

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS' TURN

GEORGIA, NOT IN THE ROOM

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Abstract

The South Caucasus, and the wider Caspian-Black Sea region beyond it, are regaining a strategic weight they have not held in decades, as new corridors, new partnerships, and renewed great-power competition converge on a space linking Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Russia. At precisely that moment, the country that spent three decades as the region's anchor of reform, democracy, and stable Western partnership is missing from the room where that future is being written, absent by its own government's choice. Rather than serving as the connective tissue that could hold a fragile region together, Georgia today is one of its sources of instability. This paper is written in that regret, and in recognition of a Georgian society that has spent two years resisting exactly this outcome, refusing to let its government's abdication become the opening through which Russia re-establishes itself in the one country that, for three decades, had kept it out.

For three decades, Georgia built its foreign policy around that role: the region's only Black Sea state, NATO's most reliable regional partner, and the indispensable partner in every serious Euro-Atlantic connectivity project in the neighborhood. This paper traces the story from that role to its collapse, starting at the peak of the U.S.-Georgia partnership, President Bush's 2005 visit to Georgia, the 2008 Bucharest summit, and the military cooperation that continued to deepen even after 2012, before turning to the moment that exposed how far that partnership has eroded: the August 2025 signing of the TRIPP transit corridor, hailed by Washington as a South Caucasus peace deal and an essential pillar of regional stability. Washington called it a regional peace, but Georgia, the region's own anchor state and Washington's own oldest strategic partner, was not invited. It then examines Georgia's parallel exclusion from the EU's enlargement track, the domestic choices of the Georgian Dream government that produced this dead end, and its deepening ties to Beijing and Tehran. It closes with policy options for Washington, Brussels, and Georgian political and civic actors, grounded in the fact that, whatever the government's trajectory, Georgian society itself has not moved.

Keywords: Georgia, South Caucasus, NATO enlargement, EU accession, TRIPP corridor, democratic backsliding, disinformation

I. Shoulder to Shoulder

In May 2005, President George W. Bush stood before several hundred thousand people in Tbilisi's Freedom Square and told them that their country was “sovereign and free, and a beacon of liberty for this region and the world.”¹ It was a statement of strategic conviction, a genuine, considered American commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and democratic choice. For years afterward, these words were backed with action.

Three years later, the partnership was tested. When Russian tanks crossed into Georgian territory in August 2008, Washington's response went beyond words. In August, with the war still underway, the U.S. Air Force airlifted some 2,000 Georgian soldiers and their equipment home from Iraq. Russia protested. At a Russian cabinet meeting on 11 August 2008, Putin said: "It's a pity that some of our partners, instead of helping, are in fact trying to get in the way. I mean, among other things, the United States airlifting Georgia's military contingent from Iraq effectively into the conflict zone."² Washington did it anyway.

Within days, U.S. military aircraft were flying humanitarian missions to Georgia, and American ships, including the guided-missile destroyer USS McFaul, were sailing into the Black Sea itself, docking at Batumi. The response crossed party lines. In the middle of a presidential campaign at home, Republican Senator John McCain interrupted his own rally to say, "Today, we are all Georgians." ³ Days earlier, Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, within a week, Barack Obama's running mate, had traveled to Tbilisi, meeting Georgian officials and people displaced from war-affected territories. Whatever one makes of the theatrics of a campaign season, the response worked because it captured a bipartisan American instinct that Georgia's fight was not a peripheral dispute but a test of whether small democracies on Russia's border could survive Moscow's coercion.

That instinct had already been institutionalized months earlier at NATO's Bucharest summit, where President Bush told the alliance that “NATO welcomes the aspirations of Georgia

¹President George W. Bush, "President Addresses and Thanks Citizens in Tbilisi, Georgia," Freedom Square, Tbilisi, 10 May 2005, georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov

² Vladimir Putin, remarks at a Russian cabinet meeting, 11 August 2008, reported via wire services; cited in "Georgian involvement in the Iraq War," <https://ria.ru/20080811/150269218.html>

³Senator John McCain, remarks following a phone call with President Mikheil Saakashvili, campaign rally, York, Pennsylvania, 12 August 2008, as reported by CBS News and the American Presidency Project. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mccain-today-we-are-all-georgians/>

and Ukraine for their membership in NATO and offers them a clear path forward to meet that goal,”⁴ and where the alliance itself declared that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO.”⁵ The administration backed this decision with resources. Within weeks of the war, Washington announced a \$1 billion reconstruction package for Georgia, and in January 2009, the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership was signed, committing both governments to deepening defense, economic, and democratic cooperation. What followed was a decade of buildup, the kind that is easy to overlook because it became routine.

In August 2014, NATO's Wales summit agreed a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package,⁶ and two of its centerpieces followed in short order: the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC), inaugurated in August 2015 in the presence of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg⁷ and the Defence Institution Building School (DIBS), which opened in 2016, as a measure to “strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities and advance the country's preparations for NATO membership.”⁸

In May 2015, some six hundred American and Georgian soldiers wrapped up the largest U.S.-Georgia exercise to date, “Noble Partner”. The first time U.S. heavy armor, including fourteen Bradley Fighting Vehicles, had ever been delivered onto Georgian soil⁹. It was also the

⁴President George W. Bush, remarks in Bucharest, Romania, 2 April 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080402-2.html>

⁵NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," 3 April 2008, para. 23, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2008/04/03/bucharest-summit-declaration>

⁶CACI, NATO Grants Georgia a "Substantial Package", 17 September 2014, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13049-nato-grants-georgia-a-substantial-package.html>

⁷The NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was one of fifteen measures under the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package agreed at the NATO Wales Summit in August 2014. Its working group was formed in May 2015, and the Centre was inaugurated at Krtsanisi in August 2015 in the presence of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, becoming a standing structural entity in May 2016. See www.infocenter.gov.ge "NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC)," and www.Agenda.ge 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-opens-joint-training-and-evaluation-center-in-georgia/> or <https://civil.ge/archives/124851>

⁸NATO, "Defence Institution Building School" (factsheet), 28 June 2016, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160628_1607-dib-georgia-en.pdf

⁹U.S. Army, "U.S., Georgian forces begin two-week exercise Noble Partner," army.mil, 11 May 2015; and "Georgian partnership strengthened with Exercise Noble Partner," army.mil, 2015. The exercise, held at the Vaziani training area, marked the first delivery of heavy U.S. armor — fourteen Bradley Fighting Vehicles — to Georgia, involving soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade and 3rd Infantry Division. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/world/europe/us-and-georgia-start-military-exercise-criticized-by-russia.html> or <https://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/11/us-georgia-usa-exercises-idUSKBN0NW1FM20150511/>

first joint exercise to prepare Georgian forces for the NATO Response Force: Georgia had pledged in 2013¹⁰ to contribute troops to the NRF and take part in any military operation of the Alliance. Georgian defense forces began active participation in 2015.

