



The end of the dream of a European Georgia?

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Introduction

Hugo von Essen

The fate of Georgia will be decided on 26 October. In the parliamentary elections held on that date, the people of Georgia will make a decisive choice about the country's future for many years to come. At stake are not only Georgians' hopes for a European, democratic future but also the broader regional balance, as Russia's influence and capacity to weaken the sovereignty and manoeuvrability of both Georgia and Armenia could be significantly strengthened. Furthermore, the election in Georgia can be viewed within a broader geopolitical context, including fateful elections in Moldova and growing Western defeatism regarding Ukraine, presenting Moscow with an opportunity to demonstrate its growing power.

On the one hand is the current regime, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) political party and its oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili; and continuation along the road to autocracy, Russian vassalage and the end of Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In recent years, GD has become steadily more authoritarian, anti-western and pro-Russian, culminating in this year's "foreign agent" and anti-LGBTQ [laws](#), and the near-complete rejection of the EU's requirements for reform. If re-elected, Ivanishvili and his GD has made it abundantly clear, through open [threats](#), what would happen to the opposition and the political system.

On the other hand is the democratic opposition, which comprises various pro-European political parties that finally managed to unite ahead of the elections around the agenda of Georgia's pro-western President Zourabichvili. However, they face a severe uphill battle against the regime's many illiberal structural advantages – administrative, financial and media-related. Moreover, they continue to struggle with internal differences over tactics, messages and goals – not least on how to counter the ruling party's effective fearmongering slogan "GD or war".

The until recently meagre efforts of the West to send strong and clear signals to both GD and the Georgian population have been counterproductive. While previously characterised by naivety, disunity and lack of resolve, the West has only recently started to exert real pressure on GD through financial and political means. If Georgia's democracy is to survive this election and beyond, the West must do much more, much better.

How will GD or the opposition ensure victory for their respective visions of Georgia? What can or should the West do to support democracy and counter autocracy in Georgia? Three analyses of Georgia's upcoming elections and their implications, written by Georgian analysts, are presented below.

Shota Gvineria of the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) analyses how Russia's hybrid tactics, as manifest in the politics of GD, have succeeded in undermining Georgia's democratic resilience – and how the West can counter this through strategic engagement and a new approach to supporting democracy.

Thorniké Gordadze of the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) paints a vivid picture of what is at stake in the elections, the various illicit tactics being used by the GD

to retain power and the responses of the embattled opposition parties to these formidable challenges.

Kakha Gogolashvili of the Rondeli Foundation (GFSIS) describes GD's U-turn on 30 years of Georgian EU integration and its current dark path, from which there is likely to be no return while GD remains in power. He argues that in response, the West should stand firm with Georgia's population, hold GD accountable through targeted measures and ensure free elections.

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Can the West Counter Russia's Hybrid Warfare? The Case of Georgia

Shota Gvineria

Executive summary

Under the influence of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), is increasingly aligning itself with Russia while weakening its ties with western allies. Influenced by Russia, GD has adopted policies that erode Georgia's democracy and isolate the country from the West, facilitating Russia's long-term goal of halting Georgia's western orientation.

That Georgia's government is openly moving towards Russia is a significant outcome of Russia's hybrid warfare, the mix of political, economic, military and psychological tactics that have effectively eroded its democratic resilience. Russia's strategy highlights the West's failure to counter hybrid warfare despite Georgia's historically strong pro-West sentiment.

This article examines how Russia's hybrid tactics succeeded in Georgia and makes the case for more strategic western engagement. It urges the West to recalibrate its approach to supporting democracy in Georgia by clearly outlining a path for the country's integration through democratic governance, and by ensuring a transparent electoral process through robust international election monitoring and increased western engagement with democratic stakeholders.

Russia is winning in Georgia

Georgia serves as a case study of the success of Russia's hybrid warfare, and the major consequences for democracy, security and sovereignty. For decades, Russia has applied political, economic, military and psychological pressure, backed up by anti-democratic forces, to undermine democratic stakeholders. These actions have involved military build-ups in occupied regions, illegal borderisation and kidnappings along the line of occupation, cyberattacks and propaganda.

