L'État, C'est Moi — Georgian Dream Style

On November 4, 2026, the European Commission reported that Georgia's accession process "remains de facto halted" and that the country is a candidate "in name only." The same document pledged "unwavering support for the European aspirations of the Georgian people." Tbilisi's Foreign Ministry heard something else: a report that feeds "anti-Georgian narratives." Tbilisi treated a text criticizing a government as an attack on the state.

That reflex is the primary symptom of Georgian Dream's (GD) authoritarian nature. Georgian Dream has spent years erasing the line between the Georgian state and the party that currently runs it. The party has continuously recast criticism as hostility to Georgia. Attempts to vote it out or protest it out became plots against the constitutional order, and calls for sanctions against its officials became sabotage against the state.

The formula has a famous name. *L'État, c'est moi* is attributed to Louis XIV. While the French monarch almost certainly never said it, the apocryphal line survived because it signified how Louis XIV ruled the country. So it is in Georgia: no GD leader has declared that the state is the party and that Ivanishvili is the state. They legislated it instead and now use the same logic to ban opposition parties.

Max Weber described this underlying logic as patrimonialism, a form of rule in which office is treated as the ruler's personal affair and the public and private realms are not separated; later scholars coined the term neopatrimonialism for systems that keep the formal distinction on paper while dissolving it in practice. The description fits Georgia, whose main political actor, Bidzina Ivanishvili, is the ruling party's honorary chairman and holds no elected office. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way defined competitive authoritarianism by the same mechanism: regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist, but incumbents' abuse of the state gives them a significant advantage over their opponents, making the fusion of party and state a primary modus operandi.



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L'Etat,
c'est moi
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Two further ideas complete the picture. Kim Lane Scheppele's concept of "autocratic legalism" describes elected leaders who dismantle constitutional constraints by means of law and not in defiance of it, just as the Georgian Dream has strengthened its grasp on power through a series of authoritarian laws in 2024-2026 and is now banning the opposition through the Constitutional Court. The Copenhagen School's theory of securitization explains GD's accompanying rhetoric, since declaring opposition an existential threat to the constitutional order removes the discourse from ordinary politics and makes extraordinary measures possible. Together, the two let repression take a respectable form: opponents cease to be rivals for office and become a danger to sovereignty, and the laws that silence them can be presented as acts of national defense.

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This entire construction depends on treating as synonyms four terms that democratic theory keeps clearly distinct. The state is the permanent political community; the constitutional order is the set of rules by which power is won, exercised, and lost; the government is the temporary holder of executive power; and the ruling party is a private association that competes for it. Democratic accountability means keeping these four apart, so citizens can remove the party and the government without touching the constitutional order or the state; once the distinction is erased, every election, every protest, and every critical broadcast can be described as an attempted coup. Scratch the surface of Georgia's current politics, and this is what we will see.

A Lawsuit Against All Opponents

Georgian Dream's restatement of this doctrine runs to 470 pages. On September 2, 2025, GD lawmaker Tea Tsulukiani presented the report of the parliamentary investigative commission she chaired, a body this journal has described as unconstitutional in its very composition, and whose conclusions relabel the 2003 Rose Revolution as a coup. This report effectively filed more than a decade of opposition politics under the heading of serial revolutions: the attempt to "storm" parliament on June 20, 2019; the 2020 parliamentary elections and subsequent demonstrations and boycott; the 2021 local elections and return of Mikheil Saakashvili and his arrest; the 2022 protests against the government, which failed to get the candidate status; 2023 protests against the foreign agents bill (so-called Russian law); 2024 parliamentary elections and post-election protests and boycott; and massive demonstrations after the November 2024 announcement to refuse accession talks. Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili later counted "six direct attempts" at overthrow between 2019 and 2024.

What is striking about this catalog is the nature of the events it contains: with a single exception, they are election disputes, parliamentary boycotts, and street protests against the laws, that is, attempts to change the government, not to abolish elections, courts, or the constitution. The report nonetheless served as the evidentiary basis for a lawsuit claiming that the opposition parties have attempted to change the constitutional order.

