

GEO POLITICS

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Life of Pi



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Our Mission

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

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

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

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The Tiger in the Boat

In *Life of Pi*, survival depends on understanding one unforgiving fact: sharing a boat with a tiger does not make the tiger a companion. Its temporary restraint is not trust, and managing its hunger is not the same as taming it. Our cover places Donald Trump in that boat, fishing in dark waters with Russia behind him. Whether he sees himself as the hero steering towards peace or as the victim of circumstances inherited from others, he is entering dangerous waters alongside a power that interprets every concession as evidence that further pressure will work, and that will bite as soon as it sees the opportunity. The implications for real Pi, Zelenskyy, are grim, as he is losing the support of one of his strongest allies. But the implications for the rest of the world are no less grim and dangerous.

The question of who is entitled to decide for whom runs throughout this issue of *GEOpolitics*. It appears in Georgia's attempt to outlaw its opposition, in the capture and diffusion of popular sovereignty, in a peace process that may deny Ukraine political agency and create new problems for NATO, in national vetoes over EU enlargement, in Moldova's costly effort to escape Russian dependency, in Poland's conditions for Ukrainian membership, and in Ukraine's struggle to redefine its cultural relationship with Russia. Each article examines a different arena, but the underlying contest is similar: decisions in one area can have major implications for the others, and today's good wishes for stability might become premonitions of tomorrow's insecurity.

Sergi Kapanadze opens the issue with Georgian Dream's effort to ban the country's principal opposition parties. The government frames the case as

a defense of constitutional democracy against the so-called "collective National Movement," although the targeted parties together represented nearly half of voters in the 2024 election. The political logic is more revealing than the legal justification. A ban would deprive the opposition of established brands, public funding, airtime, electoral representation and experienced personnel before the 2028 parliamentary election. Yet the unresolved case is itself useful: as long as the threat remains pending, it constrains every opposition choice while preserving a bargaining chip with Western governments. Kapanadze describes the opposition's position as *zugzwang*: participation, boycott, protest, unification and fragmentation can all be turned against it. Comparative experience offers the ruling party little comfort, however. Where competitive elections survive, banned movements generally return under new names; where bans succeed permanently, they do so because the political system has become a full dictatorship. Georgian Dream must therefore choose between a measure that may fail and one that would complete Georgia's authoritarian transformation.

Jaba Devdariani takes the argument deeper, asking whether Georgia is experiencing only democratic regression or the usurpation of sovereignty itself. State institutions continue to legislate, collect taxes and enforce decisions, but the capacity and legitimacy underpinning Georgian sovereignty are being depleted. Defense institutions have weakened, the national security framework has decayed, and constitutional commitments have been suspended whenever they obstruct the interests of the ruling party or its founder. The central question is therefore no longer simply how to restore fair elections,

but how Georgian citizens can reclaim the power to make rules that actually bind those who govern. Devdariani argues that a resistance movement focused entirely on returning to the previous order may underestimate the scale of the rupture. Democratic sovereignty must be rebuilt through political participation, civic organization, and institutions that can translate popular consent into effective authority.

Shota Gvineria places the issue's central international dilemma in the war against Ukraine. Washington increasingly treats the conflict as a negotiable dispute that can be settled through pressure on Kyiv, relief for Moscow, and a commercial accommodation over energy and territory. The Kremlin sees something larger: an opportunity to establish a European order based on spheres of influence. A settlement imposed on Ukraine would therefore deliver more than occupied land. It would validate Russia's claim that borders can be revised by force and that great powers may limit the alliances, institutions and leaders available to neighboring states. Gvineria argues that such a deal would not contain escalation. It would free Russian military capacity, reward coercion and encourage Moscow to test NATO's political limits through hybrid attacks or a deliberately restricted military strike. Europe can replace much of the financing Washington provides, but it cannot yet rapidly replace American early-warning, satellite and missile-defense capabilities. Ukraine's continued resistance remains Europe's first line of defense and the last opportunity to deter a wider confrontation without fighting one.

Vano Chkhikvadze considers whether the European Union can make enlargement fit for this harsher strategic environment. The Commission's pre-enlargement review proposes qualified-majority voting to open negotiating clusters, greater use of constructive abstention, gradual access to the single market, and stronger safeguards against democratic backsliding after accession. These ideas could reduce one government's ability to paralyze an entire

candidate's progress. They do not, however, remove the final unanimity requirement, settle the budgetary and agricultural consequences of Ukraine's membership, or explain how the Union's internal balance of power would change after enlargement. Gradual integration can sustain reform by delivering visible benefits, but it can also become an indefinite waiting room in which candidates adopt European rules without acquiring a voice in making them. Georgia remains the bleak counterpoint: formally a candidate, it is falling so far behind Ukraine and Moldova that the possibility of catching up diminishes with every month.

For Thornike Gordadze, Moldova has become Georgia's uncomfortable mirror. Georgian Dream portrays Chişinău's alignment with Brussels as a surrender of sovereignty that has produced higher prices, weak growth and insecurity. Moldova has indeed paid heavily to end its dependence on Russian gas, electricity and trade. Yet those costs have purchased something strategically important: a reduced capacity for Moscow to coerce the Moldovan state. Georgia has chosen the reverse path, enjoying rapid growth partly through Russian money, tourism, re-exports and renewed energy dependence while allowing its defense and European ambitions to decline. The comparison is therefore between two understandings of sovereignty. Moldova accepts immediate economic pain to enlarge its future freedom of action; Georgian Dream claims sovereignty while rebuilding the dependencies that can eventually extinguish it. If Moldova advances towards EU membership, it will expose the weakness of Tbilisi's argument that accommodation with Russia is the only route available to a vulnerable small state.

Nadiia Koval examines another obstacle on Ukraine's European path: the changing position of Poland. In 2022, Warsaw championed Ukraine's candidate status as a strategic means of moving the free world's borders eastward. Four years later, Polish support is increasingly conditioned on agricultural

protections, transport interests and Kyiv's acceptance of Warsaw's interpretation of the Volhynia massacres. The shift reflects the rise of the Polish right, changing public opinion, bilateral disputes and Warsaw's dependence on an American security policy that now accommodates important Russian demands. Poland continues to insist that Ukraine must not lose the war, but no longer treats Ukrainian EU membership as a strategic necessity of its own. Koval warns that this retreat deprives eastern enlargement of its most influential advocate at the moment when Washington is withdrawing from European security. Restoring Poland's leadership will require shielding intermediate accession decisions from domestic veto politics, investing more firmly in European defense and rebuilding the bilateral relationship between Warsaw and Kyiv.

Sébastien Gobert concludes with Ukraine's unfinished derussification. The removal of Soviet and Russian monuments, the renaming of streets and the retreat of Russian cultural products accelerated dramatically after the full-scale invasion. Pushkin disappeared from much of the public landscape, Ukrainian use expanded, and a legal decolonization process followed the civic reaction to Russian aggression. Yet the incomplete dismantling of Kyiv's former People's Friendship monument captures

the broader project's ambiguity. Ukraine's history cannot be reduced to passive colonization, nor can every cultural figure with a connection to Russia be classified in the same way. Gogol, Tchaikovsky, the Russian language and inherited traditions occupy more complicated ground than explicitly imperial symbols. Gobert therefore treats derussification as an evolving democratic argument rather than a task that can simply be completed. Ukrainians have decisively rejected being politically Russian; how they reorganize the cultural inheritance left behind remains a question for a plural society, and will depend partly on how the war ends.

The sea on our cover is dark because the destination is no longer clear, while the tiger is visible enough for its nature to be understood. The danger lies in believing that feeding it will change that nature, that another state can satisfy it, or that temporary calm proves the strategy successful. Sovereignty is lost in precisely such increments: a sanction waived, a veto tolerated, an opposition removed, a dependency restored, a neighbor's consent converted into a right of control. Survival begins by recognizing the animal in the boat. Security begins by ensuring that it does not decide where the boat goes ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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Banning the Opposition: Georgian Dream's Gamble and Opposition's Zugzwang

In August 2024, two months before the Parliamentary elections, Bidzina Ivanishvili declared that the vote “must become the Nuremberg Trials” for the United National Movement (UNM). The next day, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [explained](#) how this would work. Georgian Dream (GD) would ask the Constitutional Court to ban the opposition parties that crossed the threshold and cancel their members' mandates. At the time, many observers read this as campaign talk. Two years later, on October 21, the Constitutional Court began hearing the case to ban five opposition parties, preceded by a handful of legislative changes that have set the stage for Ivanishvili's pledge to come true at any moment. The Court now has nine months to issue a ruling, even though precedent suggests it can shelve the decision indefinitely, absent clear regulations and sanctions for missing deadlines.

On October 28, 2025, Georgian Dream MPs [filed](#) a lawsuit asking the Constitutional Court to ban the United National Movement, Akhali, the leading party

of the Coalition for Change, and Lelo, the core of the Strong Georgia coalition. These three parties garnered 30 percent of the vote during the 2024 Parliamentary elections. The Federalists were [added](#) in April 2026, and in mid-September the ruling party [announced](#) it would also seek to ban Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia. In the 2024 elections, the parties now facing the ban [won](#) close to 38 percent of the vote between them.

The GD-dominated Parliament had laid the groundwork for these moves. A law adopted in April 2025 also envisages barring “successor” parties, and in October 2025 Parliament [gave](#) the Court the power to bar individuals “associated” with a banned party from founding, joining, or funding a party, or from standing as candidates.

If the Court bans the opposition parties, Georgia would become the first Council of Europe member to ban its entire parliamentary opposition in a single case.



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If the Court bans the opposition parties, Georgia would become the first Council of Europe member to ban its entire parliamentary opposition in a single case. That alone deserves international attention, far beyond what is currently given.

But the case also raises obvious questions. Georgian Dream already holds a large majority (albeit not a constitutional one) and faces no national election until October 2028. The opposition is divided, many of its leaders are in prison or on trial, and almost all of the parties have left Parliament. So, why go to the trouble of a ban? And why, after filing the case, does the ruling party keep restarting the clock every time it adds a new party to the list submitted to the Constitutional Court?

Bans that stop halfway, leaving elections in place, have mostly failed and even backfired. But the ones that worked required full dictatorship.

This article will examine GD's underlying motives and the political theory that helps explain both sides' options and possible moves. Various worldwide examples of successful and attempted party bans can also help us understand what happens when governments take this route. The short version is this. The record and theory give Georgian Dream some models to follow, but most of the ones that "worked" required going much further than GD has gone. Bans that stop halfway, leaving elections in place, have mostly failed and even backfired. But the ones that worked required full dictatorship. Opposition parties and the international community can also learn interesting lessons, which we explore in detail below.

Why Georgian Dream Wants a Ban

It is worth starting with the government's own explanation. Kobakhidze has [argued](#) that "a healthy democracy cannot exist" when the ruling party's only

opponent is "a criminal political force," and that out of 400 registered parties, the goal is to ban only one: the "collective United National Movement." All of the to-be-banned parties are therefore [portrayed](#) as one political power, the "collective UNM." In February 2025, after the main opposition groups refused their parliamentary mandates, Kobakhidze [gloated](#) that, "for the first time in the past 20 years," the "collective UNM" would not be represented in Parliament.

The lawsuit relies on Article 23(3) of the Constitution, which allows a party to be banned if it aims to overthrow the constitutional order by force or undermine the country's independence or territorial integrity. It accuses the party's leaders of abuses committed while UNM was in power between 2004 and 2012, of refusing to recognize election results, of organizing attempts to seize power in 2022, 2024, and October 2025, and of raising tensions with Russia. Its main evidence is a [report](#) from a parliamentary investigative commission chaired by Tea Tsulukiani, which we have analyzed at length on these pages and [dubbed](#) the "unconstitutional revenge commission." Transparency International Georgia has also [pointed](#) out that the commission was set up in a way that breached the Constitution, that past acts by state officials cannot simply be attributed to today's parties, and that disputing an election is a political position, not a threat to the state.

But beneath the official reasons, three practical reasons make sense from the ruling party's perspective.

The first, and probably the most important, is 2028. Georgian Dream won the 2024 elections, which the opposition and many observers dispute, and the opposition largely boycotted the 2025 local vote. But no one can be sure about the next parliamentary election, given sanctions, a frozen EU path, and a restless urban electorate that does not necessarily enjoy living under the threat of fines, arrests, curbs on freedom of expression and assembly, and relentless propaganda from state media. Georgia's electoral system is proportional, and the GD

cannot change the constitution or the electoral system. This means they need more than 50 percent in every future election to keep power. If no parties compete, the GD can easily grab all seats and even spare a few dozen for the satellite parties it has set up in recent years. Moreover, without competition, the GD can easily secure a constitutional majority, paving the way to change the constitution and remove the loathed Article 78, thus removing the constitutional burden on state institutions to aspire to and work towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

If one wonders why Georgian Dream would want to remove an article it initiated, the answer is simple. Civil society and opposition pressured the introduction of Article 78 in 2017, and Georgian Dream had to take up the topic and present itself as a champion of European integration. That era is long gone. Since 2022, the party has moved sharply away from the EU, turning its own constitutional commitment into an increasingly inconvenient obligation. Removing the article would also offer a convenient electoral campaign issue: Georgian Dream could portray EU integration as a path to war, shifting the debate away from economic hardship and domestic repression onto the familiar ground of its anti-war rhetoric. Finally, removing Article 78 would eliminate a formal constitutional obstacle to further rapprochement with Russia, giving the government greater freedom to pursue that course.

Second, a ban removes known party brands and effectively undermines the opposition's resources. Qualifying parties receive state funding, free air-time, and a role in election administration. A banned party loses all of this, and authorities can seize its assets. Number 5 (of UNM) is still a very strong brand. Coalition for Change also built Number 4 into a successful brand. Lelo invested heavily in its Number 9 brand and a bright yellow color. The same can be said of Gakharia's 25 and Purple. The individual ban law removes people from politics, especially those who are active and create pressure, even if they're not always the most popular; for example,

Gakharia's party has used parliamentary seats effectively, engaging in debates and then making the clips go viral on social media. So, as the old Soviet saying goes, "no people, no problem."

The successor-party law is meant to stop the banned political groups from simply regrouping under a new name and a new brand. These laws aim to close the gaps that let banned parties return elsewhere, as they repeatedly did in Thailand and Türkiye. Hungary's recent experience adds a newer lesson. In April 2026, Viktor Orbán, the ruling party's closest ally in the EU, [lost](#) power to Péter Magyar's Tisza, a party that had barely existed before 2024. Orbán never banned anyone. For Georgian Dream, the lesson can easily look like this: the danger is not just the old, experienced, embattled opposition, but a new party vehicle drawing on the same voters. The "associated persons" clause reads as an attempt to reach and destroy that vehicle before it forms.

