

Bringing Georgia's Democracy Out of an Autoimmune Tailspin

“Our society has managed to critically analyze the ongoing international developments, maintain an objective view of reality, and protect national interests. Thanks to the alertness and support of the Georgian people, we managed to start the movement towards true sovereignty,” thus [spoke](#) Mikheil Kavelashvili, Georgia's president appointed by a single ruling party, the Georgian Dream. Mr. Kavelashvili is not known for rhetorical flourish, and his speech at an official event follows the party's long-held official line.

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Political regimes, especially less-than-democratic ones, often put forward as slogans the values they routinely undermine. The Stalinist constitution exalted human rights; the Warsaw Pact pro-USSR

regimes were known as “peoples’ democracies;” the list goes on. And in effect, while lately, and rightly, much of the national and international discourse focuses on the damage done to Georgia's democracy, Georgian Dream has done a grave damage to Georgia's sovereignty as well—to the point that it is barely palpable. Yet, as Jacques Derrida [argued](#) in *Rogues*, the relationship between democracy and sovereignty is far from straightforward. The concepts and instruments Derrida proposed could help not only analyze what is happening now but also understand how the question of sovereignty relates to an (eventual and hopeful, but by no means guaranteed) restoration of Georgian democracy.

Sovereign Depletion

There are two ways of looking at sovereignty. One is to say “we know sovereignty when we see it being exercised,” and to look at the outward signs of sovereign control. Where does Georgia stand on this count?



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From the get-go, we see that sovereign control over the country's international borders is problematic; portions of the northern and northwestern border with Russia are not controlled by Georgia's authorities because Russia continues to occupy Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. In all fairness, this is not the fault of the Georgian Dream government, even though it routinely shifts blame from the aggressor to the previous Georgian leadership.

On the other hand, and this is happening on Georgian Dream's watch, Tbilisi refuses to allocate funds to defend whatever remains of its capacity to exercise its sovereign right to protect itself with hard power. As the former head of the Ministry of Defense's policy and planning department has convincingly [argued](#), defense spending as a share of GDP has been falling. It stands at 1.66 percent in 2026 and is projected to fall to 1.55 percent in 2027. In monetary terms, the defense budget has grown slowly (from a low base compared to immediate neighbors), but most of it (51 percent projected for 2027) will go to salaries, while funding for training and equipment stagnates at a very low level. The two most recent Defense Ministers, Juansher Burchuladze and Irakli Garibashvili, are currently in [jail](#) on corruption [charges](#). The National Security Council was abolished in 2025; the last national security concept was adopted in 2011; the strategic defense review document was last adopted in 2017 and expired in 2020. Scores of civilian staff who signed a petition supporting the European course [were purged](#) in 2025.

Things are barely better in the national security establishment. Not only has it been [used](#) extensively to track and harass political protests, but its management has also been highly volatile. Georgia's State Security Service has had four chiefs since April 2025. The longest-serving security chief in the Georgian Dream administration, Grigol Liluashvili, is serving a 13-year [sentence](#) for several bribery charges. The police brutality during the 2024–2025 protests has

been widely [documented](#) and [condemned](#) by rights groups and the [Council of Europe](#).

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In other words, when it comes to the indivisibility of external sovereignty, as well as the popular legitimacy of exercising the monopoly on the use of force, Georgia's sovereignty seems weakened: both the legitimacy and capacity of relevant policies and services have been undermined, as Shota Gvineria demonstrated in this journal [before](#).

Otherwise, the state retains internal sovereign legal authority. The majority of citizens and political leaders seem to recognize – even under duress, with reservations and at times under protest – the ability of the state to legislate and carry out judicial functions. Several political leaders were [sentenced](#) to jail terms on flimsy charges and served their time. While perhaps not in full conformity with the rule of law and due process, the state exercises a monopoly on the use of force. Sovereign citizens still voluntarily pay taxes, and many of them, while unjustly subjected to draconian laws limiting their freedom of expression and assembly, even pay unduly imposed high fines. The state continues to effectively exercise monetary and fiscal policy. It also acts in the foreign policy arena (even though contact with European governments and actors has been reduced to a minimum) and enters into international [agreements](#), while routinely holding high-level meetings with the leaders of international organizations and neighboring states.

Where Did the Sovereignty Go?

Yet another question remains: who has sovereignty? Carl Schmitt's [dictum](#) from *Political Theology*, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” could be particularly useful here, especially since Schmitt rejected liberal democracy's concept of popular sovereignty and argued for an embodied bearer of sovereign authority. Derrida rephrases that concept slightly in *Rogues*: the sovereign is he “who has the right to suspend law.”

While it has long been argued, including on [these pages](#), that the legislative system as a whole has been reshaped to serve individual and party interests, we have seen a couple of overt cases of “suspending the law” in Georgia. In September 2023, the legislation was blatantly changed to [shield](#) one person, former prosecutor-general Otar Partskhaladze, from U.S. [sanctions](#), which were officially imposed because Partskhaladze worked at the behest of Russia's secret services to “influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia.” While he and the ruling party denied the accusations as unfounded, it was later confirmed that Partskhaladze took up residence in Russia, changed his last name (to Romanov) and, as recently reported, [leads](#) a Russian unit in the war against Ukraine.