Days later, on Independence Day, American soldiers stood among the Georgian army ranks on Freedom Square itself as new recruits took their oath¹¹. The following year, “Noble Partner” returned on an even larger scale: roughly 650 American, 150 British, and 500 Georgian service members training together with Abrams tanks and howitzers, timed once again to coincide with Georgia’s independence.¹²

Whoever stood on that reviewing stand on May 26th, 2016, the 25th anniversary of the restoration of Georgia’s independence, watched something rare: American, British, numerous EU states, and Georgian forces, shoulder to shoulder for the Independence Day ceremony. It was, quite literally, a small country's Independence Day underwritten by the alliance it hoped to join, marked on the same square where, in the White Hall of what is now the National Youth and Children's Palace, Georgia declared independence in 1918, and where, two days later, Azerbaijan and Armenia did the same. Long before pipelines or peace deals, Tbilisi was where the modern South Caucasus began. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were born there within four days of each other, in the same room, out of the same collapsing empire and the same dissolving Transcaucasian federation.

This didn't happen on its own. Successive U.S. administrations spent political attention and diplomatic capital on a country of fewer than four million, and Georgia's 2012 coalition government treated that attention as worth the reforms it required. Georgian Dream is often described as a Moscow project from the very beginning. That claim does not survive the record. Foreign and defense policy in those years sat with the coalition's liberal partners, not with Georgian Dream as a party, and they used that position to deliver results Georgia had not seen before:

¹⁰ DFWatch, "Georgia to Join NATO Response Force in 2015," 10 October 2013, <https://dfwatch.net/georgia-to-join-nato-response-force-in-2015-2015-23241/>

¹¹ Democracy & Freedom Watch, "Georgia celebrated a people's Independence Day," 26 May 2015. American soldiers participating in that year's Noble Partner exercise stood among Georgian army representatives on Freedom Square as 200 recruits took the military oath. <https://dfwatch.net/georgia-celebrated-a-peoples-independence-day-35979/>

¹² U.S. Army, "US, UK, Georgian soldiers cultivate capabilities in Exercise Noble Partner," army.mil, 2016. Noble Partner 2016 brought together roughly 650 U.S., 150 British and 500 Georgian service members, with U.S. M1A2 Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and M119 howitzers, timed to coincide with Georgia's Independence Day commemorations. https://www.army.mil/article/167848/us_uk_georgian_soldiers_cultivate_capabilities_in_exercise_noble_partner

lobbying successfully for the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, endorsed at NATO's Wales Summit in September 2014; signing Georgia's Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union in Brussels on 27 June 2014; launching the major Exercise “Noble Partner” with the United States in 2015; signing contracts in 2015 with France's ThalesRaytheonSystems and MBDA for Georgia's first major Western air defense systems, radar stations and a short-range surface-to-air missile battery¹³; and in July 2016, signing a bilateral defense cooperation agreement with Washington that fundamentally reoriented American assistance from training and equipping Georgian troops for foreign deployments, toward building Georgia's own territorial defense capacity. Whatever this coalition would later become, and whatever Georgian Dream as a party would later do with the government it went on to control alone, deepening Euro-Atlantic integration was, in its first term (2012-2016), something Georgia's governing coalition actively pursued and achieved real, measurable gains, arguably some of the most consequential results in Georgia's Western integration to date.

It is against that record of Abrams tanks on Vaziani's training ground and US army on Freedom Square that the years since have to be measured. Georgia now has a government sanctioned by its own most important security guarantor: in June 2024 the United States imposed visa restrictions on some thirty Georgian Dream officials and lawmakers; in December 2024 it sanctioned Interior Ministry officials over violence against protesters; and on 27 December 2024, the U.S. Treasury designated the party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, for undermining Georgia's democratic and Euro-Atlantic future for the benefit of the Russian Federation. The Trump administration, despite early hopes in Tbilisi for a reset in relations, has kept each of these sanctions in place rather than lifting them. Worth mentioning, allied pressure has since intensified: in February 2026, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office sanctioned two of Georgia's leading pro-government media infrastructure, Imedi TV and POSTV, under its Russia sanctions regime, for disseminating Kremlin-aligned narratives, extending international accountability from individual officials to the media apparatus sustaining the government itself. These were not fringe outlets operating at the margins of Georgia's media landscape; they were mainstream channels central to it, and both were sanctioned, among other things, for portraying Ukraine's government as illegitimate and disseminating Kremlin-aligned

¹³ Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Georgia Signs Air Defense Deal With MBDA," Defense News, 13 July 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2015/07/13/georgia-signs-air-defense-deal-with-mbda/>

narratives.¹⁴ The Georgian Dream government's response was not to distance itself from the finding but to defend the channels publicly and summon the British ambassador in protest.¹⁵

Another development lies with the strategic partnership charter signed in 2009, that now sits in the deep freeze. Nine years ago, Washington was arming Georgia's defense forces. Now it is sanctioning Georgia's government. Nothing measures the distance between then and now more precisely than that.

II. Not in the Room

On 8 August 2025, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev stood in the White House and, with President Trump presiding, signed a joint declaration that both governments and Washington described as a peace deal for the South Caucasus.¹⁶ President Trump announced that the transit corridor connecting Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory would be developed under American leasing rights and rebranded as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). The State Department presented the deal as an opportunity for "unlocking the great potential of the South Caucasus region in trade, transit, energy, infrastructure, and technology."¹⁷

This was, by any measure, a genuine diplomatic achievement: nearly three decades of war, closed borders and hostility gave way, on paper at least, to a negotiated settlement anchored by direct American engagement. It was also, for Georgia, a warning shot fired at close range. Analysts covering the deal noted that Georgia, the region's closest and only strategic U.S. partner just a year

¹⁴ The United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office sanctioned Imedi TV and POSTV on 24 February 2026 under its Russia sanctions regime, citing the dissemination of Kremlin-aligned narratives, including the portrayal of Ukraine's government as illegitimate. Sanctions included asset freezes and director disqualification. [Civil Georgia](https://search-uk-sanctions-list.service.gov.uk/designations/RUS3393/Entity), OC Media, Kyiv Post, 24-27 February 2026 <https://search-uk-sanctions-list.service.gov.uk/designations/RUS3393/Entity> or <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/uk-sanctions-georgian-tv-channels-over-ukraine-disinformation>

¹⁵ The Georgian Dream government publicly defended Imedi and POSTV following the UK sanctions and summoned the British ambassador in protest. [Civil Georgia](https://www.civilgeorgia.com), February 2026.

¹⁶ [Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com), "Azerbaijan, Armenia sign US-brokered peace accord at the White House," 8 August 2025; [The White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov), "President Trump Brokers Another Historic Peace Deal," 8 August 2025.

