

GEO POLITICS

№34 | September 2026

The RaZor's Edge



THE RAZOR'S EDGE



2960-9453

GEO POLITICS

Issue №34
September, 2026

Our Mission

Issue	№34
September	2026
www.politicsgeo.com	
info@geopoliticsjournal.org	

[follow](#)

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

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

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

Contributors



Sergi Kapanadze Editor and Contributor

Dr. Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International Relations and European Integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze was a Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia from 2016–2020 and a Deputy Foreign Minister in 2011–2012. He is a co-founder and former director and chairman of the board of the Georgia-based think tank, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



Thornike Gordadze Contributor

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



Shota Gvineria Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010–14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

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.



Jaba Devdariani Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011–2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



Vano Chkhikvadze Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.

Walking the Razor's Edge Is Only Possible If Trodden Carefully, but Purposefully

A razor's edge is a narrow place between movement and disaster. It offers no room for complacency, but standing still is not an option either. Europe and its eastern neighborhood now find themselves here, as the old security order is being revamped, former alliances and rules of the game are being reevaluated, and new ones are being formed. Walking this edge requires more than caution. Excessive caution can become dangerous when adversaries like Russia exploit hesitation and weakness. The challenge, therefore, is to move with purpose while preserving the principles that give the destination meaning.

This issue of *GEOpolitics* examines the predicament of walking slowly but surely toward the goal by focusing on current developments relevant to this journey: the changing nature of alliances, the Black Sea's security challenges, the EU's dilemma between pragmatic geopolitics and value-driven foreign policy, European states' internal political struggles that affect their strategic choices, Russia's "bottleneck" strategy of controlling connectivity projects, and the Kremlin's use of history as a tool of control.

Shota Gvineria opens this issue of *GEOpolitics* by examining the changing nature of alliances and the strategic logic behind their formation. He analyzes the emerging compact among Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, which share no common border but have complementary resources and a shared

concern over the regional balance of power. Although the Mecca agreement lacks NATO-style institutions, an integrated command structure, or an automatic military trigger, its significance lies in what the three governments believe they can provide for one another: Saudi capital, Turkish defense-industrial capacity, and Pakistani manpower, reinforced by the ambiguity of Islamabad's nuclear status. Gvineria argues that the traditional currencies of collective security (territory, military capability and political identity) are consequently being reassessed. This shift carries serious implications for the Black Sea, where Ukraine and Georgia remain outside any effective collective-defense arrangement while confronting sustained Russian pressure.

Sergi Kapanadze picks up where Gvineria left off by focusing on the Black Sea security vacuum. He argues for a new Black Sea Compact among Türkiye, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia, supported by the EU, that could protect infrastructure, operate secure shipping lanes, pool maritime awareness, and underwrite wartime risk. Such a compact should differ from existing Black Sea formats by pooling military maritime resources, including Ukraine's, and addressing real-world threats in the Black Sea, securing trade routes, and harmonizing commercial practices and policies. Such a compact should also include Georgia, which is indispensable because of its coastline and transit role, but Tbilisi's engagement should not be a condition. European investment

and participation in major trans-sea infrastructure projects should be linked to the release of political prisoners, the abandonment of plans to ban opposition parties, the repeal of authoritarian legislation and the restoration of competitive elections.

For Vano Chkhikvadze, EU enlargement now sits at the intersection of geopolitical urgency and democratic credibility. Moving too slowly leaves candidate countries exposed to Russian, Chinese and other external influence; moving without credible conditions risks importing institutional weakness and “stabilocracy” into the Union. Georgia illustrates the dilemma particularly clearly: its candidate status preserves a formal European perspective, while democratic backsliding has emptied that status of practical momentum. Chkhikvadze argues that geopolitical alignment alone cannot compensate for weakened institutions, corruption, or the erosion of the rule of law. His answer is a more predictable process: measurable benchmarks, conditional milestones, meaningful interim benefits, and closer scrutiny of strategic dependencies in infrastructure, procurement, energy, and finance. Such clarity would give reformers tangible objectives while making obstruction and non-compliance more costly. The fundamentals-first principle must remain intact, but Brussels must also define its own absorption capacity and prepare its institutions, budget and decision-making procedures for new members. Enlargement cannot remain an examination process in which only the candidates are required to prepare.

The source of Europe’s paralysis, Jaba Devdariani continues, lies less in Brussels than in national capitals. Political fragmentation in France and Germany, and the strengthening of ultra-right parties, have deprived the EU of the engine that once turned common concerns into collective decisions. Populists benefit from public anxiety, while the Commission fills the resulting vacuum with symbolic initiatives it lacks the authority to implement. This is why the European security architecture cannot be molded,

as Paris and Berlin’s hands are tied. Yet European citizens have not abandoned the Union: large majorities still believe it offers greater protection and want member states to act together. The missing element is a credible political narrative connecting that instinct to achievable common action. For Georgia and other aspirants, securing a European future will therefore require reaching European societies, not merely navigating the institutions in Brussels.

Temuri Yakobashvili continues by examining Russia’s strategy of projecting influence not only through military occupation, but by controlling the bottlenecks connectivity projects must pass through. Moscow does not always seek to block corridors, pipelines, railways, or digital networks; it often gains more by keeping them open but dependent, costly, and vulnerable to interruption. Georgia’s position in the Middle Corridor illustrates both the value and the danger of such “chokepoint sovereignty.” A country can be indispensable to regional connectivity while lacking strategic freedom over the systems crossing its territory. The remedy is redundancy through alternatives: alternative routes, diversified ownership, resilient infrastructure, and governments that are not politically dependent on Moscow. In the contest over the South Caucasus, control of networks may matter as much as control of land.

Thornike Gordadze closes the issue by showing that control can also be exercised by bringing past memories to life through a controlled historical narrative and rewriting conventional history. The Georgian government’s rehabilitation of the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk recasts a historical warning about Russian domination as evidence of Russia’s supposedly protective role. Gordadze places this revision within the Kremlin’s wider politics of history, through which imperial expansion becomes fraternity, territorial ambition becomes historical justice, and the sovereignty of neighboring states is rendered conditional and cloaked in the nostalgia for a great Soviet past and historic Orthodox

brotherhood with Russia. Georgia's official narrative is moving in the opposite direction from much of the post-Soviet region, where societies are reassessing the legacies of Russian rule. Rewriting Georgievsk

is therefore not only a historical dispute, but also a way to prepare the nation for new relations and even a deal with Russia ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

Content

The New Currency of Alliances and Implications for the Black Sea Region SHOTA GVINERIA	9
A Need for a New Black Sea Compact: Security Without Moscow, and the Price of Georgia's Seat SERGI KAPANADZE	16
EU Enlargement at a Geopolitical Crossroads: Can Brussels Reconcile Values and Strategy? VANO CHKHIKVADZE	26
Europe Torn Apart by Indecisiveness JABA DEVDARIANI	33
Choke, Don't Block Russia's Bottleneck Strategy in Its Neighborhood and the Middle Corridor TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI	38
When the Past Becomes Geopolitics: Putin's Dangerous History Lessons THORNIKE GORDADZE	47

Disclaimer:

GEOpolitics offers space for a wide range of perspectives, fostering independent thinking and open discussion. The journal articles reflect contributors' views and may not represent the editorial team's position.

The New Currency of Alliances and Implications for the Black Sea Region

On 7 August 2026, in a palace in Mecca, three heads of government [signed](#) a document stating that an armed attack against any one of them would be regarded as an attack against all. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told Reuters the next day that the mutual defense element was [technically](#) the same as NATO's Article 5. Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan share no borders with one another. They sit arrayed around Iran, which Türkiye and Pakistan border by land and Saudi Arabia meets across the Persian Gulf, and which had been under American and Israeli attack for five months when the signatures were affixed. Three states with no common frontier had bound themselves to a collective defense clause built around a shared adversary rather than a shared perimeter.

The division of labor in this new alliance runs on complementary functions, with money from Riyadh, defense industry from Ankara, and combat manpower and an unstated nuclear status from [Islamabad](#). Pakistan also becomes the first state

outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty to extend a mutual defense clause to partners holding no nuclear weapons, in a field where formal extended [deterrence](#) has been almost exclusively an American instrument.

There are reasons to question what this really means. The text has never been [published](#), and neither has the [Saudi-Pakistani agreement](#) of September 2025, whose formula it reproduces almost word for word, suggesting a document was inherited rather than drafted by the three parties. There is no joint command, no standing force, and no trigger. What exists is a ministerial committee, political and military committees, a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia, and operational procedures still to be worked out.

The agreement covers the state-level strike of the kind Israel [delivered](#) against Doha in September 2025, through a mechanism that commits nobody to anything automatically, and says nothing about the constant sub-threshold pressure its members



SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



© GEOPOLITICS

actually [live](#) with. Every one of these objections may have merit, but the agreement still tells us something important, because what matters here is less whether the clause would ever be activated than what these three governments judged they had to offer one another, that they could no longer get from anyone else.

What matters here is less whether the clause would ever be activated than what these three governments judged they had to offer one another, that they could no longer get from anyone else.

Alliances have always been priced in three currencies. Territory, for the depth, basing, and denial it provides. Capability, for reaching a fight. And political identity, which decides who gets admitted to the club. NATO admits European states that can uphold the principles of the [Washington Treaty](#) and contribute to North Atlantic security. Its stated foundations are democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. The Collective Security Treaty Organization ([CSTO](#)) drew its members from the former Soviet Union, placing greater weight on geographic proximity and dependence.

Mecca revalues all three. Territory seems to be largely irrelevant, since no two signatories share a frontier. Capability broadens from forces to functions, with capital, industrial base, manpower, and nuclear ambiguity spread across the three countries. The political criterion is the most interesting. The text names no enemy, and officials from all three governments described the agreement as purely defensive and open to any [brotherly](#) nation that wishes to join. That phrase does the work in this arrangement that democracy does in the Washington Treaty, setting eligibility by shared faith rather than by shared political order or governance model. The summit was convened at the invitation of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and the Pakistani prime minister performed the Umrah hours before signing.

The Mecca agreement raises three questions: what alliances have historically bought, what changed to make this one thinkable, and what any of it means for states that cannot secure themselves alone.

Set against NATO and the CSTO, the Mecca agreement raises three questions: what alliances have historically bought, what changed to make this one thinkable, and what any of it means for states that cannot secure themselves alone. The Black Sea is where those questions are least theoretical. Two of its littoral states sit outside every collective defense arrangement while absorbing continuous pressure from the largest, and the region holds assets that no alliance framework in existence knows how to price.

What Alliances Have Always Bought

Historically, the value of these three currencies followed a clear strategic logic. For most of the modern era, alliances were built around a particular understanding of how a state loses its independence. To exercise political control over another country, you had to defeat it, occupy it, install a government that would do what you wanted, and build the institutions through which the arrangement would run. Conquest was the entry cost, and everything that mattered politically came afterward. Alliances were designed against that sequence, on the reasonable assumption that preventing the conquest prevented what the conquest was for.

Alliances were designed against that sequence, on the reasonable assumption that preventing the conquest prevented what the conquest was for.

This is a claim about which route was primary rather than about which routes existed. Control without

invasion was always available, and Tehran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Santiago in 1973 remain the standard illustrations. Soviet doctrine theorized and used subversion at length, and the Finnish arrangement institutionalized one version of it. The non-military route lacked reliability. It moved slowly, cost a great deal, depended heavily on conditions inside the target, and could be undone. Conquest was faster and more certain, so the defensive architecture was built against conquest.

Territory earned its price in that world during that time because it did three things at once. It supplied the depth that allowed a defense to trade space for time. It provided the bases and infrastructure through which reinforcement arrived. And it denied the adversary the same ground. Contiguity mattered because proximity made assistance physically feasible and because neighbors facing the same adversary perceived the threat in the same way, which is harder to fake than a signature.

Capability earned its price for reasons that need less explanation. Alliances are promises to fight, and a member that cannot reach a fight or contribute to one is a liability whose defense others must underwrite. The concern runs through every enlargement debate NATO has held.

Political identity is the currency that gets least attention and does the most work. The Washington Treaty does not admit every European state that contributes to North Atlantic security. It admits states in a position to advance the treaty's principles, which the preamble names as democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. The CSTO projected a different identity, drawing its members from a single dissolved union and binding them through dependence on Moscow rather than through any shared political order. Both arrangements restricted entry on political grounds. They differed in which politics they required.

Why the Pricing Changed

The assumption underlying the old price tags has been failing in public for four years, and 2026 made that failure hard to dispute.

Consider first what overwhelming force now buys. The United States held complete conventional dominance in Afghanistan for two decades and departed, leaving the government it had gone in to remove. Russia has held conventional superiority over Ukraine since February 2022 and occupies roughly a fifth of the country, having produced in the process a Ukrainian polity more firmly Western in orientation than the one it attacked and two additional NATO members on its own border. The United States and Israel opened the most intense air campaign of the decade against Iran on 28 February 2026 and killed its supreme leader within days. Six months on, the political settlement that campaign was meant to produce has not arrived, and its most visible consequence has been a public [quarrel](#) inside the alliance about who helped and who did not.

That quarrel is itself instructive, and the record is contested enough to require care. Trump [stated](#) in March that most allies had declined to join, called the alliance a paper tiger and its members cowards, and [said](#) in April that NATO had not been there when the United States needed it. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte [countered](#) on 24 June with a figure of up to five thousand American military flights launched from NATO territory during the six-week campaign, including from Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Romania. Romania approved base [access](#) on 11 March through its Supreme Council of National Defense and parliament, hosted roughly five hundred additional American troops with tankers and surveillance aircraft, and closed Bucharest airport to commercial traffic so American tankers could launch. Spain [refused](#) the use of Rota and Morón and closed its airspace on the ground that the operation fell outside the UN Charter; Italy [withheld](#) a Sicilian base because its bilateral agreement required

parliamentary approval that could not be obtained in time; and Poland [declined](#) only to relocate Patriot batteries, on the stated ground that they protect Polish skies and the eastern flank. What divided the alliance was legal opinion, parliamentary procedure and, above all, political judgment. Military capability was not the binding constraint in a single case.

Now consider what control costs when nobody fires. Hungarian voters ended sixteen years of Fidesz government on 12 April 2026, returning a constitutional [majority](#) to Péter Magyar's Tisza party. Those sixteen years had carried a NATO and EU member a considerable distance from the political order it joined, through electoral rules, control of the judiciary, media dominance, and the use of state [resources](#). No foreign soldier was involved at any point, and neither alliance possessed an instrument that addressed the process. The reversal came the same way, from an election, with the alliance again playing no part.

Georgia is the case where both halves can be observed against the same adversary pursuing the same objective. Russia won militarily in August 2008 in five days, but produced a country more firmly Western in orientation than the one it invaded. The campaign conducted from 2012 onwards, without a shot fired, delivered what the invasion could not – a subservient government, which effectively satisfies all of the Kremlin's objectives in the region.

Political control of another state no longer requires taking its territory, which means the instrument alliances were built to deter is no longer the primary route to the outcome alliances exist to prevent. Territory retains value, but its value is being realized in a different way.

None of this means geography stopped mattering. Something more specific happened. Political control of another state no longer requires taking its territory, which means the instrument alliances were

built to deter is no longer the primary route to the outcome alliances exist to prevent. Territory retains value, but its value is being realized in a different way.

Two arrangements in a single month, in regions that share nothing, illustrate the point. On 18 September 2026, Trump [announced](#) that the United States had agreed with Denmark and Greenland to give Washington permanent control over security and all other needs in Greenland, with no expiry and no cost, and barring American adversaries from bases, military presence, or sensitive investments without express approval. Nothing has been signed. Both governments confirmed a deal and expect to sign it in New York during the General Assembly, but they describe it differently. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen [stated](#) that it does not give the United States sovereignty, that it recognizes the Kingdom's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the Greenlandic people's right to self-determination, and that it strengthens common security in the Arctic and North Atlantic and is therefore good for NATO and Europe. On the record, a gap remains between an American claim of permanent control and a Danish insistence on retained sovereignty, with a signature still to come.

The dynamic is worth more than the text. Denmark spent this year under annexation pressure severe enough that its military drew up an operations order dated 13 January contemplating the [demolition](#) of Greenlandic runways with explosives to stop American aircraft landing. It resolved that pressure by conceding security control over the territory to a fellow member of its own alliance through a bilateral arrangement negotiated entirely outside the alliance.