The legal hook for banning the opposition parties is Article 23 of the Constitution, which prohibits parties that aim to overthrow or forcibly change the constitutional order. Papuashvili himself made the most candid connection between this provision and the opposition, explaining that the opposition has

"denied both the domestic political and foreign policy legitimacy of the current Georgian government" and, therefore, "must be declared unconstitutional." In this reasoning, either the government is illegitimate, or its critics are illegal, and it admits no third possibility, such as a lawful opposition that disputes the fairness of an election, or angry people who protest the detour from the European integration path, protected by the Constitution.

European law draws the line in a different place. The European Court of Human Rights holds that a party may campaign for a change in the law, and even in the constitutional structure of the state, provided that the means it uses are "legal and democratic" and that the change it proposes is itself compatible with fundamental democratic principles, and it has upheld dissolution only where a party was tied to terrorism and violence (*Herri Batasuna*) or was found to threaten democracy itself (*Refah Partisi*). The Venice Commission's guidelines likewise reserve prohibition for parties that advocate or use violence to overthrow the democratic constitutional order, and treat peaceful advocacy of constitutional change as insufficient. Hence, no surprise that its October 2026 opinion on Georgia's party-ban amendments was extremely critical.

The government's claim nevertheless deserves a serious answer. Some protesters did attempt to force their way into parliament on June 20, 2019, and prosecutors charged five opposition figures with a coup attempt after the protests of October 2025. However, when violence occurs, courts can punish it through individual criminal liability. Such episodes cannot convert a decade of contested elections into a single conspiracy, or turn more than a third of the electorate into its accomplices.

The Georgian Dream's pleadings have since made the equation explicit. Archil Gorduladze, who represents the ruling party in the proceedings, said on October 31, 2026, that "actions directed against the people's sovereign will should receive an appropriate constitutional assessment" and that the lawsuit "serves exactly this goal," adding the same day that "the source of state power is the people" and that the opposition parties "still do not recognize the Georgian people's choice." On November 10, before entering the courtroom, he told journalists that these parties "are trying to establish external rule in the country" and "carry out the will of these foreign forces." The lawsuit he defends supplies the detail: the opposition is accused of seeking to have the Georgian state and government "punished" from abroad, so that the resulting discontent serves "as a lever of pressure on the Georgian government," and resolutions of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly and of the European Parliament are entered as evidence.

> ***Popular sovereignty, which belongs to the people and is exercised through elections that may go either way, is treated as having been transferred to the party that won the last one, so that disagreement with that party, once voiced abroad, becomes an offense against the nation.***

To paraphrase, the argument runs as follows: GD was elected by the people and therefore exercises the sovereignty which the people conferred; pressure from European states and institutions to alter its decisions or the country's course is an assault on that sovereignty; and parties which invite such pressure have placed themselves outside the Constitution. The syllogism deserves to be stated plainly because it contains the whole doctrine in miniature: popular sovereignty, which belongs to the people and is exercised through elections that may go either way, is treated as having been transferred to the party that won the last one, so that disagreement with that party, once voiced abroad, becomes an offense against the nation.

Protest, Sanctions, Legitimacy

As the party ban hearings in Batumi have progressed, the ruling party's representatives' pleadings and the bench's questions have reduced the case to three cornerstones: protests, sanctions, and legitimacy. Each of them names a form of political opposition that is lawful in a constitutional democracy, and each is converted by the same operation into an offense against the state.

The first concept concerns the streets and demonstrations. A rally against Georgian Dream is described not as an exercise of the freedom of assembly but as an attempted coup and an attempt to change the constitutional order by force. This is why Goguladze sought at the November 11 hearing to tie the men charged over the events of October 4, 2025 to the United National Movement (UNM) as a whole. The reasoning runs from the acts of some individuals at one demonstration to the character of every demonstration, and from there to the parties whose supporters attend them, or who organize some of them, although the object of a protest that demands new elections or a government's resignation is the government, while the constitutional order, which provides for both elections and resignations, is left exactly where it was.