The third reason is leverage, internal and external. A ban that is filed but not decided is useful in itself. It hangs over every choice the opposition makes: whether to run, whom to put on the lists, whether to protest and what means of resistance to use. It is also a card to play with Western governments. Each time the ruling party has widened the lawsuit, the nine-month deadline for a ruling has [restarted](#), first in April and again in September 2026. Georgian Dream may fear the West's reaction to an actual ban. GD might also want to keep something to trade. In fact, the GD can learn from Aleksandr Lukashenko. Arresting and releasing political prisoners, or threatening and then not banning political parties, moves the negotiation post away from more serious problems that need addressing – undemocratic laws, disenfranchising Georgian citizens, and undermining state institutions, which the West might well consider as sufficient grounds for sanctioning those responsible. But if a mere withdrawal or delay of the constitutional appeal can reduce pressure and even serve as a bargaining chip to normalize relations with certain Western capitals, then it is the lowest-cost option.

What will the Georgian Dream achieve by banning all the parties? The Constitutional Court will (once again) lose its reputation, as few independent observers will consider its decision as independent. One of the Constitutional Court judges, Manana Kobakhidze, recently [resigned](#) in protest, saying she did not want her career as a lawyer to end when her tenure as a judge ended. She was one of the GD leaders until 2017 and has been a Constitutional Court judge since then, and the current GD leadership described her departure as “jumping ship.” This, along with appointing two loyal judges in the weeks before the hearings started, already undermines the Court’s reputation. On September 23, two judges, Goga Kikilashvili and Sergo Metopishvili, were [appointed](#) to the Constitutional Court, one by President Mikheil Kavelashvili and another by the Supreme Court Plenum. Kikilashvili, 37, replaced Giorgi Kverenchkhiladze, whose term ended on October 2 and who was among the few judges willing to dissent in cases that went the government’s way. He is also the son of former Supreme Court justice and known GD loyalist, Khvicha Kikilashvili. Teimuraz Tughushi, another dissenter, leaves soon. Irine Imerlishvili [quit](#) early last year. By the time the ban reaches the bench, no one will be left to write a dissenting opinion, which is presumably the point of making the appointments now rather than later.

With almost no working opposition, dismantled civil society, silenced media, and a shrinking Western partnership, the GD will have no one to counter Ivanishvili’s power, security, and finances.

The next Parliament without any opposition, like the current one, will almost certainly lack legitimacy. However, the GD will have a constitutional majority and an ostracized, arrested, or exiled political opposition, leaving no one to counter its rule. It will also save them significant financial resources needed to run elections, buy votes, and exert undue

pressure on voters. With almost no working opposition, dismantled civil society, silenced media, and a shrinking Western partnership, the GD will have no one to counter Ivanishvili’s power, security, and finances. Personal sanctions, which came late and were not strong enough, are already in place against Ivanishvili and several officials, which also lowers the price of further steps. No concrete, imminent pressure is on Georgian Dream to pursue party bans, which further lowers the already low price. Moreover, GD propaganda will also point to European examples, above all Moldova and Ukraine, and ask why Georgia should be held to a different standard, since Chişinău and Kyiv have also banned opposition parties. That argument deserves a separate answer, which comes below.

Menus, Threats and Zugzwang

Political science offers several tools that help explain what both sides, the GD and the opposition, are doing.

The first is Andreas Schedler’s idea of a “menu of manipulation.” Schedler [described](#) how rulers who hold elections without allowing fair competition choose from a menu of tactics. One of the most basic is to limit who may run. This can be easier than rigging the count: there is no ballot stuffing to film, and courts can do the work months in advance. The trade-off is that the more choice you remove, the less legitimacy the election confers. In Cambodia, the Supreme Court dissolved the main opposition party in 2017, clearing the way for the ruling party to win all 125 parliamentary seats in 2018. The election was widely condemned as illegitimate. Yet the ruling party retained its monopoly on parliamentary power. A victory stripped of democratic credibility can still serve its immediate political purpose.

The second is the idea of “competitive authoritarianism” developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. They [wrote](#) about regimes in which the competition is real but unfair, and in which the opposition can still sometimes win. Their later work argues that

how such regimes develop depends heavily on two things: “linkage,” meaning the density of a country’s ties to the West, and “leverage,” meaning how much the West can hurt the government. Georgia has high linkage: a large diaspora, EU candidate status (albeit in name only), free trade with the EU, visa-free travel, and a young population oriented towards Europe. Its leverage, however, has fallen since the accession process stalled. In these terms, a ban bets that leverage has dropped far enough that linkage no longer matters.

Georgia has high linkage: a large diaspora, EU candidate status (albeit in name only), free trade with the EU, visa-free travel, and a young population oriented towards Europe. Its leverage, however, has fallen since the accession process stalled. In these terms, a ban bets that leverage has dropped far enough that linkage no longer matters.

The third tool is basic game theory, starting with the ruling party’s side. In a normal democracy, losing an election is costly but survivable. When leaders fear prosecution, loss of property, or worse after leaving office, losing becomes catastrophic, and it becomes rational to pay a high price to lower the chance of losing. Much of the Georgian opposition has promised to hold Georgian Dream’s leaders accountable if it comes to power. It is not inconceivable that the opposition leaders, who have been unjustly prosecuted, arrested, impoverished, and exiled, will seek revenge on Ivanishvili and his minions if they return to power. Even if they promise not to, Ivanishvili will likely see it as big trouble if he loses levers of power. However understandable, that raises the stakes of losing. Political scientists call this a commitment problem: the ruling party destroys the opposition, creating a vicious loop. The opposition cannot credibly promise a soft landing and a soft transfer of power, so the incumbent sees no safe way out and cracks down even harder.

The same logic explains the delay. Thomas Schelling [observed](#) that a threat is often worth more than the act it threatens. As long as the constitutional case is pending, the opposition must plan for the worst, and Western governments have a reason to keep talking, pressing, maneuvering, and looking for a face-saving way out. Once the Court rules and parties are banned, the threat is used up, and the costs arrive. Keeping the case alive and restarting the clock when needed is a rational way to maintain the threat without paying for it.

On the opposition side, the best word for the position is *zugzwang*, a chess term for a situation in which a player must move, has only a limited number of moves, and every available move makes the position worse.

Here are the *zugzwang* options for the opposition. If the opposition takes part in elections, it lends legitimacy to a process it calls rigged, and the GD has already said that taking part will not save any party from the ban. Gakharia’s For Georgia will also likely get banned despite running and entering Parliament. If the opposition boycotts, it loses seats, money, and visibility, and the constitutional lawsuit then cites its refusal to recognize the elections as evidence against it. If it takes its seats in the lost elections, it may still be targeted: again, Gakharia’s For Georgia kept its mandates but was still added to the ban list, partly because of its “conduct in parliament.”

If the opposition goes into the streets, any clash can be used as proof of a coup attempt, as the October 4 events showed. If the parties merge into one, they confirm the “collective UNM” story and offer a single target, which can still be banned under the affiliated-party clause. If they stay apart, they remain weaker, keep fighting each other, and fail to show the strength essential to defeating a potent authoritarian incumbent. If they create new parties, the successor-party law and the individual bans are already waiting to be activated.

Zugzwang, however, does not mean the opposition can do nothing. It means no move within the current rules improves its position. The only good answers are those that change the rules of the game itself.

Mikheil Saakashvili, on September 21, called through his Facebook to “overturn the table on a cardsharp” and not engage in the election or coalition-building discussion. While it is unclear what this means, Georgian Dream propaganda uses the statement as a call for a coup or revolution; the logic is understandable. If you know the game is rigged, you need to do something extraordinary to succeed. Nika Gvaramia also said the opposition’s strategy should be to either aim for fair elections or do everything to ensure no unfair election takes place. This could be interpreted as a call for an active boycott, which is a politically and legally legitimate move. In any case, whatever the move, the opposition’s only strategy is an intensified public outreach and mass mobilization campaign that needs to start as early as possible, to ensure that whatever call to action comes in 2028, people follow the lead.

Two more ideas complete the opposition puzzle. The first is what game theorists call the shadow of the future. Legal tools outlive the governments that create them. A precedent for banning the opposition and a law barring individuals from politics will be available to whoever governs Georgia next. Bangladesh shows how quickly that can happen.

The second is coordination. The opposition’s hardest problem is itself: who leads, under which name, on which list, how parties coexist, how they cooperate, share resources, distribute tasks, and work together. A ban can solve this dilemma by removing old brands and giving everyone a common enemy, as roughly happened in Senegal. Some opposition politicians consider this scenario realistic and are unconcerned; however, this calm approach reflects a degree of naivety. Once the parties are banned and opposition politicians are legally excluded from the political scene, two problems emerge.

First, they will need to find a party or other political vehicle to bandwagon for the next elections, or for whatever type of public mobilization campaign. It is not guaranteed that other actors who escape the ban would want banned party members on board, especially if it increases the risk of being placed on the banned list under the affiliated persons law. The second problem is that of name recognition. No matter how demonized state propaganda makes current opposition leaders, their name recognition and support, even by official 2024 numbers, are close to 40 percent. Bringing in new names with very low name recognition, even if they are the only alternative, may not attract general opposition supporters. Only an inspirational, energetic, and charismatic leader like Magyar could fill such a vacuum, but he is nowhere to be seen and impossible to manufacture.

Thirty Years of Party Bans

Party bans are not only an African or Asian practice. Europe has a long record of them, though democracies have generally targeted parties linked to violence or threats to constitutional order, subject to judicial review. Spain banned Batasuna, the political wing of the Basque separatist movement, in 2003 because of its links to ETA, and the European Court of Human Rights upheld the decision in 2009. Once ETA abandoned violence, the Basque nationalist left returned to electoral politics. Türkiye shows the limits of such bans. The Islamist Welfare Party was dissolved in 1998, and its successor, Virtue, in 2001. Yet their political movement survived through the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won the 2002 elections. Pro-Kurdish parties have similarly reappeared under new names after successive bans. Moldova offers a more recent and politically contentious example. Its Constitutional Court [banned](#) the Șor Party in 2023, targeting a political network associated with a convicted fugitive and allegations of illicit financing. Unlike Georgia’s proposed approach, Moldova’s principal opposition parties remained free to contest elections, although

subsequent exclusions of Şor-linked parties raised concerns over electoral fairness.

Outside Europe, the record reveals two contrasting outcomes. In Thailand, courts repeatedly dissolved major opposition parties, from Thai Rak Thai in 2007 to Move Forward in 2024, only for successor parties to inherit their voters. Nevertheless, judicial intervention, combined with other institutional restrictions, prevented electoral victories from consistently translating into government power. Senegal demonstrates that bans can fail when independent institutions survive: despite the dissolution of Ousmane Sonko's PASTEF party in 2023 and his exclusion from the presidential race, his substitute candidate, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, won the presidency in March 2024 after the Constitutional Council blocked an attempt to postpone the election. Cambodia presents the opposite outcome. After the Supreme Court [dissolved](#) the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party in 2017, Hun Sen's ruling party won every parliamentary seat in 2018. The ban succeeded because the government controlled the security forces, enjoyed Chinese backing, and accepted the disappearance of meaningful electoral competition.

Across these cases, the distinction lies in whether other institutions, competitive elections, and opportunities for political organization remain intact. Where they do, banned movements often return. Where they disappear, party bans become instruments for entrenching authoritarian rule.

Nicaragua and Belarus illustrate what happens when exclusion becomes comprehensive. Nicaragua stripped its main opposition party of legal status in 2021 after arresting leading presidential challengers, while Belarus used compulsory party re-registration in 2023 to eliminate virtually all organized opposition. In both countries, loyal security forces, Russian

support, and political repression helped governments consolidate control. Bangladesh provides a different warning: Sheikh Hasina banned Jamaat-e-Islami shortly before her overthrow in August 2024, only for the succeeding authorities to ban her own Awami League in 2025. Political exclusion can outlive its architects and become a weapon against them. Across these cases, the distinction lies in whether other institutions, competitive elections, and opportunities for political organization remain intact. Where they do, banned movements often return. Where they disappear, party bans become instruments for entrenching authoritarian rule.

These cases show a fairly consistent pattern. Where a banned party has a large voter base, and elections still matter, a successor appears and usually does well, as in Thailand, Türkiye, and Senegal. Bans "work" in the sense that they secure the regime only when the government goes on to close the system completely, with a foreign backer and loyal security forces, as in Cambodia, Belarus, and Nicaragua. Democracies ban small, violent parties, and Strasbourg court reviews them. What Georgian Dream is planning to do comes from the playbook of authoritarian states, not European democracies.

What Is at Stake: Four Scenarios

For Georgian Dream, the stakes are high. The party is trying to protect its hold on power, its leaders from future prosecution, and its founder's fortune. Potential costs include losing visa-free travel to the EU, more personal sanctions, weaker investment, and a Parliament that no one abroad treats as legitimate. There is also a less obvious cost. For fourteen years, the ruling party's main message has been that UNM might return. Banning UNM removes the opponent it knows how to beat.

For the opposition, the stakes are its legal existence, its money, the careers of hundreds of people, and the meaning of the votes of more than a third of the electorate. The historical record offers two outcomes: the parties die out, as in Tajikistan or Belarus,

or they renew themselves, as in Thailand or Türkiye.

How this plays out depends heavily on timing.

In the first scenario, a ruling comes relatively soon. A decision would be due around early to mid-2027, more than a year before the October 2028 elections. Georgian Dream would pay the international price early and have time to absorb it. The opposition would have time to build new vehicles, as the Thai parties did. The key question is whether new faces can appear faster than the Court can add them to its lists. The risk for the ruling party is that an early ban clears away the old leaders, many of them unpopular even with opposition voters, and makes space for a clean challenger of the kind that beat Orbán. For the opposition, the risk is that individual bans reach the organizers and that the new vehicles compete with each other.

In the second scenario, no ruling ever comes. The case stays pending, like the HDP case in Türkiye. The Constitutional Court starting to review the case does not automatically mean it will decide before the 2028 elections. Georgian Dream keeps its leverage, avoids the cost, and leaves the opposition in limbo. Candidates think twice before joining lists that might be canceled, and donors hesitate. The criminal cases against opposition leaders continue regardless. The weakness is that threats lose force when never carried out, and Western partners may start treating the case as background noise. For the opposition, this is a scenario in which it can still operate but cannot plan, and the main danger is politicians' and donors' self-restraint.