The Mecca arrangement defines a set of states whose defense is a matter for that set alone. The Greenland deal, as Washington describes it, reserves to the United States a permanent veto over who may hold a base, a presence, or a sensitive investment on the island. Neither involves Russia, and neither was

negotiated through an institution. Both accept that security is settled by powers within defined zones rather than by rules applying equally to everyone, which this journal has previously [identified](#) as Moscow's central objective, and which now appears on its own in regions where Moscow has no part to play. That earlier analysis warned in April 2025 that American rhetoric on Greenland and Canada was normalizing the use of national security to justify territorial ambition. Eighteen months later, the normalization will have a document attached to it.

Spheres of influence are returning to the agenda across several regions at once, and the states most exposed are those that sit inside a contested zone where no primacy has been established.

What Small States Now Hold

If the currencies have been revalued, the question for a state that cannot defend itself alone is what it now holds that a guarantor needs and cannot obtain elsewhere. Several answers have become available that did not exist in the old pricing, and they are concentrated in the Black Sea.

Corridors are valued for what crosses them rather than for the depth they provide. Georgia holds the only land route between the Caspian and the Black Sea that avoids both Russia and Iran, which is a scarce asset in a year when both powers are subject to sanctions and both are unreliable as transit. Operational knowledge has become tradable because the character of war changed in four years, and Ukraine holds Europe's only body of war-tested drone and counter-drone practice. Exposure to continuous sub-threshold attack generates defensive experience that the rest of the alliance lacks, and more than seventy documented [violations](#) of NATO and Moldovan airspace, including a cruise missile that came down near Lublin on 29 July, have made front-line states the only ones accumulating it. Energy and data transit carry their own value, and Romania's Black Sea gas and Georgia's pipeline and fiber routes are both instances. Public legitimacy belongs on the

list as well, since a guarantor's willingness now turns partly on whether a partner's population will sustain the alignment under pressure.

Armenia has replaced its suppliers and gained monitoring, funding, and consultation mechanisms. But it has not acquired a guarantor.

Armenia is an interesting case, too. Yerevan froze its CSTO participation in February 2024 and stopped contributing financially in May of that year. It [passed](#) legislation initiating EU accession in January 2025, [agreed](#) to a Strategic Partnership Commission with Washington the same month, [diversified](#) arms procurement toward France and India, [signed](#) a framework allowing participation in EU crisis management operations, and [held](#) first consultations with Brussels on security and defense focused on hybrid threats and disinformation. On 7 June 2026, a government pursuing that course won a contested parliamentary [election](#) against a Russian-backed alternative, taking 49.81% and sixty-four of one hundred and five seats on the highest turnout for a scheduled election since 2018, while all three opposition parties entering parliament [campaigned](#) on repairing ties with Moscow. Armenia has replaced its suppliers and gained monitoring, funding, and consultation mechanisms. But it has not acquired a guarantor, and no process with a defined endpoint has opened, raising the question of whether this contribution, while necessary, is actually sufficient.

What Gets Written Over

The Mecca agreement formalized something that was already load-bearing. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have run a military relationship for six decades, structured by a 1982 [protocol](#) that stationed more than ten thousand Pakistani troops in the Kingdom, and by mid-2026 Pakistan had again deployed several thousand troops along with fighter aircraft, drones and an air defense system. Türkiye arrived with an umbrella already extended to Qatar, Syria and Libya.

The document did not create any of that. It recorded a set of relationships that had become dense enough to be worth recording, which is how alliances have generally come about. They are written over existing substrate, and the currencies examined here are simply the forms that substrate takes.

A corridor is only worth something if the state it crosses can guarantee what passes through, an alignment is only worth something if the government means it, and a constitutional obligation is only worth something if the bodies bound by Article 78 intend to execute it.

That is the part of the Mecca lesson most likely to be missed in Tbilisi and in Kyiv. Neither country is standing outside a door, and neither is in a queue whose order somebody else controls. The opera-

tive question is what each is accumulating now that a guarantor would later find worth formalizing. Ukraine has been accumulating it under fire since 2022, in a body of operational knowledge that no European military possesses and every European military will need. Georgia held a comparable set of assets and has spent three of them, because a corridor is only worth something if the state it crosses can guarantee what passes through, an alignment is only worth something if the government means it, and a constitutional obligation is only worth something if the bodies bound by Article 78 intend to execute it.

In a system reorganizing around zones of recognized primacy, the Black Sea is the one contested region where no power has established one, which is precisely why the pressure on it is continuous. Whether it becomes someone's sphere by default depends on what its states build before the question is settled elsewhere ■

A Need for a New Black Sea Compact: Security Without Moscow, and the Price of Georgia's Seat

On 17 September 2026, a Turkish diplomat told Agence France-Presse about Ankara's new draft [memorandum](#) for the Black Sea. Türkiye is proposing two protected shipping lanes for civilian vessels: a western route hugging the Romanian and Bulgarian coasts, and an eastern route through the territorial waters of the states on the sea's eastern and southern shores. "We want to use the territorial waters of the adjacent states," he said, "including Türkiye — and Georgia, if they are willing to take part." Earlier, in October 2025, the EU [convened](#) a ministerial meeting in Luxembourg on cross-regional security and connectivity, including security in the Black Sea region. Georgia's foreign minister, Maka Botchorishvili, was [not invited](#) at all.

It is clear that the Black Sea is being reorganized by Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, Ukraine's drones, and the European Union's money, and it is being reorganized without Russia. Georgia has been offered

a seat at that table because of where it sits, not because of what it can do. The question is whether Georgia wants the seat and what it should cost.

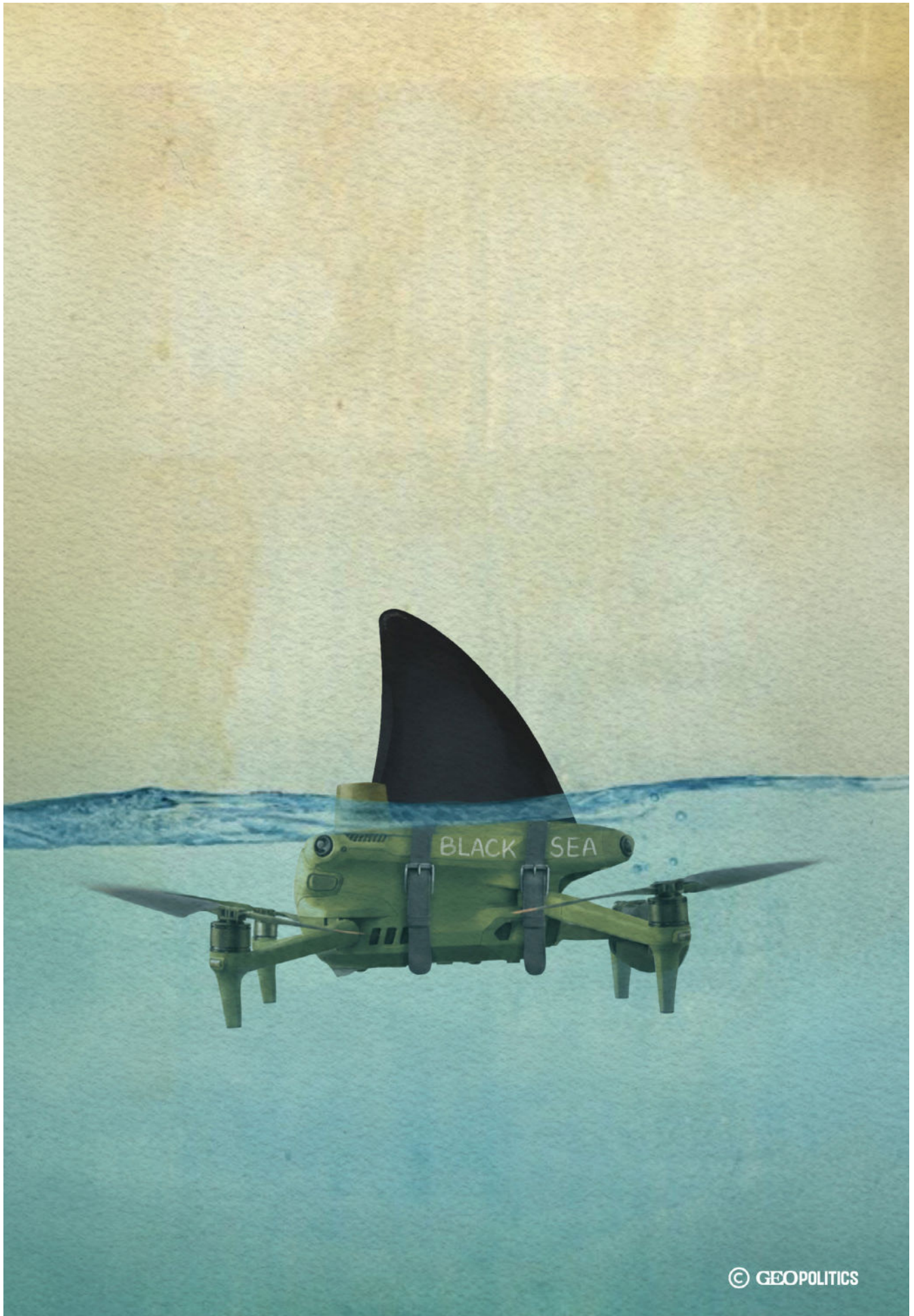
A War That Changed the Black Sea

The Black Sea of September 2026 bears almost no resemblance to the Black Sea of February 2022. Then, it was a Russian-Turkish lake with a limited NATO coastline. Now, as Ukrainian analysts at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [argue](#), Russian operational control of the maritime battle space has fallen from roughly 90% to around 25%. Russia's Black Sea Fleet [lost](#) its flagship in 2022, its [main base](#) in 2023, and, after Ukraine's 12 August [strike](#) on Novorossiysk, saw the frigates Admiral Essen and Admiral Makarov disabled — most of what remained of its surface combat power this summer. It is a fleet that hides in port and is struck there.



SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr. Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International Relations and European Integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze was a Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016-2020 and a Deputy Foreign Minister in 2011-2012. He is a co-founder and former director and chairman of the board of the Georgia-based think tank — Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



This illustration draws on Vin Zzep's "Brilliant Disguise - Goldfish with a Shark Fin" poster.

And yet Ukraine is losing the export war. This paradox defines the current moment and must be the starting point for any serious Black Sea policy. Sea denial is not sea control. Ukraine has made the sea unusable for the Russian navy, but it cannot make Odesa's cranes and silos safe from missiles and Shaheds launched from land.

And yet Ukraine is losing the export war. This paradox defines the current moment and must be the starting point for any serious Black Sea policy. Sea denial is not sea control. Ukraine has made the sea unusable for the Russian navy, but it cannot make Odesa's cranes and silos safe from missiles and Shaheds launched from land. Russia [struck](#) the greater Odesa ports more than 180 times in the first half of this year and 67 times in July alone. Ukraine's agriculture ministry has cut its grain export [forecast](#); its storage will be full by November; the Danube alternative is choked by [drought](#).

The Black Sea is therefore no longer a Russian-Ukrainian theatre with bystanders. It has become a shared sea in which every littoral state's ships, platforms and pipelines are vulnerable to drone attacks.

The war at sea has also spread to everyone else. Since late June, at least 25 Turkish-owned vessels have been [attacked](#). Turkish companies operate around 40% of the ships calling at Ukrainian ports, which exposes Turkish crews to being hit, and some have already been injured. A drone [detonated](#) a kilometer from a Trans-Balkan pipeline compressor station in Bulgaria on 8 August; Romanian jets [destroyed](#) another drone near the Neptun Deep gas platform on 20 August; Kazakhstan's oil exports through the CPC terminal at Novorossiysk were suspended for a week in July after four tankers [were hit](#) in four

days. The Black Sea is therefore no longer a Russian-Ukrainian theatre with bystanders. It has become a shared sea in which every littoral state's ships, platforms and pipelines are vulnerable to drone attacks.

Türkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [called](#) for a mutual moratorium on attacks on commercial shipping in August, but Russia [dismissed](#) it as a "half measure." Türkiye then quietly began withholding Dardanelles transit permits for merchant vessels bound for Novorossiysk — a step outside the [Montreux Convention](#), which, inter alia, governs warships, and one of the most consequential things any state has done in this war without announcing it. Now comes the September memorandum, with its two lanes and its conditional invitation to Georgia.

Thirty Years of Black Sea Formats

The Black Sea is not short of institutions. It lacks institutions that work, and the reasons they do not work fall into three recognizable patterns.

The first generation, built between the end of the Cold War and the annexation of Crimea, was inclusive by design. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation ([BSEC](#)), founded in Istanbul in 1992, gathered eleven states, including Russia, around a consensus rule. [BLACKSEAFOR](#), a Turkish initiative of 2001, put six navies — Russia's among them — into joint exercises and search-and-rescue; it froze after the 2008 war in Georgia and [died after 2014](#). Operation Black Sea Harmony, Türkiye's own maritime security patrol [launched](#) in 2004, invited Russia two years later and faded into oblivion after 2015. The [Black Sea Grain Initiative](#) of 2022 was the last of this line: a UN- and Turkish-brokered arrangement that worked for a year and collapsed the day Russia chose to leave it. The lesson of the first generation is that every format that included Russia functioned only while Russia found it useful, and Russia's usefulness test was, as Luke Coffey and Can Kasapoğlu [observed](#), whether it kept NATO out.

The second generation was Western, and almost all of its formats were very soft (or toothless). The EU's Black Sea Synergy of 2007 and the Eastern Partnership of 2009 were regional-cooperation and neighborhood policies with no real security dimension capable of countering live threats. [GUAM](#), the Georgia–Ukraine–Azerbaijan–Moldova grouping, was created in 1997 as an alternative to Russian-led integration and has never had the resources or the members' attention to be more than a communiqué. The [Three Seas Initiative](#) of 2016 connected the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas for EU members only, admitting Ukraine and Moldova as partners but structurally excluding Türkiye and Georgia — the two states whose coastlines matter most. The Bucharest Nine, founded in 2015, gave the eastern flank a voice inside NATO but spans two seas with different threat geometries. NATO itself, after Warsaw in 2016, [settled](#) for a “tailored forward presence” in Romania — a multinational brigade and more air policing — after Romania's proposal for a standing allied Black Sea fleet was cold-shouldered by Bulgaria, whose prime minister [said](#) he wanted to see sailboats and tourists in the sea, not warships. And the United States, whose Congress [introduced](#) a Black Sea Security Act in 2023, settled for report language obliging the State Department to write a five-pillar strategy that its own supporters [described](#) as loosely defined and unfunded, and that has not survived the change of administration in any recognizable form. The lesson of the second generation is that formats built in Washington, Brussels, or other European capitals either had no ships or had the wrong members.

The third generation of formats is wartime, functional and narrow. Ukraine's unilateral corridor of 2023 replaced the Grain Initiative and has moved more than two hundred million tons without asking anyone's permission. The Türkiye–Romania–Bulgaria Mine Countermeasures Task Group (MCM Black Sea), [established](#) in January 2024, has run ten operations under a six-monthly rotating command and, in July, [amended](#) its mandate to cover critical

infrastructure. NATO launched [Eastern Sentry](#) in September 2025 after drones crossed into Polish airspace, and Romania has been [shooting](#) drones down over the Danube delta and the gas fields since. These are the formats that actually do things.

What included Russia did not survive Russia's absence. What was broad had no ships or teeth. What has ships and arms is small. Nothing on the list is both wide enough to cover the whole non-Russian littoral and hard enough to protect what is being built on it and counter real threats.

Line the three generations up and the shape of the problem is obvious. What included Russia did not survive Russia's absence. What was broad had no ships or teeth. What has ships and arms is small. Nothing on the list is both wide enough to cover the whole non-Russian littoral and hard enough to protect what is being built on it and counter real threats. That is the gap, and it is why something more ambitious than another conference, another platform, or another mandate amendment is now required.

The Problem Is Not the Absence of a Strategy

It is tempting and wrong to say that the EU has no strategy. The European Union [adopted](#) its first Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region in May 2025. It [published](#) an implementation report in July 2026. It [launched](#) a Connectivity Agenda Platform in June that is expected to mobilize up to two [billion](#) euros through international financial institutions for the Trans-Caspian corridor. It has [agreed](#) with Romania and Bulgaria to build a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub at Constanța and Varna. So, indeed, Brussels has a strategy, a budget line and institutional readiness.