The right to oppose power is older than any constitution. In Reykjavik, facing the parliament building, stands Santiago Sierra's Black Cone, unveiled in 2012 as a monument to civil disobedience, whose plaque cites the French Declaration of 1793 to the effect that when government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is "the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties." The closest modern equivalent is the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which warns that the rule of law must protect human rights "if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression." None of this seems to be an argument that the Georgian Dream shares, even if none of the "attempted revolutions" called for insurrection or revolution.

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The second concept concerns the sanctions. The GD presents sanctions against the ruling-party officials, or against those who serve it in the courts and the police, as directed at the Georgian state, and frames advocacy for them as participation in an attack on it. The lawsuit cites the opposition's calls for Western sanctions as evidence of an effort to "punish" Georgia, and the judge-rapporteur, Vasil Roinishvili, asked the applicants whether they had calculated the material damage the defendants' actions caused the state, citing visa regimes and international resolutions. The question presupposes its own answer, since a visa ban on a minister or an asset freeze on a judge inflicts no loss on the public purse or the citizenry, and can count as damage to the state only if the officeholder and the state are taken to be one and the same.

At the hearing of November 13, 2026, Judge Giorgi Tevdorashvili put the same thought more directly, asking whether it does not harm the country's economy when the government is sanctioned, to which the United National Movement's representative replied by asking what economic damage the Georgian state had suffered from the sanctioning of a single named police official. The question returned on November 16, when Tevdorashvili asked Gvaramia whether "demanding sanctions on government representatives" harms state interests, and the President of the Court, Revaz Nadaraia, asked Lelo's Grigol Gegelia whether a constant demand for sanctions on high officials could be directed against the state. "Unequivocally and categorically, no," Gegelia replied. "We never demanded harm to the people or to our state." Gvaramia's counter-question was simpler: "How does a sanction on Bidzina Ivanishvili harm this country?"

The lawsuit itself is unambiguous on this point. Under the heading of assistance to a foreign power in undermining Georgia's independence, it alleges that the opposition parties strive to have "the Georgian state and the Georgian government" "punished" from abroad, so that discontent accumulates among citizens, who then turn against "the government they lawfully elected," and that this process is used "as a mechanism of sabotage against the Georgian state and as a lever of pressure on the Georgian government."

Among the acts listed are conduct said to be harmful to the visa-free regime, the obstruction of Georgia's path to EU membership, and a "systematic information attack from abroad on the Georgian state and the Georgian government," together with attempts to have "foreign sanctions imposed on the Georgian state and the Georgian government," the evidence for which consists of resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, resolutions of the European Parliament adopted with the support of the opposition's partner political groups, and bills introduced in the United States Congress. Throughout these passages, state and government appear as a fixed pair, so a resolution criticizing the government's conduct, or a draft law aimed at its officials, is counted, without further argument, as an attack on the country's independence.

> ***In reality, disputing an election result appeals to the constitutional order, rather than rejecting it, because the claim that a parliament was unlawfully elected presupposes the binding force of the very rules that define lawful election.***

The third concept concerns legitimacy. The refusal to recognize the government formed after the disputed elections of 2024 is treated as a refusal to recognize the state itself and as an action against the constitutional order, which is the meaning of PM Kobakhidze's remark that the members of Gakharia's party "do not recognize the constitutional order or the legitimacy of the government," as though these were a single object. The same logic underpins the new Article 316[1] of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes promoting a "perception" of illegitimacy. In reality, disputing an election result appeals to the constitutional order, rather than rejecting it, because the claim that a parliament was unlawfully elected presupposes the binding force of the very rules that define lawful election. The argument of non-recognition also applies to the Lelo-Strong Georgia and Gakharia For Georgia parties, both of which participated in the 2025 local elections and have taken their seats in the local councils, with Gakharia's party even returning to Parliament in October 2025.

