on Western components, conventional air defense and military aid. Yet it has reduced the share of its security that depends on the next political decision made in a distant capital.

This matters for smaller countries with limited defense budgets, especially those bordering Russia – in the Baltic, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Arctic. No state can buy enough expensive systems

to protect all of its critical infrastructure. Investing in domestic drone capacity – operators, components, electronic warfare, testing ranges, local repair and rapid procurement – offers a more realistic way to build mass and resilience.

Drones, however, will not replace alliances, air defense, or conventional forces.

Most armies of former Soviet Union countries inherited the same accounting. Equipment is capital:

registered, signed for, and investigated when lost. People are the renewable input. Ukraine reversed the entries. A ground robot can be sent along a mined or drone-covered route because the driver, medic, or infantryman it replaces cannot be reordered. An FPV may be lost against a vehicle, helicopter, radar or refinery because its modest cost can force Russia to spend far more to repair, replace or protect the target ■

Structure of New Critical Infrastructure

For much of the modern era, the term “critical infrastructure” evoked a familiar picture: power plants, electricity grids, oil and gas pipelines, bridges, airports, ports, railways, water systems, telecommunications networks and major government facilities. These were tangible assets, fixed in a particular place, owned or controlled by identifiable institutions and protected mainly through physical security, redundancy and emergency response.

That picture no longer captures the systems modern societies depend on. Infrastructure has become an ecosystem of physical assets, digital networks, data, software, satellites, cloud platforms, artificial intelligence, energy systems, financial networks, logistics chains and human expertise. Some of its most important components are invisible. Some sit thousands of miles from the populations that rely on them. Others are privately owned, globally distributed or governed by automated processes. Failure in one part of the system can move rapidly through several sectors and across national borders.

The critical infrastructure of the next decade should therefore be understood less as a list of facilities than as a network of essential functions and dependencies.

Policy has begun to catch up. The European Union’s Critical Entities Resilience Directive [defines](#) resilience as the ability to prevent, protect against, respond to, resist, mitigate, absorb, accommodate and recover from disruption. It covers energy, transport, banking, financial-market infrastructure, health, water, digital infrastructure, public administration, space and food. A United States national security memorandum likewise [describes](#) critical infrastructure as physical and virtual systems whose incapacity could have a debilitating effect on national security, economic security, public health or safety. The critical infrastructure of the next decade should therefore be understood less as a list of facilities than as a network of essential functions and dependencies.



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Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia’s Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



From Assets to Essential Functions

The central change is conceptual. Traditional infrastructure policy asked which facilities were critical. The more useful question now is which functions must continue when individual facilities fail. A hospital is a critical facility, but it cannot operate without electricity, telecommunications, water, medicines, transport, payment systems and cloud-based medical records. A power plant depends on software, fuel, communications, specialized components and, in many cases, satellite-based positioning and timing. A financial institution may own little heavy infrastructure and still become incapacitated when it loses cloud services, data connectivity or trusted digital identity.

Criticality is shifting from the asset to the service, and from the service to the chain of dependencies that keeps it alive.

Criticality is shifting from the asset to the service, and from the service to the chain of dependencies that keeps it alive. Aybars Tuncdogan [argues](#) that highly digitalized economies face a condition of “mass criticality”: a widening set of cloud, identity, software and communications providers can now become indispensable to many sectors at once. The point is not that every component deserves the same protection. Governments must understand which combinations of failure would interrupt an essential function.

This changes the unit of analysis. Risk cannot be measured only at the perimeter of a plant, port or ministry. It must also be traced through suppliers, communications links, data services, maintenance contractors and specialized personnel. The CISA resilience playbook [maps](#) this problem through dependencies, cascading failures and recovery planning. That is a more realistic model than treating each sector as a separate fortress. Tomorrow’s infrastructure will resemble an interconnected nervous

system: distributed, adaptive and difficult to divide into neat administrative boxes.

Digital, Data and Space Infrastructure

The boundary between physical and digital infrastructure has nearly disappeared. Electricity grids are software-controlled. Water systems depend on industrial control systems. Airports rely on interconnected databases, communications and automation. Ports use digital logistics platforms; factories run through industrial Internet-of-Things networks; financial infrastructure is overwhelmingly digital. A cyberattack can produce physical damage, while sabotage of a cable, data center or satellite link can cause digital disruption. Cybersecurity is no longer an added layer of protection. It is part of infrastructure engineering itself.

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That convergence has expanded the attack surface. A modern facility may contain thousands of sensors, controllers, cameras, wireless connections, remote-management tools, and third-party software components. Each adds capability, but each can also become an entry point. The practical consequence is uncomfortable: a facility can be physically intact and functionally unavailable. Security planners must protect the flow of commands and information as seriously as they protect walls, gates and machinery.

Data must now be treated as infrastructure in its own right. Data centers, cloud platforms, internet exchange points, domain-name systems, satellite networks and fiber-optic cables perform functions once associated with roads, ports and electricity grids. NATO [reports](#) that more than 95% of global internet traffic passes through undersea cables. Those cables carry financial, commercial and governmental information on a scale that makes them

strategic assets. Protection must cover not only where data is stored, but how it moves, who controls it, how it is authenticated and what happens when it becomes unavailable or untrustworthy.

The same logic extends above the Earth. Satellites underpin communications, navigation, weather forecasting, agriculture, logistics, disaster response, financial transactions and military operations. Dava Newman, Pascale Ehrenfreund and Peter Martinez [observe](#) that space systems are converging with terrestrial infrastructure and digital services. Positioning, navigation and timing signals provide an invisible foundation for transport, telecommunications, finance and energy. Commercial constellations such as Starlink have also shown the value of distributed satellite communications when terrestrial networks are attacked or interrupted. Infrastructure protection now extends vertically, from underground cables and pipelines to orbital systems.

AI, Autonomy and Distributed Systems

Artificial intelligence may have the greatest effect on the architecture of critical infrastructure. It can monitor complex systems continuously, identify unusual electricity consumption, detect suspicious network activity, analyze satellite imagery, anticipate equipment failure, and flag abnormal maritime movement. Digital twins can model how an attack, natural disaster, or technical failure would move through a network before the event occurs. NIST [shows](#) how those models can help manufacturers identify cyber vulnerabilities and test defensive responses without placing live operations at risk.

The advantage is speed. Instead of waiting for an operator to notice a failure, an AI-enabled system can detect abnormal behavior, isolate a compromised component, and shift demand to another part of the network. That capability matters in systems where seconds determine whether a local fault becomes

a national outage. Yet the same dependence creates a new class of vulnerability. If infrastructure increasingly relies on AI, an adversary may attack the data, sensors, or algorithms that guide the system rather than the machinery itself.

The challenge is thus not only to protect infrastructure with AI, but to protect AI as infrastructure.

The Department of Homeland Security's safety framework [identifies](#) risks from AI-enabled attacks, attacks on AI systems, and failures caused by deploying AI in critical functions. Training data can be poisoned, sensors manipulated, and automated decisions deceived. The challenge is thus not only to protect infrastructure with AI, but to protect AI as infrastructure. Human expertise remains indispensable, particularly when automated systems confront conditions outside their training or when operators must decide whether a signal is genuine.

At the same time, infrastructure is becoming more autonomous and more distributed. Electricity grids will increasingly balance supply and demand automatically. Drones will inspect pipelines, bridges, power lines and offshore installations. Robots will perform dangerous maintenance, smart buildings will regulate energy use and autonomous vehicles will interact with intelligent transport systems. Solar generation, batteries and microgrids can produce electricity locally; edge computing can process data closer to users; distributed manufacturing can reduce dependence on distant factories. The International Energy Agency [finds](#) that a more decentralized Ukrainian electricity system can improve security and resilience. Distribution does not remove risk, but it can deny an adversary a single decisive target. Governments will have to protect thousands of interconnected nodes rather than one enormous installation.

War, Recovery and Allied Resilience

If technology is redefining what critical infrastructure is, war is showing how it must be protected. Ukraine has become the clearest laboratory. For decades, efficiency encouraged centralization: large power stations, major transport hubs and consolidated databases offered economies of scale. Precision missiles, inexpensive drones and persistent cyber operations have exposed the security price of that concentration. A transformer or substation may take months to replace, while a comparatively cheap drone can damage it in seconds. The defender can spend millions protecting an installation against a threat that costs a fraction of that amount.

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Ukraine's response has combined air defense with smaller generating units, mobile power, distributed energy resources, emergency generators, local storage and alternative supply arrangements. It has also [announced](#) underground weapons-production facilities to reduce the vulnerability of fixed industrial sites. Yet the deepest lesson is not concealment. It is recovery. The International Energy Agency [documents](#) repeated attacks on the Ukrainian energy system and the need for repairs, spare equipment, emergency logistics and international support. Repair crews, engineers and replacement transformers have become strategic capabilities.

The governing question is no longer whether every attack can be prevented. It is how quickly a failure can be detected, contained and repaired.

Eva Sula [describes](#) Ukraine as a continuity laboratory, where survival depends on restoring services

while attacks continue. That is the practical meaning of resilience. Complete invulnerability is impossible against cyberattack, sabotage, extreme weather, technical failure and war. Systems must instead absorb shocks, provide essential services at a reduced level, isolate damage, recover quickly and learn from failure. The governing question is no longer whether every attack can be prevented. It is how quickly a failure can be detected, contained and repaired.

War also reveals that infrastructure is a battlespace, a weapon and a source of strategic leverage. Much of it is privately owned. Telecommunications networks, cloud platforms, ports, online marketplaces, data centers and energy facilities often sit outside direct government control. The Associated Press [reported](#) the disruption of Wildberries, Russia's largest online retailer, after a Ukrainian cyberattack, illustrating how privately operated digital services can become wartime economic targets. Governments cannot manage this environment alone; military institutions, intelligence services, regulators, operators and technology companies need permanent mechanisms for sharing warnings and coordinating recovery.