What the non-Russian Black Sea lacks is not a strategy but a security instrument that matches it.

What the non-Russian Black Sea lacks is not a strategy but a security instrument that matches it. Of all the frameworks above, exactly one has put ships to sea to face live threats — the trilateral, the smallest, and the one that involves no Brussels institution at all. The EU's own strategy acknowledges this: its security flagship is a monitoring hub, and the document says it will “coordinate with the existing trilateral demining initiative.” The strategy knows it needs a security layer it does not itself provide.

Brussels also has money. It can theoretically pay for infrastructure that runs across a sea in which drones are being shot down over gas platforms. The Georgia–Romania electricity [cable](#) alone is assessed at 3.57 billion euros; it would run 1,100 kilometers, 700 of them at depths beyond two thousand meters, within 150 kilometers of Russian naval bases. This is a serious constraint and [requires](#) insurance, which is very hard to obtain. Nobody will underwrite that cable against wartime risk at a price the project is currently estimated to cost.

The supply case is also conditional. Georgia [was](#) a net electricity importer in 2025, and almost all its exports were concentrated in May–July, limiting the dependable surplus available from its existing hydro-dominated system. Yes, Azerbaijan has begun delivering substantial renewable projects, but its 2022 [pledge](#) to develop 8 GW of wind and solar by 2027, with 80% intended for export, remains far ahead of its 2025 wind-and-solar [production](#) of just 0.77 TWh. The cable's prospective supply therefore depends on additional plants, grid reinforcement and export arrangements being delivered simultaneously.

The same is true, on a smaller scale, of port investment in Georgia and Bulgaria, of war-risk premiums on every hull entering Odesa, and of the

[Neptun Deep](#) platform, which is supposed to make Romania the EU's largest gas producer from next year.

Europe, therefore, has strategy and money. It has no instrument that makes the assets it is funding defensible.

Europe, therefore, has strategy and money. It has no instrument that makes the assets it is funding defensible, and no political framework that binds the five non-Russian littoral states to defend them together. That instrument could be the Compact.

What a Black Sea Compact Is and Is Not

Vagueness is where regional-security proposals go to die, so when one is advocating for a Black Sea Compact, specifics matter.

The compact should be an agreement among the five non-Russian littoral states — Türkiye, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Georgia — with the European Union as a partner, to do four things together that none of them can do alone.

1) Protect critical infrastructure. Cables, pipelines, offshore platforms and port approaches, through shared surveillance, seabed monitoring and, where a member consents, patrol in its territorial waters. This is not a new idea; it is what the three-state Mine Countermeasures group agreed to do in July 2026 when it [amended](#) its mandate from mine clearance to “surveillance and reconnaissance... to prevent deliberate attacks against critical infrastructure.” The compact extends that mandate to five states and gives it a budget. The difference would be Ukraine's participation, which could bring new technologies, capabilities, and a serious anti-Russian dimension to this endeavor.

2) Run protected lanes. Civilian shipping corridors along members' territorial waters — the western lane along Romania and Bulgaria that already exists

in practice, and the eastern lane along Türkiye and Georgia that Ankara has just proposed. The Black Sea Grain Initiative of 2022 showed that the model works; it also showed that a model which depends on Russian consent dies when Russia withdraws consent. Lanes inside members' own waters do not. This, especially if Ukraine and Georgia are on board, would essentially leave Russia out of the Black Sea transit discussions. This would, however, require new arrangements on the illegal trade with Georgia's occupied regions, which currently mainly happens from Türkiye. Several ideas on this were [discussed](#) about fifteen years ago, and bringing them into the Compact's mandate would reduce Russian economic influence in the occupied regions.

3) Share maritime domain awareness. This would effectively mean the Constanța–Varna Hub, fused with Turkish coastal radar and Ukrainian battlefield intelligence. Türkiye [supplies](#) up to 67% of situational-awareness information to NATO and Ukraine in the Black Sea, while Ukraine brings extensive combat experience with maritime drones, electronic interference, and threats to commercial navigation. The hub should turn these complementary inputs into a continuously updated picture: identifying ships that disappear from tracking systems, checking suspicious movements near cables and gas platforms, and circulating verified warnings about drifting mines and unmanned craft. Permanent Turkish and Ukrainian liaison officers, a round-the-clock watch, and agreed rules for releasing sensitive information would connect detection to action, with each alert assigned to the national authority responsible for investigating or responding. Existing cooperation provides a foundation. The European Maritime Safety Agency has already [demonstrated](#) integrated maritime monitoring off Constanța, and Ukraine contributes combat lessons through NATO exercises. The next step is to make those exchanges routine and fast enough to protect shipping and infrastructure.

4) Underwrite the risk. On 16 September, the London insurance market's Joint War Committee [extended](#) its listed area to almost the whole Black Sea, carving out only the territorial waters of Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia — so that every hull entering the open sea now needs separate war-risk cover at an additional premium, while every hull that stays inside those four countries' waters does not. Basically, the underwriters have priced the compact before anyone has signed it: the littoral lanes are the only part of the sea the market still treats as insurable, and the eastern lane through Georgian waters exists on the JWC map before it exists in any agreement. Building on that pricing, an EU-backed war-risk reinsurance facility should give private insurers a defined public guarantee against losses on Black Sea shipping and infrastructure, with separate terms for individual voyages and for long-lived assets such as ports, cables and offshore energy installations. Existing mechanisms offer a starting point. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's EUR 110 million guarantee facility [supports](#) war-risk insurance in Ukraine, and the Unity facility [covers](#) ships carrying non-military cargo to and from Ukrainian ports, but both are Ukraine-specific and voyage-based, and neither touches a cable, a platform or a Georgian port. A broader facility would need explicit coverage limits, deductibles, claims deadlines and cancellation provisions, so that lenders and operators can assess what happens after an attack rather than after a lawsuit. Alongside it, Brussels should broker a single corridor-governance agreement for the Middle Corridor's Black Sea leg: interoperable electronic customs documents submitted once and reused by every participating authority; published through-rates covering rail, port handling and the sea crossing; coordinated schedules; and a designated operator responsible for resolving delays and disputes across the journey — the fragmented coordination and border procedures that the World Bank [identified](#) in 2024 as the corridor's binding constraints. Brussels cannot deliver any of this alone, but it can tie guarantees and

infrastructure funding to common service standards and transparent charges, and that gives investors and shippers what they currently lack in the Black Sea: an identifiable price, an accountable counterpart and an agreed allocation of risk — the three things the JWC has just told them they cannot get anywhere outside four countries' territorial waters.

At the same time, the Compact cannot be everything; for instance, it cannot be a collective defense treaty; nobody should promise to go to war for anybody; however, its members could defend each other strictly at sea. It should not be a substitute for NATO or a rival to it. It should not deploy non-littoral warships, and it should not touch, revise, reinterpret, or reopen the Montreux Convention, even if many believe that it is now obsolete. The Compact should operate inside the sea, among the states that own its shores, on the principle of regional ownership. It should become, if you will, the tri-lateral mine-countermeasures group grown to five members, a wider mandate, European money, and a political charter. This would make it very similar to the security architecture that currently exists over the Baltic Sea.

Everyone Should Bring Something

Regional formats usually fail because they are talking shops. The remedy is a format in which each member's contribution is specific, and the others need it.

Türkiye brings the only real navy in the basin, control of the Straits, the largest coastline, the strongest maritime industry, and the diplomatic standing to talk to Moscow and Kyiv at once. Without Türkiye, the compact cannot exist. In fact, Türkiye has every reason to spearhead such a Compact. It will reassert its leading role in Black Sea security, backed by European finance, without reopening Montreux or sharing authority over the Straits. Coastal states would provide the ships and conduct operations; the EU would help finance infrastructure, insure

commercial risk, fund the Maritime Security Hub, and simplify corridor trade. This closely follows the division of labor [proposed](#) by Mustafa Aydın and Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, who argued for practical partnerships among coastal allies, coordination that respects Montreux, and European engagement through connectivity and investment.

Romania brings Constanța, the largest port on the sea and the EU's Black Sea gateway; the Constanța half of the Maritime Security Hub; the expanding NATO base at Mihail Kogălniceanu, set to become the alliance's largest in Europe; and, from 2027, Neptun Deep — an offshore asset large enough to make protecting it a European interest rather than a Romanian one. Romania also brings political entrepreneurship: the Security Hub [was](#) a Romanian proposal, pushed by Foreign Minister Oana Toiu from October 2025 until the Commission [endorsed](#) it in January.

Bulgaria brings continuity along the western shore and the capacity to make the compact less dependent on any single port or country. Its coastline lies between Romania and Türkiye: surveillance, mine clearance and incident response in Bulgarian waters are therefore part of the same coastal security problem. Sofia has already demonstrated a practical contribution, [assuming](#) command of MCM Black Sea in July 2026 and agreeing to [acquire](#) seven additional mine-countermeasure vessels from Belgium and the Netherlands. Varna's half of the Hub could connect that expertise to shared surveillance, hydrographic information and maritime training. Commercially, Varna and Burgas offer additional gateways for grain, containers, industrial cargo and energy supplies, while Burgas's refinery and terminals create their own protection requirements. Their value is not unlimited spare capacity: the EIB found that insufficient infrastructure prevented Varna from absorbing cargo when Constanța became congested, and [backed](#) a EUR 50 million grain-terminal investment to address that weakness. Bulgaria also connects the sea to alternative overland routes.

The December 2025 Bulgaria–Greece–Romania corridor agreement [envisages](#) an eastern axis from Alexandroupolis through Burgas and Varna to Constanța, offering a basis for commercial diversification and military mobility. The compact should give Sofia specific, funded responsibilities, such as mine clearance, port resilience, repair support, and interoperable border procedures, whose delivery can survive changes of government. Bulgaria's importance is the continuity of these services across the western coast.

Ukraine's participation can be a game-changer. It is Ukraine's naval drones, not any NATO deployment, that removed the Russian fleet from the equation. Ukraine brings operational expertise in a kind of warfare that no member navy has practiced; it brings the western corridor, which has [moved](#) more than two hundred million tons since 2023; and it brings, in the Sea Baby and Magura programs, an industrial base for exactly the unmanned systems that infrastructure protection now requires. Ukrainian defense analysts have [argued](#) that their country's experience should be written into allied doctrine rather than admired from a distance. The compact could make that happen.

And Georgia? Georgia brings the eastern shore. That is the whole of it — and, as we will argue below, it is nonetheless enough. At least for now.

Georgia: A Consumer, Not a Provider

Georgia is not a Black Sea security provider. It has no navy, no mine-countermeasures capability, no integrated air defense, and no maritime surveillance beyond a coast guard. Russia occupies much of its coastline, and it is building a naval base at [Ochamchire](#) on that stretch. Georgia has not fought at sea, has not contributed to the trilateral, and — for two years — has not been invited to the Black Sea-related initiatives. Whatever Georgia brings to a Black Sea Compact, it is not force.

It brings territory, and three facts make that territory indispensable right now.

First, the Georgia–Romania electricity cable, the EU's flagship connectivity project in the sea, lands at Anaklia. There is no Georgian-free version of it; the whole point is to connect Caspian and Caucasian power to the European grid through the Black Sea, and Georgia is the shore.

Second, the Middle Corridor has one Black Sea entry with rail behind it, and it is Georgia — Poti, Batumi and, if it is ever built, Anaklia. Kazakhstan's president said in June that corridor volumes [had risen](#) fivefold to over four million tons, with a ten-million-ton target. Every one of those tons bound for the Black Sea must cross Georgia.

Third, and most immediately, Türkiye's eastern lane runs through Georgian territorial waters. The alternative is a route that hugs the Turkish coast alone and stops short of the corridor's ports — a route to nowhere.

But what if Georgia refuses? In fact, Georgia has refused to enter any arrangement that goes against Russia's security interests. Does the whole edifice fall in such a case?

The answer is – no. The reason is that the Compact's security core is on the western and southern shores, where the war is, where the ships are, where the MCM Black Sea already operates. If Georgia stays out, the western lane runs, the Hub opens, the trilateral becomes a quadrilateral with Ukraine, and Neptun Deep is defended. What fails is the eastern connectivity layer: the cable, the corridor's Black Sea leg, the eastern lane. And the party that loses most from that failure is not Brussels or Ankara, but Georgia.

In fact, Georgia's longer-term indispensability is real but is currently wasted by the Georgian Dream, which prefers to blackmail the West, arguing that “you need us more than we need you.” Friedrich Conradi [argued](#) at Carnegie in April that the Middle

Corridor may prove “a dead end” because of Georgia’s political paralysis. If the West, and in this case the EU, plays its cards correctly, it could get Georgia on board and even unwind some undemocratic trends of recent years.

Why Conditions for Georgia, and Not for Baku or Astana

If the compact is vital and Georgia is needed, the obvious course would seem to be to drop the politics. The European Union does not condition its energy partnership with Azerbaijan on the state of Azerbaijani democracy, nor its corridor investments in Kazakhstan on Kazakh elections. It deals with both transactionally, and both sides understand the terms. Many ask: why should Georgia be treated differently — because it holds candidate status, or because it is small enough to be pushed around?

There are three reasons. The first is about what Georgians chose. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan never asked to join the European Union. Georgia did. It negotiated an Association Agreement and a free trade area; it obtained visa-free travel based on specific rule-of-law commitments; it wrote European integration into Article 78 of its constitution; and in December 2023 it asked for and [received](#) candidate status, a relationship defined by conditionality. The conditions attached to Georgia are not a moral tax on a weak state. They are the content of the relationship Georgia itself demanded. Brussels does not apply them to Baku because Baku never signed up to them. To drop them for Georgia would not be treating Georgia like Azerbaijan; it would be treating Georgia’s own constitutional choice as a fiction.

The second is about Europe’s own interest. Deepening transit and infrastructure cooperation with Georgia at the price of dropping democratic demands might bring the European Union a short-term geoeconomic benefit. But Georgia’s drift towards the EU’s competitors, and their growing influence over the country’s strategic infrastructure, cast doubt

on the long-term value of that benefit. In such conditions, European investment risks strengthening the position of the EU’s own rivals in the region. Upholding democratic principles and institutional requirements in relations with Georgia is therefore not a distraction from the EU’s economic and strategic interests. It is part of defending them.

A European Union that pays for a cable landing at Anaklia without conditions is not buying influence in Georgia, but buying a power line for a Chinese port.

Look at the evidence. The government that has spent two years dismantling the institutions Brussels asked it to build is the same government that handed the Anaklia concession to a consortium led by a U.S.-sanctioned Chinese state company, that [upgraded](#) its “strategic partnership” with Beijing this spring, and that has restored a working relationship with Moscow while shouting at Brussels. Democratic backsliding and the capture of strategic infrastructure by the EU’s competitors are not two problems. They are one problem seen from two sides. A European Union that pays for a cable landing at Anaklia without conditions is not buying influence in Georgia, but buying a power line for a Chinese port.

Conditionality on connectivity should be chosen because, for the first time since 2022, Brussels holds something Tbilisi cannot get elsewhere.

The third reason is that Georgia, under the Georgian Dream government, is not, in fact, easily pushed around — and the record proves it. This regime has ignored every European condition for two years, at the cost of frozen candidate status, visa-free travel [suspended](#) for its officials in March, the whole population [warned](#) in December that theirs is next, and its election [unrecognized](#) by the European Parliament by 444 votes to 72 in 2024. None of it moved Bidzina Ivanishvili. What is different about connectivity is

that it is the one European good the Georgian Dream government actually wants — the ports, the cable, the corridor money, the investment that keeps the economy afloat and the patronage flowing. Conditionality on connectivity should be chosen because, for the first time since 2022, Brussels holds something Tbilisi cannot get elsewhere.

As for the conditions, they are well known, and we have [covered](#) them at length in this journal. In a nutshell, they include releasing political prisoners, refusing to ban political parties, rescinding non-democratic legislation, and reforming the electoral framework to allow disenfranchised citizens of Georgia to choose their governments in a normal competitive process.

None of these require a monitoring mission or a decade. Each is a decision the Georgian Dream could take next Monday, and Brussels could verify by Friday. That is what makes them appropriate as compact conditions and distinguishes them from the accession benchmarks. It is also what makes them honest: a government that refuses to take four reversible decisions cannot claim it is being asked for too much. It is telling everyone what kind of governance model it prefers for the Black Sea ■

EU Enlargement at a Geopolitical Crossroads: Can Brussels Reconcile Values and Strategy?