In the third scenario, the ban comes shortly before the 2028 vote. This is the most damaging version for the opposition and the most clearly visible as election manipulation. Past cases show the range of timings. Cambodia banned the CNRP eight months before the election, Senegal dissolved PASTEF seven months before the planned vote, Nicaragua disqualified Citizens for Liberty three months before, and Moldova removed Heart of Moldova two days

before. A late ban leaves no time to register successors, build lists, and teach voters a new name. But it also brings the strongest international reaction and risks protests when public attention is highest. Senegal shows that a late move can backfire if even one institution refuses to go along. The opposition's defense here can only be prepared in advance: spare parties, substitute candidates, and lists of people the Court has not reached, as the HDP and PASTEF did. Without that, the vote splits or drifts into a boycott.

A fourth path is to go all the way, as Belarus did. That would require things Georgian Dream may not have: security forces tested under real pressure, an economy able to live without Europe, and a foreign patron. The obvious candidate is Russia, which occupies a fifth of Georgia's territory, and open dependence on Moscow would be very costly politically. This is probably why the ruling party prefers the middle ground. The record, however, suggests the middle ground does not hold for long.

Georgian Dream's tools are not unusual. Courts, commissions, successor bans and lists of barred individuals have all been used before.

Georgian Dream's tools are not unusual. Courts, commissions, successor bans and lists of barred individuals have all been used before. What is unusual is the scale, and the attempt to do it inside the Council of Europe while still holding competitive elections.

The record points to a simple dilemma. Where voters remain free to choose, banning the parties they vote for mostly changes the names on the ballot. Voters find a successor, sometimes stronger than the original, as in Türkiye and Senegal. Where bans secured the government, as in Cambodia, Belarus, and Nicaragua, it was because elections stopped meaning anything, and because the regime had a foreign backer and an economy that could survive isolation. Georgia's ruling party would have to choose between these two outcomes, and neither is comfortable.

The first does not solve its problem. The second would change Georgia's place in the world far more than most of its own voters seem to want.

For the opposition, the situation looks like *zugzwang*, and within the current rules it is. But the history of banned parties also shows that their supporters do not disappear. The movements that survived prepared new vehicles in time, brought in new faces, kept competing, and avoided violence. Those that died out left the country or waited for the old names to come back.

For outside observers, the main point is timing. Once a ban is issued, the record suggests it is rarely reversed by foreign pressure.

For outside observers, the main point is timing. Once a ban is issued, the record suggests it is rarely reversed by foreign pressure. What happens before the ruling, and before 2028, is what will count. And the European Union, the United States, and the civilized West in general are running out of time to influence the process ■

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.

Political regimes, especially less-than-democratic ones, often put forward as slogans the values they routinely undermine.

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](#).

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.

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).

In either case, 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).

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.”

What is happening in Georgia is not some kind of democratic regression but a deeper usurpation of popular sovereignty.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 ■

Peace Deal or Escalation

On October 9, Donald Trump [announced](#) that after a call with Vladimir Putin, he had agreed to let Russia release large volumes of diesel onto world markets, waiving sanctions designed to starve the Kremlin's war budget. The next day, after Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the decision weak, Trump [said](#) it was time for Ukraine to get a new president. Within two days, the Kremlin [echoed](#) the demand and rejected Zelenskyy's offer to hold elections under a 60-day ceasefire, with Dmitry Peskov offering to hold fire only on election day and [reiterating](#) that Moscow does not want a ceasefire at all. In one week, Washington eased pressure on Russia to manage fuel prices before the midterms, publicly questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's elected leader, and watched the Kremlin pocket both concessions without offering anything in return.

The episode exposes the gap at the heart of Washington's current mediation. The U.S. treats the war as a commercial dispute over territory, prices, and sanctions that the right mix of incentives can close. Moscow pursues an objective no transaction can deliver: a European security order rebuilt on [spheres](#)

[of influence](#), which Russia has sought since the Soviet collapse and which Putin now believes is within reach. The Kremlin sees Donbas territory and control over Black Sea trade through Crimea as instruments of that goal, and the goal itself is Ukraine's subordination to the Kremlin's sphere of influence and the West's acceptance of it. For that reason, no stable middle ground exists. In Moscow's eyes, any arrangement short of Ukraine's capitulation is a pause, which is exactly how Peskov [justified](#) rejecting the 60-day ceasefire: Kyiv would use it to regroup. Sergei Lavrov made the same point from the UN General Assembly podium in September, [declaring](#) that the aims of the war would be achieved "no matter the circumstances." Putin will accept a compromise only when he concludes that his maximal aim is out of reach, and an American policy that pressures Kyiv while relieving Moscow tells him the opposite.

The stakes reach well beyond Ukraine. Pressing Kyiv to capitulate would hand Moscow at the negotiating table a victory it has [failed](#) to win on the battlefield and can ill afford to achieve.



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The war can end in one of two ways. Moscow can be compelled to accept peace, because military and economic pressure convinces it that its aims are out of reach, or it can be handed a capitulation deal that grants them. The first could secure a lasting peace. The second might silence the guns in Ukraine, but a Russia rewarded for its aggression and released from that war could afford both a near-term test of NATO and the long-term rebuilding of its military power, raising the risk to Europe now and over the coming decade.

The second might silence the guns in Ukraine, but a Russia rewarded for its aggression and released from that war could afford both a near-term test of NATO and the long-term rebuilding of its military power, raising the risk to Europe now and over the coming decade.

Oval Office 2.0, or a Change of Course?

Washington and Kyiv have been in similar rupture before. In February 2025, Trump [called](#) Zelenskyy a “dictator without elections”; the Oval Office meeting collapsed days later, and Washington briefly suspended intelligence sharing and arms deliveries. The relationship, however, recovered. Kyiv [signed](#) the minerals agreement in April, and by September 2025 Trump was [declaring](#) that Ukraine, with European support, could win back all its territory. The swings continued into this year. At the NATO summit in Ankara on July 8, Trump [promised](#) to grant Ukraine a license to produce Patriot interceptors; on July 31, days after hosting Zelenskyy at the White House, he [told](#) his cabinet that “we have not agreed to that,” offering as his only explanation that Washington must be very careful about letting anyone build such advanced weapons. The retreat came while Ukraine faced a chronic shortage of PAC-3

interceptors, the only weapons in its arsenal able to stop Russian ballistic missiles. If October 2026 follows the same cycle, the current crisis is noise, and Europe and Kyiv should absorb the insults and wait for the next swing.

If those logs hold up, a restriction that stops at Ukraine’s border is a policy decision, not a technical fault.

The evidence, though, points the other way, and the first difference lies in the instruments. In 2025, the pressure was largely rhetorical. In October 2026, it reached Ukraine’s war machine within days. According to CNN [reporting](#), Trump threatened to cut off intelligence sharing and weapons purchases unless Kyiv halted its refinery strikes. On October 13, Zelenskyy said Ukraine had received no advance warning of Russian ballistic missile strikes on Kyiv and Kharkiv, and Ukraine’s air force [said](#) that partners resumed warnings only after a two-day gap. The next day, SpaceX [restricted](#) the Pentagon-funded Starshield service for terminals moving faster than 160 kph, disabling the interceptor drones Ukraine uses against jet-powered Shaheds. Washington [denies](#) cutting intelligence, and Elon Musk [says](#) the U.S. government governs the network’s operating limits. Kyiv has since tested the official explanation: on October 17 Zelenskyy [told](#) reporters that vehicles carrying Ukrainian terminals ran at more than 180 kph on EU territory without interruption, and that Ukraine holds the logs. If those logs hold up, a restriction that stops at Ukraine’s border is a policy decision, not a technical fault.

The second difference is the target. Washington is constraining the one Ukrainian instrument that was imposing measurable costs on Russia, and it was working. Ukrainian strikes had pushed Russian refineries down to about 60 percent of capacity and halted seaborne diesel exports almost entirely, according to Kpler data cited by the [Financial Times](#). Trump had pressed Kyiv to stop since at least September 13, when he [said](#) the strikes were causing

a diesel shortage and that there were “plenty of other targets.” When Zelenskyy ordered a resumption of strikes on refineries, Trump [branded](#) Kyiv’s actions a disgrace.

The third difference concerns Moscow. In 2025, the sanctions regime stayed in place. In 2026, Congress wrote it into law: the Graham Act [passed](#) the Senate 86 to 11 and the House 262 to 159, codifying existing sanctions and [authorizing](#) tariffs of up to 500 percent on Russian goods and 100 percent on major buyers of Russian energy, subject to a national interest waiver. Three weeks after signing it, Trump licensed Russian diesel exports, and on October 16 he [signed](#) an order waiving the law’s sanctions and tariffs aimed at Russia’s energy revenues. Kirill Dmitriev [called](#) the suspension of the Graham Act “truly historic.”

A fourth difference runs through commerce alongside the diplomacy. According to [The New York Times](#), Putin raised a multibillion-dollar deal for Lukoil’s global assets with Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner at the Kremlin on September 5, a deal pursued by a group that includes Middle Eastern firms with business ties to their families. However, commerce alone cannot explain the choice. If the war were a transaction, Ukraine would be the better counterparty. The minerals agreement Trump demanded created a joint Reconstruction Investment Fund with preferential U.S. access to new projects, [due to begin investing](#) in 2026. Ukraine [holds deposits](#) of at least 20 of the 50 minerals Washington classifies as critical, its reconstruction will require investment on a scale few markets can match, and its combat-proven drone industry offers joint production that no other partner can provide. A purely transactional White House would be bidding on Kyiv.

The fifth difference is doctrine. Unlike in early 2025, the administration now has a written National Security Strategy that makes the Western Hemisphere its top priority under a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, names strategic stability with Russia as an American interest, and [places](#) the

burden of European security on Europe’s shoulders. However, there are still reasons to expect this policy could be reversed. Trump has reversed himself on Ukraine repeatedly, senators from both parties have [urged](#) him to abandon the diesel deal, and the November 3 midterms may explain much of the fuel price logic. Weighed against the five differences, these factors look like brakes on a direction of travel more than signs of another reversal.

Moscow read the strategy exactly that way, with Dmitriev publicly assigning the Western Hemisphere to Trump, Europe to Putin and Asia to Xi. Convergence on a principle requires no coordination, and the evidence supports the first claim without proving the second. The rhetoric resembles 2025; the instruments, the targets, and the doctrine do not.

The more probable reading is that October marks a change of course. What connects the instruments, the target, the waivers, and the doctrine is a convergence between the White House and the Kremlin on a principle: a world organized into great-power spheres, in which the sovereignty of the states between them is negotiable. Moscow read the strategy exactly that way, with Dmitriev publicly [assigning](#) the Western Hemisphere to Trump, Europe to Putin and Asia to Xi. Convergence on a principle requires no coordination, and the evidence supports the first claim without proving the second. The rhetoric resembles 2025; the instruments, the targets, and the doctrine do not.

What Russia Demands, and Why Ukraine Cannot Capitulate

Russia’s demands target the instruments of Ukrainian statehood, and their scope has widened as the war has gone on. The “denazification” Putin named

as a war aim in February 2022 has always meant regime change in Kyiv. In June 2024, he [required](#) Ukraine to cede all four provinces Russia claims, and at the Istanbul talks in June 2025, Moscow's memorandum [added](#) neutrality, limits on Ukraine's army, and official status for the Russian language. Through 2026, the demands reiterated full Ukrainian withdrawal from Donbas: in May, Yuri Ushakov [said](#) that trilateral talks were inappropriate until Kyiv leaves the part it still controls. In October, Ukraine's elected president was added to the list, when the Kremlin took up Trump's call for a new leader within two days.

Moscow has said plainly that it will accept nothing less. Lavrov's promise at the UN that Russia's aims would be achieved regardless of circumstances was followed on October 16 by Putin, in military uniform, [naming](#) the capture of Donetsk as one of his main military objectives, on the same day Washington waived the Graham Act. Each demand is built so that meeting it would weaken Ukraine's capacity to resist the next one. Zelenskyy has made the argument himself: leaving Donbas and its 200,000 residents would [open the road](#) into central Ukraine and would not stop the Kremlin from making new demands. A capped army removes the means of defense, neutrality removes any guarantor, a leadership chosen under Russian pressure removes political agency, and ending the strike campaign removes the only lever that makes Russia pay. Ukraine's refusal to comply is the only policy that keeps the Ukrainian state in existence.

Even if Kyiv were pressured into accepting these terms and signing a settlement, the consequences would reach far beyond Ukraine. A settlement brokered by Washington on Moscow's terms would ratify two principles: borders may be redrawn by force, and a great power may veto its neighbors' alliances. Those principles negate the foundations of European security since 1975, from the Helsinki Final Act's commitment to the inviolability of frontiers, through the 1990 Charter of Paris and its recognition of every state's freedom to choose its alliances,

to NATO's open door. Moscow has never hidden that its demands extend beyond Ukraine. Its December 2021 [draft](#) treaties required NATO to renounce further enlargement and withdraw forces and infrastructure to 1997 positions, and at this year's General Assembly Lavrov [invited](#) states to help build a new continent-wide Eurasian architecture, while accusing the West of destabilizing the world through force and double standards.

Ukraine's signature on Russia's terms would be the first treaty of a Europe divided into spheres, countersigned in Washington.

If indeed the White House shares the principle of spheres of influence, Ukraine's capitulation would become the founding precedent of the new order, endorsed by the power that built the old one. Every state between Russia and the European Union would draw the lesson, Moldova and Georgia first among them, and so would the Baltic states that Russian propaganda has long cast as Moscow's lost provinces. Through American mediation, the Kremlin would have secured the revision of the post-Cold War settlement that it could not impose through three decades of pressure and more than four years of full-scale war. Ukraine's signature on Russia's terms would be the first treaty of a Europe divided into spheres, countersigned in Washington.

Can Europe Fill the Gap?

European governments understand the stakes better than the White House does, or at least care more about them, and they can replace much of what Washington provides, though not all of it and not at the same speed. The distinction that matters is between gaps of political will and gaps of capability. Money is a problem of will, and Europe has already shown it can solve it, at least till now. Space-based intelligence and missile warning are problems of capability, and no amount of will closes them in the time that matters.

The distinction that matters is between gaps of political will and gaps of capability.

On intelligence, Europe has come further than most observers expected. In January, Emmanuel Macron [said](#) France now provides two-thirds of the intelligence Ukraine receives from partners, a year after Kyiv depended overwhelmingly on American capabilities, and a Western official [told](#) the Financial Times that Ukraine could reduce its remaining dependence significantly within months. Shares of intelligence are a poor measure of what matters most, however. Early warning of ballistic missile launches comes from the American Space Based Infrared System, and Europe has [nothing equivalent](#), nor a ready alternative to Starlink that Ukrainian soldiers could fit to their drones. An EU official [conceded](#) that Europe cannot replace Starlink or Starshield until its own systems mature, possibly in early 2027, and even then at a lower level. The October warning gap showed the cost of that dependence in two days. It compounds a [shortage](#) of interceptors against ballistic missiles, which is why Zelenskyy asked EU leaders this week for more Patriots. The European alternative, the Freyja project, expects its [first combat test](#) only in 2027.