GD's foreign policy shift is a direct result of Russia's efforts. Having gained full control over Georgia's political system, GD claims alignment not only with Russia but also with Iran and China, acting as a reliable proxy to obstruct Georgia's western orientation. As detailed below, Russia's dominance and its influence over the regime's decisions are evident in three main areas: the growing economic dependence on Russia, political and strategic infiltration, and consolidation of Russian-style governance.

Growing economic dependency on Russia

The wave of Russian migration that followed Russia's partial mobilization linked to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has severely affected Georgia. There were 148,000 [arrivals](#) in the third quarter of 2022 and 160,000 in the first three quarters of 2023. This demographic shift poses security, economic and social challenges, despite [reports](#) that

some of the migrants have left for third countries. The resumption of direct flights between Georgia and Russia in May 2023, amid expanded western sanctions on Russia, further cemented GD's political alignment. Air connectivity has driven economic [dependency](#), as Russian migration temporarily boosted the tourism and real estate sectors while contributing to inflation and increased housing costs. Trade with Russia surged by 32% in the first half of 2023, raising [concerns](#) that this economic reliance could enable sanctions evasion.

Political and strategic infiltration

Russia has systematically infiltrated Georgia's strategic sectors and influenced political decisions. GD has weakened national security by degrading its ties with NATO and allowing infiltration in defence matters. Structural changes have dismantled security mechanisms, leaving a vacuum in defence planning and capabilities. Georgia's shrinking defence budget, which is far lower than its neighbours, underscores this neglect. Notable [examples](#) of Russian infiltration include the 2016 revelation that classified military information was handed to Russian services and the former Chief Prosecutor being sanctioned by the US for aiding Russia. Key political and public figures are openly linked to Russia, further exposing Georgia's vulnerability.

Consolidation of Russian-style governance

Georgia's legislative trends mirror Russian-style authoritarianism, exemplified by the "foreign agent" law targeting NGOs and media critical of the government. This law, which closely resembles Russian tactics, labels organisations that receive foreign funding as agents of foreign influence and subjects them to harsh regulations. In the lead-up to parliamentary elections, this move has consolidated GD's power by stifling opposition and criticism, thereby undermining democracy. The GD leadership's threat to [ban](#) opposition parties and civil society after the 2024 elections highlights this repressive turn.

[Crackdowns](#) on protest and restrictions on civil liberties are further demonstrations of a government solidifying control through intimidation, suppressing dissent and shaping the pre-election landscape. This [erosion](#) of democratic institutions blocks progress on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, aligning the country with Russia's model of governance.

A new Pre-election rhetoric

As number one on GD's election list, Bidzina Ivanishvili's [speech](#) on 14 September 2024 represented a pivotal moment for Georgia's foreign policy. During a party rally in Gori, he again blamed the 2008 war on Saakashvili's government but notably shifted the narrative to accuse the West of provoking him. By completely disregarding Russia's involvement, he expressed regret to the Ossetian people for the violence inflicted by Georgia's attack. Ivanishvili's statements echo the Kremlin's persistent assertion that Russian forces intervened in Georgia to subdue aggressors, framed as a peace enforcement mission. This convergence of narratives not only tarnishes Georgia's image, but also significantly weakens the legal and ethical foundation for resisting the Russian occupation.

The government's pro-Russia stance now positions the West—not Russia—as the main threat to Georgia's security and identity. These narratives directly accuse the West of meddling in Georgia's domestic affairs. In this context, justifying the halting of Georgia's European integration in the light of its anti-democratic measures is increasingly difficult for the regime. GD is heavily reliant on disinformation to maintain the narrative that it is still delivering on the EU integration path, while attacking western partners and labelling any critics part of the "Collective United National Movement" (UNM).