The European Union is entering a new phase of enlargement, but the geopolitical environment is very different this time. The EU is no longer expanding primarily in a relatively stable post-Cold War environment. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's growing economic and political influence, uncertainty surrounding transatlantic relations, and democratic pressures within the Union itself have transformed enlargement from a primarily technical and institutional process into a strategic question.

In recent years, the EU has increasingly sought to act as a geopolitical player rather than simply as an economic bloc. The [creation](#) of the "Geopolitical Commission" in 2019 gave fresh impetus to this ambition. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine accelerated it further. Ukraine [applied](#) for EU membership on 28 February 2022, [followed](#) by Moldova and Georgia on 3 March. Ukraine and Moldova were [granted](#) candidate status in June 2022 and formally opened accession negotiations in June 2024. Georgia

[received](#) candidate status in December 2023, but its government's democratic backsliding brought the accession process to a de facto halt in 2024.

The EU now faces a difficult question: how can it respond to the geopolitical urgency of enlargement without compromising the merit-based and values-driven principles on which the accession process is built?

The answer matters not only for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. It also matters for the future cohesion and credibility of the European Union itself.

A Different Enlargement Environment

The European Union leadership considers its enlargement policy a vital geopolitical [investment](#) in long-term peace, security, and stability. However, the current enlargement process is unfolding in an increasingly contested geopolitical space.



VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium, and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He previously served as the EU Integration Programme Manager at the Open Society Georgia Foundation in Tbilisi for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation across various sectors. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



Unlike in the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, today’s EU operates in an environment where external actors actively seek political and economic influence in countries aspiring to join the Union.

Russia uses a combination of political influence, disinformation, economic leverage and, in the most extreme cases, military force. China relies more heavily on trade, investment, infrastructure and financial relationships. Other regional actors, including Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Gulf states, are also expanding their economic and political engagement.

At the same time, the EU is facing internal challenges. Populist and far-right political forces have strengthened in several member states, while democratic backsliding and disputes over the rule of law have exposed tensions within the Union itself.

The EU wants enlargement to strengthen European security and geopolitical influence, but it also insists that membership can be earned only through substantial democratic, institutional, and economic reforms.

This creates a fundamental contradiction. The EU wants enlargement to strengthen European security and geopolitical influence, but it also insists that membership can be earned only through substantial democratic, institutional, and economic reforms.

The Danger of an Enlargement Without a Clear Horizon

The EU has good reasons to maintain strict conditionality. It is not [planning](#) to cut corners or offer shortcuts to acceding countries, and it stands firm on the idea that joining the EU by 2030 is a realistic goal. The EU does not view membership simply as a geopolitical reward, as leaders of some EU candidate countries try to portray it. It means becoming part of a common legal, institutional, and political system.

Weak rule of law, corruption, ineffective institutions and democratic backsliding in a candidate country do not disappear when that country becomes a member. They can instead become problems inside the Union.

This is why the EU’s “fundamentals first” approach remains important. The rule of law, judicial independence, fundamental rights, and democratic institutions need to be addressed from the beginning of the accession process rather than postponed until the final stages.

Yet another danger exists: if accession becomes an indefinitely distant prospect, the process itself can lose credibility. The Western Balkans offer a powerful illustration. More than two decades after the EU’s Thessaloniki commitment to the region, only Croatia has joined the Union. Long negotiations, changing conditions, bilateral disputes, domestic political problems, and varying levels of political commitment have contributed to frustration on both sides. The longer the process continues without a clear sense of direction, the greater the risk that political elites and societies in candidate countries will question whether reforms are worth the political cost.

This creates a dilemma for Brussels. If it moves too slowly, it risks losing strategic influence. If it moves too quickly, it risks weakening the very conditions that make enlargement sustainable.

Georgia provides a particularly revealing example of this tension. The country applied for EU membership in March 2022, shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The European Council granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023, while attaching conditions related to democratic reforms and institutional development. The decision demonstrated how difficult it is to separate geopolitical considerations from the traditional logic of conditionality. The EU had a strategic interest in keeping Georgia anchored to the European perspective, but it also faced concerns about the country’s democratic [trajectory](#). Three years after the EU’s decision, Georgia

remains an EU candidate country in [name](#) only. This is not simply a Georgian problem. It raises a broader question about the future of enlargement: can the EU remain geopolitically engaged with countries whose governments are not delivering sufficiently on democratic reforms without creating incentives for other governments to believe that geopolitical importance can compensate for poor performance?

If the answer is yes, the credibility of conditionality weakens.

Credibility and Double-Standards Problems

Credibility is one of the EU's most important assets in the enlargement process. Candidate countries need to believe that reforms will produce tangible progress. At the same time, EU member states need to believe that new members will meet the standards required for membership. Both sides can lose confidence when the process appears unpredictable. Candidate countries can become frustrated when benchmarks change or when political decisions within individual member states delay progress for reasons unrelated to their own reform performance. EU governments, meanwhile, can become reluctant to support further enlargement when reform processes appear stalled.

Predictability matters almost as much as conditionality.

This is why predictability matters almost as much as conditionality.

The EU does not necessarily need to promise automatic accession by a specific date. But it should clarify the relationship between reforms and outcomes: what exactly is required, how progress will be measured, what happens when reforms are completed, and what consequences follow when they are not. In this regard, one should look at the idea of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [proposing](#) roadmaps for the candidates that

have made the most progress. Without that clarity, conditionality can be perceived not as an objective framework but as a moving target.

The credibility of conditionality depends not only on the standards themselves but also on the perception that the EU takes its own fundamental principles seriously.

Another challenge to the credibility of EU conditionality is the Union's own internal democratic difficulties. The EU expects candidate countries to uphold the rule of law, judicial independence, fundamental rights and media freedom. Yet democratic backsliding within the Union itself can weaken Brussels' ability to promote these principles externally. Hungary is particularly relevant in this debate. The deterioration of democratic checks and balances within an EU member state provides political ammunition to leaders in candidate countries who face criticism over similar issues. Governments in countries such as Georgia and Serbia have at times pointed to examples within the EU when defending controversial legislation or restrictions affecting civil society and media. This does not mean the situations are identical, nor that the EU should apply the same mechanisms to member states and candidate countries. The institutional circumstances are different. But the political effect is important. The credibility of conditionality depends not only on the standards themselves but also on the perception that the EU takes its own fundamental principles seriously. A more systematic approach to monitoring democratic governance across the enlargement area could therefore strengthen the EU's position.

The Risk of a Strategic Vacuum

The EU can no longer assume that candidate countries will simply wait for accession while Brussels decides when they are ready. Countries in the EU's neighborhood have alternatives. Governments can deepen economic relations with China, maintain

political or economic ties with Russia, cooperate with Türkiye or seek investment from Gulf states and other external partners. For smaller economies in particular, these relationships can provide immediate economic benefits. The figures speak for themselves: the share of Chinese foreign direct investment in the Western Balkan region has increased significantly. In 2015, Chinese companies [accounted](#) for just 0.2% of the region's GDP. By 2024, that share had increased more than twentyfold to 4.2% of GDP, though this is overwhelmingly concentrated in Serbia, where the Chinese FDI stock reached nearly 9% of GDP in 2024; in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo it is close to zero, and in Montenegro and North Macedonia below 1%. EU investment remains far larger everywhere, from 23% of GDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 38% in Serbia.

The EU can no longer assume that candidate countries will simply wait for accession while Brussels decides when they are ready.

China's approach differs markedly from the EU's. While the EU generally links financial and economic support to institutional and governance reforms, Chinese engagement focuses more on economic relationships, infrastructure, investment, and trade. This can make Chinese financing attractive to governments that want rapid investment without extensive political conditions.

The EU therefore faces a strategic challenge. If its enlargement process is perceived as distant and its economic offer as slow or overly conditional, other actors can fill the space. But the solution cannot simply be to offer candidate countries faster membership in exchange for geopolitical alignment. A recent [study](#) by the European Parliament shows that, although alignment has emerged as a key indicator of the enlargement process, it lacks depth. Thus, alignment alone risks creating precisely the problem the EU should avoid: stability without sufficient democratic transformation.

The Danger of “Stabilocracy”

This is where the concept of “stabilocracy” becomes important. The term describes a situation in which external actors prioritize political stability and cooperation with governments over democratic accountability and institutional reform. For the EU, such an approach could be particularly damaging. If Brussels tolerates democratic backsliding, corruption or weak rule of law because a government is considered strategically important, it may achieve short-term geopolitical objectives while creating long-term institutional problems. The experience of enlargement demonstrates why this matters. The accession process is not simply about foreign policy. It is about transforming institutions, laws and political practices so that a candidate country can function within the EU's legal and political system. A government that is geopolitically aligned with Brussels but systematically weakens democratic institutions may therefore create a different kind of strategic risk. The EU should consequently preserve the “fundamentals first” principle. Geopolitical considerations can influence the pace, instruments and level of engagement, but they should not replace the fundamental conditions for membership.

Geopolitical considerations can influence the pace, instruments and level of engagement, but they should not replace the fundamental conditions for membership.

This does not mean that the EU should treat geopolitics as separate from the accession process. On the contrary, geopolitical resilience should become a more visible part of enlargement policy. Currently, foreign and security policy alignment is addressed primarily through Chapter 31 and the broader accession framework. But strategic dependencies can also emerge through public procurement, infrastructure, intellectual property, energy, industrial policy, and financial governance. This means that geopolitical considerations could be integrated more

systematically into existing negotiation chapters. Public procurement, for example, could pay greater attention to strategic dependencies created by major foreign-funded contracts. Industrial policy could assess excessive dependence on individual external markets. Financial governance could consider vulnerabilities created by foreign financing. Energy policy could address dependencies that have strategic as well as economic consequences. This would not require the EU to create entirely new geopolitical accession criteria. Instead, it would allow the existing accession framework to better reflect the environment in which candidate countries are operating.

Another way to strengthen the credibility of enlargement would be to make progress easier to understand and compare. The European Commission's annual enlargement reports provide detailed qualitative assessments. Such assessments are necessary because democratic governance and institutional independence cannot always be reduced to simple numbers. Nevertheless, more transparent indicators could make the process easier to follow. A numerical scoring system could complement, rather than replace, qualitative assessments. It could measure elements such as whether legislation has been adopted, whether institutions have the capacity to implement it, whether reforms are functioning in practice and whether progress has been sustained over time. A scoring system would not eliminate political judgment. On the contrary, decisions about indicators, weighting and thresholds would involve judgment. But if the methodology were publicly available, numerical indicators could make progress more comparable and reduce uncertainty about how assessments are made.

The Case for Clearer Milestones

The same principle should apply to deadlines. The EU could introduce clearer milestones for reforms without promising automatic membership on a predetermined date. A political target date

differs from a conditional milestone. A target date can create momentum, but if it is missed without consequences, it risks becoming another political slogan. A conditional milestone, by contrast, could specify which reforms must be completed by a certain point and what political or institutional consequences follow whether or not they are achieved.

This could make the accession process more predictable while preserving the principle that membership depends on performance. It would also place greater responsibility on both sides. Candidate countries would know what is expected of them, while the EU would have to demonstrate that it is prepared to respond consistently when conditions are met.

The EU Must Prepare Too

One final element is sometimes overlooked: enlargement is a two-way process. Candidate countries must prepare for membership, but the EU must also prepare to receive new members. Enlargement affects the Union's budget, institutions, decision-making procedures and internal political balance. The EU's own capacity to absorb new members therefore matters.

If candidate countries cannot understand how and when the EU will determine whether it is ready for enlargement, the criterion can become another source of uncertainty.

The problem arises when the concept of "absorption capacity" remains too vague. If candidate countries cannot understand how and when the EU will determine whether it is ready for enlargement, the criterion can become another source of uncertainty. The EU should therefore make its own preparedness more transparent and measurable. This would strengthen the process's credibility by making clear that enlargement is not simply a test for candidate countries. It is also a test of the Union's willingness and ability to adapt.

Enlargement Without Abandoning the Fundamentals

The EU is now facing an enlargement environment in which geopolitics can no longer be separated from the accession process. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's expanding economic influence, uncertainty in transatlantic relations and political developments inside the EU have all made enlargement more strategically important. But greater geopolitical urgency does not necessarily require weaker conditionality. The more sustainable response would be to make conditionality clearer, more measurable and more predictable.

The EU should preserve the "fundamentals first" approach while providing candidate countries with clearer benchmarks, more transparent assessments and meaningful intermediate benefits. It should integrate geopolitical resilience more systematically into the accession chapters and make its own absorption capacity more transparent.

Brussels should avoid the false choice between values and geopolitics. A purely normative enlargement policy risks becoming disconnected from the EU's strategic realities. A purely geopolitical enlargement policy, meanwhile, risks importing unresolved democratic and institutional weaknesses into the Union.

Most importantly, Brussels should avoid the false choice between values and geopolitics. A purely normative enlargement policy risks becoming disconnected from the EU's strategic realities. A purely geopolitical enlargement policy, meanwhile, risks importing unresolved democratic and institutional weaknesses into the Union. The challenge is to build an enlargement policy that remains faithful to the principles that define the European project while responding effectively to the geopolitical environment in which the Union now operates. That is likely to be the defining test of the EU's new enlargement wave ■

Europe Torn Apart by Indecisiveness

Casting a cursory glance at the European newspaper headlines, you'd be justified in thinking that the populists – to the left and the right – are on the relentless march, and up to undoing the European project.

The unprecedented success of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has captured the European headlines. Most claim doom, drawing parallels with the rise of the NSDAP in the 1930s. The BBC [lamented](#) the “reckoning with Germany’s Nazi past,” while Euronews [bemoaned](#) the “shocking far right surge.” Others, especially across the Atlantic and in ultra-right circles, claim a new era of European politics: Elon Musk [posted](#) “Gut Gemacht!” (Well done! in German), and President Donald Trump [celebrated](#) victory as Make Germany Great Again, [drawing](#) Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s ire.

Look to France, and the recent extremely detailed [poll](#) (13 thousand respondents!) commissioned by *Le Monde* will show you that radical right-wing, Euro-skeptic candidate Marine Le Pen is comfortably heading the polls in all six surveyed scenarios

with 34-35% of support, while in four out of six scenarios her challenger for the second round would be populist-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who is no less critical of the EU. Otherwise, the mood among the French is morose: three-fourths expect things to get worse in the coming months, and the prevailing feelings are disquiet (59%), uncertainty (51%), tiredness (34%), anger (30%), and revulsion (24%). Only 17% are hopeful. 71% expect the presidential elections to bring tangible change, but drill deeper and they don’t want anything to change in their personal lives or finances much – an electoral bonanza for populists.

Gone are the [hopes](#) that Merz’s accession would “restart the Franco-German engine”: his chancellorship is now in the doldrums, with *Politico* even [discussing](#) the “endgame.” French President Emmanuel Macron himself is on the logical way out because of the electoral cycle and the lack of a clear successor. This does not bode well for a united Europe, especially for those, like Georgians, who count on its pull to bolster internal pro-democratic forces. But perhaps, not all is lost.



JABA DEVDARIANI
Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB//@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



This Is the SOTEU of Our Discontent

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has been heavily criticized in the newspapers after her State of the European Union (SOTEU) [speech](#), which she delivered to the European Parliament on 16 September. An influential French-language newsletter covering all things EU [called](#) her “the Queen of unfulfilled promises”, accusing her of recycling the litany of solutions that she presented months or even years ago, and that the Commission has failed to deliver on since. Many [point](#) out that the headline-grabbing “associate membership” for Canada has no legal basis in the Treaty and may reignite bickering among the actual candidate states. It already drew the [anger](#) of President Trump, who called the offer a “hostile” move and [derided](#) it as “laughable”.

Has something gone wrong with Ursula von der Leyen? A politician with so much experience, and the first to speak about Europe’s geopolitical relevance

and global role. While she has been [accused](#) of a power grab, of centralizing more power in the Commission than it is supposed to have, the reality that pulls Europe back is precisely the indecision that is paralyzing the member states. The underlying truth is that “Brussels” is not the all-powerful monster that its populist opponents inside Europe and on its fringes claim it to be. The Commission depends on the Member States for its decisions, but in European capitals, we hear lots of chest-thumping and no rush to band together and find solutions on common defense, climate change, or AI.