The lawsuit's central section joins under a single heading the "refusal to recognize the legitimacy of bodies and officials elected through universal elections," and the "attempts to overthrow the constitutional order of Georgia or change it by violent means," and it describes the opposition's refusal to accept the results of the elections held since 2016 as "sabotage conducted against the Georgian state and the Georgian government," a phrase in which the two are named as a single target. The same section holds that the parties were "essentially oriented not toward elections but toward overthrowing the government," defining overthrow as a change of government "by unconstitutional, non-electoral means," and dismissing the idea of a "peaceful overthrow of the government" as a contradiction in terms. This logic also treats the demand for the government's resignation and for a technical cabinet, raised in 2022 after the EU withheld candidate status (characterized in the appeal as an 'artificial pretext'), as participation in an attempt to overthrow the constitutional order.

The bench has adopted the applicants' vocabulary here, too. On November 16, 2026, Judge Eva Gotsiridze asked Nika Gvaramia of the Coalition

for Change, "If overthrow means violent actions, then what is a peaceful overthrow?", restating the lawsuit's oxymoron as a question. At the same hearing, when Judge Sergo Metopishvili told Lelo's representative that his party had recognized neither the 2021 nor the 2025 local elections, a representative for another respondent interjected: "That's a different party, Mr. Judge." The slip shows how readily five separate parties are being tried as one.

The same principle of party-as-state polices broadcast vocabulary. Under the 2025 amendments to the Law on Broadcasting, the Communications Commission, acting on complaints filed by GD itself, ruled on July 3, 2025, that Formula and TV Pirveli had broken the law by using terms such as "illegitimate parliament," "regime," and "oligarch," and fines followed in due course, with Formula penalized in May 2026 for phrases that included "Ivanishvili's rule" and "the regime's court." In October 2026, Transparency International Georgia reviewed seven of the regulator's memoranda from the preceding six months and counted 93 distinct words and phrases that had been held impermissible, among them "political prisoners," "prisoners of conscience," "repressive laws" and "judicial clan," while the fines imposed had climbed from GEL 2,500 to 10,000.

The same pattern, interestingly, extends to proposals for judicial reform, including vetting of the judges. Back in 2024, Kobakhidze said that "the so-called vetting conflicts with the Georgian Constitution and constitutional principles in general" and that checking the integrity of judges "is nobody's business," while Papuashvili held that "the participation of the foreign organization in the issues of the judiciary today is equal to the attack on the judiciary." The measure thus denounced had been requested by the European Commission itself, whose November 8, 2023 recommendation on the nine steps included a mechanism to check judges' integrity, so a demand drawn from the conditions of Georgia's own candidacy now serves as evidence of unconstitutional intent. The importance of vetting was also highlighted in the November European Commission report on Georgia.

The bench returned to vetting at the hearing on November 13, 2026, and it took more time than any other issue, while the judges' positions proved difficult to distinguish from the applicants'. Judge Eva Gotsiridze asked UNM representatives why inviting foreign experts was so necessary and whether, in their view, there were no honest people in Georgia. She then likened the proposal to the appeal which the Slavic tribes of the ninth century addressed to the Vikings, to the effect that theirs was a good country without order and that the Vikings should come and rule it, before asking whether the opposition was proposing a return to the Russia of the ninth century and whether the state's refusal of such an arrangement was not correct from the standpoint of constitutional law. The President of the Court supported this line of questioning by asking whether the respondents considered constitutional a vetting that would extend to the judges of the Constitutional Court themselves. This logic is instructive on two counts. A proposal contained in a party's program, and corresponding to the extraordinary re-evaluation of senior appointees with the participation of international experts which the Commission has asked of Georgia, is being examined as possible evidence of unconstitutionality; and the argument of sovereignty is advanced from the bench by judges who could themselves be subject to the scrutiny in question. On November 17, the UNM's Khatia Dekanoidze responded that the judges were "misleading the Georgian people" by presenting resistance to vetting as a defense of sovereignty, since the proposal "did not provide for checking the entire judicial corps" but only its senior ranks.

Article 78, Read Backward

Nowhere is the gap between the interest of the party and the interest of the state wider than on the question of Europe. Georgia applied for EU

membership on March 3, 2022; in June of that year the Commission's opinion set out twelve priorities and the European Council recognized a European perspective while withholding candidate status; on November 8, 2023, the Commission recommended candidacy on the basis of nine steps; and on December 14, 2023, the European Council granted the status "on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken." None of these lists constituted a legal obligation, since they were political conditions for moving to the next stage, but their political character made them consequential.