On money, the obstacles are political, and Europe has the tools to route around them. The EUR 90 billion loan for 2026 and 2027 was [agreed](#) through enhanced cooperation, with Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia exempted from any obligation. For the first time, Slovakia refused to endorse the summit's Ukraine conclusions, with Robert Fico [insisting](#) Ukraine needs money for reconstruction rather than weapons. Bulgaria's new government under Rumen Radev [halted](#) arms donations in June, with its defense minister arguing that Ukraine needs more people than weapons, although Radev has [promised](#) not to obstruct common EU decisions. Hungary's new prime minister, Péter Magyar, [lifted](#) Orbán's block on the loan while keeping Hungary out of it, and he opposes both military aid and fast accession even as

he calls Russia a security risk for Europe. The next test is already on the table: Zelenskyy has [asked](#) for EUR 70 billion more next year, Ursula von der Leyen says the request has to be covered, and Belgium still blocks the use of roughly EUR 200 billion in frozen Russian assets. Governments that refuse to contribute can slow European funding, but the formula used for the EUR 90 billion loan, which let willing members proceed while Budapest, Bratislava and Prague opted out, shows they cannot block it. Europe can finance Ukraine's defense; it cannot yet replace American strategic capabilities.

Why Capitulation Invites a Test of Article 5

The case for pressing Kyiv into a settlement must answer an obvious objection: a Russia freed from the war in Ukraine could turn its forces and its war economy against another target. Advocates of a quick deal answer it with Russia's exhaustion. They argue that such a depleted country would lack the means to resume the war or start a new one, so a settlement, however unjust, would hold, and Moscow would need a decade to rebuild before it could threaten anyone else, a decade Europe would use to rearm. The argument rests on two assumptions, but neither is strong: that the danger to NATO begins only once Russia can fight a large war, and that Russian strength must therefore be measured against Europe's.

The escalation Moscow is preparing requires no full-scale war. A limited military confrontation on Europe's periphery would demand only a fraction of the forces now committed in Ukraine, and a Russia freed from that war could afford two things at once: a near-term test of NATO and the long-term rebuilding of its military power. Capitulation might pause the fighting in Ukraine, but it would raise risks to Europe in the short term and in the long term.

Russia is already climbing an escalation ladder against Europe, and it has tested the cost of each

rung before stepping onto the next. The lower rungs are hybrid. Estonia [says](#) Russian intelligence ordered the August arson attack on Milrem Robotics, a Tallinn company whose unmanned ground vehicles serve Ukraine's forces; Germany [accuses](#) Moscow of orchestrating an attempted drone attack on Leipzig airport; NATO shot down a drone over Lithuania for the first time in September; and the IISS [has recorded](#) a threefold increase in hybrid incidents across Europe between 2022 and 2025.

On September 13, Russia moved closer to the line. A Russian drone [struck](#) a train at Yahodyn on the Polish border as European officials returning from the Yalta European Strategy conference in Kyiv were crossing, among them Boris Johnson and security advisers from several EU governments. Radosław Sikorski [said](#) the strike hit a few hundred meters from Polish territory, and Donald Tusk warned that the escalation could reach Poland itself. Whether the diplomatic train was the intended target remains unproven: the Ukrainian rail operator called it quite possible, and Russia claimed to have hit infrastructure used for military cargo. The signal holds either way, since Moscow chose to strike a node that Western officials depend on, within sight of NATO territory, during a high-profile departure. On the same day, Washington pressed Kyiv for the refinery strikes. On September 30, Russia added a declaratory step: Maria Zakharova [named](#) European factories producing arms for Ukraine as possible military targets, and Putin said he was not announcing strikes, but that this was a threat.

Two scenarios follow from this trajectory. The lower rung is a strike on a defense plant in a NATO country that produces weapons for Ukraine. It sits in a gray zone that allies have already begun to dispute: EU Defense Commissioner Andrius Kubilius said such a strike would be an Article 5 case, and a NATO diplomat [retorted](#) that Kubilius does not decide what triggers it. That variant would test whether allies even agree that the treaty applies. The higher rung is a limited standoff strike, by missile or drone,

on a military target in a frontline state that kills NATO soldiers: a logistics hub that moves equipment to Ukraine, or a base where Ukrainian troops train, framed by Moscow as a legitimate target of a party to the war. A limited ground incursion, although less plausible, cannot be excluded and needs further analysis. In any case, the higher rung is the most consequential scenario because it removes all ambiguity. It would test whether allies act on a commitment they cannot deny, and either answer would serve Moscow. Its prize is larger, since a failure in a clear case would destroy the credibility of Article 5 outright.

Escalation against NATO does not require Russia to be able to defeat Europe, occupy its territory, or bomb its capitals. It requires Moscow to know where European willingness to escalate ends, and to strike just short of that line.

The higher rung also shows why the military balance between Europe and Russia is the wrong variable for measuring the near-term risk. Escalation against NATO does not require Russia to be able to defeat Europe, occupy its territory, or bomb its capitals. It requires Moscow to know where European willingness to escalate ends, and to strike just short of that line. A strike on a NATO military target that causes casualties would be an unambiguous Article 5 case, and its clarity is the point. It would force all 32 allies to decide whether to respond militarily and, if they agreed, what that response would be. No ally would march on Moscow. Few would agree to strike Russian territory, particularly after Putin's [warning](#) that an attack on Kaliningrad could bring his entire arsenal, including nuclear, into play.

Even if consensus held, the response allies could realistically agree on would stay within the attack's theater: air defense, reinforcement of the targeted ally, perhaps strikes on launch sites near the border, and further sanctions. A peripheral military engagement along one stretch of the border between NATO

and Russia would cost Moscow some equipment and some prestige, while leaving its territory, its economy and its war machine untouched. Measured against the prize, a demonstrated ceiling on Article 5, that price is low, and the Kremlin can calculate it in advance. This is what the absence of a coordinated NATO strategy for imposing costs means in practice: the Alliance [treats](#) each incident as a one-off and leaves every ally to bear Russian pressure primarily on its own, so the costs it is actually prepared to impose, even when united, fall short of what would deter Putin. Either way Moscow gains. A failure of consensus would undermine NATO's credibility as a deterrent, and a bounded response would expose its ceiling.

Ukraine's military intelligence assesses that Russia is preparing for a possible war with NATO by 2030. The historical record points the same way. Each pause Moscow obtained in the last two decades became a staging ground for the next offensive.

The long-term risk lies in what Russia would rebuild once the war in Ukraine no longer consumes its forces. NATO and EU officials [express](#) optimistic views that Russia is currently unable to start an invasion of a NATO country, but only thanks to the Ukrainian side. Ukraine's army ties down Russian ground power, and capitulation would free that force, along with a defense industry already on a war footing. Ukraine's military intelligence [assesses](#) that Russia is preparing for a possible war with NATO by 2030. The historical record points the same way. Each pause Moscow [obtained](#) in the last two decades became a staging ground for the next offensive: the war against Georgia in 2008, which ended with Russian troops on Georgian soil and no cost to Moscow, preceded the seizure of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014, and the Minsk agreements that froze that war preceded the full-scale invasion of 2022. The Danish Prime Minister [warned](#) that if Ukraine

falls, the door opens for Russia to advance into other parts of Europe. Whether the Kremlin would accept the risk of the higher rung depends on the conditions it reads as a green light.

Each condition Moscow would read as a green light would be strengthened by the abandonment of Ukraine. The first is a judgment about Washington. A Kyiv Post [analysis](#) put it precisely: Russia would most likely strike if convinced that NATO's response would stop short of a direct strike on Russian territory, and what matters to the Kremlin is less America's formal commitment than its willingness to back a rapid and forceful response to a single limited strike. An administration that waives sanctions on Moscow and switches off capabilities in Kyiv supplies that conviction. The second is the record of costless incidents: shot-down drones, protests, and expulsions have imposed no meaningful price, and a settlement on Russia's terms would teach the Kremlin that even a war of conquest goes unpunished. The third is capacity. As long as Ukraine ties down the bulk of Russia's ground forces, a strike on NATO risks opening a second front Moscow could not sustain; a capitulation would lift that constraint while European programs such as [IRIS²](#) and FREYJA remain years from maturity. The same analysis names the indicator to watch: a shift in Kremlin rhetoric from claiming the right to strike to stating that Europe was warned.

The restraints are real and should be weighed honestly. For now, most of Russia's deployable ground forces remain committed in Ukraine, which is precisely the restraint a capitulation would remove. Trump's record of reversals cuts both ways, and a strike that killed American or allied soldiers could provoke a response from Washington that Moscow cannot predict. A clear attack could unite Europe instead of dividing it; even Magyar, no friend of Kyiv, calls Russia a security risk. Putin's nuclear warning over Kaliningrad suggests he expects some response and is building a shield around any limited move. None of these factors predicts when or whether

Russia will act. They show that most of the conditions Moscow would read as a green light are moving in its favor, and that the variable Europe controls most directly is the one Russia watches most closely: the credibility of its own willingness to respond. The question is less whether Russia can attack NATO than whether it believes NATO has already told it the price.

Who Wins from a Forced Peace?

A Ukrainian capitulation would feed two risks at once. It would free Russian forces, confirm that Washington will not pay costs for European security, and teach Moscow that pressure on a weaker neighbor, applied patiently enough, produces Western acquiescence. Each of those lessons lowers the expected price of testing NATO. Peace in Ukraine on Russia's terms would therefore raise the probability of conflict with the Alliance, despite Russia being too weak to fight Europe head-on and because its possible costs cannot exceed its expected gains. Russia does not need to outgun Europe; it only needs to exploit its limits.

For Ukraine, a forced capitulation would cost its sovereignty; for Europe, it would mean a higher risk of escalation in the short and long term. What the United States would gain is far harder to establish. If the White House does share Moscow's vision of a multipolar order divided into spheres of influence, the bargain is lopsided. No power seriously contests American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, so Washington would be conceding Europe's security order in exchange for a sphere it already holds. The commercial dividends on the table, from Russian diesel to Lukoil's assets, are small compared with that concession, and Russia's conduct offers no support for the hope of prying Moscow away from Beijing. The costs, by contrast, would be strategic: the credibility of American guarantees, which allies in Asia watch as closely as those in Europe, and the cohesion of an alliance that has multiplied American power for more than seven decades. The rationale

behind this exchange deserves further analysis; on the evidence available today, it is difficult to identify one that serves American interests.

A region where democratic breakaways fail, and captured states are locked in place, would offer Europe no stable peace, only a wider belt of instability along its border. Ukraine's capitulation would close the exit for every state still trying to leave Russia's sphere.

The consequences would also spread across the wider region between Russia and the European Union. Moldova and Armenia, the two states now trying to loosen Moscow's grip, would face a Kremlin emboldened by success and a West that had just shown how little its commitments are worth. Both depend on the credibility of a European path to sustain their reforms and the public consent that democratic consolidation requires. A forced capitulation in Ukraine would raise the pressure on them while draining the hope that sustains their choices, and fragile democracies caught in that combination rarely stabilize. Captured states would lose even the prospect of escape. Georgia, where the Georgian Dream government has suspended the country's EU accession path, and Belarus, already folded into Russia's military posture, would be pulled deeper into Moscow's orbit and pressed to serve as platforms for an expanding axis of autocracies. A region where democratic breakaways fail, and captured states are locked in place, would offer Europe no stable peace, only a wider belt of instability along its border. Ukraine's capitulation would close the exit for every state still trying to leave Russia's sphere.

The central argument of this article follows from these costs. A durable peace requires a Russia compelled to accept that its aims cannot be achieved, while a Russia handed a capitulation would have every reason to push further, against Ukraine's neighbors and against NATO itself. Compelling

Moscow remains within reach. Ukraine's strike campaign is already imposing costs on Russia's war economy that no Western capital pays for, and Europe should defend it as its own leverage. Congress can contest every Graham Act waiver, since each requires a national interest certification. Europe can fund the EUR 70 billion Kyiv needs, break the deadlock over frozen Russian assets, and treat ballistic missile interceptors, satellite communications and early warning as emergency priorities. NATO, for its part, needs a cost-imposition strategy agreed in

advance and applied to incidents in the aggregate, so Moscow can no longer calculate the price of each probe as zero, and allies should settle publicly, before Russia tests it, how they would respond to a strike on their territory.

Ukraine's refusal to capitulate is Europe's first line of defense, and the window in which Europe can still hold that line without fighting for it is narrowing. If Europe does not name the price of attacking it, Moscow will discover it by experiment ■

EU Enlargement Horizon: When Ambition Meets Veto

The European Commission presented its long-awaited pre-enlargement policy [review](#) on October 6, 2026. The package follows the Commission's March 2024 [communication](#) and the European Council's subsequent request for in-depth policy reviews. It addresses internal reform and the preparations required for future accessions. It also draws lessons from earlier enlargements, including the use of national vetoes to pursue bilateral disputes and the difficulty of responding to democratic backsliding after accession. The Commission proposes stronger safeguards for new members and changes to the way the EU takes decisions. The document offers grounds for cautious optimism, but important political questions remain. Will member states accept limits on their vetoes? How will Ukraine's integration affect the single market, the budget and the balance of influence in the Council? And can the Union prepare for enlargement while candidates carry out the reforms demanded of them?

Enlargement remains a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity; both the EU and future members must be ready at accession; and each candidate must advance according to its own reform progress.

Enlargement and internal reform were among the issues discussed at the European Council in Brussels on October 15–16, 2026. The [conclusions](#) largely reaffirmed the principles set out in the 2023 Granada [declaration](#). Enlargement remains a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity; both the EU and future members must be ready at accession; and each candidate must advance according to its own reform progress. Leaders noted the Commission's communication and asked the Council to analyze its proposals and move the work forward. This provides political direction, but it does not amount to agreement on the individual reforms.



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These debates also matter for Georgia and the EU's eastern neighborhood. Georgia retains candidate status, but its accession process has been effectively [halted](#) since 2024. Ukraine and Moldova, meanwhile, opened negotiating [clusters](#) 2 and 3 on October 13, 2026, building on the earlier opening of the fundamentals and external relations clusters. Opening negotiations is an important step, but it does not mean the required reforms are complete. The Commission has also announced indicative [roadmaps](#) for Ukraine, Moldova, Albania and Montenegro, conditional on continued reform momentum. These should guide preparations rather than guarantee accession on a fixed date.