The Commission President is trying to reach out to Europe directly: in the SOTEU, she proposed a new “Congress of Europe” to bring together thinkers, scientists, artists and citizens. Ursula von der Leyen says she wants to “reclaim [...] European imagination” – and the controversial Canada offer is surely a part of that game. For Europe to survive as a joint project, it must inspire, especially in the era of social media stunts. But she is racing against the tide: according to Politico’s [quick poll](#), 22% of the

surveyed French and 10% of Spaniards have never heard of her. Of those who did, most in Germany, France, and Spain think she is doing a bad or very bad job, but the largest proportion in all three states does not know what she is doing or can't decide. It is hard to be inspiring when you are unknown.

Little Engine That Could Not

This is where the team formerly known as the “Franco-German engine” is coming into play. The surge of anti-European populism in these large European states is not unexpected, given the complexity of current challenges. Most citizens in Western parts of Europe, unlike their Eastern peers, have no personal experience of undergoing hard and quick adjustments. The Western and Northern European social states guaranteed growth in quality of life and stable employment from the 1950s till about the late 1980s. That model unraveled slowly in the 1990s and then came undone fast – partly due to external shocks, but also due to internal changes, such as the major demographic shift at least partially linked to prosperity. Europeans live considerably longer (81 years in Germany, 83 in France on average, a life expectancy jump of 14–16 years on average since the 1950s, [according](#) to Eurostat) and have fewer babies. The mainstream political parties haven't prepared their citizens for the changes this entailed. Especially in France, they preferred to muddle through and borrow to keep the social system running, rather than decisively confront the powerful (and famously strike-happy) trade unions. In Germany, they did more so. Still, the economic model that relied on cheap Russian gas to finance industrial exports to China has now collapsed, taking some of that VROOM out of the German internal combustion engine.

Most citizens in Western parts of Europe, unlike their Eastern peers, have no personal experience of undergoing hard and quick adjustments.

These problems should have brought Paris and Berlin together and seated them more confidently and assertively in the European Union driver's seat. Some considerable thought has indeed gone into this: in 2023, an official Franco-German expert group published a comprehensive [report](#) on EU reform and enlargement. But as the foresightful critics [pointed out](#) at the time, this approach externalized internal problems: it sought EU-institutional solutions to a problem whose source lay at home, in the domestic political dynamics of EU states. France and Germany are therefore trying to mold Europe's future with hands shackled by their own domestic politics.

France and Germany are therefore trying to mold Europe's future with hands shackled by their own domestic politics.

The rise of populists who have successfully blamed outsiders (migrants and/or the EU, more often than not) for internal woes has undone the hapless 'big tent' post-WWII political parties. In France, where this trend was most obvious in the meteoric rise to the summit of Emmanuel Macron, who had never before held elected public office, it has proven a false start. As he is leaving office, Macron leaves little political inheritance.

Neutered at home, leaders in Paris and Berlin can no longer set the sails on the European ship the way they once could. Even their much-touted bilateral defense initiatives tend to falter: witness the collapse of the FCAS/SCAF future combat aircraft project deal in unsightly bickering between the French Dassault and German Airbus, which the leaders could not redress. Or the [badly delayed](#) future tank program.

But the implications at the European level are even more significant: delays hamper the EU Council, where decisive action is needed not because Paris and Berlin necessarily disagree, but because they no longer actively cooperate. Without the once-powerful backing from the two, Brussels ran repeatedly

afoul of the trickery and stalling of the quarrelsome leaders in Budapest, or even Bratislava, on crucial subjects.

The Commission, and its President, could be excused for wanting to fill the power void that has emerged: after all, this is the internal logic of all bureaucratic institutions. Except the Commission cannot *really* do that, because the Treaty intentionally hobbles it. Hence Ursula von der Leyen's symbolic acts of power and dazzling abbreviations. They do little to bridge the real power gap, and additionally irritate the European capitals even more, while handing ammo to the populists. What is more, she is failing to reach over the heads of the national leaderships to give Europeans what they expect and want.

We Will Miss It When It Is Gone

With all the party-political vitriol and journalistic scorn poured on it, one could think that European citizens deride the EU just as much as the Rassemblement National or AfD do. But poll upon poll suggests this is far from being the case.

An impressive 74% of European respondents surveyed by the large-scale [Eurobarometer study](#) conducted in Spring 2026 on a sample of up to 26.5 thousand people in all 27 states believe their country has benefited from EU membership; 68% want the EU to play a more important role in protecting citizens from global crises and security threats, 73% believe it should receive new resources, and 90% want the member states to be more united. But the same study also revealed anxiety about the geopolitical situation (58% are pessimistic about the future of the world) and the primacy of domestic concerns such as declining living standards and inflation. Notably, these anxieties are more pronounced in France and Germany.

This chimes well with, but also contextualizes, another study - the [European Sentiment Compass](#) published jointly by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and the European

Cultural Foundation (ECF) in September 2026. This was done on a smaller scale, involving only close to 6,000 citizens of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK, and complemented by political and media research in 15 EU states. In this study, 56% believed Europe's future was in danger, but three-quarters had a positive vision for Europe in the coming 20 years. Only 13% wanted "less Europe" and blamed the governments more than the EU for their daily troubles.

One conclusion that the authors draw is that Europeans want more EU, not less, but increasingly doubt that it is possible. In this way, the highly mediatized doomsaying (unabashedly amplified by the malevolent manipulators inside and outside Europe) is rapidly transforming into a self-fulfilling prophecy of an "unstoppable rise" of the radical anti-European forces.

Von der Leyen may be onto something when she speaks about citizens' imagination: Europe must be perceived as a destiny to survive these difficult times.

Another important point [is well made](#) by André Wilkens, ECF Director: "Unless people can imagine themselves in a common European future, Europe remains an arrangement, not a destiny." So, von der Leyen may be onto something when she speaks about citizens' imagination: Europe must be perceived as a destiny to survive these difficult times. Unfortunately, in the French election campaign, only Raphaël Glucksmann — a maverick center-left candidate — is articulating such a vision.

Where Does It Leave Us?

If history teaches us anything, it is that one should never succumb to preemptive capitulation when populists are rising. Polls show that Europeans are concerned, very concerned about tomorrow and politically disoriented. But a full 75% believe that a united Europe can keep them safer than any national

government. This is an electoral reservoir that French and German politicians can and must tap into, with a message of shared destiny and specific – if small – deeds that prove joint action is possible.

Europeans are concerned, very concerned about tomorrow and politically disoriented. But a full 75% believe that a united Europe can keep them safer than any national government. This is an electoral reservoir that French and German politicians can and must tap into, with a message of shared destiny and specific – if small – deeds that prove joint action is possible.

The European Commission – whether or not von der Leyen retains her function – will continue to find itself in a bind. The problem is structural: countries have fewer resources and thus find it logical to pool them in a common European vat to address transnational problems of security, environment and competitiveness. But they – especially smaller states – also fear that the pooling of resources is diluting their national weight in international relations and is potentially allowing larger countries – especially Germany – to make distribution choices. This tension will affect both planning and implementation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

Not Brussels, but national capitals distracted by internal politics are the main obstacle to membership. Ultimately, they, too, should try to reach the hearts

and minds of European citizens directly and ensure the membership referenda deliver positive results.

For countries on the EU porch in the Western Balkans, and for Moldova and Ukraine, too, the lesson is that their path to membership will not get easier. Not Brussels, but national capitals distracted by internal politics are the main obstacle to membership. Ultimately, they, too, should try to reach the hearts and minds of European citizens directly and ensure the membership referenda deliver positive results.

Georgia is a special case: the Georgian Dream government has not only formally stepped back from membership but also backtracked on legislative advances of the past decades. Georgia's body politic has been severely maimed by the past years of violence. Mutual mistrust is rife, and society is internally atomized. Yet, like the rest of Europe, Georgians believe Europe can keep them safer than they are now. But they currently see no path ahead. It is up to the Georgian political class – widely understood – to articulate a realistic vision and root Georgia's future in the common European destiny.

For that task to succeed, one needs a strong, truthful but optimistic narrative which would put the stream of negativity that is spouting now not only from pro-Russian or MAGA outlets, but also from European mainstream publications into a narrative context. With Georgia's weakened creative class, hamstrung journalism, civil society and academia, a bookmaker would not bet on the success of such an endeavor. But this does not mean it should not be tried ■

Choke, Don't Block

Russia's Bottleneck Strategy in Its Neighborhood and the Middle Corridor

Great powers rarely need to control an entire neighborhood to exercise influence over it. Sometimes it is enough to control the doors. For Russia, the geography of the post-Soviet space has always offered such doors in abundance: mountain passes, railways, pipelines, ports, electricity grids, military bases, border crossings and, increasingly, regulatory systems. The strategic objective is not necessarily to shut these doors. In many cases, Moscow benefits more if they remain open, but only sufficiently open, sufficiently dependent and sufficiently controllable to ensure that alternatives remain expensive, slow or politically risky.

This distinction is very important. The proposition that Russia wants the South Caucasus simply “closed” is too crude. Moscow trades through Georgia, supplies Armenia with gas across Georgian territory and, in 2026, publicly [discussed](#) restoring railway connections through occupied Abkhazia. It actually

uses those countries to avoid Western sanctions. A more defensible proposition is that Russia benefits when the South Caucasus remains a chokepoint that Moscow can reach into, influence, or bypass at will. This distinction changes how we should understand Russian regional strategy. The issue is not simply occupation – it is not even primarily about territorial control but about control over choices.

A country may possess sovereignty over its territory while lacking strategic freedom if a foreign actor can influence the routes by which its energy arrives, the railways over which its goods travel, the ports through which its exports move, or the infrastructure through which its neighbors connect.

Eurasian geography offers a complex example. A country can be a sea state, a land bridge, an energy transit route, or the principal gateway of the emerging Middle Corridor between China and Europe, or all together – as Georgia is. Paradoxically,



TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

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.



while a country's strategic value increases precisely because it is difficult to replace, that same lack of redundancy creates vulnerability. A corridor can be commercially attractive and geopolitically important while remaining strategically fragile if one country, or a small number of infrastructure nodes within that country, can slow, redirect, or price access to it.

Paradoxically, while a country's strategic value increases precisely because it is difficult to replace, that same lack of redundancy creates vulnerability. A corridor can be commercially attractive and geopolitically important while remaining strategically fragile if one country, or a small number of infrastructure nodes within that country, can slow, redirect, or price access to it.

The Russian strategy therefore need not be to destroy connectivity. It may be enough to ensure

that connectivity never becomes fully independent of Russian influence. This is the essence of the bottleneck strategy.

From “Weaponized Interdependence” to “Chokepoint Sovereignty”

The intellectual starting point is the concept of “weaponized interdependence,” developed by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman. They [argue](#) that states controlling central nodes in international networks can exploit those nodes for surveillance or coercion.

While the Middle Corridor was created partly to bypass Russian territory, Russian policy is evolving from exploiting a network it controls to preventing an alternative network from becoming robust enough to eliminate Russian leverage. This is a second-order form of weaponized interdependence. The strategy is not necessarily to own the new corridor, but to prevent it from becoming independent. For that goal, Russia employs several tools at its disposal:

Residual asset: Russia retains ownership, concessions, or operational control over infrastructure inside another country. The asset becomes a standing option. Moscow does not have to use it constantly. Its value lies in the ability to withhold access, change terms, or threaten withdrawal.

Client actor: Russia can exercise influence through governments, political networks, or territories that can obstruct connectivity without requiring direct Russian intervention.

Regulatory chokepoint: Administrative procedures can be more effective than military force because they are reversible and legally defensible. Safety inspections, permits, environmental requirements, customs procedures, and licensing decisions can slow a strategically important flow without appearing to constitute coercion.

Physical disruption below the threshold of war: Damage to cables, pipelines, or other infrastructure can create uncertainty even when attribution remains contested.

Inherited dependency: A country may retain formal sovereignty but remain dependent upon infrastructure inherited from the Soviet or earlier regional system.

Constructed legal veto: A treaty or regulatory framework need not explicitly grant Russia a veto. If investors believe Moscow can obstruct a project, they may demand a risk premium or simply decide that the project is not worth pursuing.

The common denominator is that a bottleneck does not have to stop the flow. It only has to make the alternative more expensive than the status quo. That is why Russia's most important strategic assets are sometimes surprisingly mundane: a railway concession, a refinery, an electricity distributor, a border crossing, a port connection, or a pipeline terminal.

Georgia: The Single Thread in the Middle Corridor

Georgia best illustrates this strategy because its geography creates a structural condition that politics can exploit: single-threaded connectivity.

The principal land-based Middle Corridor routes from the Caspian Sea toward Europe pass through Georgia. The country contains approximately 249 kilometers of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and roughly 248 kilometers of the South Caucasus gas pipeline. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway also passes through Georgia, with the gauge transition physically located at Akhalkalaki.

This creates something unusual in contemporary Eurasian infrastructure: a major international connectivity project whose western gateway depends disproportionately on one relatively small country. The northern alternative runs through Russia, while the southern alternative runs through Iran. For Western governments seeking to diversify away from both, Georgia is therefore an important transit hinge.

This explains why the Middle Corridor can expand rapidly while remaining strategically vulnerable. Transit volumes have increased substantially from the very low base of the early 2020s. Container traffic has grown particularly quickly, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway has recorded dramatic increases in container movements.

The important point is therefore not that Russia wants “to block” the Middle Corridor. It does not. The important point is that the corridor remains insufficiently redundant. Current Middle Corridor capacity [remains](#) only a fraction of the northern Russian route's capacity. That makes the Georgian section strategically important even before it reaches commercially dominant volumes. A chokepoint matters because of tomorrow's traffic, not merely today's.

Narrowing Gate, Widening Rhetoric

Georgia's government has repeatedly presented the country as the central link in the Middle Corridor. Major road projects have been completed, the Rikoti section of the East-West Highway has substantially improved east-west transportation, and the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum has promoted Georgia's role as a regional logistics hub. Yet infrastructure development is uneven. The contradiction is most visible in the port sector.

Poti is operating close to capacity. Anaklia, the proposed deep-water port, is therefore strategically important because it could provide Georgia with additional container capacity and a genuinely deep-water gateway. But the Anaklia [story](#) has become remarkably complicated.

The original Western-backed consortium lost its contract in 2020, followed by an international arbitration process in which the tribunal [rejected](#) the investors' claims and found that the state had not interfered with their efforts to attract financing. In 2024, a Chinese state-owned consortium was selected as the sole bidder for the new project.

By 2026, however, the Chinese consortium had [withdrawn](#) before a binding construction contract was concluded. The Georgian government subsequently announced a state-led "landlord model." At the same time, the 2026 budget allocation for Anaklia was [cut](#) sharply, from GEL 150 million to GEL 50 million. Construction nevertheless began, including dredging and breakwater work.

This is why the evidence should not be simplified into "Georgia is not building Anaklia." It is building it. The more interesting question is whether the project will be built at the scale and under the governance model necessary to turn Georgia into a genuinely European-standard logistics gateway. That distinction is strategically significant. Washington and European commercial interests have

continued investing in Poti. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation [invested](#) in Poti's second berth, while APM Terminals [has continued](#) expanding its operations in Georgia.

The Western preference therefore appears increasingly concentrated around an existing commercial port rather than the politically complicated Anaklia project. That does not point to a Russian-controlled strategy, but it does create a vulnerability Russia can benefit from.

Russia's Georgian Levers

The most revealing Russian lever may actually be one that Russia has recently advertised as connectivity. For years, the railway through occupied Abkhazia has remained closed. The 2011 agreement associated with Russia's WTO accession [envisioned](#) monitored transit across Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, but those arrangements were never implemented.

In February 2026, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk publicly [raised](#) the possibility of restoring railway links through occupied Abkhazia. The stated Russian objective went beyond simple Georgian transit and envisaged connectivity to Türkiye and Iran, Mediterranean ports and the Persian Gulf.

That is precisely what makes the proposal strategically interesting. If ever restored, the Abkhaz railway would create a route that could reduce Russia's dependence on Georgian-controlled transit while simultaneously converting occupied territory into an alternative regional transport artery. The railway itself is currently in poor condition. Restoration would be expensive and take years. And the politics surrounding the transit through the occupied territory are extremely toxic and almost insurmountable.

But a road is another matter. The lesson is that Moscow does not necessarily need to restore an entire infrastructure network to obtain strategic leverage.