¹⁷ International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, "What Are They Saying: A New Era for South Caucasus Commerce Thanks to President Trump's Leadership," 11 March 2026, <https://www.trade.gov/press-release/what-are-they-saying-new-era-south-caucasus-commerce-thanks-president-trumps>

earlier, was conspicuously absent from the process that produced the agreement.¹⁸ TRIPP was designed as a route connecting Armenia and Azerbaijan onward to the Black Sea. The new corridor requires no Georgian territory, no Georgian ports, and no Georgian consent to exist. For the first time since independence, a region-defining connectivity architecture was negotiated, signed, and unveiled in Washington without Tbilisi anywhere near the table.¹⁹

This is not a minor procedural omission. For thirty years, Georgia's entire strategic self-conception rested on being the irreplaceable node: the only South Caucasus state with a Black Sea coastline, the conduit for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the most trusted U.S. security partner in the wider Black Sea-Caspian theatre.²⁰ That self-conception was never a birthright; it was the product of decades of deliberate political choices, sacrifices and heavy Western investment. Georgia earned it with sweat and blood, transforming itself from a security consumer into a security provider: the coalition's third-largest troop contributor in Iraq, the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the international force in Afghanistan²¹ and second only to the United States itself in the mission's later years, a continuous presence in NATO's Kosovo Force since 1999, one of only four non-EU states training soldiers in Mali, and the second-largest contributor, after France, to the European Union's peacekeeping force in the Central African Republic²². Georgian Dream squandered nearly all of it.

TRIPP does not erase Georgia's geography. But it demonstrates, in the starkest possible way, that geography alone no longer guarantees a seat at the table when the government occupying that geography has made itself an unreliable partner. The whole process demonstrated something strategically consequential: Washington no longer considered Georgian participation necessary to produce and present a region-defining agreement. Unlike geography, trust cannot be inherited. It is the most valuable currency in international relations, earned slowly and spent quickly, and Georgian Dream has spent it without any plan for how to earn it back.

¹⁸ [Just Security](#), "U.S. Counters China, Russia in the South Caucasus, Central Asia"; [Atlantic Council](#), "How Trump's 'TRIPP' triumph can advance US interests in the South Caucasus," 2025-2026.

¹⁹ Helena Bedwell, "Will Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Spell the End of Georgia's Transit Monopoly?" OC Media, 27 May 2026, <https://oc-media.org/will-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-spell-the-end-of-georgias-transit-monopoly/>

²⁰ Tinatin Khidasheli, "Washington Can Change the South Caucasus," [CEPA](#), 26 June 2026.

²¹ NATO, "Georgia: Now the Top Non-NATO Troop Contributor in Afghanistan," 26 June 2013, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2013/06/26/georgia-now-the-top-non-nato-troop-contributor-in-afghanistan>

²² Eurasianet, "Georgian Peacekeepers End African Mission," March 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-peacekeepers-end-african-mission>

Tellingly, Georgia's response to being sidelined did nothing to rebuild that trust. If anything, it made the problem worse. In December 2025, Georgian authorities demanded sharply elevated transit fees for the first fuel shipment from Azerbaijan to Armenia that passed through Georgian territory, triggering pushback from both Baku and Yerevan²³. The message from Tbilisi read as resentment. Being left out of a process the government had expected to help design, Georgia responded by raising the price of the one thing still under its control. A government that wanted to demonstrate why it still belongs in the room does not usually begin by overcharging the two parties who just discovered they no longer need it. Baku and Yerevan drew their own lesson from the episode. Both governments had just learned they could route around Georgia entirely. Within days, the government reversed course. Georgia's Prime Minister denied there was any systemic problem, telling reporters he had personally reviewed the complaints and offered Baku 'friendly discussions' on any future difficulties, then ordered a one-time, fee-free transit of the shipment. Tbilisi later replaced the disputed rate with a token, symbolic fee, a quiet concession that undercut the position it had just taken.²⁴

This is not the first time a Western-backed connectivity project on Georgian soil has stalled not because it failed, but because it was never allowed to succeed.²⁵ The deep-sea port planned at Anaklia was precisely the kind of Western-financed, transparency-based infrastructure that could have anchored Georgia's claim to the Middle Corridor for a generation. The port has sat unbuilt for years.²⁶ The international consortium behind the project fell apart, and the disputes that led to that collapse are widely blamed on domestic political interference, not a shortage of investor interest. Another project that has sat years past its proposed date without breaking ground is the Black Sea submarine cable project, initially designed to provide the region with connectivity independent of Russian-controlled infrastructure.²⁷ Each was a chance for Georgia to prove that

²³ bne IntelliNews, "Azerbaijani Media Accuse Georgia of Obstructing Freight as Transit Corridor Plans Shift Regional Balance," 9 December 2025, <https://www.intellinews.com/azerbaijani-media-accuse-georgia-of-obstructing-freight-as-transit-corridor-plans-shift-regional-balance-415698/>

²⁴ Public Radio of Armenia, "Georgian PM Orders One-Time Free Transit of Azerbaijani Fuel to Armenia," 8 December 2025, <https://en.armradio.am/2025/12/08/georgian-pm-orders-one-time-free-transit-of-azerbaijani-fuel-to-armenia/>

²⁵ Civic IDEA, "Anaklia Port – Another Step in Shifting Foreign Policy," 31 May 2024, <https://civicidea.ge/en/anaklia-port-another-step-in-shifting-foreign-policy/>

²⁶ Tinatin Khidasheli, "Georgia's Never, Never Port," CEPA, 7 May 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/georgias-never-never-port/>

²⁷ Balkan Green Energy News, "Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, Romania Establish Firm for Black Sea Interconnector," 2022, balkangreenenergynews.com; Georgian State Electrosystem (GSE), "Black Sea Submarine Cable Project Feasibility Study Review," gse.com.ge, 2022. The project's legal basis is a strategic partnership agreement signed

its indispensability was actively renewed, and that the country was ready to commit itself to the success of these projects, and ultimately to the success of the state itself. Both were also envisioned as more than commercial ventures: a functioning port and an independent Black Sea submarine cable project were meant to serve as instruments of deterrence and resilience, anchoring Georgia's security as much as its economy. Instead, today they represent a monument to the widening gap between what Georgia's location still offers and what its government has been willing to build on it.

The stakes of that gap reach far beyond Georgia's own prospects, and Washington and Brussels would be wrong to treat this as a Georgian problem alone. The entire value of the Middle Corridor to the West rests on one premise: a route through the South Caucasus that Moscow cannot touch, free, predictable, and immune to coercion. That premise collapses the moment any single link in the chain falls under effective Russian influence. Russia does not need to station a single soldier on Georgian soil to set the terms of regional transit. A captured, complicit Georgia will do that work for the Kremlin on its own. Put plainly: there is no durable Western alternative to Russian-controlled routes through the South Caucasus without a strong, sovereign Georgia anchoring the corridor's western end. Lose that, and the Middle Corridor stops being an alternative to Moscow and becomes just one more route Moscow can veto by other means.