Geopolitics and Merit Combined

The Commission presents enlargement as a geopolitical imperative while insisting that accession must remain [merit-based](#). The strategic need to strengthen Europe does not remove the obligation to meet membership conditions. Respect for democratic institutions, the rule of law and fundamental rights remains central, alongside alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Commission also intends to extend the annual Rule of Law Report to further candidate countries as they become [ready](#). This is one lever the European Union has not applied to some candidate countries (like Georgia) for unclear reasons. Changing this pattern would be useful and provide a supplementary tool for the EU and civil society organizations in those countries to influence the policy-shaping process.

The risk remains that leaders of certain countries in the accession process might believe their states will be accepted into the EU regardless, for geopolitical and security reasons, which could reduce their appetite for reforms.

One crucial feature of combining these two paradigms, the geopolitical imperative and the

merit-based process, would be avoiding incentive breakdowns. The risk remains that leaders of certain countries in the accession process might believe their states will be accepted into the EU regardless, for geopolitical and security reasons, which could reduce their appetite for reforms. The second risk is that accepting a country that is not fully ready for membership would import democratic backsliding into the European Union. The proposed remedy is gradual integration into the EU Single Market and its programs. This will be accompanied by strict conditionality.

Breaking the Vicious Circle

The European Union has often struggled to respond quickly to crises, and unanimity can allow a single government to hold up action in sensitive areas. Qualified majority voting (QMV) already applies to about 80 percent of the Council's legislative [work](#). The Commission proposes making greater use of existing treaty mechanisms to extend QMV in selected fields. These include sanctions, measures against tax fraud and fiscal measures in energy policy. Decisions with military or defense implications face a separate treaty [restriction](#) and cannot simply be moved to QMV through the foreign-policy passerelle clause.

The Commission also encourages constructive [abstention](#) under Article 31(1) of the Treaty on European Union. This allows a government to make a formal declaration that it will not apply a foreign-policy decision while accepting that the decision commits the Union. It therefore offers an alternative to a veto, subject to the treaty's limits.

For example, Hungary has frequently [applied](#) constructive abstention to avoid blocking EU military and financial support for Ukraine. However, the European Union must also appease some member states that want to keep the veto right. The Commission has therefore proposed to apply emergency brake provisions to social security systems for migrant workers, judicial cooperation, and common

rules for certain criminal offenses. The proposal also stresses that if several member states oppose the decision, debates at the Council level will continue until consensus is reached.

This is, in a way, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it would pave the way for the candidate countries, but on the other, keeping the country that carried out crucial, costly, and painful reforms at the door of the EU might bring huge disappointment to the people of that country and also cast a shadow on the credibility of the EU enlargement process.

For accession negotiations, the Commission recommends QMV for opening clusters and taking intermediate [decisions](#). This would reduce opportunities to block a candidate repeatedly during negotiations. Final admission would still require unanimity and ratification of the accession agreement by all contracting states under Article 49 [TEU](#). The proposal therefore addresses an important source of delay without removing the possibility of a final veto. This is, in a way, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it would pave the way for the candidate countries, but on the other, keeping the country that carried out crucial, costly, and painful reforms at the door of the EU might bring huge disappointment to the people of that country and also cast a shadow on the credibility of the EU enlargement process.

Drawing Conclusions From Past Experience

Bilateral disputes have repeatedly complicated enlargement. The Commission's 2009 enlargement strategy recorded that the Slovenia–Croatia border dispute prevented negotiating chapters from being opened or closed even when technical preparations were complete. More recently, European Parliament

delegation [minutes](#) identified relations with Croatia as an obstacle during Montenegro's December 2024 accession conference. These examples show how a member state can bring a bilateral disagreement into the accession process, creating additional political uncertainty for a candidate.

The EU therefore needs a credible distinction between membership conditions and bilateral demands unrelated to those conditions.

The problem extends beyond those cases. North Macedonia's progress remains linked to constitutional amendments recognizing additional communities, including Bulgarians; the European Council president reiterated this [requirement](#) in June 2026. For the eastern candidates, Hungary's resistance to Ukraine's progress has likewise shown how vulnerable negotiations are to national political decisions. Moving intermediate steps to QMV could limit repeated obstruction. Yet the reform still requires political agreement, and an unresolved dispute could resurface when the accession treaty needs unanimous approval. The EU therefore needs a credible distinction between membership conditions and bilateral demands unrelated to those conditions.

A second lesson concerns democratic backsliding after accession. Hungary and Poland both became subjects of Article 7 [proceedings](#), illustrating how difficult it is to enforce EU values once a country has joined. Poland's procedure closed in 2024 after commitments and measures addressed rule-of-law concerns, showing that sustained EU pressure can also accompany a reversal of backsliding. The Commission now proposes an institutional [safeguard](#) in future accession treaties, available for 15 years after accession. In particularly serious cases, measures could include suspension of Council voting rights. They would follow a Commission proposal or a reasoned request by Member States and be deemed adopted unless rejected by QMV within a specified

period. This remains a proposal requiring agreement in accession treaties. It would complement existing Article 7 [rules](#), not change them automatically, and measures would remain subject to judicial scrutiny and regular review.

Gradual Integration

The Commission stresses that gradual integration should complement and reinforce the accession process. Earlier access to selected parts of the single market and EU programs is intended to reward preparation and help candidates build the capacity required for membership. The proposed [approach](#) links deeper integration to respect for EU values, implementation of relevant EU rules and strategic alignment, including alignment with the CFSP and sanctions. Access would depend on the conditions of the relevant instrument and could be adjusted where those conditions are no longer met.

Some of these benefits are already visible. Ukraine and Moldova joined the EU's [roaming](#) area on January 1, 2026, allowing users to call, text and use mobile data while traveling under the same conditions as at home, subject to the applicable rules. Financial support also links closer integration to reform. Moldova's EUR 1.9 billion [facility](#) for 2025–2027 releases funds after the Commission verifies agreed conditions, while the Western Balkans' EUR 6 billion [facility](#) for 2024–2027 combines grants and concessional loans with reform requirements. Such measures can make the accession process more tangible for citizens and businesses. They also give governments a reason to implement difficult changes before the final membership decision.

Gradual integration will strengthen the EU's influence only if both sides treat it as preparation for full membership.

The political risk is that gradual integration becomes a prolonged waiting room. A country may adopt EU rules and open its economy while remaining outside

the institutions that make those rules. To sustain support for reform, each additional benefit should therefore be linked to clear benchmarks and a credible route towards membership. The Commission's proposed annual dialogues could help assess progress and identify further opportunities, but they cannot resolve a political veto on accession. For Georgia, this means that closer economic links alone cannot replace restoring democratic standards and restarting the accession process. Gradual integration will strengthen the EU's influence only if both sides treat it as preparation for full membership.

Will It Fly At All?

The Commission has put forward proposals that could make enlargement more dynamic, but member states retain the decisive political role. The October European Council's request for further analysis keeps the process moving without settling the most contentious questions. Its [language](#) largely restates the principles agreed in Granada in 2023. The next test will be whether governments translate those principles into decisions on voting arrangements, safeguards and the terms offered to candidates. Further discussion may be necessary, but prolonged deliberation would weaken the momentum that the Commission seeks to build.

Further discussion may be necessary, but prolonged deliberation would weaken the momentum that the Commission seeks to build.

The main question that remains is whether the EU can proceed with enlargement without changing the Treaty, applying the passerelle clauses and bypassing unanimity with QMV. Why is the EU, which sees enlargement as a geopolitical matter, not ready to change the treaty? It is also not guaranteed that EU member states would so easily give up voting rights for the sake of enlargement. The document also says little about the internal reforms of the EU and the reform of voting rights in the Council, since

the accession of Ukraine to the EU will shift the power balance at the Council eastward, and the Polish-Ukrainian axis, representing 15.5 percent of the population of the EU-29, can act as an anchor to set up blocking minorities. The European Commission does not provide an answer to the most pressing issue of dealing with Ukraine's agricultural sector and the allocation of cohesion funds. The European Commission also floats the idea of introducing transitional arrangements for the free movement of workers and services, agriculture, sensitive products, funding, and participation in common systems and networks. It seems the European Commission shied away from proposing the [same](#) 7-year transitional period (2+3+2 system) as for countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. This leaves room to think that EU leaders are considering longer transitional periods.

For Georgia, the central problem is the gap between formal candidate status and the absence of progress

towards negotiations. On October 12, 2026, the Foreign Affairs Council expressed grave [concern](#) about democratic backsliding, the situation of opposition parties and the implementation of foreign agents' legislation. A fuller discussion is expected in January 2027. Georgia nevertheless retains its formal candidate status. The Commission's [position](#) remains that progress depends on reversing the authorities' current course and implementing the necessary reforms. Meanwhile, Moldova and Ukraine opened the second and third negotiation clusters, meaning that more than 70 percent of negotiation chapters are open. They are also expecting to get the accession roadmaps with details and deadlines for the accession process, while Georgia remains a candidate country "on paper" only, and chances to catch up with Moldova and Ukraine vanish every day ■

Moldova Is Becoming Georgia's Uncomfortable European Mirror

Moldova listens to Brussels; we do not.” With those words earlier this month, Shalva Papuashvili, the speaker of Georgian Dream’s (GD) parliament, neatly [summarized](#) the foreign-policy doctrine that has taken shape in the last few years. “The only thing Moldova is ahead of us in is Brussels’ praise,” he added.

This was no isolated provocation. In June, Papuashvili [declared](#) that the Moldovan government attached “no value to its own sovereignty and independence,” suggesting that European integration had ceased to be merely about limiting sovereignty and was instead becoming a means of “dissolving the state altogether.” When EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos subsequently [described](#) Georgia as a candidate country “only on paper,” Papuashvili [retorted](#) that Moldova was itself “a state only on paper.” Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [joined](#) in shortly afterward: if Moldova and Ukraine were ahead of Georgia in anything, he said, it was only in “negative indicators.”

These three ideas — peace, sovereignty and identity — have become the pillars of Georgian Dream’s new geopolitical discourse. Europe is no longer presented merely as a demanding or hypocritical partner. European integration itself is increasingly portrayed as a process that threatens all three.

The language is revealing. In April, Papuashvili had already [declared](#) that “the Ukrainian and Moldovan path of European integration is not the Georgian path,” characterizing it as one of “giving up territories and abolishing the state.” EU membership, he argued, could not justify sacrificing “territories, sovereignty and identity.” These three ideas — peace, sovereignty and identity — have become the pillars of Georgian Dream’s new geopolitical discourse. Europe is no longer presented merely as a demanding or hypocritical partner.



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

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European integration itself is increasingly portrayed as a process that threatens all three.

Georgian Dream has thus turned Moldova into a cautionary tale. In its telling, Chişinău obeyed Brussels and got economic stagnation, insecurity and diminished sovereignty; Tbilisi resisted Brussels and got growth and peace. Moldova submits to foreign dictates. Georgia defends its national interests.

Moldova is accepting considerable short-term economic and political costs to dismantle the dependencies through which Moscow has historically exercised influence.

Yet the comparison may ultimately prove more dangerous to Georgian Dream than to Moldova. For the two countries are conducting, in effect, a natural experiment in what sovereignty means for small states on Russia's former imperial periphery.

Moldova is accepting considerable short-term economic and political costs to dismantle the dependencies through which Moscow has historically exercised influence.

Georgia, meanwhile, is restoring some of those dependencies while presenting the resulting economic dividend and absence of war as evidence of sovereign statecraft. The Georgian leadership goes against the prevailing trend, to say the least: all of Europe, Russia's immediate neighbors such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, even Central Asian states are trying to loosen their economic or security ties with Moscow in parallel with the latter's war of conquest against Ukraine. To stake a country's future prosperity and security on a power that denies its territorial integrity, occupies two of its regions, and has driven out most of its inhabitants is more than a strategic paradox. It is a choice so counter-intuitive that it is difficult to account for without considering the possibility of powerful external pressure.

The outcome of Moldova's European gamble will therefore matter well beyond Moldova. If Chişinău succeeds, it will challenge one of Georgian Dream's central claims: that resisting Brussels is necessary to preserve sovereignty, prosperity and peace.

The Great Reversal

The irony is that scarcely 15 years ago, almost anyone asked which of the two countries was more likely to reach Europe first would have answered Georgia.

From the [launch](#) of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, Georgia was widely regarded as the European Union's star pupil in the South Caucasus. Moldova was a rather different proposition: poorer, institutionally weaker, plagued by oligarchic capture and burdened by powerful pro-Russian political forces. Moldovan public opinion was deeply divided between supporters of European integration and those favoring closer relations with Moscow. Georgia, by contrast, appeared to possess many of the advantages Moldova lacked.

Its national identity drew heavily on memories of centuries-old statehood and resistance to Russian imperial domination. Openly pro-Moscow political parties remained marginal. Successive waves of reform from 2004 to 2012 had produced a comparatively efficient state administration and dramatically reduced everyday corruption. Support for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions was both broad and remarkably resilient. Georgia had made NATO membership a strategic objective and contributed substantially to Western military operations abroad, both in the framework of NATO (ISAF-Afghanistan) and CSDP ([Central African Republic](#) and Mali).

Both countries nevertheless shared a fundamental vulnerability. Each had unresolved territorial conflicts, and Russian troops were stationed on internationally recognized national territory in both. Georgia and Moldova were, in different ways, small states living in the shadow of a former

imperial power unwilling to fully accept their geopolitical emancipation.

Today their positions have been strikingly reversed. Georgia's European trajectory has effectively ground to a halt; European officials describe it as a candidate country in name rather than substance. Moldova, meanwhile, is governed by a political force firmly committed to European integration and increasingly determined to reduce Russia's capacity to influence the country.

The reversal is about considerably more than attitudes towards Brussels. Georgia and Moldova have begun to develop opposing ideas of what sovereignty itself requires.

The Price of Economic Sovereignty

On the narrowest economic measure, Georgian Dream has a case.

Georgia has recently grown much faster than Moldova. Its economy expanded by more than [7 percent](#) last year, against [2 percent](#) in Moldova. This year, growth is expected to remain substantially stronger. Georgia also [enjoys](#) a higher GDP per head. Georgian Dream draws an uncomplicated conclusion from these figures: Tbilisi chose pragmatism and prosperity, whereas Chişinău chose Brussels and paid the price.

Moldova's geopolitical reorientation has been expensive.

There is some truth in the second part. Moldova's geopolitical reorientation has been expensive.

Only a few years ago, the country [depended](#) on Russia for all its gas and for roughly 80 percent of its electricity imports. That dependence has now effectively been [eliminated](#). Russia accounts for barely 3 percent of Moldova's foreign trade, while the EU accounts for around 56 percent. Moscow has

consequently lost several of the economic instruments through which it could once exert direct pressure on the Moldovan state.