It can preserve the option of doing so. The same logic applies to Upper Lars. The Dariali crossing is the only functioning legal land crossing between Russia and Georgia and is also Armenia's principal overland connection to Russia. In September 2025, several thousand vehicles [accumulated](#) there even while the highways were open. This is a classic bottleneck: the infrastructure exists, but capacity is limited, and disruption can rapidly become politically consequential.

Energy provides an even more important example. Georgia is simultaneously one of the region's principal non-Russian energy transit countries and a country whose own dependence on Russia has increased. Russian gas deliveries to Georgia [rose](#) sharply in 2025. Russian crude also became a dominant component of Georgian crude imports. In electricity, Russian state-controlled Inter RAO retains controlling stakes in Georgia's capital-city electricity distribution system and related assets.

The strategic paradox is very interesting. Georgia can serve as a corridor through which Europe reduces dependence on Russia, while Georgia itself becomes more dependent on Russian-controlled energy assets.

The strategic paradox is very interesting. Georgia can serve as a corridor through which Europe reduces dependence on Russia, while Georgia itself becomes more dependent on Russian-controlled energy assets. This is precisely the kind of asymmetric interdependence from which bottleneck power emerges.

Georgia as a Gatekeeper

There is another dimension that cannot be attributed automatically to Moscow: Georgia can itself act as a gatekeeper.

The December 2025 dispute over Azerbaijani fuel shipments to Armenia provides a revealing example. When an Azerbaijani fuel shipment destined for Armenia transited Georgia, Georgian authorities initially [demanded](#) substantial transit fees. The dispute was resolved after Azerbaijan signaled that it could potentially develop alternative arrangements, including direct connectivity with Armenia. Georgia subsequently reconsidered the fee. This episode demonstrated that a state sitting astride a corridor can extract rents from its geographical position. It also demonstrated the power of bypass.

This is the essence of Frederick Cooper's "gatekeeper state": political authority can derive not from controlling the entire economy but from controlling the interface between the domestic economy and the outside world. A government does not have to be acting on behalf of Moscow to produce an outcome that benefits Moscow.

If a Georgian government prefers discretionary control over a corridor to an EU-regulated, highly transparent and competitive logistics system, the resulting infrastructure may remain more vulnerable to Russian influence—even without a Kremlin instruction.

This is perhaps the most important qualification to the Russian bottleneck thesis. Russian strategy and Georgian domestic incentives do not need to coordinate to become mutually reinforcing. If a Georgian government prefers discretionary control over a corridor to an EU-regulated, highly transparent and competitive logistics system, the resulting infrastructure may remain more vulnerable to Russian influence — even without a Kremlin instruction.

This is why the argument should not be framed as "Moscow controls Tbilisi." The stronger argument is that Moscow benefits from a system in which Georgia remains indispensable but insufficiently

diversified, strategically ambiguous, and vulnerable to external pressure.

Armenia: The Test Case

If Georgia is the principal chokepoint, Armenia is the test case for whether Russia can retain influence after losing political primacy. For decades, Armenia's connectivity was deeply embedded in Russian-controlled infrastructure.

The most important legacy is the railway. Russian Railways [operates](#) Armenia's railway network through South Caucasus Railway under a concession extending to 2038. This means that any major rail corridor crossing Armenia, including the rail component envisaged by the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), must eventually confront the question of Russian operational control. TRIPP represents a fundamental change in the regional connectivity model. The 2020 trilateral statement had placed control over the transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan in the hands of Russian FSB border guards. The TRIPP framework instead establishes a U.S.-Armenian development structure while explicitly retaining Armenian sovereignty over territory, customs, borders, security, and law enforcement.

Under the May 2026 framework, the proposed TRIPP Development Company would be [owned](#) 74% by a U.S.-controlled entity and 26% by Armenia, with a 49-year initial term and an option for a further 50 years under specified conditions.

Russia's original model placed a Russian security institution at the center of the corridor. The emerging model places an American-controlled development company inside Armenian territory while leaving formal sovereign authority with Armenia. That is why TRIPP represents such a profound challenge to the Russian bottleneck system.

The Railway Problem

Yet the Russian position has not disappeared. The Armenian railway concession remains. That creates an extraordinary institutional contradiction. A new Western-supported railway corridor may require infrastructure that sits within a network operated by a Russian company whose concession runs until 2038. This means TRIPP's success will depend not merely on diplomacy between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States, but also on resolving a legacy infrastructure relationship. This is exactly how residual-asset power works. Russia does not necessarily have to prevent Armenia from joining a new connectivity architecture. It can simply retain an existing piece of infrastructure that the new architecture needs.

Gas provides another example. Gazprom Armenia remains Russian-owned, and Armenia remains heavily dependent upon Russian gas. The gas reaches Armenia through the North Caucasus-Transcaucasia pipeline, which passes through Georgia. This arrangement shows that Russian leverage in the South Caucasus is not composed of isolated assets. It is a network of dependencies connecting Georgia and Armenia.

At the same time, Armenia has been reducing Russian control over border infrastructure. Russian border guards have progressively [withdrawn](#) from Armenian checkpoints, including Zvartnots airport and Armenia's border crossings. The result is a fascinating strategic race. Armenia is removing Russian control from the points where sovereignty is most visible while simultaneously confronting Russian control over infrastructure where sovereignty is less visible but economically essential.

Russia has also attempted to preserve influence through political and economic instruments. The events surrounding Samvel Karapetyan and opposition forces in 2025–26 demonstrate the potential importance of Russian-linked economic networks in Armenian politics.

Russian restrictions on Armenian agricultural and food products around the June 2026 election [demonstrated](#) that Moscow retains the capacity to impose economic costs. The same policy was attempted with Georgia almost two decades ago, when Russian authorities designated Georgian products as “unsafe for consumption.”

Russia does not always need to determine the outcome of Armenian politics to constrain the choices available to Armenian governments. That is another form of bottleneck power.

This is the important distinction between political influence and political control. Russia does not always need to determine the outcome of Armenian politics to constrain the choices available to Armenian governments. That is another form of bottleneck power.

Azerbaijan: The Missing Piece

Azerbaijan demonstrates the limits of the Russian bottleneck strategy. Moscow retains some influence in Azerbaijan, but Baku has progressively diversified its strategic and economic connections.

Azerbaijan has access to alternative routes through Iran, maintains the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and operates major energy connections westward through the TANAP and TAP. As a result, Russia has fewer direct opportunities to make Azerbaijan itself a transport hostage. The possibility of opening trade through Nakhchivan makes Baku’s hand even stronger.

The pressure therefore shifts toward the weaker links. Those links are primarily Georgia and Armenia, and this is strategically significant. Azerbaijan does not have to be captured if its corridors can be constrained elsewhere.

The Wider Patterns

Unfortunately, Georgia and Armenia are not isolated cases. In Moldova, the Cuciurgan power plant in Transnistria illustrates how a residual Russian-controlled energy asset can become a strategic dependency. The subsequent construction of the Vulcănești–Chișinău electricity line demonstrates the counterstrategy: build alternatives rather than negotiate indefinitely with the chokepoint.

Meanwhile, Belarus demonstrates the “client actor” model. Migration flows, border closures and airspace disruptions can generate significant effects at comparatively low cost. Yet the Belarus case also demonstrates a Western mistake: a chokepoint can sometimes be transferred rather than eliminated. When Lithuania cut Belarusian potash transit through Klaipėda, the trade did not disappear. Much of it [shifted](#) toward Russian ports. Moscow and Minsk would love to resume the trade through Klaipėda, however, and Lukashenka would gladly release another batch of political prisoners if Vilnius were to agree to resume transit.

Serbia offers another residual-asset example. Gazprom and Gazprom Neft’s ownership of Serbia’s NIS refinery created a situation in which sanctions against the Russian shareholders became a problem for Serbian fuel security. Russia did not have to physically shut the refinery. Ownership itself created the vulnerability.

Kazakhstan and the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) provide perhaps the clearest infrastructure case. CPC carries the overwhelming majority of Kazakhstan’s crude exports, while Russian actors possess significant ownership and board-level influence in the consortium. When Russian regulatory authorities [intervened](#) against CPC’s marine terminals in 2025, the pipeline itself did not have to be shut down. This is the essence of regulatory chokepoint power.

The Limits of the Strategy

Russia's bottleneck strategy is powerful, but it is not unlimited. The most important countermeasure is making it redundant. The Baltic states demonstrated this through their 2025 [synchronization](#) with continental Europe's electricity system. Years of investment transformed an inherited dependency into a diversified network. Moldova's new electricity interconnection [serves](#) a similar purpose.

TRIPP represents another possible example. The purpose of a new corridor is not just to move goods faster; it is to make an existing Russian-controlled network less indispensable. This is why infrastructure competition has become a form of geopolitical competition. The contest is no longer simply between Russia and the West over territory; it is between networks.

The Critical Role of Georgia

This brings the argument back to Georgia. Georgia is not merely another South Caucasus state caught between competing geopolitical forces; it is a piece of infrastructure in its own right. Its geography makes it a corridor, its ports make it a maritime gateway, its railways make it a bridge, its roads make it a land connection, and its energy infrastructure makes it a transit state. And its political choices determine whether these assets become integrated into a broader, rules-based network or remain dependent upon discretionary national and regional gatekeepers.

Georgia's relationship with the European Union cannot be viewed solely through the traditional vocabulary of democracy and political conditionality. There is also an infrastructure-security dimension.

This is why Georgia's relationship with the European Union cannot be viewed solely through the

traditional vocabulary of democracy and political conditionality. There is also an infrastructure-security dimension. A Western strategy that abandons Georgia without simultaneously creating alternative routes risks weakening the very connectivity architecture it seeks to protect. Conversely, a strategy that ignores governance because Georgia is geographically indispensable risks allowing a critical corridor to remain vulnerable to discretionary political control.

The challenge is to make the corridor more resilient than the politics of any single government. That means investing in ports, railways, digital infrastructure, energy interconnections and customs modernization. It means creating competing routes inside Georgia itself. It means connecting Georgia to European regulatory systems and ensuring that Western infrastructure financing is not merely announced but actually disbursed. Most importantly, it means reducing the strategic value of the chokepoint.

The best way to counter Russia's bottleneck strategy is to ensure that the party, or regime, that rules a bottleneck country is less dependent on Moscow. The Moldovan and Armenian examples show that, with pro-Russian forces defeated, Russia's leverage has weakened, even if the chokepoint infrastructure is still intact and Moscow-controlled.

From Chokepoints to Resilience

The ultimate lesson of Russia's strategy is therefore paradoxical. The objective should not be to prevent Russia from possessing influence; that is unrealistic. The objective should be to make Russian influence less consequential.

This can be done through two parallel tracks of resilience. First, build alternatives; second, weaken the regimes that serve Russia's interests and increase Russia's leverage over bottlenecks.

A resilient system is one in which the closure of one railway, the loss of one port, the interruption of one pipeline, or the withdrawal of one investor does not kill a strategic project. This requires alternatives. It also requires recognizing that infrastructure is no longer simply physical. Ports, pipelines and railways increasingly depend on digital systems, financial networks, satellite positioning, cloud services, fiber-optic cables and AI-driven logistics.

The chokepoint of tomorrow may therefore be an algorithm, a data center, a digital identity system or a software platform just as easily as a mountain pass.

The second component of resilience is the nature of the government that runs the place. In places like Georgia, where the government has deliberately chosen to serve Russia's interests, the priority should be to exert leverage so that authoritarian practices are weakened, and democratic pro-Western forces get a level playing field. In Moldova and Armenia, pro-Western parties in power, supported by Brussels, Washington and Western institutions, have undermined Russia's bottleneck instruments. In Georgia, the same support should be extended to those democratic forces that are countering Georgian Dream.

Russia's experience in the post-Soviet space offers a lesson that applies far beyond Russia. Power increasingly belongs not only to those who control territory, but also to those who control the points through which other people's systems must pass.

Russia's experience in the post-Soviet space offers a lesson that applies far beyond Russia. Power increasingly belongs not only to those who control territory, but also to those who control the points through which other people's systems must pass. The strategic response is therefore not to eliminate connectivity but to multiply and diversify it.

Russia's bottleneck strategy is ultimately a strategy of optionality. It needs influence over the government or institution that sits at the narrowest point. And it does not need to stop connectivity altogether. It only needs to ensure that the alternatives remain sufficiently expensive, uncertain, or politically vulnerable that the old system never truly disappears.

The outcome will help determine whether the South Caucasus remains a collection of strategically vulnerable corridors or becomes a genuinely redundant, interconnected region in which no single power can turn geography into a veto ■

When the Past Becomes Geopolitics: Putin's Dangerous History Lessons

When Georgian Dream (GD) Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [called](#) a special briefing in the sweltering August heat, many expected a major announcement about the country's future. Instead, he delivered a long, preachy lecture about a historical defense of the 1783 Georgievsk Treaty, under which the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti (Eastern Georgia) [placed](#) itself under Russian protection. In these particularly turbulent times, few political leaders would devote a lengthy press conference to an event that took place 243 years ago, say, James Cook's voyages or Marie-Antoinette's accession to the French throne. The choice of subject, however, was hardly accidental. For much of modern Georgian historiography, the Treaty of Georgievsk has stood as the beginning of the country's subordination to Russia: the Empire failed to honor its guarantees, did not protect Tbilisi from Persia's sack of 1795, and ultimately abolished the Georgian monarchy and annexed the kingdom in 1801.

Kobakhidze offered almost the opposite reading, [describing](#) King Erekle II's decision as not merely justified but the "only correct and unavoidable" choice available to Georgia, and arguing that it ultimately helped preserve Georgian statehood and the nation's Christian faith. The episode's significance lies less in the eighteenth-century dispute itself than in what its revival says about Georgia today. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Treaty of Georgievsk has generally been remembered as a cautionary tale about Russian protection turning into Russian domination and about Russia's predatory nature. Its rehabilitation by GD is part of a broader attempt to recast the country's past through a new paradigm: all Georgia's ills are blamed on the West ("Europe," "Liberalism," "Deep State"), and on its attempt to provoke conflict between two brotherly Orthodox nations. A parliamentary ad hoc commission has already [recast](#) the Rose Revolution and the 2008 war as episodes of Georgian provocation, under Saakashvili's government now branded as "foreign agents," and of Western manipulation.



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

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

РОДИНА-МАТЬ ЗОВЕТ!



Художник: И. ТОЛСТОЙ. Редактор: И. ФОНЧЕРНИКОВА.
— Москва и СПб. 400 л. Тираж: 100 000 экз. Цена: 30 руб.

Государственное издательство
ИСКУССТВО
Москва 1941 Ленинград

Описание: «В. Путин. Красный ортодокс», Игорь Толстой, 90, 400 руб. 30 экз.

Russia's responsibility, by contrast, has been systematically downplayed by GD, even in the April 1989 [massacre](#) of a peaceful pro-independence demonstration.

The Georgievsk episode reaches further back, however, suggesting that this is not merely a tactical reinterpretation of the recent past but an effort to alter the historical frame through which Georgians understand their relationship with Russia and the West. That helps explain why the briefing caused such alarm. At a moment when Georgia's European trajectory is being steadily [dismantled](#), invoking the last great treaty that preceded the country's incorporation into the Russian Empire inevitably invites speculation about whether Moscow might once again be offered the role of guarantor, or whether Georgia is being prepared, politically and psychologically, for a new settlement with Russia, a possible "Georgievsk 2.0" agreement with Moscow.

GD's deliberate reopening of these questions therefore represents more than a change of emphasis. It reverses the post-independence paradigm, and bears an unmistakable resemblance to the transformation of the politics of history in Vladimir Putin's Russia. While Ukraine has increasingly foregrounded the history of its national resistance to Russification, neighboring Armenia's government is trying to [decolonize](#) Armenian national consciousness and liberate it from Russia's little-brother complex. Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, has openly [referred](#) to the "Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan." Kazakh authorities have [erected](#) monuments to Kenesary Khan, the leader of the major uprising against Russian rule in the mid-19th century, and to the [Alash](#) movement. While history textbooks in Central Asia are being [revised](#) to replace the terms "voluntary accession" and "Soviet modernization" with "colonial incorporation and resistance," Georgia, by contrast, is moving against this broader post-Soviet current. Much as in its position on Russia's war against Ukraine, Tbilisi's growing alignment with Moscow is also increasingly visible in its approach to the country's own historical narrative.