The conflict surrounding Iran adds a wider geographical dimension. The U.S. Energy Information Administration [estimates](#) the enormous volume of petroleum products moving through the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint whose disruption can affect shipping, insurance, prices, supply chains and inflation far beyond the immediate theatre. Criticality is no longer necessarily national. A subsea cable, semiconductor plant, LNG terminal, pipeline, port or shipping route may be part of another country's critical infrastructure even when it lies outside that country's jurisdiction.

Infrastructure is also increasingly allied infrastructure. A country's resilience may depend on electricity interconnectors in neighboring states, foreign semiconductor plants, commercial cloud

providers, allied satellites, maritime routes and international supply chains. A NATO study [argues](#) that critical-infrastructure security is an enabling condition for collective defense. Alliances will therefore have to defend not only territory and populations, but also the networks that allow forces, economies and public services to function.

Georgia: What to Protect and How

Georgia is a particularly relevant case because its strategic importance outweighs its physical size. Its geography places it at the intersection of the Black Sea, the South Caucasus, and European and Central Asian transport, energy, and communications networks. Pipelines, electricity connections, ports, railways, roads and telecommunications systems serve domestic needs, but they also carry regional trade, energy and data. For Georgia, critical infrastructure is both national and international.

Black Sea security, energy diversification and the development of the Middle Corridor are raising the value of resilient Georgian infrastructure. Batu Kutelia and Vasil Sikharulidze [explain](#) that Georgia's place in Black Sea connectivity gives it a strategic role in linking Europe with the South Caucasus and Central Asia. That opportunity comes with exposure. A disruption in a Georgian port, railway, energy link or digital route can produce effects well beyond Georgia's borders, while a foreign failure can interrupt essential services inside the country.

The answer is not to protect every asset equally. Batu Kutelia [argues](#) for protecting systems and functions rather than isolated objects, with adaptability and resilience built into planning. Georgia should identify the services that must survive, map their cross-sector dependencies and decide what minimum level of operation is acceptable during a crisis. The strongest investment may be a second route, a stock of spare equipment, a trained repair team or a manual fallback procedure rather than another wall around a facility.

Alessandro Lazari and Nana Tabagua [recommend](#) a clearer national framework for critical-infrastructure security and resilience in Georgia, aligned with European practice and supported by cooperation between the state and private operators. That framework should connect risk assessment with redundancy, secure digital systems, emergency power, alternative telecommunications routes, diversified transport connections and rapid repair. It should also define how government shares threat information with companies that operate essential services.

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is difficult to paralyze. Distributed energy, modular services and cross-border interconnection can reduce single points of failure, but only if institutions can coordinate under pressure. Georgia will also need agreements for mutual assistance, replacement equipment, cyber response and continuity of transport and communications. Those arrangements cannot be improvised after a crisis begins.

If Georgia provides secure and resilient energy, transport and digital connectivity, its infrastructure becomes a strategic asset for Europe and the wider region. That result depends on embedding the country more deeply in European and Euro-Atlantic economic, political and security systems. Georgia cannot meet every demand of future infrastructure resilience alone. Its advantage lies in becoming a reliable node in a larger network: connected enough to matter, diversified enough to endure and organized well enough to recover ■

Domesticated FIMI: When Foreign Propaganda Comes Home

On December 29, 2025, the Georgian government [announced](#) that it was sending nine industrial generators to Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities later [confirmed](#) their delivery to the Sumy region. On January 29, 2026, TV Imedi [claimed](#) that Georgian-donated generators were already being resold on a Ukrainian classifieds site. The evidence shown to viewers was a screenshot; no matching serial number or procurement record established that the advertised machines were the donated equipment.

The story nevertheless traveled. Russian outlets [repeated](#) the allegation, [crediting](#) Imedi, and Russian-language accounts carried it across [Facebook](#) and [Telegram](#). An almost identical claim about Polish generators had circulated days earlier. Polish officials [debunked](#) it by comparing the specifications and documentation of the donated equipment with the machines advertised online. Georgian officials debunked nothing, as the main source of the

allegations was a ruling-party-affiliated propaganda outlet.

The point is not simply that a Georgian broadcaster aired a Kremlin-friendly story. The point is the direction of travel. In this case, Imedi, a Georgian propaganda outlet, produced the claim and Russian infrastructure internationalized it. This time, Georgia was the source, and Russia was the amplifier, kind of inverted foreign information manipulation interference (FIMI).

That inversion exposes a blind spot in the European vocabulary of information warfare. The European External Action Service [defines](#) FIMI as intentional and coordinated manipulative behavior by state or non-state actors, including proxies. In practice, the diplomatic and security machinery built around FIMI still asks a familiar question: which foreign actor is behind the operation?



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But what if the foreign actor, like the Kremlin, is no longer behind it? What if an imported propaganda system has been absorbed by a domestic ruling party, financed by a domestic advertising market, voiced by domestic officials, and reproduced by nationally licensed broadcasters? What if Moscow does not supply the script and order the propaganda message box?

Georgia now presents precisely that condition. I call it domesticated FIMI.

A Foreign Problem With a Domestic Address

The field has started to recognize the gap. Researchers increasingly use DIMI (domestic information manipulation and interference) as FIMI's internal counterpart. Recent scholarship [argues](#) that foreign and domestic manipulation must be theorized together rather than kept in separate intellectual boxes. International IDEA, drawing on Georgia and three other country cases, similarly [finds](#) that foreign manipulation is rarely the original cause of democratic decline. It becomes potent where domestic political, institutional, and media conditions already allow it to take root.

Foreign manipulation is rarely the original cause of democratic decline. It becomes potent where domestic political, institutional, and media conditions already allow it to take root.

DIMI is a useful category, but it does not fully capture the Georgian case. It identifies where manipulation is produced, not where its political DNA comes from. Ordinary domestic propaganda can be invented locally, serve a local incumbent, and have no meaningful foreign pedigree. Georgia's system is different. Its most important narratives were imported, adapted, and *eventually naturalized*. Their Russian origin still matters even when no Russian editor, payment, or instruction can be demonstrated.

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Domesticated FIMI is therefore the condition in which foreign-origin information manipulation has been absorbed into a host state's political communication and in which state-aligned actors produce, finance, and distribute it domestically; it reproduces itself without foreign tasking; and it no longer depends on the originating actor for survival.

Four tests, in my opinion, distinguish it.

First, the genealogy of information manipulation is foreign. The core narratives can be traced to an identifiable external doctrine or propaganda repertoire. Second, production is domestic and aligned with the state or ruling party. Local political party leaders, state officials, broadcasters, influencers, and institutions create the content using domestic resources. Third, reproduction is self-sustaining. If the foreign source disappeared tomorrow, the domestic system would continue producing messages. Fourth, the flow can reverse. The host state, while consuming imported narratives, also generates claims that the original foreign ecosystem picks up and exports.

Foreign DNA, Local Machinery

The foreign genealogy of disinformation is easy to trace. "Sovereign democracy," the idea that outside scrutiny is an attack on national independence, was [coined](#) in Putin's Russia in 2006. The mythology of Western-engineered "color revolutions" hardened in Moscow after democratic uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia [adopted](#) its foreign-agent law

in 2012 and its anti-LGBT “propaganda” law in 2013. Georgian Dream later imported each of these narratives: foreign-funded civil society is now a subversive network, which stages revolutions and serves foreign interests. Human rights, including those of sexual minorities, are a product of and are protected at the behest of the morally decadent West. Western criticism of declining democracy is the same as attempts to overthrow a democratically elected government and tantamount to intervention in domestic affairs.

Ruling elites in emerging dictatorships study which instruments have protected other regimes, adapt them to local law and culture, and use them without waiting for instructions. Copying a successful authoritarian technology is often more efficient than coordinating a covert operation.

The existence of these narratives, clearly of Russian DNA, does not prove command and control. It demonstrates authoritarian learning: ruling elites in emerging dictatorships study which instruments have protected other regimes, adapt them to local law and culture, and use them without waiting for instructions. Copying a successful authoritarian technology is often more efficient than coordinating a covert operation.

The machinery that delivers these narratives is unmistakably Georgian. Three pro-government commercial broadcasters - Imedi, Rustavi 2, and POSTV - [captured](#) more than three-quarters of Georgia's television advertising revenue in the first quarter of 2026. The Georgian Public Broadcaster reinforces much of the same agenda from a formally public platform. Thus, this ecosystem is much larger than a typical pro-Russian network of smaller media outlets and amplifiers. In Georgia, it is a commercial and institutional mainstream of national television.

Media capture is more subtle than censorship. Formal ownership and private advertising survive, but political authorities shape the economic rewards and penalties outlets face. Friendly broadcasters gain access, advertising, and protection; critical ones encounter financial pressure, hostile regulation, litigation, or ownership upheaval.

Media capture is more subtle than censorship. Formal ownership and private advertising survive, but political authorities shape the economic rewards and penalties outlets face. Friendly broadcasters gain access, advertising, and protection; critical ones encounter financial pressure, hostile regulation, litigation, or ownership upheaval. For example, as of April 2025, the government-aligned broadcasters Rustavi 2 and Imedi TV [owed](#) the state budget almost GEL 42 million (EUR 13.9 mln) in tax arrears - GEL 25.1 million (EUR 8.34 mln) and GEL 16.9 million (EUR 5.61 mln), respectively. During the first three quarters of 2025, opposition-minded TV Channels Formula and TV Pirveli [earned](#) only GEL 7.8 million (EUR 2.59 mln) in combined advertising revenue, compared with GEL 45.5 million (EUR 15.12 mln) earned by Imedi, Rustavi 2, and POSTV. By spring 2026, Formula's free-to-air [signal](#) and TV Pirveli's satellite [broadcasts](#) had both been interrupted over unpaid distribution fees. In addition, the Communications Commission [fined](#) Formula in May and TV Pirveli in June 2026 for language used in their reporting; Formula then [received](#) another content-related penalty in July. Critical television, instead of outright banning, is being made progressively more expensive to operate.

