

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.



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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 ■