This is why the distinction between prudence and accommodation matters beyond Georgia's domestic politics. A cautious Georgian government can avoid unnecessary confrontation with Russia while maintaining transparent infrastructure, Western security cooperation and institutional resilience. A government that weakens those safeguards does not reduce Moscow's capacity for coercion; it reduces Georgia's capacity to withstand it.

These episodes are emblematic of a larger pattern. When this paper describes Georgia as sitting on a strategic asset, geography is only one part of it. The longer list is what actually made Georgia matter: a functioning link in regional peace, a corridor free of Russian coercion, a resilient nation that absorbed Moscow's pressure without breaking, a state expected to abide by the rule of law and the norms of international trade, and, above all, the region's only genuine democracy, one whose example was expected to be contagious. The Rose Revolution of 2003 was not an isolated event. It was the opening chapter of what became known across the post-Soviet space as the wave

by Georgia, Romania, Hungary, and Azerbaijan on 17 December 2022; the feasibility study ran 2022 through November 2024; and as of now, construction has still not started, with operation targeted for 2029-2030. That's about four years from the founding agreement to today with no ground broken.

of color revolutions, and Georgia is where that wave began. These were Georgia's real competitive advantages, and now they are precisely the things that the country is losing. None of these advantages could be taken for granted or assumed permanent. They're getting harder to sustain by the year. The peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, paired with the normalization now underway between Armenia and Turkey, is already opening shorter, more direct routes that bypass Georgian territory entirely: in May 2026, Ankara and Yerevan completed the technical groundwork for direct trade²⁸ that no longer needs to be routed through an intermediary state such as Georgia. Geography was never going to protect Georgia indefinitely.

What protected Georgia, beyond its own competitive advantages, was a sealed partnership with the West, one that Washington and Brussels judged not only in dollars and trade volumes but in the currency of security, regional stability, and trust. That is where Georgia earned its place as a loyal Democratic state whose example had an infectious effect across its own neighborhood. That partnership was Georgia's real chance: not merely to survive between larger powers, but to develop alongside them, to stand as a strong partner and an exemplary democracy that did not only ask for protection but contributed to regional stability and the wider security architecture, leaving its partners no excuse to set it aside.

Rather than build on that chance, Georgian Dream has spent the past two years insulting the very partners whose trust it needs. The Prime Minister has publicly accused the U.S. Ambassador of 'demanding that Georgia open a second front against Russia,' recasting American diplomats as conspirators against the state.²⁹ In a private letter to the Trump administration, Georgian Dream's leadership described its own crackdown on the 2024 protests as having 'effectively suppressed a USAID-funded and planned attempt at revolution,' language the outgoing U.S. ambassador called 'threatening, insulting, unserious, and received extremely poorly in Washington.'³⁰ Parliament's speaker has called a sitting British member of parliament 'corrupt'³¹ for raising concerns about Iranian influence in Georgia, dismissed the European Parliament as a

²⁸ Turkish Minute, "Turkey, Armenia Complete Preparations to Launch Direct Trade in Push for Normalization," 13 May 2026, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2026/05/13/turkey-armenia-complete-preparations-to-launch-direct-trade-in-push-for-normalization/>

²⁹ Tinatin Khidasheli, "Georgian Dream Shifting from Western Partner to Provocateur," Jamestown Foundation, 14 December 2025, <https://jamestown.org/georgian-dream-shifting-from-western-partner-to-provocateur/>

³⁰ RFE/RL, "Georgian Leadership Sent 'Threatening, Insulting' Letter To Trump Administration," 7 July 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-leadership-threatening-letter-trump-administration/33466235.html>

³¹ Mikheil Khachidze, "Georgia's Disputed Parliamentary Speaker Calls UK MP 'Corrupt' Over Iran Influence Concerns," Kyiv Post, 5 February 2026, <https://www.kyivpost.com/analysis/69488>

'fan club' for a 'dictator, an executioner, and a corrupt person,' and accused a member of the European Parliament of 'fascist statements.'³² Even a Republican co-sponsor of Congress's own Georgia sanctions bill has said Georgian Dream has 'regularly insulted President Trump and other cherished U.S. officials.'³³ This isn't improvisation. It's daily upkeep on a narrative in which every partner becomes a conspirator, and every insult becomes proof the government is standing up to them.

Thus Georgian Dream explains its losses by invoking a 'Global War Party' and a 'Deep State' it claims are conspiring against Georgia, phantoms that explain nothing to Washington or Brussels and cost the country everything real: not only Georgia's standing, but the shield that standing used to provide.

The danger ahead is structural. A South Caucasus rebuilt around Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China each pressing their own interests into whatever space Georgia leaves open, is not an architecture designed to exclude Georgia. It is worse than that: it is an architecture that functions perfectly well without Georgia in it. If TRIPP matures into a genuine parallel route rather than a complement to Georgia's own infrastructure, and if Tbilisi's estrangement from Washington and Brussels continues on its present course, Georgia will not be pushed out of the region so much as quietly stepped around, until being bypassed stops being news and simply becomes the region's new baseline. Nothing about that outcome would be forced on Georgia from outside. Georgia would arrive there the way it has arrived at everything else in this account: not because its geography changed, but because its government did.

III. The Enlargement Trio, Minus One

Georgia's exclusion from the American-brokered peace process has a mirror image in Brussels with the EU. On 14 December 2023, the European Council granted Georgia EU candidate status on the explicit understanding that Tbilisi would implement nine reform steps recommended

³² SOVA, "Speaker: European Parliament Is the 'Successor to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies,'" 5 May 2026, <https://sovanews.tv/en/2026/05/05/speaker-european-parliament-is-the-successor-to-the-ussr-congress-of-peoples-deputies/>

³³ Office of Congressman Joe Wilson, U.S. House of Representatives, "Congressmen Wilson, Cohen, Hudson, Veasey Welcome House Passage of MEGOBARI Act," 5 May 2025, <https://joewilson.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressmen-wilson-cohen-hudson-veasey-welcome-house-passage-megobari-act>

by the European Commission the previous month.³⁴ The same month, Ukraine and Moldova opened the door to accession negotiations, moving a step ahead of Tbilisi. Much more has happened since December 2023, and the language used in Brussels has moved on with it. Nobody talks about the enlargement trio anymore. Nobody talks about Georgia being on a membership path, because by mid-2026 there are not many left who believe there is one.