In 2023, I [wrote](#) in this journal that “The Georgian Dream invested heavily throughout the last ten years to gain control over media outlets and shape public opinion.” The picture is now more complete. Mtavari Arkhi, the country's leading critical television channel, [stopped](#) broadcasting on May 1, 2025. Formula

TV has downsized significantly. In February 2026, to probably avoid further sanctions from the West, Imedi was reportedly [sold](#) for a symbolic GEL 1,000 (about 330 Euros) to a government-linked buyer who promised that its editorial line would remain unchanged. Major online news agencies are struggling after the passage of the FARA and Grants Laws, which make any foreign donation a criminal offense.

Domestication of FIMI is one way to avoid Russia-related sanctions, which Western states often impose on Russia-affiliated media. If no trace to Moscow can be found, sanctions lose sense, as there is no direct Russian link. Despite this, some external actors have begun reacting. On February 24, 2026, the United Kingdom [sanctioned](#) Imedi TV and POSTV under its Russia regime for spreading misleading information about Ukraine. The European Parliament later [suspended](#) Imedi's access for one year after an accreditation violation, while Rustavi 2 and POSTV received warnings. The UK reached the right targets, but through a legal instrument built around Russia. That is the conceptual problem: the available tool required the conduct to be classified as Russian precisely when the production system had become Georgian. Introducing the concept of a domesticated FIMI might make it easier for other entities, like the EU, to qualify the propaganda ecosystem for sanctions related to Russia.

Russian Message with Georgian Accent

The strongest evidence of domesticated FIMI is not any single falsehood. It is the seamless mixture of imported and indigenous messages.

The repertoire of Georgian Dream propaganda narratives now includes anti-Western demonization, West's moral decadence, anti-Ukrainian narratives, the "second front" scare tactics, discrediting opposition and civil society as foreign agents, anti-LGBT messaging, praise for conservative allies (like Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, or Robert Fico), amplifying Georgian Dream's legitimacy (for instance, by pub-

lishing letters from Donald Trump), sportswashing, portraying the Georgian Dream as the protector of religious values and the Church, and what might be called *comparaganda*, i.e. the selective use of Western laws and practices, to justify internal Georgian repression with the message – "it is also done in the West, so we are not so exclusive in repressions." *Comparaganda* is a mirror image of the well-known "whataboutism", a standard Soviet and then Russian response to the criticism of the West – amplifying their failures and human rights abuses in response to Western criticism of Soviet/Russian treatment of its citizens.

Only part of this repertoire has a Russian pedigree. Claims that football victories, para-athletics medals, drug seizures, migrant deportations, church constructions, or favorable index ratings prove government competence are ordinary incumbent propaganda. They do not need a Kremlin original. Yet they appear in the same bulletins, in the same register, and through the same presenters as claims that Brussels wants war, "deep state" is pushing Georgia into the second front with Russia, NGOs are foreign agents, or Western values threaten Georgian identity. Operationally, there is no seam between the Russian inheritance and the domestic product.

Comparaganda shows the localization particularly well. Georgian broadcasters frequently and in a targeted manner cite surveillance of the AfD in Germany, FARA enforcement in the United States, dispersals of the protesters in Denmark, prison overcrowding in Britain, or Western disputes over transgender athletes to normalize Georgian Dream's repressive policies. This technique requires close knowledge of, and systematic tracking of, Western domestic politics. It is calibrated for a society that remains pro-European: the latest EU-funded survey [shows](#) 71 percent support for EU accession. The audience cannot easily be argued out of Europe. It must instead be argued into cynicism, by persuading that Europe is hypocritical, morally exhausted, and no more democratic than Georgia's rulers.

The “peace vs. war” narrative works the same way. Moscow’s premise is that the West wages war with Russia and wants to use its satellites, like Ukraine, or others as cannon fodder. Georgian Dream turned that premise into a domestic propaganda product: only the ruling party guarantees peace and that Georgia is not opening the second front, while everyone else, including all opposition parties, wants war; every meaningful opponent, including the media and NGOs, belongs to the global war party. The source material of this narrative is clearly Russian. The packaging, targeting, and political dividends, however, are made in Georgia.

Why Europe’s Toolbox Misses the Target

Domesticated FIMI creates four policy problems.

First, attribution can misfire. The EU’s foreign-policy tools are designed to expose and punish hostile foreign actors, such as Russia. Applying them to domestic broadcasters can force institutions into a claim they may not be able to prove: that a Georgian outlet is controlled by Russia. Georgian Dream then converts the accusation into another sovereignty infringement propaganda story, that Brussels is allegedly branding Georgian journalists as Moscow’s agents because they refuse European tutelage. This narrative has already been used to counter the UK’s sanctioning of Imedi.

Second, incident-counting severely understates the threat. FIMI monitoring is designed to identify coordinated foreign activity and count the instances of FIMI episodes. A Georgian broadcaster producing Kremlin-compatible content for Georgian political purposes falls outside this frame by definition. The reports may accurately measure attributed foreign incidents while missing the largest producers of the same narratives inside the domestic mainstream.

Third, content responses are exhausted and inefficient. Fact-checking remains necessary, especially when fabricated evidence or false translations

circulate. But it is not a factual inaccuracy that is so effective. It is the repetition, agenda-setting, selective context, and the authority of familiar anchors. Debunking one claim leaves the production line untouched, and the new claim emerges as quickly.

Domesticated FIMI occupies the uncomfortable space where the conduct is visible, but foreign sponsorship may no longer be necessary or provable.

Fourth, Russia-specific sanctions create an avoidable evidentiary trap. The UK’s designation of Imedi and POSTV identified demonstrable conduct but placed it under a regime requiring a Russian nexus. The EU’s own restrictive framework for Russia’s destabilizing activities likewise [covers](#) information manipulation attributable to the Russian government. Domesticated FIMI occupies the uncomfortable space where the conduct is visible, but foreign sponsorship may no longer be necessary or provable.

Few policy steps can be taken by the European anti-disinformation community to tackle this problem.

The EEAS and partner institutions should add a domestic-reproduction marker to FIMI analysis. Domesticated FIMI should not replace FIMI or DIMI. It should identify cases where a foreign narrative pedigree, domestic state-aligned production, self-sustaining reproduction, and reverse amplification appear together. This would widen the analytical frame without casually labeling domestic actors foreign agents.

The EU should also treat media capture as part of information security. Ownership transparency, beneficial-ownership disclosure, the allocation of state and state-linked advertising, regulator independence, and public-broadcaster governance are not secondary media-policy questions. They are the actual infrastructure of the threat. The EU’s own media-freedom framework already [recognizes](#) these

connections, while the Commission's Georgia report [notes](#) political influence over major networks, a weak advertising market, and growing regulatory power. These findings should become measurable conditions in any future re-engagement with Tbilisi.

At the same time, European sanctions (which are yet to be introduced) should focus on conduct and content, not attempt to invent and locate the sponsor. Europe needs a listing instrument for systematic information manipulation that can target actors on evidence of coordinated conduct, material reach, and democratic harm, with due-process and freedom-of-expression safeguards. The threshold must be high: unpopular opinion, partisan journalism, or criticism of the EU cannot qualify. Coordinated deception, fabricated evidence, concealed state support, and participation in coercive media capture can.

Moreover, support for independent Georgian media must move from project logic to survival logic. Grants for individual investigations remain valuable, but they cannot compensate for an advertising market distorted by political pressure, legal restrictions on foreign support, and selective regulatory enforcement. Emergency operating finance, secure distribution, legal defense, journalist protection, and alternative revenue models are no longer optional components of media development. They are part of Georgia's democratic infrastructure. The survival of the country's remaining critical national broadcasters is on the front lines of the struggle for Georgian democracy. Finding legally viable ways to keep them operating should therefore become a priority for European decision-makers working on Georgia.

Spending millions of euros constructing reflections of Georgian media abroad while allowing the originals to be suffocated at home is a poor media strategy, to say the least.

Instead, parts of Europe have begun trying to recreate Georgian journalism outside Georgia. On 27 April 2026, Poland's public broadcaster TVP [launched](#) VT Sakartvelo News, an 18-minute Georgian-language bulletin produced by Georgian journalists in Warsaw and Georgia and distributed through Belsat, YouTube, and Facebook. On 3 August, Deutsche Welle [opened](#) its Georgian-language Instagram service with EU financing under the Information Shield's initial 18-month phase.

There is nothing inherently wrong with producing more Georgian-language journalism. The absurdity lies in treating these initiatives as substitutes for media institutions that already possess national audiences, studios, correspondents, archives, professional communities, and the capacity to shape Georgia's daily political agenda. A Warsaw-produced bulletin and a European-funded Instagram account run from Berlin cannot replace a functioning national broadcaster. Spending millions of euros constructing reflections of Georgian media abroad while allowing the originals to be suffocated at home is a poor media strategy, to say the least.

European policymakers should follow the money. Georgian civil society has already mapped the companies advertising on sanctioned channels. Scrutiny of commercial enablers may alter incentives more effectively than another hundred debunks.

Finally, European policymakers should follow the money. Georgian civil society has already [mapped](#) the companies advertising on sanctioned channels. Scrutiny of commercial enablers may alter incentives more effectively than another hundred debunks. A propaganda machine operating at commercial scale should be treated as a commercial system, not merely as a content problem. The figures [published](#) by Georgia's Communications Commission in August 2026 make the point rather neatly.

Its underlying second-quarter disclosures [show](#) that Imedi continued to receive advertising money from companies registered inside the European Union: Polish GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare, Hungary's Egis Pharmaceuticals and Essity Slovakia are still placing ads in Imedi TV. All these payments came after the United Kingdom [sanctioned](#) Imedi for deliberately spreading disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The British designation was evidently not enough to persuade every European advertiser to withdraw. An EU designation, directly binding on companies operating within the Union, might concentrate minds more effectively.