Such freedom has not come cheaply. The rapid reorientation of energy supplies contributed to a steep increase in prices, weighing on households and businesses and depressing economic growth. Maia Sandu has estimated that higher energy costs alone deprived the economy of the equivalent of roughly three percentage points of growth. Moldovans have therefore been asked to absorb an immediate reduction in living standards in return for a strategic benefit whose economic rewards will arrive, if at all, only later.

Georgia has moved in almost precisely the opposite direction. Its recent prosperity has coincided with the restoration of some of the very economic dependencies on Russia that successive Georgian governments once worked to reduce. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia has benefited from a large influx of Russian money and migrants, booming tourism and trade, and rapidly expanding re-export businesses connected to Russia and other Eurasian markets.

The composition of Georgia's exports is particularly revealing. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan [have emerged](#) among the country's largest export destinations, but a substantial share of this trade consists not of Georgian-made goods but of [re-exports](#), particularly vehicles and other products ultimately serving the Russian market currently under severe Western sanctions. By one estimate, only 46 percent of Georgia's exports [consist](#) of domestically produced goods, compared with around [80 percent](#) in Moldova. Georgia's impressive export figures therefore say somewhat less about the productive transformation of its economy than the headline numbers suggest.

Energy tells a similar story. Georgia had once largely freed itself from dependence on Russian energy. That achievement is now being partly reversed.

Russia [supplies](#) roughly a quarter of Georgia's natural gas and more than 40 percent of its petroleum products. Tourism, trade, re-exports and financial flows have similarly restored Russia to a prominent position in the Georgian economy.

This makes Georgian Dream's argument more paradoxical than it first appears. The government presents superior growth as the dividend of defending Georgia's "sovereignty" against Brussels. Yet much of that prosperity rests on renewed exposure to Russia. Moldova, by contrast, has accepted slower growth, higher energy prices and considerable short-term pain to reduce precisely the dependencies through which Moscow could exercise political leverage.

Moldova is paying an economic premium to reduce Russia's capacity to coerce it. Georgia has enjoyed an economic premium while rebuilding the dependency it once sought to escape.

The question is therefore not simply which economy is currently growing faster. It is which model will prove more sustainable, and which offers greater strategic autonomy.

Georgia's boom is more vulnerable to geopolitics than its headline growth figures suggest. Moscow could once again transform economic dependence into political leverage, demanding further concessions from Tbilisi, perhaps eventually even acquiescence in the permanent loss of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. But the opposite geopolitical development would create difficulties too. A future normalization of economic relations between Russia and the West, after the war ends in Ukraine, could reduce Georgia's value as an intermediary and re-export hub, draining away some of the exceptional flows that have sustained its recent boom.

What Georgian Dream presents as an economic miracle may therefore prove, at least in part, a geopolitical windfall, with a precariously short shelf life.

Two Ideas of Security

The same inversion is visible in security policy.

Georgia once sought to build a small but capable military. It contributed actively to Western-led international operations, from Iraq and Afghanistan to EU missions in Africa, while making NATO membership a central objective of its national security strategy. Moldova started from almost the opposite premise. When its constitution was [adopted](#) in July 1994, permanent neutrality was written into the country's fundamental law.

Under Georgian Dream, however, building a credible military has [gradually ceased](#) to be a strategic priority. This has not simply been a matter of budgetary restraint. It forms part of a broader policy of accommodation towards Moscow, built on the assumption that Georgia can best preserve its security by avoiding anything Russia might interpret as threatening.

Georgian Dream presents this policy not as vulnerability but as vindication. Its leaders repeatedly point to the absence of war as proof of their “peace policy.” Ukraine provides the indispensable counter-example: Kyiv resisted Russia and got war; Tbilisi accommodated Russia and got peace. The implication is that deterrence itself can be provocative, while restraint towards Moscow constitutes a form of security policy.

To sustain this argument, Georgian Dream has developed an increasingly conspiratorial vocabulary. At its center stands the mysterious “Global War Party,” an ill-defined transnational force supposedly determined to open a “second front” against Russia in Georgia. Western governments and institutions are portrayed as instruments, allies or proxies of this network, intent on dragging Georgia into a confrontation its government has wisely avoided.

This narrative has also become an explanation for freezing the country's European trajectory. Conditions attached to further integration are presented not as requirements concerning democratic

institutions, political freedoms or the rule of law, but as an ultimatum: Georgia is supposedly being asked to choose between Europe and peace. To this has been added a cultural argument that integration will eventually require Georgians to abandon their traditions and accept an alien social agenda.

The inversion is remarkable. A country that once regarded NATO membership, military preparedness and integration with the West as instruments for safeguarding its sovereignty increasingly portrays them as possible causes of war. Military weakness becomes prudence; accommodation becomes deterrence; strategic retreat becomes sovereignty.

Moldova, historically much more cautious about security, is moving in the other direction.

Constitutional neutrality is unlikely to disappear soon. Yet Chişinău increasingly rejects the assumption that neutrality should mean vulnerability. Its emerging doctrine rests on a straightforward proposition: a neutral country can, and must, be capable of defending itself.

The models are not so much today's NATO members as countries such as Finland before joining the alliance, or Switzerland: militarily non-aligned but armed, resilient and anything but strategically passive. Moldova is consequently developing closer bilateral defense relationships with European countries, strengthening intelligence cooperation and investing in its own military capabilities, including drones and air defense.

Moldova increasingly believes that peace requires reducing Russia's capacity to coerce it. Georgian Dream increasingly behaves as though peace requires reducing Georgia's capacity to resist Russia.

The contrast is striking. Moldova increasingly believes that peace requires reducing Russia's capacity to coerce it. Georgian Dream increasingly

behaves as though peace requires reducing Georgia's capacity to resist Russia.

One country is trying to make neutrality credible by becoming harder to intimidate. The other, despite having no constitutional commitment to neutrality and retaining a formal aspiration to join NATO, increasingly equates security with avoiding anything that might displease Moscow.

Moldova's European Gamble

Moldova is willing to bear these economic and security costs because its government believes there is a destination at the end of them: membership of the European Union.

In June 2026, the EU formally [opened](#) Moldova's first negotiating cluster, covering the "fundamentals" of membership. External relations followed in July, and in October Brussels opened [two further clusters](#), covering the internal market and competitiveness. Four of the six clusters are now open, encompassing 24 of the 33 negotiating chapters. The Moldovan government says it aims to complete the necessary work by 2028, putting the country in a position to join the EU around 2030.

For Chişinău, speed is not merely a bureaucratic preference. It is a political necessity. One of the most powerful arguments used by Moldova's Russia-friendly opposition is that the EU will never actually admit the country, that Moldovans are being asked to endure economic hardship, confront Moscow and undertake painful reforms in pursuit of a promise that Brussels has no intention of honoring. The most effective way to defeat that argument is not another declaration of solidarity from a European commissioner. It is visible progress towards membership.

The electoral calendar adds urgency. Moldova's next presidential election is due in November 2028, followed by parliamentary elections in spring 2029.

By then, pro-European politicians will need to demonstrate that the sacrifices demanded by their geopolitical choice have produced tangible results.

So far, many Moldovans have experienced the costs more immediately than the rewards: sharply higher energy prices, sluggish economic growth, relentless Russian political interference and the physical spill-overs of a war taking place next door. The political bargain remains sustainable because a sufficiently large part of society believes these costs are the price of a safer and more prosperous European future.

That promise cannot remain open-ended. And here Moldova's gamble becomes Europe's responsibility. Accession must remain conditional on reforms; lowering standards for geopolitical convenience would ultimately weaken both Moldova and the EU. But procedural rigor need not mean strategic lethargy. An accession process that stretches indefinitely into the future would vindicate Moscow's most effective argument: Moldova can sacrifice for Europe, but Europe will never make Moldova European.

Moldova is small enough that its eventual integration need not constitute an overwhelming fiscal burden. Its [population](#) is roughly 2.4 million; many Moldovans already possess Romanian citizenship and therefore enjoy EU mobility rights. Its geopolitical significance, meanwhile, greatly exceeds its economic weight. Situated between Romania and a Ukraine at war, Moldova forms part of the strategic space connecting Ukraine to the European Union and the Black Sea. A Moldova returned to Russia's sphere of influence would not merely represent a failed enlargement policy. It would create a new vulnerability on Ukraine's western flank.

Moldova has chosen Europe at considerable cost. Brussels should make sure Moldovans are not eventually left wondering when Europe intends to choose them.

Georgia's Moldovan Test

But Moldova's European gamble has consequences beyond its own borders.

It is becoming a test of one of the central claims on which Georgian Dream has built its increasingly anti-European politics: that integration with the EU is either unattainable on acceptable terms or comes at an intolerable price in sovereignty, national identity and peace.

This is precisely why Georgian Dream's hostility towards Moldova is so revealing. Moldova has become not simply another candidate country but a negative counter-model. Brussels rewards Chişinău, Georgian officials suggest, because its government submits to Brussels; Georgia is punished because it refuses to do so. Moldova sacrifices sovereignty for European approval; Georgia protects sovereignty by resisting European pressure.

Yet this makes Moldova potentially a very dangerous counter-argument to Georgian Dream's worldview. The two countries share many of the same vulnerabilities. Both are small former Soviet republics with Russian troops on internationally recognized territory. Both have experienced Russian economic pressure and political interference. Both live close to the war in Ukraine. Neither can alter its geography.

But they are drawing opposite conclusions from it. For Georgian Dream, vulnerability requires accommodation: avoid provoking Russia, preserve economic ties, limit defense ambitions and resist Western pressure. Moldova has increasingly reached the opposite conclusion: vulnerability makes diversification, resilience and European integration more urgent.

Moldova therefore creates something Georgian Dream has increasingly sought to eliminate from Georgia's domestic political debate: a counterfactual.

What if a small, vulnerable post-Soviet state can reduce its dependence on Russia without being

destroyed? What if it can deepen relations with the European Union without surrendering its national identity? What if strengthening defense does not inevitably provoke war? What if Brussels is prepared, eventually, to admit a country from the former Soviet space that fulfills the conditions?

None of this is yet assured. Moldova remains poor. Its institutions require further reform. Its politics remain polarized, Russian interference is persistent, and the accession process could stall. Enlargement ultimately depends not only on reforms in Chişinău but on political decisions in 27 EU capitals. Moldova should not be prematurely celebrated as a completed European success story.

But it does not need to become an EU member tomorrow to affect Georgian politics. It merely has to keep moving while Georgia moves backwards. Every negotiating cluster opened with Moldova makes the contrast harder to dismiss. Every new energy interconnection, infrastructure project, or piece of access to the European market makes Europe less abstract. Every year in which Moldova remains at peace while strengthening its resilience makes it harder to argue that European integration inevitably brings war.

There is a deeper historical irony. For much of the first two decades after the Rose Revolution, Georgia presented itself as the post-Soviet state that had travelled furthest from Moscow's political orbit. Moldova seemed more hesitant, more oligarchic and more vulnerable to Russian influence. If Moldova now succeeds in anchoring itself in Europe while Georgia consolidates authoritarian government and restores its dependence on Moscow, the former laggard will have become a demonstration of what the former frontrunner might have been.

Keeping Hope Alive

Moldova must demonstrate that moving towards Europe does not entail what Tbilisi increasingly claims it does: economic ruin, war, the surrender

of national identity or submission to foreign rule. It is equally important that the EU shows its preparedness to welcome new members that have struggled to join a community founded on freedom, the rule of law and democratic institutions. Such a positive example would carry more weight than yet another European Parliament resolution or another reprimand from the Commission.

But it would be a mistake to expect it to pose any serious intellectual challenge to Georgian Dream, or to unsettle the narrative on which the Georgian government has built its case. The Georgian Dream leadership is unlikely to be troubled by these questions. Its propaganda machine will find new ways to portray Moldova's European integration as a surrender of sovereignty, a descent into colonial dependence or a threat to the Christian faith and "traditional family values." GD has long since crossed the threshold at which the distinction between truth and falsehood, or even between right and wrong, carries much political weight. Its narratives are primarily instrumental, tailored to particular segments of society, above all the most vulnerable and least

informed, who form an important part of the party's electoral base. They also serve those with a vested interest in preserving the system: people who may know perfectly well that the official story is false, yet find it convenient, or necessary, to profess belief in it, as their social status and economic sustainability depend on it.

Self-criticism, however, is hardly the point. Too many questions have gone unanswered, too many contradictions have accumulated, and too many opportunities for reflection have been squandered for the authorities to be expected to change course now. The more important audience is elsewhere: among Georgians who continue to believe that their country has a democratic and European future. For them, the success of Moldova and Ukraine would be more than a geopolitical achievement. It would be proof that sacrifice and perseverance can still be rewarded, that Europe remains faithful to its promises, and that Georgia's present predicament need not determine its future. Without such proof, disillusionment may harden into nihilism. With it, hope can endure ■

The Neighbor's Consent: What Ukraine's Accession Means for Poland

On May 22, 2022, Andrzej Duda, then Poland's president, became the first foreign head of state to address the Verkhovna Rada in person since the full-scale invasion. "I personally will not rest until Ukraine becomes a member of the European Union in the full sense of the word," he [told](#) the deputies. Four days into the invasion, he had co-signed, with seven other Central European presidents, [a call](#) to grant Ukraine candidate status immediately. Four years later, on July 1, 2026, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of Law and Justice, whose party had held the presidency and the government in 2022, [wrote](#) to its members that Ukraine "cannot be admitted to the European Union unless it entirely abandons" the course of its politics of memory, and called on them to use every available means to block the government's efforts to integrate Ukraine "on privileged terms."