In May 2024, the Georgian parliament adopted a law on the “transparency of foreign influence” modeled explicitly on Russia's foreign agents legislation and against the Commission's recommendations. On 27 June 2024, the European Council concluded that Georgia was backsliding on the nine steps and that its accession process was, in effect, halted.³⁵ On 28 November 2024, Georgia's Prime Minister announced that Georgia would not pursue accession negotiations until 2028; weeks later, on 19 December, the European Council formally registered its regret and suspended the process outright.³⁶ By the time the Commission published its 2025 Enlargement Report, the assessment was blunt: Georgia was, in the Commission's own words, “a candidate country in name only.”³⁷

Meanwhile, the other two countries of the trio kept moving. The Ukraine Facility, which entered into force on 1 March 2024, provides up to €50 billion in financial support for 2024-2027.³⁸ Moldova's Growth Plan, proposed the same October that Georgia's own government was already signaling retreat, delivers up to €1.9 billion for 2025-2027, the largest EU support package Chişinău has ever received.³⁹ Both packages arrived bundled with the high-level visits, summits

³⁴Council of the European Union, "Georgia," consilium.europa.eu; candidate status granted 14 December 2023 on the understanding that the nine steps recommended by the European Commission on 8 November 2023 would be implemented.

³⁵[EU Neighbours East](#), "Georgia accession process de facto halted as EU calls on government to change course," following the European Council conclusions of 27 June 2024, which cited backsliding on the nine steps, including the adoption of the foreign influence transparency law in May 2024.

³⁶Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced on 28 November 2024 that Georgia would not pursue the opening of EU accession negotiations until 2028; the European Council formally registered its regret and suspended the accession process in its conclusions of 19 December 2024.
https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/29/georgia-halts-eu-application-leading-to-protests-denouncing-a-betrayal_6734538_4.html?srsId=AfmBOoriRT_VLfpVhJw6rWXIDcmPRMo4N1kkf7m8BxNd4SE_SqOGIMbs or <https://www.dw.com/en/georgia-thousands-protest-after-pm-suspends-eu-entry-bid/a-70913068>

³⁷European Commission, 2025 Enlargement Report, cited in [OC Media](#), "EU calls Georgia 'candidate in name only' in damning 2025 enlargement report."

³⁸The Ukraine Facility, in force from 1 March 2024, provides up to €50 billion in financial support to Ukraine for 2024-2027. [European Commission / Council of the European Union](#).

³⁹The European Commission's Growth Plan for Moldova, proposed October 2024 and finalized in March 2025, provides up to €1.9 billion for 2025-2027 — the largest EU financial support package Moldova has received. [Council of the European Union](#), March 2025.

and public reaffirmations that mark an accession track still functioning as intended. Georgia has been absent from that rhythm entirely, not selectively excluded from particular meetings, but removed from the agenda altogether. The frontrunner of 2023 is now the one enlargement candidate whose own prime minister has publicly foreclosed the process for the remainder of the decade.

Obviously the problem is not necessarily the loss confined to money and summits, real as those are. Every EU accession negotiation is also a technical and administrative apprenticeship of years of harmonizing law, training civil servants, and building the institutions that a future member state needs regardless of who governs it. Ukraine and Moldova are spending these years building that muscle, despite war and economic hardships. Georgia's government has chosen to let it acquire a different kind of muscle instead: the legal and administrative machinery for restricting freedom of speech and expression, mostly outlawing freedom of assembly and peaceful public gatherings, limiting civic space, controlling the media, arresting dissent, etc.

This is the same story replayed, now in Brussels. Washington did not need to formally eject Georgia from anything to signal that Tbilisi was no longer indispensable; it simply negotiated South Caucasus regional projects without even consulting Tbilisi. Brussels did not need to revoke Georgia's candidate status to make the same point, and it did not simply watch from the sidelines. It has raised the issue directly at the level of the European Council, and produced recommendation lists, progress reports and public statements at a pace matched by few other candidate files. It has even explicitly tasked a Special Representative for the South Caucasus with the crisis in Georgia⁴⁰, and Tbilisi has responded to almost none of it. Georgia's own government voluntarily froze the process, and Brussels was left with no option but to document the freeze in its own official language.

In both capitals, the mechanism of Georgia's marginalization has been the same: not a decision made about Georgia by outsiders, but a decision made by Georgia's own government to opt out, dressed up as sovereignty.

The sovereignty argument does not survive scrutiny. Georgia was not conscripted into the accession process. Georgia applied for candidacy and accepted the nine reform steps the European Council set as conditions for candidacy, had its own government formally adopt an action plan on

⁴⁰ EU Neighbours East, "EU Appoints New EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia," 31 July 2024, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-appoints-new-eu-special-representative-for-the-south-caucasus-and-the-crisis-in-georgia/>

27 November 2023 to implement them within weeks, and agreed, as every candidate state before it has, that membership comes bundled with obligations the applicant itself signs up to meet. Nobody in Brussels asked Tbilisi to rewrite its constitution to fit EU demands. As the EU's own commissioner for enlargement put it when Georgian legislation triggered this latest crisis, 'adherence to these EU values is not negotiable';⁴¹ the EU's ambassador in Tbilisi made the same point even more plainly: accession 'happens based on rules and principles that apply to all and are not negotiable.'⁴² A government that voluntarily joins a rules-based club, and then calls compliance with those same rules an assault on its sovereignty, is trying to redefine the word to mean the right to break a promise without consequence.

But the fact is that what actually protects Georgia's sovereignty is well written into its own Constitution, not imposed by anyone else or improvised by whichever government happens to hold power. Article 78 obligates Georgia's state institutions 'to take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,'⁴³ not as an aspiration but as a constitutional duty. Important to note that Georgian Dream wrote that obligation into the constitution itself, through constitutional reform, chaired at the time by the same person who now serves as the Prime Minister.

European integration has been a dream of generations of Georgians, who believe that integration, rather than isolation, is what keeps a small state's independence intact. That conclusion rests on the plain fact that a nation of fewer than four million people, sitting on the frontier of a state the European Parliament has formally declared a sponsor of terrorism,⁴⁴ does not survive on sovereignty rhetoric. It survives inside alliances strong enough to make that sovereignty mean something.

⁴¹ European Commission, "Georgia: Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos on Latest Developments," 2 April 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/georgia-joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-kallas-and-commissioner-marta-kos-latest-2025-04-02_en

⁴² 1TV, "Ambassador Herczyński: Georgia's EU Accession to Happen Based on Rules and Principles That Apply to All and Are Not Negotiable," 18 October 2024, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/ambassador-herczynski-georgias-eu-accession-to-happen-based-on-rules-and-principles-that-apply-to-all-and-are-not-negotiable/>

⁴³ Viktoriia Lapa and Justin Frosini, "Challenges to Georgia's EU Integration: Is the Georgian 'Russian Law 2.0' Contrary to the Georgian Constitution?" Verfassungsblog, 13 May 2024, <https://verfassungsblog.de/challenges-to-georgias-eu-integration-is-the-georgian-russian-law-2-0-contrary-to-the-georgian-constitution/>

⁴⁴ European Parliament, "European Parliament Declares Russia to Be a State Sponsor of Terrorism," 23 November 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>

IV. The Dead End

Two moments, less than three years apart, show how this dead end was built, choice by choice, not inherited from a government that arrived in 2012. The first of those choices came immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the moment at which Georgian Dream's subsequent strategic logic became unambiguous.