In another case, in April 2024, the ruling party majority amended the tax code to exempt repatriation of offshore assets from duties. Later, company [registers](#) and further analysis of financial data suggested that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the man behind Georgian Dream, personally [benefited](#) from this law.

Notably, both “exceptions” occurred precisely when Georgian Dream was increasingly and simultaneously diverting from the European and democratic paths.

One could also argue that the decision to [suspend](#) the EU membership process itself is a major “exception” in Schmitt's sense, since it contradicts the Constitutional [provision](#), which calls on

constitutional bodies to “take all measures within the scope of their competencies” to ensure Euro-Atlantic integration.

Since the legitimacy of democratic representative and executive bodies is challenged due to [fraudulent elections](#), and the decision to suspend EU integration was massively challenged in the streets, the question is: on whose sovereign authority were these decisions taken? Who assumed the right to make an exception? Bidzina Ivanishvili personally? Or was it the external power behind this realignment, as Natalie Sabanadze [argued](#)?

The diagnosis should be that if the people no longer exercise sovereignty de facto, as provided by Chapter 1 of the Constitution, and since sovereignty is, by nature, indivisible, then it has been usurped – either by one man (who is then a usurper) or by a foreign country (which would mean that Georgia is occupied).

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This has a direct relationship to democracy, understood literally as the right of the *demos* (people) to make the rules (*cratos*). But there is no purpose in people making rules if these rules have no effect. And to have that effect, people need sovereignty.

Bring Me back, I Don't Know Where...

Ever since the protesters hit the streets after Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's fateful announcement

in November 2024, opposition commentators and protesters have used the language of resistance, a term still alive [600 days later](#). To resist means countering a change considered unacceptable. By inference, such a movement assumes a *return to a status quo ante* as its objective, before the declaration of November, before the panoply of draconian laws that erected a “sophisticated architecture of repression,” to [quote](#) Amnesty International. The EU parliament calls on Georgia to “reverse its anti-democratic and anti-European course.”

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Let's assume our analysis is correct, and the dominant diagnosis of what is happening in Georgia is not some kind of democratic regression but a deeper usurpation of popular sovereignty. The recent [conclusion](#) by the Venice Commission – a rule-of-law legal authority – echoes this by writing of the series of laws limiting political rights: “rather than protecting the sovereignty of Georgia, the constitutional system and political parties from foreign influence and external interference, the legislation at stake risks undermining them profoundly.”

So, a sovereignty crisis then. But would reversing legal and political decisions be sufficient to restore popular sovereignty? Is the framework of resistance still valid?

These dilemmas are not theoretical; they are real and have led to soul-searching among intellectuals who support protest. Some have [suggested](#) “admitting defeat” as the numbers of protesters dwindled in the face of arrests, fines and repression. Others [pointed](#) to the importance of staying the course. Many Georgians look with a wry smile at the impotence of international commentary to suggest any practical solution beyond condemnation.

The answer, perhaps, lies in envisaging the Georgian *demos*' objective not as restoring the status quo, but as restoring its sovereign democratic control, the ability to make law and make it stick, to make rules that are obeyed. Political science teaches us that this can be done through several approaches:

One is the most straightforward: somehow trigger and then win elections, a constitutionally mandated pause in the “political time” of representative democracy when sovereignty briefly returns to the people, restoring the right to govern in the name of the people to a duly constituted legislature. This is the current strategy of the protest movement, which raises two questions: a) why would the usurper voluntarily yield the sovereignty it has captured? And b) what leverage could be applied to that end? Let's leave these questions open for now.

Another view is that arbitrary usurpation of sovereignty returns supreme power to the people, though not through the orderly process of written law. As John Locke [wrote eloquently](#), “for all Power given with trust for the attaining an end, being limited by that end, whenever that end is manifestly neglected, or opposed, the trust must necessarily be forfeited, and the Power devolve into the hands of those that gave it.” If the power is now “diffused in multitude” as Derrida was suggesting, there is an underlying understanding that those bodies that claim (and, as we saw, practically exercise) sovereignty no longer do so legitimately. There is a need, therefore, to distill a more restricted sovereign community from this diffuse *demos*.

This can be done in two ways. A more gradual approach may mean challenging the indivisibility of sovereign authority and thus undermining it. Several proposals from civic movements following this logic were discussed in the immediate aftermath of the 2024 elections: a campaign of civic disobedience, a general strike, a “tax strike” (refusing to pay taxes), and/or creating [parallel representative bodies](#) (quasi-parliament). These proposals have gained no traction.

The second, more radical, option in political thought is a right to revolt. Locke wrote in *Two Treatises of Government* that “the true remedy of Force without Authority is to oppose Force to it” – a concept that found its famous reflection in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. While no party or political group currently advocates such a course (despite repeated accusations and investigations by the authorities), an (admittedly rather ludicrous) attempt at revolt was indeed [made](#) on October 4, 2025.