In April 2024, Radosław Sikorski, foreign minister of the government that had replaced Kaczyński's, set out the logic of 2022 in his [exposé](#) to the Sejm: Poland could "move the borders of the free world

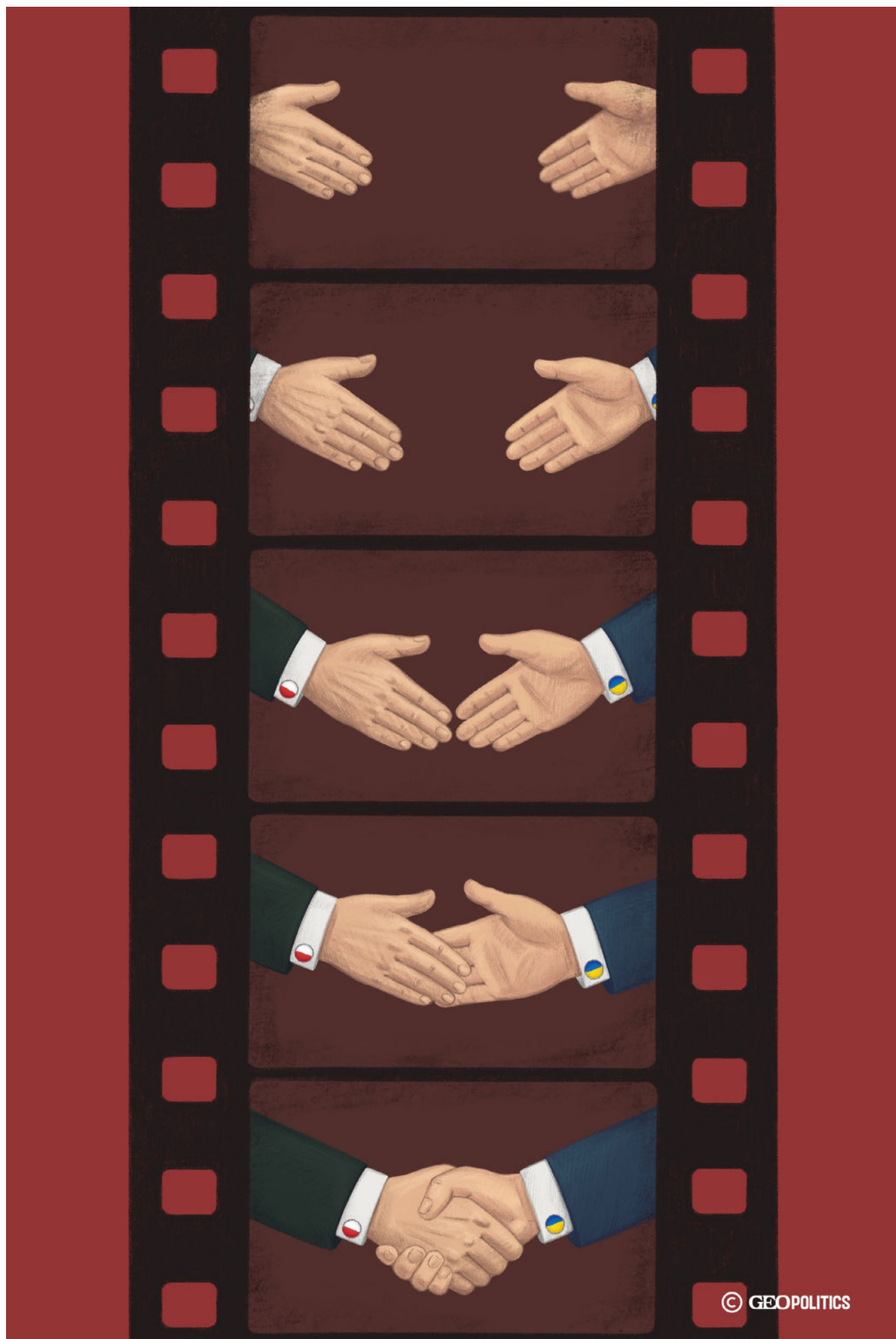
hundreds of kilometers to the east," and even as a net contributor to the Union's budget it would gain from membership more than it lost. In September 2026 the same minister [said](#) in Kyiv that Poland blocks no negotiating cluster, but that Ukraine must expect compromises on agriculture and transport and be careful in choosing its national heroes. The foreign policy strategy of March 2026 and the MFA position of July [codified](#) this: "the decisions taken must secure Poland's key interests"; no accelerated, partial, or "reverse" membership; transition periods for agriculture and transport; Poland's interests defended "[like Hungary](#)." Polish society has moved with its politicians: support for Ukraine's membership fell from [87 percent](#) in March 2022 to [43 percent](#) in June 2026.

Between these statements lies a change that runs through both political camps, with different intensity. The state that drove Ukraine's admission to Western institutions now attaches conditions beyond the accession criteria, slows the process, and measures Ukraine's membership by the particular interests it may affect.



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The change occurred during wartime and has three sources: the electoral rise and ideology of the Polish right, ambiguous American policy on the war, and bilateral disputes that Warsaw now pursues through the accession talks. Its consequences reach beyond the two countries.

What Changed Poland's Position on Ukraine's European Integration

The first source lies inside Polish politics. Law and Justice held power from 2015 to 2023 and lost it despite winning 35 percent of the vote, but the far right that entered the Sejm in 2019 with 7 percent, and won the same share in 2023, is no longer a fringe: in the first round of the presidential election of 2025 Konfederacja's candidate Sławomir Mentzen and Grzegorz Braun of its breakaway Confederation of the Polish Crown won [21 percent](#) between them, and the presidency went to Karol Nawrocki, the candidate of the right. In an [October 2026 CBOS poll](#), the right holds nearly two-fifths of the vote and the far right a fifth. Polish politics is contested between the liberal center and a right that sets the agenda on migration, agriculture, and Ukraine, and whose ideology runs in two directions that contradict each other.

One is Polish security leadership in the region, which requires Ukraine as a partner inside the Western institutions. On April 5, 2023, receiving Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Warsaw, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki [said](#) that “the place of the heroic Ukrainian nation is in NATO, is in the European Union.” The other is everything else the right stands for — nationalism, protectionism, resistance to Brussels and Berlin, opposition to migration and fear for Polish identity — in which Ukraine is an adversary in history and a competitor in the economy, and Ukrainians in Poland a burden on the state. This reading coexisted uneasily with the first and, since April 2023, has gradually overtaken it. Ten days after Zelenskyy's visit, Kaczyński announced a [ban](#) on imports of Ukrainian grain and dozens of

other products. “There is no Poland without the countryside,” he [told](#) the farmers that autumn, and his agriculture minister [explained](#) that since “on the present terms, Polish agriculture will never win against Ukrainian agriculture,” the ban was a precondition for Ukrainian membership. In August 2025, Nawrocki [vetoed](#) the law extending the refugees' legal stay, because “Polish citizens are treated worse in their own state than guests from Ukraine.”

The same ideology treats the Union, and Germany as its embodiment, as a threat to what is Polish, and has made opposition to qualified-majority voting — the question that decides whether a large enlargement is possible at all — a cause. While the European Parliament [was debating its proposal for](#) qualified majority voting on “interim steps in the enlargement process,” Morawiecki [warned](#) that the Parliament's proposals would “lead to the liquidation of nation states”; Kaczyński [calls](#) the Tusk government “an occupying power” serving Germany, and in July 2026 described its Ukraine policy as “one-sided submission to the interests... of our eastern neighbor, dictated to Tusk from Berlin.” At the Volhynia memorial in Chełm that same month, Kaczyński [said](#) Ukraine “cannot enter the European Union... with Banderism, and we will do everything so that it does not enter, if it does not withdraw from all of this.”

The Polish government has adjusted to a consensus that the right has moved. Through three election campaigns in a row — 2023, 2025, 2027 — the pressure of the right has shifted opinion on the questions that count: for instance, support for accepting Ukrainian refugees fell from 94 percent in early 2022 to [48 percent](#) in December 2025, and [60 percent](#) approved Nawrocki's veto. The government thus refuses to implement the [migration pact](#) in full and carries the farmers' interest inside its coalition: when the Sejm speaker, from the Left, promised Kyiv membership “as soon as possible,” the deputy speaker from the Polish People's Party [countered](#) that “it would be the death of Polish agriculture.” Nevertheless, this adjustment to the rise of the right does not explain

the whole turn; the rest lies in security and American policy.

The Trump administration has moved to press Kyiv rather than Moscow.

The second source is the ambiguous American policy on the war, which has taken different forms under the two presidents. The Biden administration sustained Ukraine's defense, but it managed escalation rather than sought Russia's defeat: it delayed tanks, ATACMS missiles, and F-16s and only gradually lifted restrictions on striking Russian territory. As Democratic congressman Jim Himes [observed](#), "we have just about always been too late." Indeed, Republicans close to Trump [blocked](#) its aid request in Congress for half a year. The Trump administration has moved to press Kyiv rather than Moscow.

Tusk asks no one "to love Ukraine," only to see that "it is in Poland's interest that Ukraine does not lose this war."

Washington's weight in Warsaw is of a different order from Brussels'. About 10,000 American troops are stationed in Poland, and the right has turned its pro-American line into a pro-Trump one: Trump [endorsed](#) Nawrocki during the 2025 campaign, and in May 2026 he [announced](#) 5,000 additional troops "based on the successful election of Karol Nawrocki," while withdrawing 5,000 from Germany. The government could not ignore this, and on Ukraine, Warsaw has adjusted its interest to the outcome Washington would accept. Tusk asks no one "to love Ukraine," only to [see](#) that "it is in Poland's interest that Ukraine does not lose this war."

The result is an ambivalence Warsaw has to live with. It repeats that Ukraine cannot lose and lends this position important political support, secures the hub at Jasionka through which [almost all Western aid](#) passes, and keeps calling on others to support it. At the Warsaw Security Forum this October, Tusk [made](#) supporting Ukraine the duty

of anyone who has Poland's sovereignty in mind. Meanwhile, American policy, on which Polish support has depended, has shifted since November 2025 to accommodate many of Russia's demands at the expense of European security. The 28-point plan closed NATO to Ukraine and instead [declared](#) it "eligible for EU membership," and the December 2025 draft [set](#) accession for January 2027. Poland had no part in writing those terms; Sikorski's September demand for a seat at the peace talks came because it had none. Yet even so, the objection Warsaw raised to the American settlement concerned Ukraine's accelerated membership: the president's office answered from Washington that Nawrocki [unequivocally opposed](#) such a path within a peace agreement.

Kyiv had expected Warsaw's help in accelerating its accession, as in 2022, and the December 2023 change of government seemed to make this more likely. Instead, it received a firm position that acceleration was impossible and, on top of conditions on agricultural exports and truckers' rights, a condition on history policy.

The third source is bilateral. Kyiv had expected Warsaw's help in accelerating its accession, as in 2022, and the December 2023 change of government seemed to make this more likely. Instead, it received a firm position that acceleration was impossible and, on top of conditions on agricultural exports and truckers' rights, a condition on history policy. Poland's consent to Ukraine's membership was made dependent on Kyiv's acceptance of the Polish interpretation of the Volhynia massacres — the killing of tens of thousands of Polish civilians in 1943–44, recognized by the Polish parliament as genocide and treated by Ukraine as a Polish–Ukrainian conflict with victims on both sides. This historical condition, too, was added under the same pressure of the right and of public opinion. Membership is no longer a strategic priority but, in [Kosiniak-Kamysz's definition](#),

a matter of the state's development. Polish interests can thus turn into conditions, since the dependence is asymmetric: Ukraine badly needs Poland's consent, while Poland does not treat Ukraine's membership as a need of its own and demands that these interests be secured first.

What Poland and the Region Lose

As Ukraine has long been the central country for Polish leadership in EU enlargement policy, Warsaw can no longer play that role after the strategy shift. Other candidates have champions of their own: Moldova is helped by Romania, whose president [proposed](#) in September 2025 to begin “technical negotiations” with Chişinău “even if the negotiations are not officially launched” — and Warsaw itself has hinted that Moldova's path could be separated from Ukraine's. When Hungary's veto raised the question of decoupling the two candidates, which Kyiv [opposed](#), Poland's deputy minister for European affairs [said](#) that “when the time comes, we're open to having this discussion.” Georgia has no champion, as its government has halted its European integration process, and the Commission [calls](#) Georgia “a candidate country in name only.” The Polish Council presidency of 2025 [promised](#) “the pace and quality” of enlargement east and south, but in the end opened nothing in the east. Instead, Warsaw only offered to “revive” the Eastern Partnership — a format of 2009 for neighbors without a membership perspective. That is a step back from enlargement, not a policy for enlargement.

Warsaw only offered to “revive” the Eastern Partnership — a format of 2009 for neighbors without a membership perspective. That is a step back from enlargement, not a policy for enlargement.

Another problem concerns the reform of the Union's decision-making, which is essential for the next round

of enlargement. In 2024, Sikorski [told the Sejm](#) that a Union of more than thirty members would have to decide more efficiently, and that Poland might have to choose between treaty reform and “closing the road to membership to its eastern and southern neighbors” — a bold statement for a politician from a country that cherishes its veto, though he would keep unanimity for enlargement itself.

The link between winning the war, successful enlargement and a stronger geopolitical Europe is the ground on which the Union revived the enlargement process in 2022, and Poland's turn weakens it at its most sensitive point. Advocacy for Ukraine has shifted to the Baltic and Nordic states, none with Poland's weight in the Council, and the conditions have multiplied rather than fallen away. This leaves the Union without an instrument of its own security on its eastern border just as Washington withdraws from it.

Restoring the Strategic Case

Restoring Polish leadership and ensuring the success of the enlargement policy for Eastern European candidate countries would require three developments.

The insulation of the accession process from domestic political pressure, which the Polish government can best achieve in cooperation with Brussels.

First is the insulation of the accession process from domestic political pressure, which the Polish government can best achieve in cooperation with Brussels. On October 6 the Commission [proposed](#) that negotiating clusters be opened by qualified majority; that new members be bound for fifteen years by a safeguard clause under which their voting rights can be suspended and their ability to block further enlargements, or to pursue bilateral disputes through them, limited; and that accession treaties carry sectoral safeguards — for Ukraine, explicitly, on farm payments and on market access for sensitive agricultural

products. This proposal grants the agricultural protection Poland demanded and [relieves](#) the government of a veto it is under domestic pressure to use: once clusters are opened by majority, decisions on Ukraine's accession cease to be an instrument of electoral competition in Warsaw, whoever governs there after 2027. On October 13, after Hungary lifted its veto, the Union [opened clusters 2 and 3](#), and Kyiv hopes to open the last two, which include agriculture, by the end of the year — under the existing rule of unanimity, while the Commission's proposals are [examined in the Council](#).

The second concerns Poland's conception of its own security, which the president and the right continue to locate outside the Union: this month Nawrocki [told](#) Rzeczpospolita that “the more American soldiers in Poland, the better,” called Tusk “[an anti-American prime minister](#)” and blamed the defense ministry for stalling talks on a permanent American base. Sikorski, for his part, asked “[our MAGA president](#)” to use his friendship with Trump to secure that base and to explain to him “that Putin is the aggressor.” Washington's pursuit of an accommodation with Russia, including the “[Europe–Russia postwar security framework](#)” its envoys raised in Miami on October 9, undermines the very premise of this reliance: that NATO and American forces stationed on Polish territory deter Russia. Nor would a future administration more firmly committed to an American presence alter the trajectory: successive administrations, whatever their disposition towards Europe, have insisted that the Europeans assume a greater share of responsibility for transatlantic

security. Irrespective of the scale of that presence and of the choices of subsequent governments, Poland has every reason to invest more resolutely in European, and not merely national, defense, and to restore both the security rationale of enlargement and its own leadership within it. The American policy of October 2026 ought in itself to provide a decisive impetus in that direction.