Politics of History in Today's Russia

Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has turned history into an instrument of state power and foreign policy, using a carefully curated past to legitimize an increasingly authoritarian present and to contest the post-Cold War order. The glorification of the Soviet victory in the Second World War has provided the regime with its foundational patriotic myth; the rehabilitation of aspects of the imperial past has supplied a narrative of Russia as a historically great power whose territorial reach was unjustly curtailed; and the portrayal of the West as a force seeking to weaken, encircle or ultimately destroy Russia has provided the ideological bridge between historical grievance and contemporary geopolitics.

History is not merely propaganda for the current Russian regime; it is one of the regime's principal languages of political legitimacy.

History is not merely propaganda for the current Russian regime; it is one of the regime's principal languages of political legitimacy. This is especially true of imperial history because it lets the Kremlin present contemporary power relations as the restoration of something supposedly natural, continuous, and historically legitimate. There are several interconnected reasons.

First, *history compensates for a weak ideological foundation*, as Putin's Russia lacks a coherent ideology comparable to Soviet communism. It is neither conventionally conservative nor simply nationalist. It combines authoritarianism, Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, Soviet nostalgia, imperial symbolism, and great-power aspirations. It's a big mishmash. History, or rather, its Kremlin version, provides the regime with the "ideological glue" that these elements otherwise lack. This transforms an essentially contemporary political project into something presented as historical continuity. Academic research

on Russian memory politics explicitly identifies this function: the official historical narrative is used to legitimize authoritarian government and contemporary foreign-policy ambitions.

Second, *imperial history solves the problem of the post-1991 territorial rupture*. This is particularly important, as the fundamental historical trauma of Putinism is not the collapse of communism. It is “the loss of empire.” The Soviet Union disappeared in 1991, but the Russian state inherited a population and political elite whose conception of Russia had been built around a much larger geopolitical space. The resulting contradiction is that Russia is legally a federal republic, but much of the regime’s historical imagination remains imperial. Imperial history helps reconcile the two. The Russian Empire and the USSR can be presented not as successive multinational empires that incorporated other peoples, but as successive manifestations of a single Russian historical state.

Third, *imperial history converts imperial domination into fraternity*. Imperialism rarely presents itself as imperialism; the narrative instead insists on “common history” or “common civilization.” Whenever citizens of Russia’s neighboring countries hear Russian officials invoke notions such as “brotherly people,” “a shared faith,” or “our common victory over Nazism,” they should recognize the language for what it often conceals: a justification for domination and, ultimately, for the right to dictate, subjugate, and demand obedience. That is why the imperial history matters so much: it naturalizes asymmetry.

Fourth, *the imperial history delegitimizes the sovereignty of neighboring states*. It does not merely legitimize Russia. It can simultaneously undermine the legitimacy of others. If Ukraine and Belarus are described as historically Russian, and Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia as situated within a centuries-old Russian sphere, then the sovereignty of these countries can be rhetorically downgraded from an unquestionable principle to a relatively recent political development. This makes the independence

of these states appear less like an irreversible historical fact and more like an aberration produced by the collapse of the Russian/Soviet state.

Fifth, *history gives the regime a usable genealogy*, and the Kremlin can simultaneously appropriate very different historical periods: Kyivan Rus’, Tsarist Russia, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia. These regimes were obviously radically different. Yet the Kremlin increasingly constructs a selective genealogy in which they become successive chapters of one Russian statehood. This is why Putin can simultaneously invoke Peter the Great, Catherine II, the Russian Orthodox Church, Stalin, the Red Army, the Second World War, Soviet achievements such as the first man in space, etc. Historically, these references are contradictory. Politically, however, they can all serve the same proposition: Russia’s greatness. The regime therefore does not need to choose between imperial nostalgia and Soviet nostalgia. It can appropriate both.

Sixth, *the Second World War provides the emotional core*. Imperial history is important, but 1945 is probably the emotional center of the contemporary Russian historical myth. Of course, nobody is supposed to remember that during the first two years of WW2, the USSR and Hitler were allies and divided Poland and the Baltic States between them. On the other hand, the victory over Nazi Germany gives the regime an almost incomparable reservoir of legitimacy because it combines sacrifice, heroism, victimhood, and victory. The Kremlin has therefore constructed a powerful temporal bridge between 1941–45 and 2014–present. This is why “denazification” became one of the declared objectives of the 2022 invasion, creating a sense of historical repetition and continuity.

Seventh, *history creates a permanent state of mobilization and thus justifies authoritarian rule and repression domestically*. If Russia is permanently surrounded by enemies, and if those enemies are understood through historical analogies, then extraordinary political measures become easier

to defend. A historical threat becomes an existential threat, which should create national unity and require strong authoritarian leadership. Suppression of dissent and social unity around the regime become necessary, and criticism of the state becomes easier to portray as disloyalty to the historical nation. This is why memory politics and authoritarian politics reinforce each other.

History reviewed by the Kremlin therefore magnifies contemporary power, and the past becomes a form of “strategic capital.” This historical politics is not simply about “remembering the past”. It is about controlling the meaning of the past. This distinction is crucial, as the state tries to establish a “canonical history;” certain interpretations become patriotic, and others become suspect or even punishable. The result is what one could call “historical sovereignty,” the idea that the Russian state should possess authority not only over its territory and political institutions, but also over the legitimate interpretation of its past.

The Kremlin instrumentalizes imperial history because it lets it turn political choices into historical necessities.

A territorial ambition becomes “historical justice,” a sphere of influence becomes the “natural geopolitical space,” military intervention – “protection,” authoritarianism – “political stability,” and resistance by neighboring nations becomes “western plot” or “fascism.”

The Kremlin instrumentalizes imperial history because it lets it turn political choices into historical necessities. A territorial ambition becomes “historical justice,” a sphere of influence becomes the “natural geopolitical space,” military intervention – “protection,” authoritarianism – “political stability,” and resistance by neighboring nations becomes “western plot” or “fascism.”

The Historian in the Kremlin: How Putin Turned History into Power

Putin, besides being a great friend of Siberian tigers, wild geese and assorted other wildlife, is also a self-appointed authority on history. Over the years, the Russian president has often displayed his “deep historical knowledge” before cameras. On one occasion, he [appeared](#) among newly unearthed relics of the fourteenth-century prince Dmitry Donskoy, candle in hand, [ordering](#) that the relics be taken on a tour in the war zone to “give courage” to the soldiers fighting Ukrainians and other “evil forces”; on the other, when commenting about COVID or wildfires, he [expounds](#) on the history of steppe nomads such as the Pechenegs and Polovtsy.

For Putin, history is not merely something to be studied; it is something to be lectured about. He has [lectured](#) the 44th President of the U.S., Barack Obama, the president of a “country without history,” over a traditional samovar and a Russian boot; Tucker Carlson; and anyone else fortunate enough to receive a geopolitical seminar from the Kremlin’s resident time traveler.

But Vladimir Putin did not begin his career as a historian-president. In the early years of his rule, history served a more conventional purpose: to restore a sense of continuity and pride to a country traumatized by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The central reference was what Russians call the Great Patriotic War: a comfortable source of national pride, while the Soviet past could be selectively rehabilitated without requiring a full defense of communism.

The shift began in the mid-2000s. In his 2005 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin famously [described](#) the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.” The phrase was revealing not because it expressed a desire to restore the USSR: Putin was never simply a Soviet restorationist, but because it framed the post-Soviet settlement as a historical rupture and

a geopolitical loss. In Putin's emerging worldview, the disappearance of Soviet power deprived Russia of a sphere of influence to which its history entitled it.

From this point on, Putin increasingly fused several historical traditions: Orthodox and imperial Russia, the Soviet Union's military power, and the territorial reach of the former USSR. The result was not a coherent ideology, as the empire and the Soviet Union could be invoked selectively, because both represented something Putin considered essential: a powerful Russian state commanding a large geopolitical space.

The 2008 war with Georgia marked another step in this evolution. Historical arguments were increasingly applied not merely to define Russia's identity but to challenge the political legitimacy of its neighbors. Quickly, Ukraine became the most consequential case. Putin repeatedly questioned the historical distinctiveness of Ukrainians and Russians, portraying their separation as an artificial consequence of foreign intervention and Soviet administrative decisions. The underlying implication was profound: if Russian and Ukrainian statehood were historically unnatural divisions of a single people, then Ukrainian sovereignty could be treated as something reversible.

History was no longer used simply to explain what Russia was. It was being used to explain where Russia had a legitimate right to be.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 transformed this historical language into an instrument of territorial politics. In the speech announcing the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, Putin [invoked](#) Kyivan Rus', Orthodox Christianity, the Russian Empire, Sevastopol, and the Soviet experience of war. History was no longer used simply to explain what Russia was. It was being used to explain where Russia had a legitimate right to be. The past became a source of territorial entitlement.

After 2014, this logic became increasingly explicit. The Kremlin's historical narrative presented Russia not as one nation-state among others, but as the political center of a wider historical civilization whose borders wars, revolutions, and foreign interference had repeatedly distorted. The distinction between historical memory and political doctrine consequently became increasingly blurred.

Putin's July 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," [represented](#) the culmination of this process. Its central argument was that Russians and Ukrainians constituted essentially one historical people whose separation was largely the product of political manipulation. The essay was not simply an interpretation of the past. It was an argument about the present: if Ukrainians and Russians belonged to a single historical nation, Ukraine's full sovereignty and independent geopolitical choices could be portrayed as historically anomalous.

By February 2022, this historical worldview had become integral to justifying war. Putin's address [preceding](#) the full-scale invasion was an extraordinary exercise in retrospective state-building: Lenin, the Bolsheviks, the creation of Soviet republics, Crimea and Donbas were assembled into a narrative in which contemporary Ukraine appeared less as an established sovereign state than as an historical error.

The evolution is therefore important. Over two decades, history moved from national memory to geopolitical argument: from celebrating Russia's past, to mourning its territorial disintegration, to defining a privileged Russian sphere of influence, and finally to questioning the sovereignty of neighboring states. The transformation was gradual, but its political consequence was radical. Once history becomes a source of contemporary territorial legitimacy, challenging the Kremlin's historical narrative is no longer merely an academic dispute. It becomes a challenge to the political map that the Kremlin believes history entitles it to redraw.

When History Whispers to Putin What He Wants to Hear

As time passes and Putin's power becomes increasingly personal and unchecked, the Russian president presents himself as an arbiter of historical truth, and sometimes as someone entitled to settle historical disputes himself. This is reminiscent of Joseph Stalin, although the institutional context and the nature of the two regimes differ.

In June 1950 Stalin [intervened](#) personally in a highly specialized academic controversy over Nikolai Marr's linguistic theory. His *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, [published](#) in *Pravda*, addressed questions about the structure and development of language, grammar, dialects, language families, and the relationship between language and social structure. Stalin then adjudicated fundamental questions of linguistics and declared Marr's theory erroneous. His intervention effectively ended Marr's dominance in Soviet linguistics. And this wasn't merely a private intellectual intervention. Once Stalin had spoken, the academic debate was essentially over. The subsequent Academy of Sciences session treated his intervention as authoritative and "genius."

The dictator did not necessarily possess specialist knowledge, but his political authority transformed his opinion into specialist knowledge. That is also potentially relevant to Putin.

The dictator did not necessarily possess specialist knowledge, but his political authority transformed his opinion into specialist knowledge. That is also potentially relevant to Putin. An interesting scholarly article in *Contemporary European History* (Sergey Radchenko "Putin's Histories," January 2023) [describes](#) Putin's increasing personal involvement with historical questions and argues that what distinguishes him is not simply that he uses history politically, but that he intervenes in historical debates as though he possesses the authority

to settle them. The author observes that Putin's piles of archival documents function performatively: they demonstrate his supposed command of "History" rather than constitute a normal historiographical argument. Putin isn't merely offering his interpretations of history; increasingly, he says: "This is what actually happened, and therefore this is what Russia is." This formulation is indeed much closer to the Stalinist mode of authority.

The 2024 Tucker Carlson interview was an extraordinary example of this: when Carlson [asked](#) Putin why Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin spent more than 20 minutes giving him a historical lecture beginning in the ninth century (again mentioning his beloved Pecheneg tribes!). He brought out documents and constructed an argument running from Kyivan Rus' through the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union to contemporary Ukraine.

Across the interview, as well as in Putin's other "public lectures" on history, an evident and probably intentional analogy with Stalin is displayed: political authority and historical authority are increasingly fused in Putin's persona. As with Stalin after WW2, Putin, the supreme political authority, becomes the ultimate arbiter of a specialized intellectual field again.

Another interesting moment worth remembering occurred in 2022, at a meeting with historians and religious figures, Putin [invoked](#) Karamzin's metaphor that rulers should look at history as navigators look at nautical charts. He said that leaders who display ignorance of history and deny "historical logic" consequently sail in the wrong direction. Here Putin assumes that he is the one who understands the historical logic, the "laws of history," and thus is able to adopt the only correct political action. Putin appears as someone to whom the laws of history have been revealed by some superior force, as truth is revealed to the chosen ones in the narratives of Abrahamic religions.

If you believe that you can identify the laws of historical development, then contemporary politics becomes partly a matter of correctly understanding those laws. And that gives the political leader who claims to understand history a powerful epistemic position: “I know what history teaches; therefore I know what Russia must do.”

By incredible luck, the revealed person is also the head of the Russian state and has total control of the state apparatus. Thus, Putin claims that as there is an objective “truth” in history and he knows that truth, the state can establish or even enforce the right version of history. In his 2025 meeting with history textbook editors, Putin [complained](#) that the 1990s had disrupted the “continuity of history” and produced textbooks with contradictory interpretations. He said debate was acceptable, but it had to stay within a state-defined factual framework, quoting and criticizing several history textbook chapters on WW2. In 2020, a constitutional amendment established “historical truth” as a state value, and that same year Putin [published](#) a major WW2 historical essay (“The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”).

What we see is a purely authoritarian conception of historical knowledge. Putin thus got directly involved in the production of history textbooks and discussed with the editors, the education minister, and the Kremlin’s chief historian [Vladimir Medinsky](#) (who, by no accident, is at the same time the chief peace negotiator with Ukraine) the structure of the Russian historical narrative, the Great Patriotic War, the 1990s, the Soviet nationalities policy, the creation of Soviet republics, Russia’s historical continuity, and everything that Russian schoolchildren should be taught.

To sum up the current stage of Putin’s relationship with history as a discipline, one conclusion stands out: he increasingly presents himself, or seeks to persuade others, as governing through history. Historical interpretation is no longer merely a tool for legitimizing political choices; it is becoming

a mechanism through which questions of political authority are decided: who belongs to the Russian nation, what constitutes legitimate Russian territory, which borders can be regarded as historically valid, and which neighboring peoples have a legitimate right to sovereign statehood, etc.

Consequently, according to the “laws of history” and “historical truth,” Putin can see what policy is therefore required. Moreover, Putin aligns with post-WW2 Stalin and presents himself as the political leader who rescues science from bad specialists: falsifiers, Western interpretations, liberal historians, and the chaotic historiography of the 1990s. That is very close to a supreme political authority acting as a guardian of historical truth. It may represent the emergence of a form of personal epistemic authority in which the ruler increasingly claims the capacity to adjudicate the truth of the nation’s past, and thereby the legitimacy of its present and future.

When Imperial Order Denies Sovereignty

The Kremlin’s imperial historical narrative has an especially important consequence for the post-Soviet space: it is fundamentally incompatible with the idea that the former Soviet republics possess independent historical trajectories of their own. Ukraine is the most consequential case, but the logic extends much further: to Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Belarus, the Baltic states, and Central Asia.

This is also why the Russian regime’s historical politics has become increasingly imperial rather than merely Soviet. The Soviet past remains indispensable, above all the 1945 victory, but the deeper framework is increasingly one of Russian state continuity across 1917 and 1991, in which the Empire and USSR are selectively reassembled as stages of a single great-power history. That is arguably one of the most important ideological transformations of Putinism.

The July 2021 Essay on Ukraine: Historical Revisionism as a Political Program

Putin's "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," [published](#) on 12 July 2021, is one of the most consequential texts of his presidency. Its significance lies less in any individual historical claim than in the political conclusions that Putin draws from his interpretation of the past. The essay presents Ukrainians and Russians as parts of a single historical community and portrays the emergence of an independent Ukrainian nation and state as largely the product of external manipulation, foreign intervention and Bolshevik mistakes. In this account, Ukraine is not simply a neighboring country with which Russia shares a complicated history. Its very political separation from Russia is cast as historically questionable: if Russians and Ukrainians constitute one historical people, then the existence of a fully sovereign Ukrainian state, free to choose its alliances and geopolitical orientation, can be presented as an abnormality.