The Export Problem

Georgian experience with domesticated FIMI shows that such a propaganda system needs no covert Russian funding, no secret editorial instruction, and no clandestine network that can be exposed in a dramatic intelligence release, as often happens with some Russia-linked media ecosystems. It only requires state-captured media, a controlled advertising market, compliant state institutions, nationally trusted distribution, and a ruling party with a survival motive. None of these conditions is unique to Georgia.

That makes domesticated FIMI replicable to other states. A government can obtain much of the strategic benefit of Russian information operations while

retaining plausible deniability of Russian involvement, because eventually there may be little direct Russian involvement left to deny. Hungarian television system came painfully close to this, and was only saved by Peter Magyar's win in the national elections.

Georgia's information space is therefore no longer best described only as a theatre of foreign malign interference. It is a domestic propaganda system of Kremlin descent, operating at commercial scale and increasingly capable of export.

Georgia's information space is therefore no longer best described only as a theatre of foreign malign interference. It is a domestic propaganda system of Kremlin descent, operating at commercial scale and increasingly capable of export. Russia developed much of the content and message box. However, the Georgian Dream acquired the transmitters, rewarded the broadcasters, localized the message, tailored it to the Georgian context, and now writes the scripts itself.

That is why domestication matters. FIMI describes something being done to a country from outside. Domestication means the country's propaganda machinery does it on its own ■

A Withdrawal of Recognition That Changes Nothing

Three weeks before the eighteenth anniversary of Russia's military invasion of Georgia in August 2008, the Government of Nauru [withdrew](#) its recognition of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and severed diplomatic relations with both. Tbilisi announced the decision on 29 July 2026, and Irakli Kobakhidze [described](#) it as a significant success for the non-recognition policy.

Ten days later, standing at a memorial to the soldiers killed during that invasion, the same Kobakhidze [said](#) that a Council of Europe [resolution 1633](#) (2008) established that the conflict entered the phase of large-scale hostilities after the Mikheil Saakashvili regime bombed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and then drew the conclusion himself that the conflict turning into a war meant the Saakashvili regime started a war. In the same remarks, Kobakhidze [blamed](#) the so-called 'deep state', usually referred to as ephemeral forces governing the West in the Russian and Georgian Dream (GD) regime's message

box, for directly tasking Saakashvili to instigate the war. He called this a crime against the state, the country, the people and the soldiers, and accused the former government of betrayal.

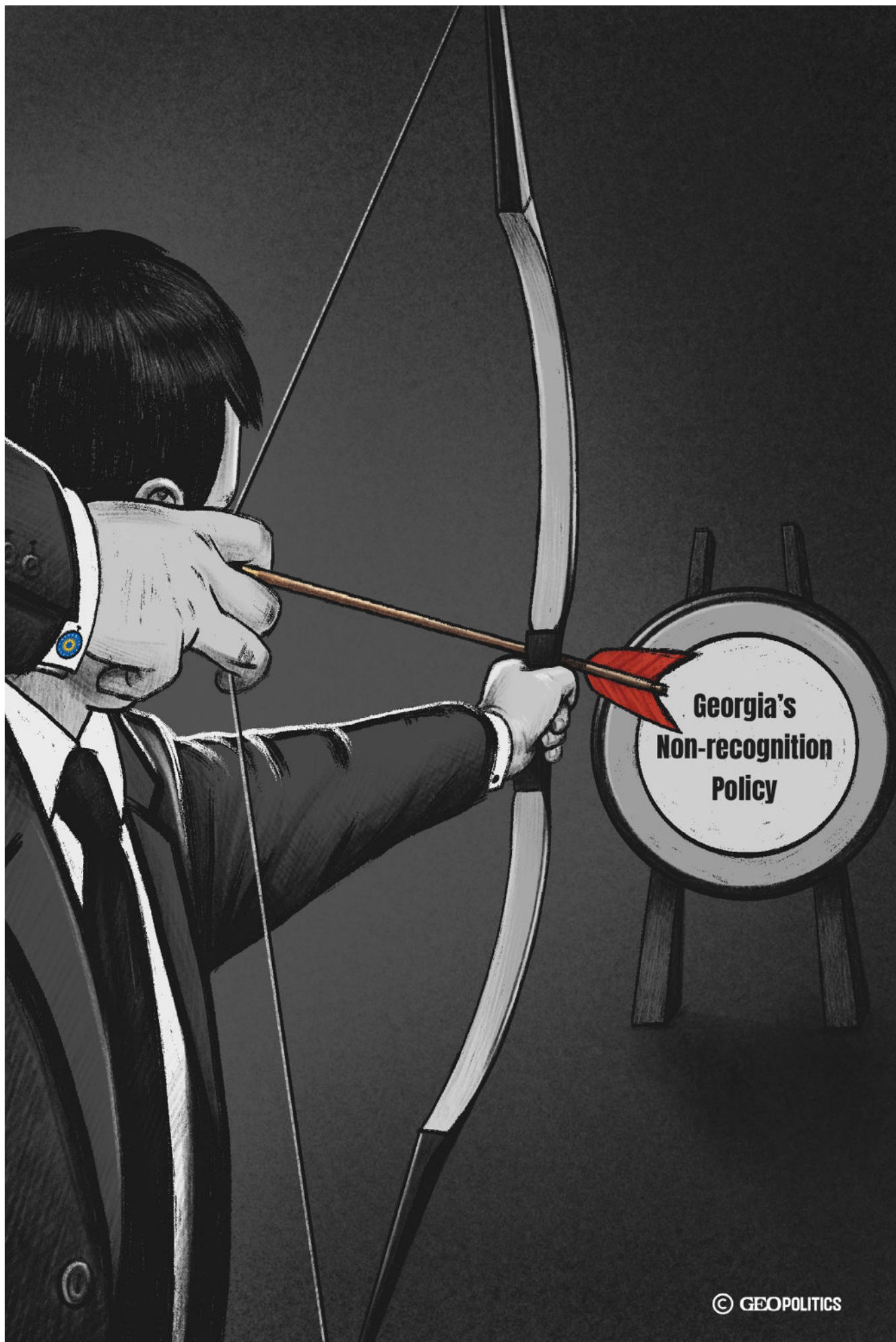
Tskhinvali's occupation regime responded in two days, with the de facto foreign ministry [stating](#) that Georgia's political leadership has officially recognized Saakashvili as the perpetrator of military aggression against South Ossetia. As was easy to anticipate, the de facto authorities claimed that Saakashvili had acted as head of state and on behalf of Georgia, and that the country must therefore bear responsibility for the August 2008 war.

A successful non-recognition policy can rest only on an international legal assessment of what happened in 2008, namely that Russia committed aggression against Georgia and holds Georgian territory under occupation. Every withdrawal of recognition that has ever occurred rested on acceptance of that proposition.



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Subtracting a name from the list of recognizers while the government itself dismantles the legal foundation of non-recognition can hardly qualify as a foreign policy achievement.

In the same month, Nauru recognized Georgia's territorial integrity, Georgian Dream leadership announced that the Georgian government had begun the war, and the occupier turned those words into a claim against the Georgian state within forty-eight hours. Those statements were hardly improvised. They rest on the parliamentary commission's [report](#) adopted a year earlier, formalizing the long-standing main pillars of the GD regime's pro-Russian foreign policy. Subtracting a name from the list of recognizers while the government itself dismantles the legal foundation of non-recognition can hardly qualify as a foreign policy achievement.

Non-Recognition Was a Collective Effort

The non-recognition policy that was relatively successful for eighteen years was never a product of Georgian diplomatic weight alone. Yes, Georgia established diplomatic relations with nearly the entire world after 2008, and the professional work behind that expansion was real. Its reach, however, was always limited by what a small state can do on its own.

The ledger of states recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia has never held more than five names, and it changed according to the recognizers' interests and partnerships with Russia and the West rather than Georgian diplomatic efforts. Non-recognition was maintained because these limitations were compensated by the partners. In the best-documented cases, the decisive instruments were [direct interventions](#) by senior U.S. diplomats and officials, European Commission [warnings](#) linking recognition to the loss of closer EU relations, and bilateral pressure from EU member states, most clearly Lithuania's

[intervention](#) with Belarus and Spain's [diplomacy](#) in Latin America, on governments considering Moscow's offer. Even the Vatican [contributed](#) with Pope Benedict XVI's diplomatic interventions and activity, persuading Latin American States to reject Russia's pressure. Georgian notes and letters mattered, but Western diplomatic power amplified them and made them count.

The major premise underpinning Georgia's claim to territorial integrity was that Georgia stood on the side of international law, and the law stood on Georgia's side. Russian propaganda efforts managed to create confusion and uncertainty by imposing its own interpretations of official documents and facts surrounding its 2008 invasion of Georgia. However, Cuba, a long list of African states, and the states of the Pacific declined recognition in part for that reason, since siding with Moscow meant siding against the principles of international law they had an interest in preserving.

That asset is now being undermined. A government that has told the world its own predecessor committed aggression has removed the claim's factual basis. On top of that, a government that shies from openly supporting Ukraine (despite voting in favor of the resolutions in international organizations), and that is perceived as the partner of Moscow, aiding them to [circumvent sanctions](#), can no longer credibly claim that international law is on its side.

Moreover, because of GD's hostile rhetoric and adversarial policy toward Western partners, Western diplomacy now lacks both the motivation and the ammunition to press the case. The motivation depended on a partnership that Georgian Dream has [dismantled](#), and no partner spends scarce diplomatic capital on behalf of a government working against it.

What remains in Tbilisi is inertia. The Foreign Ministry has been [purged](#) of its professionals in a few waves of politically motivated dismissals and

resignations, and the institutional resource that survived serves a ruling regime aligning away from the West and towards the North. Besides, a proper non-recognition requires diplomacy conducted at the highest political level. Bureaucratic correspondence does not substitute for it. Neither Irakli Kobakhidze nor Shalva Papuashvili and Mikheil Kavelashvili are known for investing personal effort in bilateral or multilateral high-level diplomacy related to non-recognition policy.