> ***Faced with a choice between the country's European integration and its own grip on power, GD chose the latter, so that by June 27, 2024, the European Council judged the accession process to be de facto halted, and on November 28, 2024, Kobakhidze announced that accession talks would be kept off the agenda until the end of 2028.***

These conditions called for de-oligarchization, an independent judiciary, free elections, depolarization, free media and a civil society able to work without harassment. For Georgian Dream, whose power rests on an informal ruler, a loyal judiciary bench and administrative advantage at the polls, this amounted less to a reform agenda than to an order to dismantle its own foundations. Faced with a choice between the country's European integration and its own grip on power, GD chose the latter, so that by June 27, 2024, the European Council judged the accession process to be de facto halted, and on November 28, 2024, Kobakhidze announced that accession talks would be kept off the agenda until the end of 2028. The string of laws adopted after that, curbing fundamental freedoms, has buried deeper the chances of Georgia's European integration.

The Constitution points in the opposite direction, because Article 78 instructs the constitutional bodies to take all measures within their competence to ensure Georgia's full integration into the EU and NATO. The ruling party's answer, delivered in June 2026 by the chair of parliament's legal affairs committee, Archil Gorduladze, was that "we do not start reading the Constitution from Article 78, but from Article 1," by which the party claims for itself the authority to rank the Constitution's commands. The Tsulukiani report meanwhile accuses the opposition of "deliberate damage to European integration," and the government, which suspended the process, now charges its critics with sabotaging it.

Sabotage against the state (read: party) is also the literal charge. On November 6, 2025, the Prosecutor General announced proceedings against eight opposition leaders, among whom Elene Khoshtaria, Zurab Japaridze and Giorgi Vashadze were accused of supplying foreign states with lists of officials "for the purpose of imposing sanctions," under Article 318 (sabotage) and Article 319 (assisting a foreign state in hostile activities) of the Criminal Code, which carry sentences of up to 15 years, the alleged harm being that "up to 300 Georgian citizens" were sanctioned as a result. The theory behind these allegations is revealing, because it treats travel bans and asset freezes imposed on named officials as injuries to Georgia.

The Friends Who Ask No Questions

The same party-as-state logic governs Georgian Dream's choice of friends, and Georgia's. In November 2026, Papuashvili declared that the European bureaucracy does not notice Georgia and would all but erase it from the map, whereas China sends a visitor at the level of vice president, which, in his reading, shows that Brussels does not respect the Georgian people and China does; in the same days he described the EU's policy as "anti-Georgian."

The implication that Georgians have a truer friend in Beijing than in Brussels can be tested against a standard Papuashvili himself set in January 2026, when he said that a state that does not recognize Georgia's territorial integrity "can never be friends of the Georgian people."

Beijing does recognize Georgia's borders on paper, but if the standard applies to conduct rather than declarations, the record favors Brussels by a wide margin. Every year since 2008, Georgia has tabled a UN General Assembly resolution on the right of return for those displaced from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, which EU member states support and co-sponsor, and on which China, as in the June 2025 vote that passed 107 to 9, has continued to abstain. The Association Agreement commits the EU to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and EU monitors have patrolled the occupation line since 2008, whereas the strategic partnership statement that Tbilisi signed with Beijing on July 31, 2023 records Georgia's firm adherence to the one-China principle while offering in return only a general respect for the territorial integrity "of all countries," without a word about Abkhazia or Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The material record is equally lopsided. Georgians have traveled to the Schengen area without visas since March 2017 and to China only since May 28, 2024. In 2025, the EU was Georgia's largest trading partner, accounting for 21.6% of its trade and buying EUR 776 million of its exports, while China ranked fifth at 8.9% and bought EUR 290 million. Chinese direct investment between 2010 and early 2024 totaled roughly USD 688 million, less than what the United Kingdom and the Netherlands invested together in 2023 alone, and the EBRD has committed EUR 5.8 billion to 318 Georgian projects since 1992.