The essay's treatment of borders is particularly revealing. Putin argues that the territorial configuration of contemporary Ukraine largely reflects Soviet decisions. He portrays the Bolsheviks as having transferred territories belonging to "historical Russia" to the Ukrainian republic. The implication is extraordinary: the borders inherited in 1991 are no longer treated as an unquestionable historical or political settlement. The argument effectively calls into question the validity of the post-Soviet territorial settlement, including the principle embodied in the 1991 [Belovezha agreements](#) that the former Soviet republics recognized each other's territorial integrity.

This is where historical revisionism becomes geopolitical revisionism. Putin is not merely revising the past's interpretation. He is creating a narrative through which the present international order can itself be revised. The distinction matters. A state may

have a nostalgic or selective interpretation of history without seeking to alter its borders; Viktor Orbán's Hungary is an example. Putin's essay establishes a conceptual bridge between the two: if today's borders are historically illegitimate, then challenging them can be framed not as aggression but as correcting a historical injustice.

Putin's essay establishes a conceptual bridge between the two: if today's borders are historically illegitimate, then challenging them can be framed not as aggression but as correcting a historical injustice.

The concept of "historical Russian lands" is therefore central. Putin does not define Russia exclusively through the internationally recognized borders of the Russian Federation. He defines it through a much larger historical space, extending across territories that were once incorporated into the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Consequently, the political subject called "Russia" becomes larger than the state recognized by international law.

The essay also introduces another crucial concept: "anti-Russia." Ukraine's rapprochement with the European Union, NATO and the United States is not presented as the sovereign choice of an independent state. Instead, Putin describes Ukraine as being transformed by the West into an "anti-Russia," a geopolitical platform directed against Russia. In this logic, Ukrainian Westernization is not merely a foreign-policy disagreement. It becomes evidence that Ukraine has been captured by external forces and is therefore ceasing to be genuinely sovereign.

The July essay therefore marks a crucial transition in Putin's intellectual trajectory. History ceases to be merely instrumentalized in support of policy; policy itself becomes the implementation of a historical narrative. The past is used to establish which peoples are genuinely nations, which territories are genuinely theirs, which borders are legitimate and

which political choices are considered historically permissible. The crucial shift of 2021 is that Russian revisionism is no longer simply about recovering influence lost after 1991. The question is no longer merely whether Ukraine would remain in Russia's sphere of influence. It is whether Moscow accepted Ukraine's sovereignty in the first place.

From Moldova to Central Asia: Using History for Imperial Dependency

Although the other post-Soviet states should not be treated as exact analogies of Ukraine, the underlying geopolitical objective appears to be broadly consistent: Russia should not have fully independent states on its borders that are free to choose their own geopolitical orientation. Yet the historical narratives deployed to justify Russian dominance vary considerably. Unlike Ukrainians and Belarusians, Moldovans, Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Uzbeks are not portrayed as constitutive parts of the Russian people. But neither are the Chechens, Tatars or Buryats. The implicit principle is therefore less one of outright incorporation than of hierarchy: ideally, the degree of political autonomy enjoyed by Russia's neighbors should not differ substantially from that tolerated for peoples within the Russian Federation itself; more realistically, limited sovereignty and geopolitical deference could be a good start.

The Kremlin reaches into different layers of imperial, Soviet, Orthodox, and Second World War history depending on the country.

For the Moldovans, obviously not easily incorporable into the Russian ethnos, the Kremlin's historical repertoire combines Bessarabia's incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1812, the Soviet Moldavian Republic, the Romanian–Moldovan relationship, and the memory of WW2. Russian narratives have often portrayed Moldova's history through the prism of its belonging to a larger Russian/Soviet space (between

1812–1917 and 1940–1991) and have treated the distinction between Moldovan and Romanian identities as politically useful.

Georgia is particularly revealing because, beyond the explicitly negative territorial narrative, which asserts that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia are not historically Georgian, Moscow deploys a series of narratives ostensibly framed in terms of “love” and “care.” These include the notion of “fraternal peoples,” invoking centuries of supposedly harmonious coexistence, a shared Orthodox faith and a common Soviet experience, as well as the “protection” narrative: the claim that the Russian Empire saved Georgia from annihilation at the hands of the Ottomans and Persians. This is well [summarized](#) in Lermontov's poem “Mtsyri,” whose famous opening lines describe Russian military presence as “divine grace” that makes Georgia bloom in peace: “And God's own grace came down to bless the Georgian land!/ In peacefulness she bloomed, in the shade of her own gardens,/ Unafraid behind the hedge that friendly bayonets made.” This pattern allows Moscow to turn its rule from a history of domination and repression of Georgia's national aspirations and culture into one of great achievement in the interest of the Georgian people.

The Orthodox faith is not merely a shared religious tradition: it becomes a political marker separating a supposedly authentic Christian civilization from a secular, liberal, and increasingly “anti-Christian” West and, by implication, a powerful argument against Georgia's Europeanization.

The “shared Orthodox faith” narrative, as opposed to both Islam and Western Christianity and, by extension, Western liberalism, is equally important. The abolition of the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church under the Tsars and the destruction of churches and repression of thousands of Georgian

clergymen under the Soviets are now largely erased from the Kremlin's narrative. Instead, Orthodoxy is presented as an ancient and supposedly uninterrupted bond between the two peoples, a civilizational affinity that places Georgia within Russia's natural sphere of influence. The Orthodox faith is not merely a shared religious tradition: it becomes a political marker separating a supposedly authentic Christian civilization from a secular, liberal, and increasingly "anti-Christian" West and, by implication, a powerful argument against Georgia's Europeanization.

The implication of all these "friendly" narratives is that Georgia's post-1991 attempt to define itself as an independent European state represents a departure from an allegedly natural historical relationship.

The Debt Armenia (Allegedly) Owes

In Armenia, Moscow has traditionally drawn on the memory of the Russian-Persian and Russian-Ottoman wars of the nineteenth century, portraying Russia as the power that liberated and protected Christian Armenians. This creates a historical narrative that links Armenian security to Russian power. The same patterns as "brotherly people," "Russia as savior and protector" mentioned with regard to Georgia also apply to Armenia, but maybe with even more acuity.

According to Russia's preferred story about Armenia, Armenian statehood is less a historical achievement than a Russian restoration project. After centuries in which Armenian political sovereignty had disappeared, the Russian Empire's conquest of the South Caucasus created the territorial and political conditions for an Armenian national home, foyer national, in the language of nineteenth-century European diplomacy, to re-emerge. The Treaty of Turkmenchay of 1828 transferred the khanates of Erivan and Nakhchivan from Persia to Russia and established the Arax as the imperial frontier. It also facilitated the movement of Armenians from Persia and the

Ottoman Middle East into the newly acquired Russian territories.

In Moscow's imperial and, later, Soviet-inflected interpretation, Armenia's survival becomes a debt: Russia is cast as the power that made modern Armenia possible. The implication is that gratitude should outlive empire. Sovereignty, in this formulation, does not quite erase the obligation incurred under Russian protection.

The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war and the 2023 Armenian [exodus](#) from Karabakh create an awkward gap in the Russian narrative. But the Russian narrative is no stranger to contradictions: Russia "loves" Georgia, while waging war on it in 2008 and [expelling](#) hundreds of thousands of Georgians from their homes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the Chechens are proud children of the empire, even if they sometimes have to be massacred en masse or [deported](#) wholesale to the steppes of Central Asia. After all, truth matters little; what matters is a powerful narrative, instilled through modern means of communication. But in Armenia's case, the task is harder because, instead of a colonial proxy such as Kadyrov or a Georgian government open to collaboration, the current Armenian leadership is an obstacle.

That is where history becomes an instrument of contemporary pressure. In April 2026, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk [argued](#) that [implementing](#) the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) had disrupted a regional balance that, in his words, had existed since the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. He specifically recalled that the treaty had transferred the Erivan and Nakhchivan khanates to the Russian Empire and placed the frontier under Russian and Iranian supervision. The choice of historical reference was revealing, very much Putin-style.

Putin and Russian elites claim that Armenia may be independent in law, but it cannot quite be independent in historical memory. And that is precisely what the current Armenian transformation is beginning to

challenge. The question is no longer whether Russia played an enormous role in shaping modern Armenia. It plainly did. The question is whether that role gives Russia a permanent veto over Armenia's future. The Kremlin's answer appears to be yes, or, at least, that Russia should retain a privileged position from which to contest any Armenian departure. Armenia's emerging answer is different: history may explain why the country exists, but it does not determine whom the country must belong to.

Putin and Russian elites claim that Armenia may be independent in law, but it cannot quite be independent in historical memory.

Central Asia: Imperial Nostalgia and Paternalism

The key narrative in Central Asia is the shared Soviet past. Russia presents the USSR as a common civilization that created modern institutions, infrastructure, education, industrialization, and inter-republican economic networks. Soviet nostalgia therefore becomes a form of soft geopolitical capital.

In 2014 Putin [said](#) of Kazakhstan that President Nazarbayev had created a state “on a territory where no state had ever existed.” He also referred to Kazakhstan's participation in the “Russian world,” alluding to the fact that a large part of its population remains [Russophone](#). The statement provoked significant concern in Kazakhstan because of its implications for the historical legitimacy of Kazakh statehood. Putin did not use the Ukrainian “one people” argument here. Instead, he said that

Kazakhstan had a state today, but its statehood was historically recent and substantially connected to the Russian/Soviet state-building process.

This argument has since become even more explicit. In a June 2025 meeting with history textbook editors, Putin [discussed](#) Bolshevik *korenizatsiya* and said that Lenin's approach involved creating “independent states, entities that had never existed before.” He was speaking specifically in the context of the Soviet nationalities policy and the creation of republics.

As we have seen, his historical digressions are no longer simply exercises in interpreting the past; they increasingly serve as political programs that the Russian state is prepared to pursue with its army and weapons.

These claims are particularly sensitive in the context of the Central Asian states. Putin's statement that Soviet national republics were political constructions rather than straightforward expressions of pre-existing sovereign nations is historically correct. The problem, however, is that Putin is not merely a historian, and he did not deliver his remarks to an audience of fellow scholars at an academic conference. As we have seen, his historical digressions are no longer simply exercises in interpreting the past; they increasingly serve as political programs that the Russian state is prepared to pursue with its army and weapons. For Central Asians, and particularly for Kazakhs, such statements are therefore more than historical reflections. They are a reason for concern ■

Pool of Our Experts



Olena Halushka

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



Zaur Shiryev

Zaur Shiryev is an independent scholar with fifteen years of expertise in South Caucasus security and conflict resolution. He previously worked as an analyst at the International Crisis Group and Academy Associate at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme.



Mitat Çelikpala

Dr. Mitat Çelikpala is Professor of International Relations and Vice-Rector at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. He specializes in Eurasian security, energy policy, and Turkish foreign relations, serving as academic advisor to NATO's Center of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism.



Richard Giragosian

Richard Giragosian is Founding Director of the Regional Studies Center in Armenia and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe. He serves as consultant for international organizations including the Asian Development Bank, EU, OSCE, and U.S. Departments of Defense and State.



Mustafa Aydın

Mustafa Aydın is Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University and President of the International Relations Council of Türkiye. Former university rector, he has held research positions at Harvard, Michigan, and the EU Institute for Security Studies.



Gabrielius Landsbergis

Gabrielius Landsbergis is the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania (2020–2024) and a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University. He previously chaired the Homeland Union party and served in the Lithuanian and European Parliaments. He holds an MA in International Relations from Vilnius University.



Khatia Kikalishvili

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



Denis Cenusa

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



Volodymyr Yermolenko

Dr. Volodymyr Yermolenko is President of PEN Ukraine and Analytics Director at Internews Ukraine. A philosopher, journalist, and writer, he is Chief Editor of UkraineWorld.org and associate professor at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, with publications in major international media outlets.



Natalie Sabanadze

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



Ghia Nodia

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



Hugues Mingarelli

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



Tefta Kelmendi

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



Tamara Kovziridze

Tamara Kovziridze held senior positions in the Government of Georgia (2004–2012), including Deputy Minister of Economy. As a partner at Reformatics consulting firm, she has advised governments across Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on regulatory reforms.



Grigol Mgaloblishvili

Ambassador Grigol Mgaloblishvili is a career diplomat with twenty years in Georgian Foreign Service. He has served as Prime Minister of Georgia, Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador to Türkiye, and faculty member at the U.S. National Defence University.



Eka Tkeshelashvili

Eka Tkeshelashvili is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. Former Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Georgia, she led key Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reform initiatives.



Tornike Zurabashvili

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher focusing on political and security affairs in Georgia and the Black Sea region. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University and extensive experience in development program management across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.



Miro Popkhadze

Miro Popkhadze is a Senior Fellow at the Delphi Global Research Center and a Non-Resident Fellow at FPRI. A former Representative of the Georgian Ministry of Defense to the UN, his work focuses on Russian foreign policy and Eurasian security. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech.



Galip Dalay

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



Adina Revol

Adina Revol, PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris, is a former spokesperson of the European Commission in France and author of *Breaking with Russia – Europe's Energy Awakening* (Odile Jacob, 2024). An expert on EU affairs, energy geopolitics, and Russia's hybrid warfare, she teaches at Sciences Po and ESCP Europe and frequently appears in French media.



Hans Gutbrod

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



Arsen Kharatyan

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



Teona Giuashvili

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



Lesia Bidochko

Lesia Bidochko is a Policy Fellow at the European Policy Institute in Kyiv (EPIK) and an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Her research focuses on Ukraine's defense innovation and the political economy of drone production.

Credits

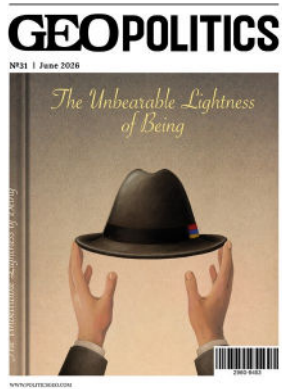
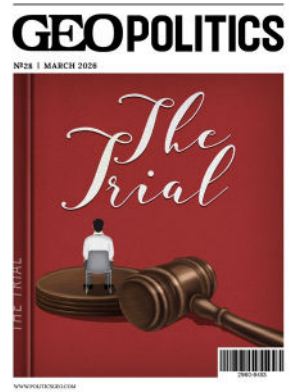
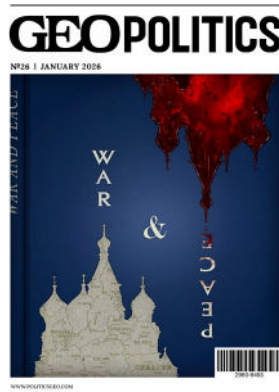
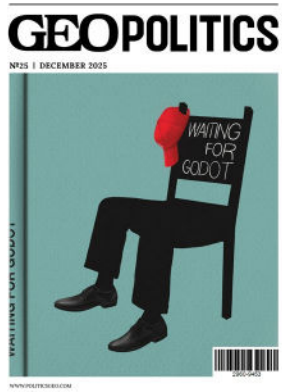
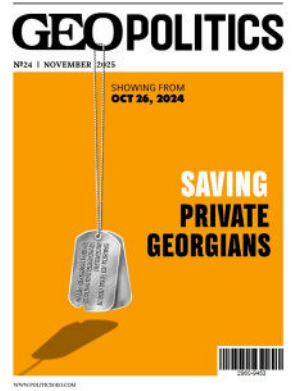
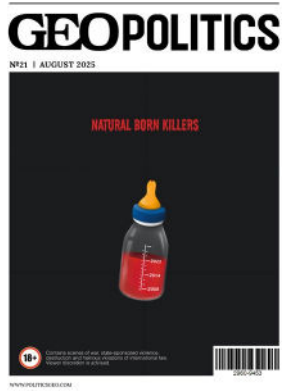
Illustrators

Valeriia Pakharenko
Oleksandra Samkova
Dmytro Dziuba

Editorial Designer

Anna Mirvoda

DIGITAL ARCHIVE



GEO POLITICS

Issue №34
September, 2026