More structured cooperation on Ukraine's European integration could also be helpful not only to Ukraine, but also to Polish leadership and position in the EU.

The third step falls to Kyiv, which cannot rely on the strategic weight of Ukraine's victory to outweigh the attention the bilateral relationship requires. The [lifting](#), in November 2024, of the moratorium on exhumations imposed in 2017 was a necessary step but did not settle the historical question: in 2026, a dispute over Ukraine's domestic memory politics crossed into foreign policy and produced the deepest crisis in Polish–Ukrainian relations in years. What is needed is deeper and sustained cooperation on history, on trade and transport, and on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and their reintegration on return, as well as a public diplomacy that addresses a Polish public opinion now turned against Ukraine's membership. Finally, more structured cooperation on Ukraine's European integration could also be helpful not only to Ukraine, but also to Polish leadership and position in the EU ■

Is Ukraine Fully Derussified Yet?

On April 26, 2022, the Kyiv municipality [removed](#) a monument, the People's Friendship Arch, that had stood in the city center since 1982, when it was unveiled for the 65th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. This monumental ensemble, dedicated to the "friendship between peoples," featured two bronze workers, one Ukrainian and one Russian, standing united as they brandished the Soviet coat of arms. It also included granite Cossacks [depicted](#) after signing the 1654 Pereyaslav Treaty – the first agreement between the Zaporizhzhian Cossacks and the Moscow tsar, under which the former swore allegiance to the latter in exchange for military assistance against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Thanks to its "architectural heritage" status, the monument survived the collapse of the USSR and the 2004 and 2014 revolutions, as well as the passage of four "decommunization laws" in 2015. It was only in 2022, after the Russian army lifted the siege of Kyiv and the Ukrainian army discovered the scale of Moscow's war crimes in towns such as Bucha, that the monument to the "friendship between peoples"

became intolerable. Symbolically, one of the workers' bronze heads detached during the removal and rolled onto the pavement. It was the Russian's.

The bronze monument was entirely taken away. Soon after, the destruction of the granite Cossacks started. It was never fully completed, though. Some scattered stones remain somewhat hidden behind a fragile fence to this day. The arch still stands. Since it is visible from the Dnipro banks, it has become, over the years, a symbol of Kyiv. No decision regarding its future has yet been taken as of October 2026. Somehow, the contrasting fate of this once-massive architectural ensemble has become a symbol of Ukraine's derussification process: a reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion, it is both radical and indecisive, subjective and incomplete.

From Leninopad...

As in other post-Soviet republics, Ukraine began distancing itself from the Soviet and imperial Russian past as early as 1989. The country underwent various waves of a so-called decommunization process in the early 1990s and around the 2004 Orange Revolution.



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Guest Contributor

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The last wave occurred during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. Across the country, both civic and radical activists went on to [topple](#) more than 1,000 Lenin statues that were still standing. With over 7,000 statues of Lenin on its territory in 1991, Ukraine was the Soviet republic with the highest density of these monuments; by comparison, Russia counted only some 5,000 despite its much larger territory. This grassroots movement was soon nicknamed *Leninopad* (literally translated as the “fall of Lenin”).

Many more Soviet monuments and symbols disappeared from the public space within a few months. It was only in May 2015 that the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) provided a legal framework for this process by voting on four [laws](#). The first text prohibited the propaganda of totalitarian ideologies, namely Nazism and communism. The second law ordered the renaming of all toponyms inherited from the Soviet times. The third law promoted the valorization of past activists who fought for national independence, including the OUN-UPA radical nationalists. The fourth law initiated a wide-ranging opening of the Soviet archives to the public.

Lenin and other Soviet symbols were well maintained by occupation authorities. The way to deal with the Soviet legacy became much more than a matter of historiography. It turned into a marker of identity.

Ukraine implemented its decommunization process within this framework. In September 2016, the Institute of National Memory [declared](#) that the government-controlled territories had removed the last Lenin monument from the public sphere. The situation was the opposite on the Crimean peninsula and in the parts of Donbas that were directly or indirectly occupied by the Russian forces. Lenin and other Soviet symbols were well maintained by occupation authorities. The way to deal with the Soviet legacy became much more than a matter of historiography. It turned into a marker of identity.

Although the Ukrainian government considered itself “Lenin-free,” the decommunization process unfolded in a complex and contradictory way.

Occasionally, some Lenin statues reappeared here and there. The Soviet leader and other symbols only partially disappeared from mosaics, facades, and factory entrance halls. Some local elites and communities long resisted the renaming of their cities and streets. Debates raged for years over implementing decommunization requirements in literature, music, and movies. Only gradually did a democratic and plural Ukraine move away from its Soviet past along the lines of an ambitious Europeanization agenda.

The decommunization process did not, however, trigger a nationwide move to cut ties with the Russian imperial past. The dramatic context of the Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas undoubtedly stirred up anger, frustrations and calls to reduce the import of Russian cultural products across the country. State authorities implemented measures to *Ukrainize* the public sphere, as [evidenced](#) by a 2017 law on Education in minority languages and a 2019 law on language quotas in the media. Yet there was no radical push to derussify a country that shared a long and complex history with Russia. In the 2021-2022 winter season, the Kyiv opera staged *Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker* more than twenty times. And from Kharkiv to Uzhhorod, Pushkin's statues stood firm.

... To Pushkinopad

It all changed on February 24, 2022. As Ukrainians mobilized to face the existential threat posed by the Russian full-scale invasion, a large number of them questioned their intimate connections with Russia, with its history, language, and culture. As in 2014, the movement began with local, civic initiatives. Along with every other cultural institution, the Kyiv opera [canceled](#) all Russia-related performances. Thousands of citizens publicly sent their private collections of Russian and Russian-language books to recycling facilities. Many Russian-speaking individuals abruptly shifted to using Ukrainian in their daily lives. According to annual [surveys](#) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS),

Ukrainian use in the family environment jumped from 52 percent in 2020 to 63 percent in 2025.

As various monuments connected to the Russian imperial past were dismantled, people placed special emphasis on the figure of the poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). Many see him as a defender of freedom against tsarist authoritarianism, yet he also lauded the brutal expansion of the Russian Empire in works such as "The Prisoner of the Caucasus" and "To the Slanderers of Russia." By all accounts, the instrumentalization of the poet's legacy, whether by tsarist, Soviet, or Russian authorities, made him an unequivocal symbol of Russia and its political presence. Before 2022, more than 100 [monuments](#) dedicated to Pushkin stood across Ukraine, second only to those dedicated to Taras Shevchenko. His name was the [third](#) choice for street toponymy in the country, behind Shevchenko and Yuri Gagarin. As a result, Pushkin became an obvious target of Ukraine's resistance to the full-scale invasion. The poet and writer Serhiy Zhadan began [publishing](#) photos of himself in front of Pushkin monuments to urge his admirers to topple them. And so they did.

As with decommunization, this bottom-up movement led to the adoption of a legal framework for derussification. In July 2023, the law "On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonization of Toponymy" [recognized](#) Russian imperial policy as criminal. It prohibited its propaganda and ordered the "decolonization" of Ukraine's toponymy. Thousands of city and street names that were outside the scope of the decommunization process had to be changed. And so they were.

The derussification process goes far beyond decommunization: it encompasses all aspects of Ukrainian life, education, language, cultural habits, and even culinary traditions.

Because of the shock of the full-scale invasion, the derussification process goes far beyond decommunization: it encompasses all aspects of Ukrainian life, education, language, cultural habits, and even culinary traditions. This in-depth phenomenon is reflected in the law. In June 2022, lawmakers [banned](#) the public performance of music by artists who had held Russian citizenship at any point since 1991, subject to certain exceptions. In December 2025, the Verkhovna Rada [voted](#) in first reading to retire the kopeck as a currency unit. It is to be replaced by the shah, which was first used by Zaporizhzhian Cossacks in the 17th century.

“Decolonization” is not unanimously used in Ukraine. Some prefer the terms “de-imperialization,” “Ukrainization” or even “return” to a stolen identity. This uncertainty reflects the dramatic context of this derussification process and its intimate link to the war’s outcome.

The explicit use of the term “decolonization” clearly illustrates Ukraine’s struggle for survival against the Kremlin’s revisionist imperial project. It also integrates the country’s own developments into the broader discourse on “decolonization studies,” which gained popularity in various academic circles. However, it implies that Ukraine was merely a Russian colony, whereas it exercised agency throughout the centuries. For example, the Kyivan elite played a crucial role in reforming the Russian tsardom in the late 17th century. Moreover, in the 20th century, the Ukrainian Bolshevik Party was instrumental in founding the USSR. Therefore, “decolonization” is not unanimously used in Ukraine. Some prefer the terms “de-imperialization,” “Ukrainization” or even “return” to a stolen identity. This uncertainty reflects the dramatic context of this derussification process and its intimate link to the war’s outcome.

Success or Failure?

On paper, the derussification process is complete. Pushkin is nowhere to be seen except in Odesa, where the local community and authorities still have not [decided](#) whether the exiled poet promoted the port as a European-minded city or permanently associated it with the Russian Empire. Other Russian historical figures have disappeared from the public space. Although Russian literature is not strictly prohibited, most of the country’s bookstores no longer [sell](#) Russian books or books in Russian. The same goes for music: commercial radio no longer airs Russian tunes, yet they remain available on online platforms. International cultural products quickly filled the gap and, most importantly, so did Ukrainian content. Within the context of an existential war, cultural creation in Ukraine has experienced a historic boost.

International cultural products quickly filled the gap and, most importantly, so did Ukrainian content. Within the context of an existential war, cultural creation in Ukraine has experienced a historic boost.

When it comes to deciding which features of Russian culture to ban, the Pushkin case is a matter of consensus. The treatment of Nikolai Gogol, or Mykola Hohol in Ukrainian, is slightly more ambiguous. Although he acknowledged his Ukrainian origins throughout his life, he consciously chose to publish solely in Russian. His place in the national pantheon is therefore up for [debate](#). Another example is the prohibition of Tchaikovsky, along with other Russian composers. Tchaikovsky himself was of Ukrainian Cossack descent who happened to be [born](#) in Russia. He remained closely connected to the Ukrainian lands, and he did not overtly contribute to Russian imperial propaganda. Thus, [banning](#) him from concert halls is more a reaction to successive Russian

regimes' instrumentalization of him than a rejection of the artist himself. This suggests that policy vis-à-vis Tchaikovsky is likely to change, depending on the war's outcome.

Overall, the derussification process has sparked debate and controversy, showing that besieged Ukraine remains a relatively open society.

Overall, the derussification process has sparked debate and controversy, showing that besieged Ukraine remains a relatively open society. Should Ukrainians revisit their history as mere victims of Russian imperialism or differentiate between different periods of time? For example, should they denounce the USSR as a sole occupying authoritarian regime, or should they participate in [celebrating](#) the 1945 Soviet victory over Nazism? Are all Soviet and Russian movies worth banning? What should be done with culinary habits such as the “Olivier” or “Shuba” salads, which are still a sign of a festive meal for many families? Is the Russian language effectively meant to disappear from Ukraine?

Since 2022, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians consistently assert that they do not want to be Russian. In this sense, they already live in a derussified state of mind, and listening to or not listening to Tchaikovsky will most likely not alter this fact.

This last question is especially sensitive when dealing with Russian-speaking [soldiers](#) and with Ukrainian civilians on temporarily occupied territories. It is also the most evolving issue, given the subjective, circumstantial, and emotional aspects of any language practice. Together with the previously raised questions and more, this shows that the derussification process in Ukraine cannot be assessed in terms of success or failure. It is a moving object in itself. Since 2022, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians consistently [assert](#) that they do not want to be Russian. In this sense, they already live in a derussified state of mind, and listening to or not listening to Tchaikovsky will most likely not alter this fact ■

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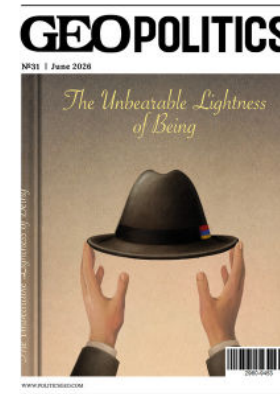
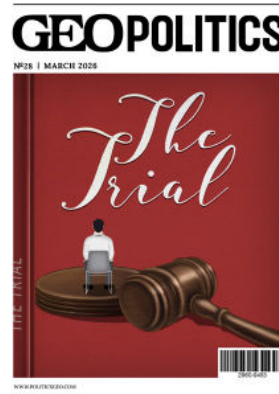
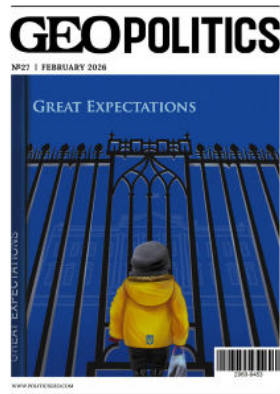
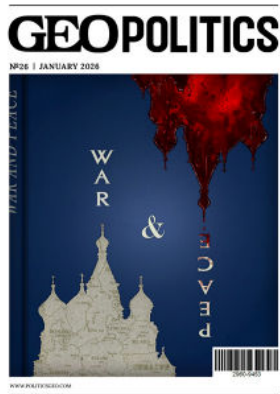
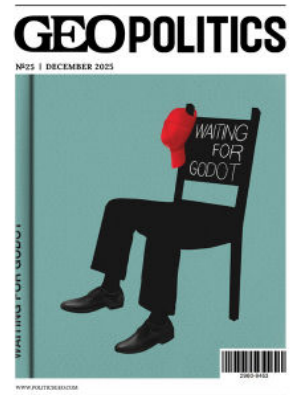
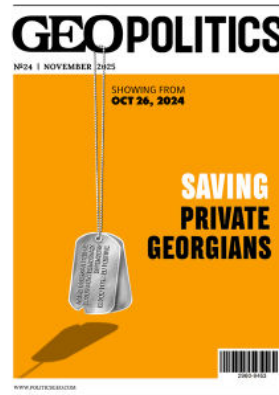
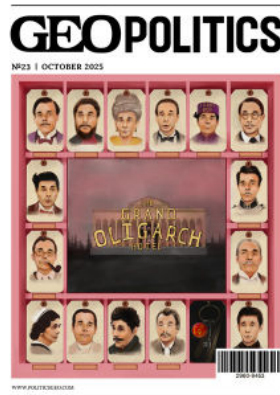
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