Most critically, Ivanishvili proposed sweeping prosecutions reminiscent of a Nuremberg-style tribunal against the "collective UNM", equating opposition parties, independent media, civil society and western partners with a so-called Global Party of War. Ivanishvili's call to eliminate the opposition under the guise of promoting peace now fuels the party's aggressive tactics for securing victory in the 2024 elections, transforming the pre-election environment into a battlefield. Ivanishvili's new narrative clearly indicates that GD has reached a point of no return, fully embedding itself within Russia's sphere of influence and raising significant concerns regarding the future of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Conclusions

Georgia's strategic location as an East-West connectivity hub makes it central to regional security. Its drift towards Russia could reduce the ability of the West to counter Russian influence in the Black Sea. This shift could also threaten NATO's eastern flank by isolating vital trade and transportation routes, especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent international sanctions against Moscow. If Georgia continues down this path, it will become a satellite state within Russia's sphere of influence, facilitating stronger ties with authoritarian regimes such as Iran and China. This alignment would enable these states to bypass sanctions and engage in illicit trade, bolstering their military efforts in critical areas such as Ukraine and the Middle East, and directly challenging western interests.

Georgia's final descent into Russia's orbit would weaken western influence in the South Caucasus and encourage similar alignments in neighbouring countries, jeopardising broader regional stability. GD's promise to double down on anti-democratic trends after winning the upcoming parliamentary elections marks a dangerous turn, undermining decades of western efforts to promote democracy and stability in the region. Remarkably, unlike in other Eastern Partnership countries, over 80% of Georgia's population still strongly [supports](#) a European orientation and Euro-Atlantic integration.

GD's alignment with Russia highlights a significant gap between the government's stance and public sentiment. According to credible studies and polls, Georgian Dream's only chance of staying in power is to manipulate the election results. Even converting state capture into a consistent approach to electoral [manipulation](#) — mainly through intimidation and vote buying — GD is only capable of mobilizing a maximum of one-third of voters. Recent mass protests against the regime's overtly pro-Russian policies have further demonstrated that persuading the remainder of the strongly pro-West electorate to back the regime is hardly possible.

In response to GD's Russian turn, the West must adopt a strategic, proactive and bold approach. Before the upcoming elections, supporting pro-democracy forces will be crucial to clearly frame the choice between aligning with the western world or Russia and its authoritarian allies. It must be clear that western integration is incompatible with moving closer to the sanctioned regime.

Maintaining the legitimacy of Bidzina Ivanishvili's rule remains crucial to both Russia and Ivanishvili himself. They prefer Georgia to function as a nominally normal country rather than become another Belarus, a pariah state decapitated by western sanctions. Thus, it is imperative that the West use this remaining leverage to closely monitor the pre-election period, election day and the vote count to minimize GD's space for [manipulation](#).

Policy recommendations

To prevent Georgia from falling completely under Russia's sphere of influence, the West must implement a coordinated strategy that engages strategically with Georgia, strengthens pro-democracy stakeholders and guarantees free and fair elections. Ivanishvili's push for victory signals a troubling shift towards legitimizing the erosion of democracy and erasing pro-democracy actors in the country. The West must have a clear plan for protecting the opposition, civil society and independent media outlets from the planned mass repression. In the event of an opposition victory, it is crucial for the West to have a concrete plan in place to guarantee a peaceful transfer of power. In either scenario, such measures should ensure that the processes are directed by the West, not Russia.

To ensure free and fair elections in Georgia, pro-democracy stakeholders should launch nationwide awareness campaigns to convince voters that a European and democratic future for Georgia is incompatible with the sanctioned regime's anti-democratic rule. In addition, the United States and European partners must facilitate free and fair elections by closely monitoring them and robustly and promptly sanctioning any attack on the democratic process or vulnerable segments of Georgian society. Sanctioning Bidzina Ivanishvili ahead of the elections would send a clear signal to the regime that the west is ready to take decisive steps in support of Georgia's democracy. This, in turn would demotivate anti-democratic and aggressive behaviour of the regime members on the lower ranks of GD. Establishing effective mechanisms to prevent election rigging will be also vital. Specific steps to this end would require:

- Extending the scope and mandate of election observation missions to address sophisticated manipulation tactics, moving beyond surface-level monitoring.
- Shifting the focus from mass media monitoring to include social media and channels in specific communication apps; tracing and exposing the regime's disinformation and intimidation campaigns to enhance transparency.
- Increasing support for local watchdogs and civil society organisations to document and counter direct and indirect forms of electoral manipulation, including vote buying and the provision of pre-election benefits, and flagging these in observation reports.
- Prioritising documentation of voter intimidation, such as coercion of civil servants and pressure on state subsidiaries or other budget beneficiaries, as serious violations.
- Registering any hate speech or calls for violence against opponents from political leaders and civil servants as pre-election violations.

By implementing these recommendations, the West can help to secure a transparent, fair and democratic electoral process in Georgia, counter Russian influence and support the country's democratic aspirations. Prompt and robust condemnation of any actions that challenge the democratic process by expanding sanctions against violators will be key. Most im-

portantly, election observation reports must go beyond identifying isolated issues and focus on evaluating the combined effect of violations on the overall integrity of the election. Failure to do so risks validating manipulated results.

From Dream to Nightmare: Georgia's Regressive Shift and its Upcoming High-stakes Elections

Thorniké Gordadze

Executive summary

The October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia will be a pivotal moment. After 12 years of Georgian Dream (GD) rule, Georgia is shifting from its pro-western stance to align with Russia, undermining plans for orientation towards Europe. There is strong public support for joining the European Union (EU) but GD is using populist rhetoric and state resources to remain in power.

The opposition is uniting but faces suppression and financial disadvantage. Although the polls show growing discontent with GD, it is uncertain whether the upcoming elections will be free and fair. The West must act decisively before the country is fully drawn into Russia's sphere to highlight the incompatibility of GD policies with Georgia's European aspirations. Two interrelated key dynamics will shape the election: what Georgian Dream (GD) does to retain power and how the opposition responds to these challenges.

The context

Georgia's political leadership now refers to the European Union and the United States as the "Global War Party", responsible for the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the 2008 war in Georgia. It has sabotaged the process of integrating with the EU by passing the Foreign Agents Act and the Family Values Act, which Brussels considers incompatible with EU membership aspirations.

The full adoption of Russia's narrative on the events of 2008 is another sign of the regime's alignment with the Kremlin's positions. At an electoral rally in Gori in September, Georgian Dream (GD) honorary president and Georgia's unofficial leader, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, reiterated the party's now official thesis that the previous Georgian government, acting under western orders, was responsible for the outbreak of the war with Russia in August 2008, and must face judgment in a Georgian equivalent of the "Nuremberg trials". At the same time, Tbilisi must acknowledge its wrongdoing and "find the strength to apologise".

How does the GD intend to win the elections?

Given that the vast majority of the Georgian people aspire to integrate with the EU and NATO, GD is making considerable efforts on the ideological front, resorting to a striking level of populism and mobilizing the state's bureaucratic machine – its so-called administrative resources.

Ideologically, GD has gradually transformed itself from a left-wing populist party promising free money in its 2012 campaign, as well as social services, subsidies and bank loan write-offs in its 2018 presidential campaign, to an extreme right-wing populist party. It has therefore directly slipped from the socialist family of European political parties (ESP) to the group of

far-right parties that exists in the wake of Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ. GD's 2024 parliamentary elections campaign is entirely centred on identity issues: defence of "Georgian traditions", preservation of the "purity of the family", the fight against "LGBT propaganda", and so on. As part of GD's strategy, as is the case for all far-right populist parties, the danger comes from the decadent West, and consequently from internal political opposition, and a free civil society and media, all of which are "agents" of the former.

For some time, the "collective West" has also been depicted as responsible for the rift between Georgia and its fellow Orthodox Christian nation, Russia. The theme of "peace" is also an essential weapon in the arsenal of topics through which GD would like to frame the electoral campaign. At the same time, western criticism of the Georgian government and possible sanctions against Georgian officials are interpreted as western pressure to force Georgia to open a second front against Russia.