Georgia's government responded with immediate strategic retreat rather than the political solidarity displayed by most of its Western partners. The next day, unprompted, the Prime Minister announced that Georgia would not join international sanctions against Russia, citing the country's economic interests.⁴⁵ The government also hesitated to apply for EU membership alongside Ukraine and Moldova. As late as 1 March, the ruling party's chairman was still warning that a 'hasty initiative could be counterproductive' and that Georgia would stick to its own timeline.⁴⁶ Only after tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets did the government reverse course, forced by the people to submit the application.⁴⁷ It was soon after the Russian invasion that the instincts driving the government in Tbilisi became unmistakable. By May 2022, a propagandist close to Ivanishvili was already telling pro-government media that unnamed foreign powers wanted to drag Georgia into war with Russia, the first sighting of an idea that would harden, by 2024, into the government's defining narrative: the 'Global War Party,' a conspiracy that has dominated Georgian Dream's rhetoric ever since.⁴⁸

The logic presented to the Georgian public was fear: fear that Russia would prevail in Ukraine, and that Georgia would become its next target if it followed Kyiv's Western course. Georgian Dream's messaging since February 2022 has consistently presented Russia as likely to prevail in Ukraine and Georgia as Moscow's next target if it "provoked" Russia as Kyiv supposedly had. This logic surfaced when Prime Minister Garibashvili stated at GLOBSEC, "one

⁴⁵ Civil Georgia, "Georgia Won't Join Russia Sanctions, PM Says," 25 February 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/475153>

⁴⁶ Civil Georgia, "No EU Application Before 2024, Kobakhidze Says," 2 March 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/476433>
The announcement was made not by the Prime Minister but then Chairman of GD party Irakli Kobakhidze.

⁴⁷ Joshua Kucera, "Georgia Formally Applies for EU Membership," Eurasianet, 3 March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-formally-applies-for-eu-membership>

⁴⁸ Lela Kunchulia, "Georgian Dream Takes On the 'Global War Party,'" RFE/RL, 18 May 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/global-war--party-georgian-dream-bidzina-ivanishvili/32951749.html> Gabriella Calder, "'The Global War Party': Anti-Western Rhetoric in the 2024 Georgian Parliamentary Elections," NATO Association of Canada, 26 October 2024, <https://natoassociation.ca/the-global-war-party-anti-western-rhetoric-in-the-2024-georgian-parliamentary-elections/>

of the main reasons was NATO, NATO enlargement,” citing Ukraine's “will and determination to become a member of NATO” as a cause of the war.⁴⁹

Officials have started to warn against opening a 'second front,' to cast Western pressure as an attempt to drag Georgia into a war it cannot survive, and to tell voters, in effect, that only Georgian Dream stands between the country and Ukraine's fate. Whatever calculations sit behind that messaging, these were not random missteps: the public strategy has been built around one consistent premise: Russia was winning, and Georgia's only safety lay in giving Moscow no reason to notice it.⁵⁰

This policy approach should be taken seriously. Georgia is a small state, twenty percent of whose internationally recognized territory remains under Russian occupation. It fought a war with Russia in 2008, received a promise of eventual NATO membership but no Article 5 protection, and watched Russia launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. No responsible Georgian government can disregard that asymmetry of power. Avoiding military provocation, maintaining channels of communication with Moscow, protecting trade and remittance flows, and refusing steps that could expose the country to an unwinnable confrontation can all be defended as legitimate instruments of small-state prudence. A foreign policy does not become pro-Russian merely because it acknowledges military vulnerability or the immediate costs of escalation.

Georgian Dream's promise was narrower than reversing the occupation or compelling Moscow to fulfill the 2008 ceasefire agreement. It attributed the territorial losses and casualties of 2008 to the recklessness of the previous government and offered the public a simpler commitment: no further war, no further large-scale loss of territory, and no repetition of Georgia's devastation. Tried against that promise, the government can point to a meaningful outcome. Georgia has not experienced another interstate war with Russia, nor has Moscow launched a new large-scale military operation to seize additional Georgian-controlled territory.

Whether Georgian Dream can claim the absence of another war as its own achievement is a separate question. To credit the government's policy, one would need a plausible counterfactual: that Russia was otherwise willing and able to open another conventional front in Georgia, and that

⁴⁹ Petra Bošková, "Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili at GLOBSEC 2023: 'NATO Expansion Caused the War in Ukraine, but the United States Is Our Number One Strategic Partner,'" Strategic Analysis, 26 February 2024, <https://www.strategicanalysis.sk/georgian-prime-minister-garibashvili-at-globsec-2023-nato-expansion-caused-the-war-in-ukraine-but-the-united-states-is-our-number-one-strategic-partner/>

⁵⁰ Marc Champion, "What If Russia Wins in Ukraine? Ask Georgia," Bloomberg Opinion, 1 May 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-05-01/what-if-russia-wins-in-ukraine-ask-georgia>

Georgian Dream's accommodation altered that calculation. After February 2022, this cannot simply be assumed. Russia was committing enormous military, financial and political resources to its invasion of Ukraine. Opening an additional front in the South Caucasus would have imposed further costs, stretched capacity and risked wider regional complications.

Russia's conduct toward Armenia provides supporting evidence. In September 2022, when fighting extended to Armenia's internationally recognized territory, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization declined to provide the military assistance Yerevan expected from a formal alliance⁵¹. The following year, Russian peacekeepers did not prevent Azerbaijan from taking full control of Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Moscow's responsibilities under the 2020 ceasefire arrangement.⁵² The cases are not identical: Nagorno-Karabakh was internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, relations between Moscow and Prime Minister Pashinyan had deteriorated, and Russia's inaction also reflected political choices. Nevertheless, the pattern suggested that, with its resources and attention concentrated on Ukraine, Moscow was increasingly unwilling or unable to incur additional military costs even to preserve its position with a treaty ally. More fundamentally, the question is why Russia would launch another conventional war for the territories it already controlled and could advance its objectives through less costly means: borderization, economic pressure, political influence, disinformation and the progressive integration of the occupied regions? The absence of another invasion may therefore reflect not only Georgian restraint but also Russia's limited need and reduced incentive to initiate one.

Even if Georgian restraint contributed to non-escalation, the record does not establish that democratic backsliding and estrangement from the West were necessary to preserve it. Georgia had already avoided renewed war while moving in the opposite direction: signing the EU Association Agreement, expanding cooperation with NATO... Nor has Georgian Dream demonstrated that continued European integration, independent institutions, competitive elections or a strong civil society would have provoked a Russian attack. Avoiding confrontation with

⁵¹ For Armenia's official position following the September 2022 fighting, Pashinyan publicly demanded that the CSTO define and defend its zone of responsibility inside Armenia <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2022/11/23/Nikol-Pashinyan-CSTO-meeting/>

⁵² For the failure of Russian peacekeepers to prevent Azerbaijan's 2023 operation and their subsequent withdrawal see AP reporting on April 23, 2024 "Russia begins withdrawing peacekeeping forces from Karabakh, now under full Azerbaijan control" <https://apnews.com/article/russia-azerbaijan-withdrawal-f60ed4e9ca5e78c071b77a2fa57cd765>

Moscow did not require suspending the EU accession process, attacking Western ambassadors, restricting independent media or dismantling the domestic institutions that had anchored Georgia's resilience.