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We can argue that the “resistance” approach of the current movement (or intellectuals and activists that speak on its behalf in a dominant fashion) is refusing to conceptualize how fundamental the break is: Georgia is not only experiencing a deficit of democracy but a capture/usurpation of sovereignty, its subsequent rapid dilution and (unproven, yet conceptualized) transfer to a foreign sovereign, which risks its potential disappearance (fragmentation as a sovereign body or absorption by the other). Why is this so, and what can be done?

Between Democracy and Sovereignty

Understanding and politically translating the complex relationship between democracy and sovereignty in Georgia is fraught, and the conflict surfaced early on, during the national movement in the 1990s. The competing slogans “first independence, then democracy” and “first democracy, then independence” have been one marker of the split in the anti-Soviet camp. The first group, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, took part in Soviet-run elections and [won](#) a majority in the Supreme Soviet of the

Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1991. Another camp challenged this choice, and then the sovereign authority of this body, and formed the National Congress in 1990 – also through elections. This moment was [framed](#) as a “formative rift” in Georgian politics and sowed the seeds of the bloody civil war that flared in late 1991 and lasted until 1994. That conflict led to state failure: an absolute loss of sovereignty over the two breakaway regions, and a comparative loss of sovereign control over larger swaths of Georgian territory. The return of (already) sovereign authority was gradual, and perhaps one could conceptualize the 2003 Rose Revolution as a breakthrough moment when popular sovereignty was reinstated. Not surprisingly, the resulting administration focused on restoration of the internal and external signs and markers of sovereign control: its focus on army and police reform, reform of the public administration, restoration of fiscal management and taxation, elimination (at times forceful) of the groups that contested sovereign legitimacy (e.g. armed gangs with territorial control), a course towards restoration of territorial sovereignty, emphasis on sovereign right to choose international alliances – are all seen as major policy steps by people who were in the political leadership or civil service. Democratization accompanied some of these policy threads, but not all. One could argue it was considered secondary, a means to an end perhaps (especially when it comes to joining Western alliances), but not an end in itself. Still, this is the big political tent currently labeled “pro-Democratic” or “pro-Western” and, by a large majority, claims ideological leadership of the resistance movement.

Yet, from that point of political pedigree and lived experience, it is not surprising that sovereignty is a positive – sometimes overarching – value for many people in that big tent. No wonder proposals to move beyond the self-imposed box of resistance aimed at re-running the elections have been met not only with pragmatic arguments for refusing that path (of which there are, admittedly, many), but also with ridicule and delegitimization as naïve, overly

scholarly, or inappropriately violent. Whatever the ruling party propaganda argues, most protest participants, and an absolute majority of political leaders, reject the notion of violent opposition to the symbols of sovereign authority. Even when facing police and paramilitary brutality in the streets, the social media chatter and political leaders of the movement only condoned minimal retorts, such as using firecrackers or laser beams to blind the riot police. Proposals for a general strike and attempts to seek social solidarity were minimized.

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In this sense, the resistance movement structurally opposes the Georgian Dream's hold on power but is not ideologically ready to reclaim popular sovereignty. It is self-constrained (and therefore easily manipulated) with imagery of a destructive conflict presented as an ultimate threat to sovereignty. Yet in current Georgia, as we described, that sovereignty is a [simulacrum](#) – a false copy of that which is no longer there.

Derrida [argues](#) that democracy is an “autoimmune” condition: it carries destructive conflicts within itself and tends to attack itself. In *Rogues*, he elaborates on the contradiction between democracy's all-embracing character and sovereignty's tendency to circumscribe the number of *demos* so it can have *cratos*, the ability to set the rules, as one such conflict. But despite using the biological analogy, Derrida does not push it to the limit: an autoimmune

condition, in his mind, does not kill democracy; on the contrary, it helps it shape-shift and adapt, even re-emerge through practice. Democracy is “never present but always deferred.”

In this deferral of democracy, in the fact that it is “always to come,” is perhaps hope for Georgia's resistance movement, too, to transcend its self-imposed boundary. Because practicing democracy, i.e., having the popular assembly decide on and impose its rules, is already a step towards conjuring sovereign power.

In practical terms, this means reclaiming the popular assembly's powers by practicing democracy. It is no accident that Georgian Dream's decisive assault on sovereignty began by constraining civic associations. They need to be relaunched, but not (only) as professional entities, not only as forums for discussion, but as places for taking decisions – small first, larger later.

There are historical precedents for that under repressive conditions: a [campaign of banquets](#) in France in opposition to repressive censorship of political opinion by Louis-Philippe (a usurper, himself) in 1847–1848 should chime positively with Georgian predispositions. In a more modern version, [citizens' panels](#) and assemblies are all the rage in the EU, and while their efficacy in that particular context is sometimes [questioned](#), it is beyond doubt that the methodology of holding such panels has evolved significantly. Solidarity movements and wider *demos* are, of course, of paramount importance.

The crucial thing is to grasp the common objective of democratic (re)constitution of sovereignty as the primary objective, orient the political process towards the (open-ended) future, not towards the past, and harness domestic and international support for this objective ■