Two files related to non-recognition have stood open under conditions unavailable since 2008. Bashar al-Assad's fall diminished Moscow's leverage in Damascus, but the new Syrian authorities kept the 2018 recognition, with Abkhazia's de facto foreign minister Oleg Bartsits even [traveling](#) there in June 2025. The four main opposition parties [wrote](#) to Ahmed al-Sharaa in January 2025, asking him to revoke the recognition, but received no answer. It is unclear what efforts Georgian Dream made in this regard, either bilaterally or through its Western allies. The only publicly available information is that Türkiye [was asked](#) to mediate with Damascus and that an OSCE Parliamentary Assembly [appeal](#) was promoted for Syria to reverse the recognition.

With Venezuela, the opportunity was even greater. Nicolás Maduro was removed from power in January 2026, and Caracas spent the following months [negotiating](#) its economic and political survival with Washington, restoring diplomatic relations in March and receiving substantial sanctions relief. A recognition purchased in 2009 with Russian money still remains intact. If Georgia had maintained a strategic partnership with the United States and the EU, it could have achieved both reversals.

The Self-Defeating Discourse

Bidzina Ivanishvili's account of August 2008 war has remained consistent since he entered politics, and it has steadily moved toward Moscow's version. In his first press conference in 2011, he [cited](#) the Tagliavini [report](#) and described Saakashvili's response to

the shelling of Georgian villages as absolute recklessness. In 2013, he [said](#) he could not imagine the occupation of neighboring territories was indeed Russia's strategy. By 2024, the position had hardened into an account in which the war was instigated at the behest of Western powers, an account that converges with Sergey Lavrov's claim that Russia acted lawfully to restrain Georgian aggressors and that has drawn open [approval](#) from Russian propaganda channels.

This stance is a matter of foreign policy choice. Ivanishvili treats Russia as an ally and the West as a threat because his personal interests and the survival of his power vertical require it. His control over the country rests on Russian money and Russian methods of governing, while Western partners press for the restoration of democratic processes, which for him means surrendering the levers of power.

From that vantage point, the occupied territories are an obstacle rather than a national security issue. They are the single formal impediment to restoring diplomatic relations and a partnership framework with Russia, which would be the genuine turning point in relations between the two states and which Moscow wants precisely because it would cement Georgia inside its sphere of influence. This cannot be done while an active territorial dispute persists and while unrecognized Russian embassies operate in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

Ivanishvili's September 2024 Gori speech was a strategic statement. As this journal [argued](#) at the time, its function was to establish that the Georgian Dream would settle the question of the 2008 war domestically, through a [Georgian "Nuremberg trial"](#) and an apology to Ossetians for starting a war.

The reframing of the war as a conflict between Georgians and Ossetians removes Russia as a party, removes occupation as the applicable legal category, and converts a question of international responsibility into an internal matter of reconciliation between

communities. Everything that has followed, including the parliamentary commission, executes that speech.

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The same logic is now being stretched back two centuries. Asked in August 2026 whether the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk between the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom (of Eastern Georgia) and the Russian Empire was a capitulation, Kobakhidze [called](#) King Erekle II's decision to establish patron-vassal relations with the Russian Empire wise and unavoidable. Kobakhidze even claimed the treaty worked, despite clear historical evidence that Russia stood aside as Georgian kingdoms ravaged by Persian invasions despite treaty obligations. Russian Empire then annexed Georgia in 1801 in contravention of the treaty, and even abolished the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church (also despite a clear treaty obligation). The most prominent Georgian historian, Ivane Javakhishvili, argued in 1919 that the Georgievsk treaty [brought](#) Georgia nothing but harm, an assessment now being revised by the Georgian Dream's messaging and propaganda.

The Commission That Sealed It

A ruling party's narrative does matter for international law. Repeated by senior officials and amplified through the machinery of government, it shapes public understanding, influences diplomatic discourse, and signals how the state approaches the issue. Whether Georgians acknowledge it or not,

a society that silently allows this discourse and does not actively oppose the government's stance adds another argument against territorial integrity. More legally consequential, however, is converting that narrative into an official institutional record that can be cited in international proceedings. The [Tsulukiani Commission](#), established on 5 February 2025, provided exactly that mechanism.

Although framed as an indictment of the United National Movement (UNM), the commission's conclusion went substantially further: it attributed responsibility for the outbreak of the war to the Georgian state itself. It claimed that Georgia's political leadership pursued "militaristic" policies, ignored warnings of escalation, disregarded military advice, and ordered an attack on Tskhinvali that caused a "three-day war, defeat, occupation, and heavy losses."

The distinction between blaming the UNM and blaming Georgia offers little protection here, as the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia's de facto authorities aptly observed. Governments change, but the state retains institutional continuity, and findings adopted by a parliamentary commission can be cited as Georgia's own official account of its authorities' and armed forces' conduct in the years to come.

The commission reached this conclusion without presenting new intelligence or independently corroborated evidence, while selectively quoting military witnesses, disregarding evidence of Russian preparation and escalation, contradicting the Georgian Parliament's comprehensive [2008 inquiry](#), and misrepresenting [PACE Resolution 1633](#), which did not determine that Georgia started the war. Its significance therefore lies not merely in repeating Georgian Dream's narrative but in placing into Georgia's institutional record a finding that effectively assigns the country responsibility for initiating the conflict – the central proposition Russia has used to justify its invasion, occupation, and recognition of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

Georgia's diplomatic position rested on partners who advanced Georgia's claim, but no partner can advance a claim more forcefully than the claimant itself. With the changed rhetoric and policy, Western partners now have limited ammunition.

Two consequences follow from the commission report and the August war-related rhetoric of the Georgian Dream, which is now [very similar](#) to that of Moscow. Georgia's legal position on non-recognition rested on the attribution of responsibility for war and occupation to Russia. Once the Georgian Dream created a legislative document shifting responsibility onto itself, it gave the Kremlin an excellent defensive shield. Second, Georgia's diplomatic position rested on partners who advanced Georgia's claim, but no partner can advance a claim more forcefully than the claimant itself. With the changed rhetoric and policy, Western partners now have limited ammunition.

Is This Policy Irreversible?

A future Georgian government can repudiate the resolution and change the rhetoric, as it should, but it will still look like one Georgian political party rebutting another. Even if that happens, every delegation arguing the case for Georgia's territorial integrity, and every partner supporting the case, will encounter a document produced by Georgian Dream's parliament alongside recorded statements by its prime minister, its speaker and its president. Those materials will be quoted, and no subsequent Georgian government's position can fully neutralize them.

There is one route by which the reversal can be attempted, and it runs through the legitimacy of the body that produced the Parliamentary report rather than through the substance of what it resolved. The chamber that adopted the conclusion was elected in October 2024 in a process that remains [contested](#) at

home and abroad. A future government that intends to defend Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity will have to contest that legitimacy in law and establish that the acts of an unrecognized parliament's one-party effort carry no authority to speak for the Georgian state.

Even then, Russia and its proxies will go on quoting the resolution and citing Georgian Dream officials, and they will treat any revocation as the partisan act, which is to say they will contest the legitimacy of the revocation exactly as the revocation contests the resolution. That is the position Georgian Dream has permanently created.

This is also the reality against which the Nauru episode should be read. Georgia collected a technical improvement to a list while conceding on the basic premise and structure of non-recognition policy.

What Can Georgia Expect from Moscow?

Russia has never indicated that de-occupation would be a part of normalization with Georgia. The [stated](#) precondition has been the reverse. Moscow requires Georgia to acknowledge what it calls the new realities, meaning acceptance that two Georgian regions are now independent states.

The eighteenth anniversary of the war produced the operational version of that demand. On 8 August the Russian Foreign Ministry [called](#) for the delimitation and demarcation of borders with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and for an agreement on the non-use of force among Tbilisi, Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. Delimitation converts an occupation line into an interstate frontier. A trilateral non-use-of-force agreement converts an occupier and its two occupation regimes into three parties to a conflict (Abkhazia, Georgia, South Ossetia) in which Russia does not appear.

The same statement welcomed what it described as a reassessment of the 2008 war within Georgian

society, and stressed that full responsibility should fall on the Saakashvili leadership. Moscow also expressed hope that Georgian statements about reconciliation with Abkhazians and Ossetians would be followed by concrete practical actions. Moscow has thus told Tbilisi what it expects next while counting the Georgian government's account of the August 2008 war as progress toward it.

Every element of Georgian Dream's approach to the occupied territories fits Moscow's expectations. The war becoming a domestic crime, the parliament certifying it, the apology for the past and the replacement of the occupation-related terminology with that of reconciliation is exactly what Russia has been pushing for.

Every element of Georgian Dream's approach to the occupied territories fits Moscow's expectations. The war becoming a domestic crime, the parliament certifying it, the apology for the past and the replacement of the occupation-related terminology with that of reconciliation is exactly what Russia has been pushing for. It is understandable that Ivanishvili has threaded this path carefully, as he knows how sensitive the issue of territorial integrity is for Georgians. However, the trajectory leaves no room for a different reading. What remains is acceptance of Moscow's ultimatum and the opening of a de jure partnership with Russia, ultimately through full diplomatic relations, with the territorial question settled by Georgian concession rather than Russian withdrawal. This journal [has explored](#) such possible scenarios in the past. That a pro-Russian Georgian politician with deep ties to the Kremlin is [promising](#) a Georgievsk Treaty 2.0 to be "soon issued by Moscow" shows that the "doomsday scenarios" might not be so distant.

From Non-Recognition to Anti-Annexation

The continuing threat that Russia will annex Georgia's occupied regions further exposes the short-sightedness of Georgian Dream's current stance. Since 2014, purchasing additional recognition for Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia has progressively lost its strategic importance for Moscow. Recognition was initially a tit-for-tat response to the Western recognition of Kosovo in 2008. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its attempted annexation of four additional Ukrainian regions in 2022 changed the rules of the game: Moscow demonstrated that, where circumstances permit, it would rather absorb territory directly, or create the legal, political and administrative conditions for doing so, than continue investing in the diplomatic fiction of independence.