The human ties tell the same story. Some 180,000 Georgians were living in EU and Schengen countries by 2020, and the money they send home sustains a considerable part of the economy: of the USD 3.65 billion in remittances received in 2025, Italy alone supplied 17%, whereas transfers from China came to USD 2.7 million, or less than 0.1%. Over the period 2008–2025, National Bank data put remittances from EU countries at about USD 12 billion and those from China at about USD 32 million. More than 13,000 Georgian students and academic staff have studied or trained in Europe through Erasmus+, and China offers no comparable program.

If China is nevertheless presented as the power that "respects Georgians," the explanation lies in what Beijing does not ask. It attaches no conditions concerning elections, courts, broadcasters or NGOs, and it has no difficulty with Georgian Dream or with the dismantling of democratic checks that Brussels describes as backsliding, so that the respect Papuashvili has in mind is respect for the ruling party, attributed, in what is by now a familiar move, to the Georgian people. Another state that couldn't care less about elections and courts is Russia. Hence Moscow's increased praise of the Georgian Dream in recent years.

Europe's Choice of Target

Ironically, Europe now faces the same question, because if Brussels responds to Georgian Dream's conduct with measures aimed at the country as a whole, it accepts the party's premise that the two are one. The measures adopted so far have for the most part been aimed correctly: direct financial assistance to the authorities was suspended in June 2024, political contacts were downgraded, and on March 6, 2026, the Commission suspended visa-free travel for holders of diplomatic, service and official passports for a period of twelve months, while Western states acting in their national capacity have, by Transparency International Georgia's count, sanctioned more than 230 individuals linked to GD.

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What has been proposed, however, by some member states is considerably broader. The Commission notes that it "can also decide to extend the measure to all Georgian citizens," and a letter from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Georgian opposition leaders, reported in February 2026, pointed to a second stage of visa restrictions that would cover the entire population. In July 2025, EU foreign ministers weighed a menu that included suspending candidate status, a step the Union has never taken unilaterally and could take only by unanimity, as well as assessing the Association Agreement, which could lead to suspending its trade provisions by qualified majority.

Each of the country-wide measures would fall on the wrong people. Visa-free travel serves students, workers, patients and, as was argued in these pages, activists who may need to leave the country at short notice; the free-trade area serves exporters and their employees; and candidate status belongs, in the EU's own telling, to a society and not to a cabinet, which is why the 2026 enlargement communication still invokes the "European aspirations of the Georgian people." The same logic granted Georgia EU candidacy in December 2023, even though Georgia's government was already drifting away from its commitments by then. Officials with second passports and assets abroad would feel little of this, whereas GD's propaganda would gain a great deal, since Kobakhidze already describes visa warnings as European bureaucrats "wildly blackmailing our country," and a blanket suspension would turn that slogan into lived experience and hand the party the one proof it presently lacks, namely that Europe is hostile to Georgians and not merely to the ruling regime.

The alternative, discussed in several European capitals, is a response as personal as the regime itself, and the EU already has a precedent. On April 28, 2023, the Council created a dedicated framework for Moldova, allowing asset freezes and entry bans on persons who undermine that country's sovereignty, democracy, rule of law, stability, or security. The difference between the two cases is instructive: Chișinău asked for the framework, whereas Tbilisi never will, simply because in Georgia the people such a framework would name are in government, which is precisely what makes the comparison instructive.

> ***Europe should decline to adopt Georgian Dream's party-as-state logic. Georgia holds the Association Agreement, the free-trade area, visa-free travel, and the membership perspective, which will outlast this government.***

The principle for European decision-makers follows directly from the analysis above: Europe should decline to adopt Georgian Dream's party-as-state logic. Georgia holds the Association Agreement, the free-trade area, visa-free travel, and the membership perspective, which will outlast this government, while identifiable people bear responsibility for the laws, the prosecutions, and the party-ban lawsuit. A European policy that keeps the first intact while distinguishing it from the second would accomplish what the Georgian authorities are no longer able or willing to do—tell the difference between a state and those who happen, for the time being, to rule it ■