Nonetheless, given the overwhelmingly positive attitude of Georgian voters to the European Union, GD tries to maintain ambiguity on the theme of EU integration. With its 2024 election slogan, "In Europe, but with Peace, Dignity and Prosperity", GD strategists are banking on voters' cognitive dissonance. The regime discredits the EU, accusing it of all manner of evils, on the one hand, while promising membership despite the country's apparent failure to meet the necessary conditions, on the other. Admittedly, the EU contributed to this confusion by granting Georgia candidate status for EU membership in December 2023.

GD does not rely on propaganda alone. Its infamous "administrative resources" include using state positions, funds and influence to benefit the ruling party. Some argue that the ruling party automatically gains 25–30% of its votes thanks to the votes of public sector employees and their families. This creates an uneven playing field, making an opposition victory unlikely without significant political upheaval. There are currently 302,000 public sector employees, and their number has grown by 4–5% every year since 2017. As their numbers increase, the levels of politicisation and political clientelism become more pronounced.

The ruling party also provides direct financial incentives, such as cash payments, the distribution of free food and gift cards, to voters. Criminals are also used to suppress opposition activities by disrupting campaign events through orchestrated violence or intimidation, among other things.

What is the opposition doing?

There is a perception in Europe that the pro-western opposition in Georgia is divided and unable to unite. Despite the many splits and divisions of previous years, however, the political field now occupied by the opposition tends towards greater unity and the formation of alliances. On several occasions, pro-West opposition parties have affirmed their common goal of removing GD from power and muted their significant ideological differences.

Despite attempts to present themselves as a unified list, the opposition is represented as four distinct units. The UNM is the party of imprisoned former president Mikheil Saakashvili, which has conservative leanings and is a member of the European People's Party. The Coalition for Change is a new formation that brings together some former UNM members and two liberal parties, Droa and Girchi. The Lelo Party was founded by a former banker, Mamuka Khazaradze, while the For Georgia Party is led by the former GD prime minister, Giorgi Gakharia.

Opposition parties lack resources, find themselves under constant pressure from the authorities and endure an ongoing and violent stream of fake news to discredit them. Their members, including their leaders, are regularly physically attacked by thugs acting for the ruling party. The UNM headquarters, for example, was stormed and vandalised by several dozen hooded individuals in May 2024, and the resulting police investigation achieved no results.

Ahead of the elections, all public billboard space has been bought up by GD posters. In the previous elections, 990 of the 1000 locations for public advertisements were occupied by GD. The imbalance is also striking with regard to the finances committed to the election campaign. In 2020, for every \$100 spent on political advertising, \$90 was spent by GD and \$10 by all the other parties combined. This does not include the “administrative resources” described above.

Despite this unbalanced situation, GD goes into the 2024 elections in worse shape than ever. Independent opinion polls and surveys show that the opposition as a whole is winning. Unlike in previous elections, GD is showing signs of the wear and tear of power, and the voters, including those who form part of the administrative resources, appear less enthusiastic. GD’s explicitly pro-Russia stance and relentless attacks on the EU and the US have also eroded support for the party among the most pro-western part of its voter base. Adoption of the Foreign Agents law, called Russian law, in May and the resulting mass protests have left a lasting mark on the regime’s credibility, especially among young people. Another novelty that makes it more difficult for GD to win is that the 2024 elections will be held under a proportional system. In previous polls, half (2016) or one-fifth (2020) of parliamentarians were elected under a majoritarian system. GD previously won all these constituencies by relying on local notables and their clientelist networks.

Conclusions

For too long, Europe and the US have been reluctant to take decisive action. Washington and Brussels have not always been critical of GD, even when its behaviour showed worrying signs. Western governments were generally satisfied that Georgia was imitating continuity with the EU integration process while at the same time maintaining a dialogue with Russia. The latter’s growing influence in Georgia only started to concern Europe and the US after Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Despite incessant verbal attacks on the EU by the Georgian authorities, their alignment with Viktor Orbán and their backsliding on democracy, Brussels granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023. The Georgian government, which sought this status while arguing against EU alignment, used the time to repress pro-European NGOs, political parties and media outlets, just as sceptics warned. Once candidate status was secured, Tbilisi adopted a “foreign agents law” in the face of all warnings from Brussels, thereby continuing to sabotage the country’s candidacy.