Annexation has hung over Georgian geopolitics as a standing possibility since 2008 and has repeatedly returned to the agenda. It did so again only last month, when South Ossetia's de facto leader Alan Gagloev [resigned](#) to become an adviser to Vladimir Putin, declaring that his task was to advance the "cherished dream" of reunification with North Ossetia and "Great Russia." The "presidency" passed to Marat Kambolov, a former Russian official from North Ossetia, following an [integration agreement](#) that further opened the occupied region's institutions to Russian personnel. Whether formal annexation follows immediately is impossible to predict, but it is quite clear that the performance of separate statehood is increasingly giving way to administrative absorption into Russia.

Georgia therefore needs to shift from a policy centered solely on non-recognition to a broader [anti-annexation strategy](#). Non-recognition asks other governments not to legitimize a *fait accompli*; anti-annexation seeks to prevent that *fait accompli* from being created. Georgia cannot pursue it alone. Its central purpose must be to raise the

diplomatic, economic and security costs of annexation to a level that Moscow is unwilling to bear. That requires advance coordination with the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom and other partners on the sanctions and political consequences that would follow any formal incorporation of Georgian territory into the Russian Federation. Deterrence will be credible only if those consequences are communicated before annexation, rather than improvised afterward.

A future European security arrangement cannot reject territorial acquisition by force in Ukraine while leaving Russia's earlier actions in Georgia outside the discussion.

Georgia must also ensure that its territorial integrity forms part of any eventual post-Ukraine settlement between Russia and the West. A future European security arrangement cannot reject territorial acquisition by force in Ukraine while leaving Russia's earlier actions in Georgia outside the discussion. This requires a proper stance on the war in Ukraine and close coordination with Kyiv, which Georgian Dream is incapable of due to their client-patron relations with Russia. Preventing the annexation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and preserving the possibility of their peaceful reintegration, must therefore become an established Western interest, not merely a Georgian diplomatic request raised at commemorative meetings.

An effective strategy must simultaneously strengthen constituencies inside the occupied regions that oppose absorption into Russia. This is particularly

important in Abkhazia, where [local resistance](#) to Russian investment and property privileges has repeatedly demonstrated that dependence on Moscow does not necessarily translate into support for annexation. These constituencies need political space, economic alternatives and access to the outside world. At the same time, Georgia's European integration must remain a credible and materially attractive counterproject to the *Russkiy mir*: a visible demonstration that association with Georgia offers access to a larger political, economic and security community rather than isolation and dependence.

Anti-annexation policy requires a more secure Georgia. One with stronger defense and institutional resilience, deeper military cooperation with its partners and credible external security commitments. None of these conditions can be created by a government estranged from the West and courting Moscow.

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Delivering on EU Enlargement

– A Race Against Time

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been the main catalyst for the revival of the EU's dormant enlargement process. However, clarity is still lacking, particularly on the homework the European Union itself must do before it is ready to accept new members. This includes reviewing the EU's decision-making process, determining whether newly acceding member states should have the same veto rights as existing members, and clarifying their access to agricultural and cohesion funds.

The geopolitical arguments in favor of enlargement are as strong as they were in the 1950s, at the dawn of the European Community, or in the 1990s, when the EU was created. The EU is becoming more active and outspoken about the next wave of enlargement. In May 2026, an ad hoc working group of the Council [was set up](#) to draft the Accession Treaty with Montenegro. In June 2026, the European Commission [adopted](#) a financial

package setting out the budgetary arrangements that would apply to Montenegro upon accession to the EU. The package is designed to ensure Montenegro's full participation in EU policies and the EU budget, both as a beneficiary and as a contributor. The European Commission has also [noted](#) that the Albanian government continues to reaffirm its objective of concluding accession negotiations by the end of 2027. The Commission considers that, provided the pace of reforms is maintained, Albania is on track to meet this ambitious objective. Meanwhile, [Moldova](#) and [Ukraine](#) have opened cluster #1 (fundamentals) and cluster #6 (external relations) in their EU accession negotiations.

Enlargement is a two-way street. Candidate countries need to prepare for membership, but the European Union also needs to prepare for the arrival of new members.



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But enlargement is a two-way street. Candidate countries need to prepare for membership, but the European Union also needs to prepare for the arrival of new members. In this regard, the European Commission is expected to present its long-awaited [initiative](#), the “pre-enlargement policy review”, while the European Council is expected to [hold](#) a “strategic discussion” on EU enlargement and reforms at its meeting on October 15, 2026.

Ultimately, however, the final word on enlargement does not belong to Brussels. It goes to the member states, and all 27 must give their consent before a new member can join.

The EU Has Homework Too

The Copenhagen criteria, established by the European Union in 1993, apply not only to countries aspiring to join the EU; they also contain the concept of the EU’s own “absorption capacity.” The EU has still never clarified what this concept means in

practice. It remains largely unmeasurable, leaving considerable room for interpretation.

The EU annually assesses the preparedness of candidate countries to join the Union, it does not regularly assess its own absorption capacity. The revival of enlargement has therefore brought the debate about EU internal reform and decision-making back to the forefront.

While the EU annually assesses the preparedness of candidate countries to join the Union, it does not regularly assess its own absorption capacity. The revival of enlargement has therefore brought the debate about EU internal reform and decision-making back to the forefront. For years, Brussels think tanks have [promoted](#) the idea of “staged integration”, which would replace the traditional “all or nothing” accession process. The idea of “two-tier” membership is also back on the table.

Recently, German authorities proposed an [association](#) membership model, primarily for Ukraine, but Kyiv immediately rejected the idea. Years ago, the European Commission also put forward the idea of “reversed membership”, but it received an unenthusiastic response from the member states. More recently, Berlin and Paris [presented](#) their joint non-paper, “A New Momentum for Enlargement”, promoting gradual integration.

Despite these proposals, several key questions remain unanswered. Would newly acceding countries benefit from EU funds and, if so, how? Would they retain veto rights? And how would the European Union address the security challenges these countries are already facing?

Ukraine Is the Elephant In the Room

For the EU, absorbing countries such as Montenegro, with a population of around 630,000, Albania, with 2.75 million, and Moldova, with 2.4 million, would be relatively manageable. The bigger question is how the EU will deal with Ukraine, a country of almost 40 million, whose territory is ten times larger than the combined territories of Albania, Moldova, and Montenegro, and which has been at war with Russia for years.

Ukraine's accession would raise several difficult questions. In terms of population, Ukraine is almost as large as Poland, although post-war demographic changes will have to be factored in. If the decision-making process remains unchanged, Ukraine will therefore have significant voting weight in the Council, as its population size will affect the double-majority voting calculations.

Ukraine also possesses the largest area of arable land in Europe and could qualify as the largest beneficiary of Common Agricultural Policy subsidies. For Cohesion Funds, its allocation could [reach](#) EUR 4.8 billion annually, compared with a possible EUR 1 billion for Georgia and EUR 0.6 billion for Moldova.

These figures become even more significant when considered alongside the enormous cost of Ukraine's reconstruction. According to UN estimates from February 2026, reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine will cost almost USD 588 [billion](#) over the next decade, nearly three times its estimated GDP in 2025, as housing, energy and other critical sectors continue to come under attack from Russian forces.

The EU will need to address whether it is ready to accept Ukraine if it meets the Copenhagen criteria but cannot restore its territorial integrity. Refusal would signal that Moscow has an indirect veto over enlargement and create an incentive to prolong the occupation in order to block Ukraine's accession.

One key question is also whether the EU can provide security to Ukraine once it joins. The EU will need to address whether it is ready to accept Ukraine if it meets the Copenhagen criteria but cannot restore its territorial integrity. Refusal would signal that Moscow has an indirect veto over enlargement and create an incentive to prolong the occupation in order to block Ukraine's accession.

How Serious Is the EU About Enlargement?

The EU enlargement process is back on the agenda. But it takes two to tango: candidate countries need to meet the Copenhagen criteria, while the European Union itself needs to be ready for further enlargement.

The European Parliament has already [flagged](#) the issue and warned in a recent resolution that the lack of such reforms should not delay the accession of new member states.

There is, however, an encouraging sign. Popular support for EU enlargement is now higher than

it was in 2004, when the bloc accepted ten new member states at once. Support currently [stands](#) at 56%, compared [with](#) 41% in 2004. This should not be taken for granted. There is no guarantee that it will remain at this level for long. The EU needs to turn this momentum into concrete action. The era of simply putting forward ideas to reform the EU needs to end; concrete steps must follow. The EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, has also [highlighted](#) the need to accelerate the enlargement process.

The EU needs to turn this momentum into concrete action. The era of simply putting forward ideas to reform the EU needs to end; concrete steps must follow.

At the same time, the French-German axis appears to be leaning towards gradual integration, which member states are also considering more broadly. The approach envisages granting candidate countries access to the EU Single Market based on their progress in the negotiations and inviting their representatives to EU institutional meetings. It would also involve including them in EU programs and projects such as PESCO, FRONTEX, the EU Agency for Cybersecurity and Digital Europe, and the Single Euro Payments Area. However, both Paris and Berlin see the adoption and implementation of the *acquis* in clusters 1 to 5, together with the provisional closure of the relevant negotiating chapters, as a prerequisite for granting countries full access to the EU Single Market. Cluster 1, among others, covers the chapters 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (justice, freedom and security), and is considered the most important part of the EU *acquis*. This raises an obvious question: if countries manage to negotiate and implement these core parts of the *acquis*, why should they not receive full membership rights?

The biggest challenge with this approach is the risk that a temporary solution between full membership and candidate status could become permanent.

This risk would be particularly serious if illiberal or populist political leaderships came to power in some EU capitals. What is presented as a temporary stage could eventually become a permanent place for countries seeking to join the EU.