The government's claim also depends on defining escalation exclusively as conventional invasion. The truth is that Russian coercion has continued without renewed war. Borderization, arbitrary detention, restrictions on movement and the gradual military, political and economic integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia's orbit have not stopped. New fences and surveillance installations have continued to appear along the occupation lines; Moscow has pursued a naval or logistical facility at Ochamchire; unauthorized Russia-Sokhumi flights have further bypassed Georgian sovereignty; and South Ossetian de facto officials have continued discussing incorporation into the Russian Federation. Georgian Dream can therefore not claim that there has been no further encroachment on Georgian sovereignty.

Accommodation has nevertheless produced some benefits for Georgia and political benefits for Georgian Dream. Moscow's official rhetoric has become less hostile, while restored flights, visa liberalization and selective economic openings have reduced costs for some Georgian citizens and businesses. Georgian Dream has also earned explicit Russian approval. In February 2023, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov praised Tbilisi's refusal to impose sanctions, describing the government's policy as being "in line with the interests of the Georgian state and people."⁵³ In November 2024, as Georgian Dream resisted Western pressure over its democratic backsliding and foreign-influence legislation, Vladimir Putin commended the Georgian authorities for the "courage and character"⁵⁴ with which they defended their position. These statements demonstrate that Moscow views Georgian Dream's course favorably.

But Russian approval is not equivalent to Russian restraint. Selective economic openings and reduced rhetorical hostility do not establish that Georgian Dream's policies caused Moscow's non-escalation, guarantee its durability, or limit Russia's capacity to escalate if its interests change. These benefits coexist with Russia's continued consolidation of the occupation and the continuing

⁵³ Lavrov's official February 2023 interview is available from the [Russian Foreign Ministry](#). Referring to Georgia's trade, tourism and energy relations with Russia after discussing its refusal to join sanctions. English reporting by OC media provides the full Georgian political context <https://oc-media.org/russias-top-diplomat-compliments-georgia-for-not-irritating-them/>

⁵⁴ Putin's remarks were delivered at a press conference in Astana on 28 November 2024. The Russian state agency TASS quotes him praising the Georgian authorities <https://tass.ru/politika/22526189>. For English language see <https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/putin-expresses-surprise-at-georgian-authorities-courage>

erosion of Georgian sovereignty. At the same time, Georgia's relationships with the actors capable of balancing Russian power have weakened dramatically. The result is not neutrality between Russia and the West, but a growing asymmetry: Moscow retains its instruments of pressure while Georgia weakens its principal external counterweights.

If the national-security returns of accommodation remain uncertain, its domestic political returns are much clearer. The policy has produced one unmistakable form of security: security for the ruling party. By presenting domestic opponents and Western demands as participants in an alleged effort to open a "second front," Georgian Dream has transformed a legitimate national fear into an instrument of political control. Criticism becomes provocation, external conditionality becomes conspiracy, and the continuation of Georgian Dream's rule becomes synonymous with the preservation of peace. This may strengthen regime security, but regime security and national security are not interchangeable. A government can reduce political threats to itself while simultaneously weakening the institutions and alliances that protect the state.

The appropriate verdict is therefore neither that Georgian Dream's strategy has achieved nothing nor that it has made Georgia secure. Its tenure has coincided with the avoidance of another full-scale war, an outcome of genuine importance, but the government cannot claim exclusive authorship of that outcome. Meanwhile it has failed to halt Russia's consolidation of the occupation or obtain any reciprocal limitation on Moscow's coercive leverage. Most importantly, Georgian Dream has not established that preserving peace required weakening democracy and abandoning the partnerships on which Georgia's long-term security depends. Strategic caution toward Russia can be prudent; converting that caution into domestic authoritarianism and strategic isolation is a political choice, and it is most definitely not a security necessity.

The second of those two moments came two and a half years later, in October 2024, when Georgians went to the polls for a parliamentary election and when the logic of external accommodation acquired its domestic institutional form. The OSCE/ODIHR described the process as a "captured environment": legislation that undermined fundamental freedoms and civil society ahead of the vote, diminished institutional independence over the election process itself, and voter-facing pressure that, combined with election-day practices, kept some citizens from casting a ballot without fear of retribution⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ OSCE/ODIHR, "Georgia's Elections Marred by an Uneven Playing Field, Pressure and Tension, but Voters Were Offered a Wide Choice: International Observers," 27 October 2024, <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/579376> see more in final report at OSCE/ODIHR, Georgia,

The European Parliament reached a similar conclusion. In November 2024, it adopted a resolution, rejecting recognition of the results outright, citing documented intimidation of voters, interference with observers and media, and irregularities involving electronic voting machines, and calling for a rerun under independent, internationally supervised administration.⁵⁶ By February 2025, it had moved from questioning the vote to questioning the government itself, declaring Georgia's "self-proclaimed authorities," including the newly installed president, to be without legitimacy, and calling on the international community to join a boycott of the ruling elite.

What followed domestically was not a single crisis but a compounding one. The foreign agents law, passed in May 2024, was only the opening move. After the disputed 2024 election, the government escalated in stages: a December 2024 package that raised fines for ordinary protest conduct tenfold and armed police with sweeping preventive-detention powers; a February 2025 amendment extending administrative detention for protest-related offenses from 15 to 60 days. The legislative crackdown accelerated sharply in April 2025: parliament passed the FARA-style "Foreign Agents Registration Act", which added criminal liability for failure to register, a fine of up to 10,000 GEL and up to five years in prison. Within a week, another set of amendments to the Law on Grants followed, requiring organizations to get government approval before accepting any foreign grant, with violators fined twice the value of the funds received. The same week, parliament also unanimously passed amendments to the Law on Broadcasting banning broadcasters from receiving any foreign funding, monetary or in-kind (equipment, training, media-development programs), with only commercial advertising and sponsorship exempted. In October 2025, a package was passed that reclassified repeated protest conduct, mask-wearing, blocking a road, and joining an assembly the police had already declared illegal from an administrative violation into a criminal one, carrying prison terms of up to two years for ordinary participants and four for organizers. In December 2025 parliament abolished voting from abroad altogether, closing the polling stations where Georgian Dream had won only 13.5 percent of the vote a year earlier.⁵⁷

Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2024: Final Report, 20 December 2024, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2024/georgia-26oct2024-parliamentary-elections_osce_584029_20241220.pdf

⁵⁶The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 21 November 2024, by 444 votes to 72 with 82 abstentions. [European Parliament press releases](#), 21 November 2024 and 4 February 2025; [OC Media](#), 2024-2025.