The threat that Georgia might fall under Russian influence has never been more real. The closest comparison would be the country’s defeat in the 1993 Abkhaz War and its subsequent subjugation. Unlike in 1993, however, when Russia was weak and lost control of Georgia a few years later, and not yet fiercely hostile to Washington and Brussels, Putin’s Russia is now much more assertive and at war with the West. In addition, Georgia had just emerged

from Soviet rule in 1993. In contrast, 30 years later, just before GD came to power it was the most pro-West country in the region, with a population that overwhelmingly aspired to join the EU and NATO.

Georgia's geographical potential as a key transit hub between Europe and Asia is fully understood in the West. Its loss would increase Europe's dependence on Russia, which would give Russia formidable leverage. The importance of Georgia is therefore geopolitical and geo-economic.

In the context of Central Asian countries' growing attempts to emancipate themselves from Moscow's influence and develop alternative transit routes that avoid Russia, Georgia's journey reverses the general regional trend. Armenia's attempted pivot to the West is dependent on Georgia's geopolitical evolution; the loss of Georgia automatically gives Russia victory in Armenia. Azerbaijan and Turkey also view Georgia as an essential piece of the puzzle for their geopolitical plans, and Georgia's fall to Russia would seriously compromise these plans.

The US has already put several Georgian officials on the sanctions list, in particular those involved in undermining democracy or those visibly acting in the Kremlin's interests. Washington and Brussels have also suspended significant aid programmes in Georgia. The US State Department recently leaked information about completing preparations for a package of sanctions targeting Ivanishvili and high-level Georgian officials. In contrast, the EU is only discussing the possibility of suspending the visa-free regime it operates with Georgia if the elections are found to have been rigged.

These measures are necessary, even if they have come late. Western sanctions are generally reactive, delayed responses to negative developments in a certain country. For this reason, they lack efficiency as they are put in place once authoritarianism has already been consolidated. It would be preferable if measures could be more preventive, and conditionality could be tightened at the first sign of symptoms.

Policy recommendations

- Ahead of the crucial elections, the West should be bold and explicit about the incompatibility of a Europe-oriented future for Georgia with current GD policies.
- Punitive measures should be more preventive, and conditionality should be tightened at the first sign of symptoms.
- Sanctions should be publicized in such a way that GD cannot use them to provoke anger against the West. The Georgian people should understand that hostile measures taken by Brussels or Washington are the direct consequence of the Georgian government's policies. The Georgian people are suffering due to the behaviour of their government and not a "neocolonial and oppressive West".

Georgia's Unexpected U-turn

Kakha Gogolashvili

Executive summary

Georgian governments have pursued integration with the European Union (EU) for over 30 years, reflecting the will of the majority of the population. They have implemented EU standards and reforms, culminating in 2022 with the “European Perspective” and EU candidate status in 2023. Unexpectedly, the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), has recently begun to ignore EU recommendations, prioritise “state sovereignty” and pursue controversial policies such as resisting judicial reform, distancing itself from the EU and strengthening its alignment and ties with Russia. Why has GD chosen this risky path? As most Georgians support integration with the EU, how should the EU and the international community respond to GD's policy of steering the country away from Europe?

The EU and other democratic actors should remain steadfast in supporting the Georgian people's democratic aspirations while holding GD accountable for its political shift. Sanctions or other measures must be carefully designed to avoid backfiring, but normal relations with GD should be curtailed to signal disapproval. EU accession talks should be suspended, and it should be made clear that GD has lost the trust of its international partners. The upcoming elections are critical. To facilitate a pro-European regime, the EU and the United States must ensure that the elections are free and fair.