At the center of the EU's internal reform debate is another difficult question: whether decision-making should move from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) in areas where unanimity currently applies, including common foreign and security policy, enlargement and taxation.

EU Internal Reform In a Time of Geopolitical Urgency

The European Union needs to become more engaged in taking concrete steps on both enlargement and internal reform. The current enlargement process is not happening in a vacuum, and the EU is not the only actor competing for influence in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. China has offered attractive financial packages and invested in strategic infrastructure in some candidate countries, increasing their economic and strategic dependence on Beijing. The Western Balkan countries have become a major destination for Chinese infrastructure investment, [accounting](#) for 79% of China's total investments in Central, East and Southeast Europe. Russia is also using a range of instruments, from election [interference](#) to foreign information manipulation and interference, to exploit vulnerabilities and bring countries into its orbit. Georgia is a clear example of this dynamic. While the EU remains stuck in debates about its internal reforms, these actors are taking more concrete and often bolder steps to strengthen their influence. Delays to enlargement therefore weaken the EU's influence in candidate countries. Time is being lost, and trust is being shaken.

The second challenge is the rise of illiberal and populist political groups in EU member states. Some oppose further enlargement, while others support

the accession of hybrid democracies as a way to weaken the European Union from within. This creates an additional political constraint on an enlargement process that already requires unanimity among member states.

Changing the system would require treaty change or the use of a so-called “passerelle clause,” which itself requires the Council to act unanimously after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament.

Another challenge is the Catch-22 surrounding the move from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) in areas such as foreign policy, enlargement and taxation: changing the system would require treaty change or the use of a so-called “[passerelle clause](#),” which itself requires the Council to act unanimously after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. Some EU member states, particularly smaller and mid-sized ones, support retaining unanimity to protect their national interests. This dilemma has fed one of the most controversial proposals in the current enlargement debate: whether new members should have the same veto rights as existing members.

No Veto Rights For New Members – Orbán Effect In Action

As mentioned, one idea being considered by some EU member states is to allow new countries to join without veto rights in certain policy areas, particularly enlargement, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, taxation, and sanctions. The objective would be to prevent institutional gridlock and the abuse of veto power, often associated with former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This could be described as the “Orbán effect.”

The proposal can also be viewed through the prism of domestic politics. It could make enlargement easier to sell in member states where support is relatively low, including France and Czechia, where

[support](#) stands at 43%, and Austria, where it stands at 45%, particularly as illiberal and populist groups gain political ground.

In this context, it will be particularly interesting to see how the EU treats Montenegro, whose accession treaty is currently being prepared. Montenegro could serve as a blueprint for future treaties, with safeguards introduced there potentially reflected in the accession treaties of other candidate countries.

The candidate countries themselves are divided over the idea. [Montenegro](#) and Kyiv do not support it, while the Prime Minister of Albania and the President of Serbia have already [signaled](#) their openness to waiving veto rights if and when their countries join the club.

Allowing new members to join without veto rights is being presented as one possible solution. The idea is backed by the EU's founding states: Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

The proposal is framed as a “transitional” and “temporary measure.” However, acceding countries fear that it could undermine the principle of equal membership and leave them without an effective means of protecting their national interests.

The proposal is framed as a “transitional” and “temporary measure.” However, acceding countries fear that it could undermine the principle of equal membership and leave them without an effective means of protecting their national interests. There is also a political problem. Candidate countries are undertaking costly and often painful reforms, making it difficult for their political elites to sell the idea of “second-class” EU membership to their own citizens.

The EU therefore faces another challenge: how to communicate the idea to candidate countries clearly and convincingly.

The proposal has already generated repercussions and has been instrumentalized by anti-EU political forces. The Georgian Dream leadership, for example, immediately seized on the argument, [claiming](#) that candidate countries would be admitted only if their voices served a "merely decorative function" and that such arrangements would transform the EU from a union of equal nations into a union of "first-class" and "second-class" nations. Such ambiguity gives political leaders in candidate countries an opportunity to portray the EU as a scapegoat and use uncertainty about future membership to justify refusing to pursue the accession process or carry out democratic reforms.

The EU Needs to Beat the Clock

While EU candidate countries are doing their utmost to prepare for membership, the EU itself still needs to speed up its internal reforms. The idea of scraping or suspending veto rights for newcomers, while potentially addressing some of the EU's institutional concerns, cannot be treated as a "silver bullet." It requires greater clarity and better communication. Looking at the history of EU enlargement, there have been cases where transitional periods were introduced for newly joined states to gain full access to the Internal Market. One example was the seven-year transitional period on the free movement of workers for most of the countries that joined the EU in 2004. However, no newly acceding country has ever been denied the right to exercise veto power in the EU's decision-making process. If introduced, such an arrangement would therefore represent an unprecedented step in the history of EU enlargement.

The EU is preparing to draft a new generation of accession treaties, starting with Montenegro. One key element is expected to be post-accession safeguards designed to ensure that countries remain on track on the rule of law and the fight against corruption. However, when it comes to suspending voting rights, the absence of a clearly defined timeline could indirectly introduce a form of

"second-class membership". This could undermine the credibility of the EU accession process itself.

The EU should take the "absorption capacity" component of the Copenhagen criteria more seriously. It should consider developing a clearer definition of what this means and regularly assessing its own preparedness in much the same way as it assesses candidate countries. Such an assessment could include, but should not be limited to, the EU's institutional capacity to accommodate new Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament, the implications for voting weights in the Council, the impact on cohesion and regional funds, and the consequences for the Union's security.

The European Union cannot afford to lose the current enlargement momentum. It has done a great deal over the past few years to accelerate the enlargement process, but there is still a long way to go, particularly on internal reform. The EU needs to move faster and make the structure, timing and scope of its internal reforms and the enlargement process clear.

The European Union cannot afford to lose the current enlargement momentum. It has done a great deal over the past few years to accelerate the enlargement process, but there is still a long way to go, particularly on internal reform. The EU needs to move faster and make the structure, timing and scope of its internal reforms and the enlargement process clear. If a mechanism suspending or limiting the veto rights of newly acceding countries is introduced, the conditions and duration of such a mechanism should also be clearly defined.

Enlargement and internal reform therefore need to advance in parallel, without reforms to the Union undermining the credibility of the accession process.

And time matters. The longer the EU remains unclear about how it intends to accommodate new members, the more space it leaves for anti-EU

forces—both inside and outside the Union—to exploit that uncertainty and undermine public support for enlargement ■

Does Georgia Fit into “Global Europe”?

Coping with the Shift in Development Paradigm

Almost two years have passed since the Georgian Dream government brought the country's relationships with the EU into an artificial coma. From a candidate country, Georgia has moved into the “candidate in name only” basket. As verbal jousting between Tbilisi and Brussels continues, the world around is rapidly changing. And the EU's policy is seeking ways to adapt to new realities and challenges, regardless of Tbilisi's temper tantrums.

International development assistance has suffered a major shock with the closure of USAID and the U.S. decision to reduce or stop contributions to the major international agencies. The European Union is expected to step in, but it is reeling under the weight of shouldering the brunt of supporting Ukraine while Europe's internal politics are shifting, too.

The global development agenda of Western European countries is moving from the language of common values into the territory of mutually beneficial interests: from promoting democratization to trade and investment, from grants to loans.

Recent examples abound: [Sweden](#) now focuses on “trade, investment in education, infrastructure, economic reforms and domestic resource mobilization”, while [Finland](#) states as an overarching goal of its development policy to establish a “closer connection between trade and development.” In Germany, boosting the long-neglected defense and security budget line is also coming at the expense of development policy. As Germany's Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development [lamented](#), the withdrawal of USAID and the hike in defense spending mean that her country will focus more on combating extreme poverty, while development financing will be reduced and transformed into loans.

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If the European countries want to spend less on development and democratization assistance, they seem mostly willing to use the EU more often as a common “bucket” to consolidate limited funds.

For those in Georgia who want its European trajectory to resume, it is crucial to watch the ongoing negotiations on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), the European Union’s budget, which will determine how much is spent, where, on what objectives, and how. The [regulation](#) proposed by the European Commission to establish the Global Europe instrument for the upcoming MFF cycle (2028–2032) offers insight into some of these questions. While this is still a proposal – the EU Parliament is supposed to vote in Autumn– the direction the Commission took seems firm.

Consolidation Is the Key

What is immediately apparent is that the European Commission is proposing a radical consolidation of the existing funding baskets (known as “instruments” in EU parlance): five will be merged into the Global Europe pillar, including those targeting accession and candidate countries, the Ukraine facility, neighborhood, and global programs. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which until now was the Commission’s key instrument for bringing candidate countries up to speed, will disappear. Instead, the new “Europe” pillar of “Global Europe” will lump together candidate countries, potential candidates, and the Eastern Neighborhood.

The general principle is that the European Union “shall concentrate its means where they can make the most transformational impact with a view to supporting sustainable development and catering for the strategic interests of the Union.” The language hints at resource precarity and an imperative to spend them wisely.

Creating one instrument instead of five gives the EU budget-wide flexibility: it would be easier to move

money inside one instrument than it has previously been between instruments. As a direct response to current unpredictability, the Commission wants to adapt spending better to shifting priorities. Consolidation also means multiple priorities competing for slightly over EUR 43 billion foreseen for the Europe pillar in the 7-year cycle (the financial headroom may increase to respond to potential crises). The key lesson for Georgia is that Brussels is unlikely to keep relations in a comatose state. If Tbilisi does not move ahead to meet Brussels, or moves backward, the expectations (and funding levels) are likely to be downgraded and defunded in a lasting manner. On the other hand, if there is rapid progress, the instrument foresees the capacity to “step up its cooperation where needed in light of the volatility of the external context.”

If Tbilisi does not move ahead to meet Brussels, or moves backward, the expectations (and funding levels) are likely to be downgraded and defunded in a lasting manner. On the other hand, if there is rapid progress, the instrument foresees the capacity to “step up its cooperation where needed in light of the volatility of the external context.”