Early signs of a U-turn

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia has faced power struggles, economic hardships, coups and territorial conflicts. Despite these challenges, an aspiration to join the European Union has been constant among the majority of Georgians. As a consequence, successive governments have steadfastly pursued this goal for three decades, reflecting Georgia's proactive and unwavering commitment to the European orientation.

In August 2021, the then Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, unexpectedly rejected the EU's second tranche of a €150 million long-term loan, which was conditional on reform of the system for appointing Supreme Court judges and the Prosecutor General. This rejection came after initial agreement on the EU's terms, which would have given the parliamentary minority some influence over these appointments.

Similarly, on 30 June 2021, Georgian Dream (GD) withdrew from an EU-brokered [agreement](#) aimed at resolving the political crisis that followed the disputed 2020 elections. The agreement, which had been facilitated by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, was intended to address issues with the judiciary, the electoral code and power-sharing in parliament.

EU Candidacy: the undesirable gift

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reshaped geopolitical dynamics. Ukraine's courageous resistance garnered EU support for its membership aspirations, leading to an application

for membership on 28 February 2022. Following Ukraine's move, Moldova and Georgia also submitted applications. While the governments of Ukraine and Moldova initiated these steps, in Georgia it was public pressure and the parliamentary opposition that drove GD to apply. By June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova had been granted EU candidate status, whereas Georgia received a "European Perspective", and the promise of candidate status on meeting 12 priorities for reform, which included judicial reform, "de-oligarchisation", enhancing media freedom and tackling corruption.

In February 2023, GD, through its affiliated party People's Power, proposed a controversial "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", which requires NGOs and independent media outlets receiving foreign financing to register as "foreign agents". Introduced without stakeholder consultation, the law faced widespread opposition from civil society, the media, international bodies, the EU and the US. Mass protests, led by Gen-Z activists and supported by diverse age groups, put pressure on GD to withdraw the law.

Despite the proposed law, and despite only having partially met nine of the 12 EU-mandated reform targets, Georgia was granted candidate status by the European Council on 15 December 2023, influenced by public opinion and civil society advocacy. However, the indifferent reaction of GD leaders raised doubts about their commitment to the EU path. The chance Georgia was given should have encouraged GD to act rapidly to fulfil the new conditions as set out in the EU's "Nine Steps". These new conditions combined the remaining unfulfilled priorities with some additional ones on fighting disinformation and alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Just three months later, however, GD reintroduced the proposed law withdrawn one year before in an action that provoked mass protests from citizens and strong criticism from partners in the EU and the US.

Dramatic evolution

Throughout 2024, GD has engaged in extensive propaganda efforts targeted at local government, citizens of various regions and law enforcement bodies. It has also reinforced and re-equipped the special forces and riot police. Consequently, during a month and a half of daily rallies, police and affiliated special forces used excessive force to attack and detain largely peaceful protesters. Many detainees were violently treated, while others were attacked in the streets by organised groups widely believed to be linked to GD. Around 50 protesters were severely injured, some with broken bones and head trauma requiring hospitalization.

GD believed it was well-prepared for the protests but the intensity of the demonstrations and the sharp international reaction caught it off guard. Despite the GD leaders' repeated claims that no valid criticisms of the law had been made, the [Venice Commission](#) and [OSCE/ODIHR](#) issued comprehensive analyses highlighting the proposed law's incompatibility with democratic principles, the Georgian Constitution and the country's international commitments.

Ignoring these criticisms, GD leaders dismissed the opinions of these respected international experts as "biased judgments" influenced by the "Global War Party".¹ The law came into force on 1 June and three months later the Ministry of Justice was ready and entitled to

¹ The Global War Party, invented by GD, is a mystical group of masonic type organisations that allegedly rules the western world and intends to provoke Georgia into a war with Russia.

begin monitoring and imposing fines on NGOs and media outlets that do not comply. Most NGOs have decided not to register as foreign agents and are braced for sanctions. They have already appealed to the Constitutional Court, but the court, involved in the scandalous approval of the presidential impeachment, which is widely viewed as unjust, recently ruled against immediately halting the application of the law, opting instead to address the issue through a prolonged procedural trial.

As a next step, NGOs plan to seek a provisional ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to suspend the law until a final judgment is rendered. At the same time, GD is continuing to find ways to impede the work of free NGOs on monitoring and observing the upcoming elections. The anti-corruption body recently issued an ordinance declaring two well-known and active NGOs “subjects with explicit electoral aims”, which imposes certain restrictions on them. This status was rapidly rescinded following immediate pressure from wider society, but fear and uncertainties related to the possibility of other attacks on the electoral process remain.

International reaction

The US State Department promptly imposed a travel ban on 60 Georgian politicians and officials involved in passing the controversial law and orchestrating violent attacks on peaceful protesters. Two high ranking police officers recently were subjected to wider financial sanctions. In addition, the US Congress introduced separate bills in both chambers, proposing severe sanctions on Georgian officials. These bills, which aim to support Georgia’s people and democratic values, also suggest the possibility of reassessing and reducing the level of US relations with Georgia, including cuts to military aid and support.

In May, the European Parliament urged EU member states and the European Commission to implement severe sanctions against the relevant politicians, police officers and members of the special forces if the law was adopted by the Georgian Parliament. The proposed sanctions included suspending the visa-free regime and freezing financial assistance to the Georgian government, as well as suspending Georgia’s candidate status for EU membership. The meeting of the European Council on 24–25 June limited itself to sharp warnings to the Georgian government to return to the European track but did not take the expected measures. Nonetheless, the EU and the US had already cut a considerable part of their financial support to the Georgian government and reduced to a minimum political contacts with Georgian officials. In addition, on 30 October the European Commission plans to present an enlargement report that sees no prospect of Georgia being recommended to initiate accession talks.

Conclusions

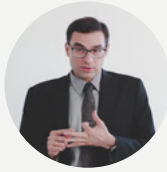
GD has disregarded warnings from long-standing international partners, jeopardised Georgia’s European aspirations and threatened Georgia’s political and economic stability. This behaviour suggests that GD is no longer aligned with the principles of EU integration, which require adherence to democratic rule, transparency, accountability and an independent judiciary. After 12 years in power, GD seems to have transformed into an exclusive club intent on ruling indefinitely on its own terms. Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who fears losing

his informal power, could be driving this policy shift. At a GD rally in Tbilisi on 29 April, he accused the West of provoking the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and the current Russia-Ukraine conflict. He also vowed to punish political opponents, labelling them foreign agents and enemies of the nation. GD's actions, notably the vote by 84 parliamentarians and members of the government to pass the controversial law, demonstrate a disregard for the will of the people and the Georgian Constitution, which mandates advancing the country on a European and Euro-Atlantic path. There is seemingly very little chance of Georgia returning to an EU Integration agenda while GD remains in power. Georgian citizens see the forthcoming parliamentary elections as the only route to salvation.

Policy recommendations

In this situation, the EU and other democratic actors should:

- **Stand firm with the Georgian people:** Maintain unwavering support for the Georgian people and their democratic aspirations.
- **Design targeted measures:** Ensure that any sanctions or measures are carefully crafted to avoid being exploited by GD to discredit or foster negative sentiments against Georgia's democratic allies, as this could backfire and be counterproductive.
- **Hold GD accountable:** Ensure that GD and affiliated officials responsible for Georgia's political U-turn face the consequences of their actions.
- **Suspend EU accession talks:** Refrain from initiating any negotiations on Georgia's EU accession at this stage.
- **Suspend normal relations:** Curtail regular engagements with GD, signalling to the Georgian people that the current situation is unacceptable.
- **Signal GD's betrayal of trust:** Make it clear that GD has lost the trust of international partners, especially as the upcoming elections will be pivotal for Georgia's future.
- **Ensure free and fair elections:** The EU and the US must take all necessary steps to ensure that the forthcoming elections in Georgia are free and fair, which is crucial to enabling regime change and allowing a pro-European coalition to take responsibility for the country's future.



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About SCEEUS

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