Values, Yes... But It Depends

This brings us to values and interests. The document establishing the Global Europe instrument is fairly clear on how it reconciles these two elements.

The overall objective is steeped in the language of interests: “promoting mutually beneficial partnerships with partner countries, contributing simultaneously to the sustainable development of partner countries and to the Union’s strategic interests.” The universality and indivisibility of human rights is then held up as the overall guiding principle for the actions.

In subsequent articles, it becomes clear that respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, minority rights, etc. are common to the EU, and that their realization is the key expectation of countries seeking to accede to the Union. “The prospect of Union membership has a powerful transformative effect, embedding positive democratic, political, economic and societal change,” the document states, arguing that this change and necessary reforms are in the “common interest of the Union and its partners.”

Yet, beyond the candidate countries, the Union’s ambition to carry its values diminishes sharply: relations with the neighborhood are “founded on the values of the Union,” but the focus is shifting to “mutually beneficial and tailored partnerships focusing on strategic priorities and fostering regional cooperation.” The Black Sea region is mentioned specifically in this regard to “helping mitigate challenges posed by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.”

Such a vision puts Georgia in an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, if it is considered a candidate country, it would be expected to make transformative changes to comply with the EU’s values and institutional systems. On the other hand, if it drifts decisively and falls into the “Neighborhood” basket, the EU’s focus on values and reforms may diminish, but its financial engagement may not, provided interests are aligned. This is where the geo-economic considerations come into play.

Global Gateway and Focus on Infrastructure

Global Europe is positioned as an instrument supporting the Global Gateway strategy. The [Global Gateway](#), though still a bit arcane, is essentially the EU’s response to China’s Belt-and-Road initiative. It combines investment-driven, large-scale projects in digital, climate and energy, transport, health, and education and research sectors, positioned as

values-driven and predictable. The projects under Global Gateway are supposed to benefit from the best borrowing rates, since they are backed by the EU’s top-notch financial guarantee.

Ideally, the Global Europe may serve as a development-oriented “software” guided by values, feeding into largely investment-driven infrastructural “hardware” of Global Gateway. Yet the experience from multiple regions suggests that the two goals are often difficult to reconcile. More and more strategic connectivity interventions under Global Gateway, including the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, have been associated less with development effectiveness and more with Europe’s geopolitical ambitions and an imperative to compete with China, the United States, and Russia.

So far, the project ensuring Black Sea submarine digital and energy connectivity is the Global Gateway flagship project in the South Caucasus, linked to associated country projects in Georgia and Armenia. But there are others financed through the Global Gateway investment program, including the railway through Nakhichevan and the development of the port of Baku, as recently [announced](#) by the Commission President on July 1, 2026. The tension between geopolitics and values is particularly palpable here, since the Commission President described Baku as a “reliable partner” only two months after its Parliament [cut ties](#) with the European Parliament, citing “anti-Azerbaijani policy, slander and smear activities.”

If regional politics allows and Tbilisi plays its cards right, even under Georgian Dream’s current policy, it will have space to squeeze into the EU’s strategic regional projects and perhaps be hailed as a partner.

If regional politics allows and Tbilisi plays its cards right, even under Georgian Dream’s current policy,

it will have space to squeeze into the EU's strategic regional projects and perhaps be hailed as a partner. The key obstacle here is not so much the EU's commitment to values as Georgia's questionable capacity to absorb funds and implement activities, especially given recent high-level [corruption](#) allegations and trials. How the European Union can assess and mitigate these risks depends largely on how Global Europe is run.

How Would They Run It?

When discussing the practical application of an instrument in a given country, much hinges on its implementation modality. Who initiates projects, who participates in deliberations, and to what extent often defines how decisions on values vs. interests are made.

The IPA framework was often criticized for the extended control it provided over the programmatic agenda of the accession candidate's government. Serbia is sometimes offered as an example of a country that has mastered absorbing IPA funding without yielding on reforms.

For Enlargement and Neighborhood East partners, Global Europe is supposed to be implemented through a multiannual "performance-based plan," according to the document submitted to the European Parliament, but the design of that plan is not yet available and will be drafted by the Commission at a later stage.

It is already clear, however, that the programming process will remain a dialogue between the Commission, Member States and a partner country. The EU Delegation in the country will play a central coordinating role. The noticeable change from the IPA practice is the growing role of the EU Member States.

On the one hand, the performance-based plan is supposed to be shaped through a "Team Europe" approach – which means that the EU Member

States, their development agencies and, potentially, development banks and financial institutions (such as EBRD) present in a country will have a role in shaping the performance-based plan. On the other hand, and crucially, the Council of the EU (meaning the Member States) will set the conditions for the performance-based plans and assess their implementation. This additional layer will come above the current Commission review.

From Georgia's perspective, these changes are ambiguous. The Commission was at times accused of a lack of transparency and favoritism in the accession process, which led to the development of the so-called "merit-based criteria" in accession negotiations that are supposedly easier to monitor and verify externally. Increasing the role of Member States in the planning and assessment process adds a stronger, explicitly political (and thus unpredictable) element to a rather complicated mix of assessing candidate and associated states' performance.

What Will They Measure?

The EU instruments are curious documents for policy analysts because their results are supposed to be measurable through built-in institutional procedures. Oftentimes, reviewing the monitoring and evaluation frameworks – that is, what exactly is being measured and how – reveals more about the instruments' nature than their stated objectives.

Reviewing the monitoring and evaluation frameworks – that is, what exactly is being measured and how – reveals more about the instruments' nature than their stated objectives.

Here, the changes proposed by the new regulation are rather important. The previous instruments were based on a so-called "results chain" approach in which inputs are used to implement activities, which create outputs and are transformed into immediate outcomes and medium-term results, which feed into

an overall impact (such as, for example, “citizens’ rights better protected through national human rights institutions”).

The Global Europe regulation attached Performance Regulation, and annexes do not mention this approach. They are built around a library of indicators (i.e., things one can plausibly monitor) at only two levels: outputs (what is directly produced or supported by the implementation of an activity) and results (direct effects of supported activities).

The words “outcome” or “impact” do not appear at all in the text that deals with programming and its evaluation, only in the narrative part on the effectiveness of development.

This is a curious phenomenon. Technically, the reason is understandable: efficiency drive. Consolidating programming requires aggregating measurable indicators, and from 7 thousand, their registry is reduced to 500.

But it remains to be seen to what extent and how such change will affect strategic thinking – which programmatically means keeping focus on outcome and impact levels. While some practical details of evaluation and monitoring are still in development,

and then would need to be transposed into practice, one can’t help but notice that the compression of the results framework to immediately observable indicators reflects the overall spirit of the document: its accent on overall geopolitical unpredictability, combined with near certainty about emergencies coming Europe’s way.

If this ambition to extend the community of values through, among others, its programmatic instruments is abandoned even in its nearest neighborhood, this won’t augur well for those in Georgia who feel strongly about the values that brought the EU into existence.

Does it mean that the EU no longer believes in being able to shape the world in its own image, as a democratic society of nations, based on the rule of law and respect for human rights? Perhaps this is a realist view. But if this ambition to extend the community of values through, among others, its programmatic instruments is abandoned even in its nearest neighborhood, this won’t augur well for those in Georgia who feel strongly about the values that brought the EU into existence ■

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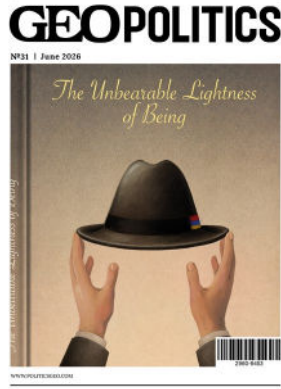
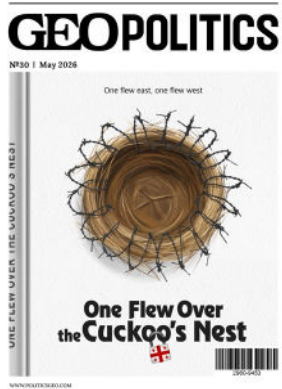
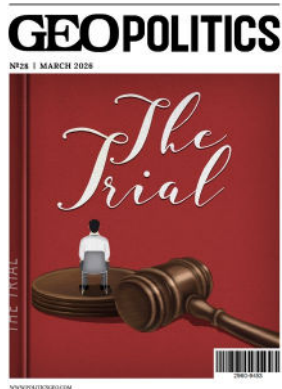
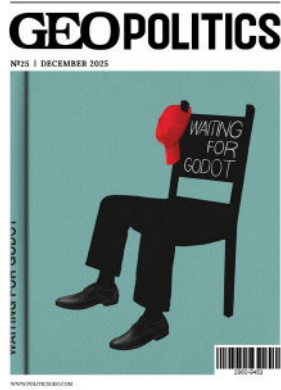
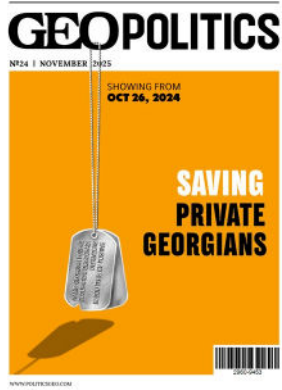
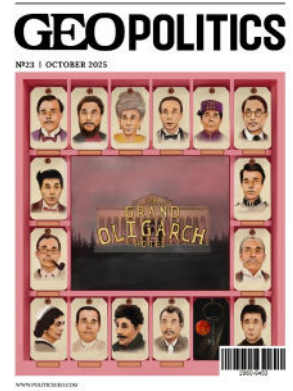
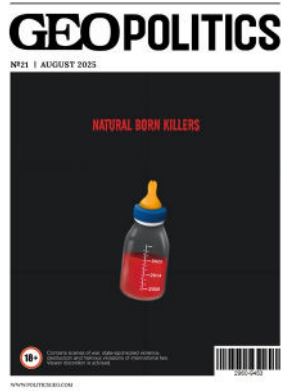
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