⁵⁷ ICNL, "Georgia: The Foreign Agents Registration Act," 9 April 2025, https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ICNL_Brief-on-Georgia-FARA_fv.pdf; CPJ, "Georgia Parliament Very Close to Making Harsher 'Foreign Agent' Bill a Law," 20 March 2025, <https://cpj.org/2025/03/georgia-parliament-very-close-to-making-harsher-foreign-agent-bill-a-law/> ;

All of this ran alongside a sustained legal campaign against the civic infrastructure that had, until then, connected Georgian society to its Western partners, and more.

Human Rights Watch's July 2026 assessment describes new laws that place virtually all foreign funding under government control, impose stigmatizing “foreign agent” labels, and threaten independent groups with severe fines and imprisonment; in 2025 alone, authorities froze the bank accounts of twelve independent civic organizations.⁵⁸

This is the paradox at the center of the dead end. Over seventy percent of Georgians support EU accession, a similar share supports NATO membership, and yet the government committed to reversing both has held power regardless. Every parliamentary session has been spent drafting and redrafting laws to regulate, fine, and criminalize civil society, the media, and activists, each round narrower than the last, making it harder to protest, to organize, to stay critical, but people still do. The protests that followed the November 2024 EU announcement have not stopped. Civil society and individual activists have, more often than not, stayed one step ahead of the process the government keeps writing to stop them. The fact that the protest has not stopped is itself the evidence that the choice was never accepted. The government has spent two years systematically dismantling the mechanisms that connected Georgia to the West. The door it has tried to shut is, for now, being held open from the other side, because the society it pretends to govern has spent the same two years crying out loud that it has not consented to that choice.

V. Drifting East

A government that closes its Western doors does not simply stand still; it goes looking for others to open. Georgian Dream has found two, and both routes run through capitals with little patience for the rules-based order Georgia once claimed to be building toward.

The first is Beijing. Georgia and China established a strategic partnership in 2023; on 9 June 2026, President Xi Jinping and President Mikheil Kavelashvili jointly announced its elevation to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” marking the thirty-fourth anniversary of bilateral

⁵⁸[Human Rights Watch](#), “Georgia: New Laws Devastate Independent Civic Groups,” 9 July 2026, and World Report 2026: Georgia. In 2025, authorities froze the bank accounts of twelve independent civic organizations.

relations.⁵⁹ The Prime Minister pointed to visa-free travel and new direct flights as deliverables of the preceding three years, modest achievements individually but together a clear signal of direction: as Georgia's Western accession track sat frozen, its China track was being upgraded on schedule.

Significant evidence of drift is not diplomatic ceremony but the penetration of Chinese technology into Georgia's security infrastructure. An investigation by a Georgian think tank, Civic IDEA, based on customs data and public procurement records, found that nearly 80 percent of surveillance cameras imported into Georgia came from Chinese Hikvision and Dahua, while the Georgian police operated more than 7,300 cameras, nearly all produced by those companies or other Chinese manufacturers. Civic IDEA's subsequent examination of procurement records found Chinese surveillance equipment being acquired across the state—from municipal authorities and public agencies to institutions connected with the security sector.⁶⁰ Georgia's Revenue Service has also purchased seventeen X-ray inspection systems from Nuctech, a Chinese security-technology company whose equipment is used to inspect cargo, baggage and vehicles at borders and customs facilities.⁶¹ These purchases do not prove that Beijing controls Georgian data or directs Georgian surveillance, but they constitute a serious risk: sensitive public-security and border functions are becoming technologically dependent on suppliers that the United States has restricted on national-security grounds and that European authorities have subjected to growing scrutiny.⁶² At the same time that Georgia is weakening institutional cooperation with its principal Western security

⁵⁹China and Georgia established a [strategic partnership](https://civicidea.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ASSESSMENT-OF-GEORGIA'S-STRATEGIC-PARTNERSHIP-STATEMENT-WITH-THE-PRC.pdf) in 2023; see the assessment by Civic IDEA at <https://civicidea.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ASSESSMENT-OF-GEORGIA'S-STRATEGIC-PARTNERSHIP-STATEMENT-WITH-THE-PRC.pdf> on 9 June 2026, President Xi Jinping and President Mikheil Kavelashvili jointly announced its elevation to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" see <https://civicidea.ge/en/georgian-dream-moves-the-country-further-into-chinas-orbit-georgia-china-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-announced/>

⁶⁰ Civic IDEA's 2026 procurement investigation traces the integration of Chinese surveillance and digital systems into municipal, educational and security-related state institutions <https://civicidea.ge/en/exporting-technological-authoritarianism-how-chinese-technology-is-integrating-into-georgias-state-infrastructure/>

⁶¹ Civic IDEA's investigation of the Nuctech–Georgia Revenue Service contract documents procurement of seventeen X-ray scanners from 2021: <https://civicidea.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Report-6-1.pdf>

⁶² For the international security concerns surrounding these suppliers: The FCC restricted Hikvision, Dahua, Huawei, ZTE and Hytera equipment used for public safety, government-facility security and critical-infrastructure surveillance: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-launches-new-chinese-tech-crackdown-will-ban-some-imports-2026-06-26/> EU opened an investigation concerning possible Chinese subsidies to Nuctech, emphasizing the security importance of inspection systems used at airports and ports: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/eu-regulators-open-foreign-subsidies-investigation-into-chinas-nuctech-2025-12-11/> AidData also explains the data and national-security risks associated with Chinese scanners at ports, airports and borders: <https://www.aiddata.org/blog/chinas-global-scanner-dissemination>

partners, it is embedding Chinese equipment in the domestic systems through which the state observes citizens, controls borders and processes commercially sensitive information.

The same pattern is visible in critical infrastructure and finance. Chinese state-owned and Chinese-linked companies have become major contractors on Georgia's East–West Highway and other transport projects, frequently using financing supplied by European and multilateral institutions.⁶³ Important developments have occurred in the banking sector as well. In April 2026, BasisBank, owned by China's Hualing Group, completed the acquisition of 95.99 percent of Liberty Bank, Georgia's third-largest lender.⁶⁴ Liberty Bank is not simply another commercial asset: its extensive retail network and role in distributing pensions and social payments give it access to the financial data of a particularly large and politically sensitive segment of the Georgian population. None of these transactions alone constitutes Chinese strategic control. Taken together, however, they produce concentrated exposure across the physical, digital and financial systems on which Georgia's claim to be a secure Western-facing corridor depends.

There is also a political and institutional dimension. In the 2023 strategic-partnership statement, Georgia did more than welcome Chinese trade and investment. It formally endorsed Xi Jinping's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative, agreed to strengthen coordination with Beijing in regional and international affairs, and committed itself to cooperation within those frameworks. The Global Security Initiative is particularly consequential for a country whose constitution mandates integration into NATO: it advances a Chinese conception of security organized around state sovereignty, regime stability, "indivisible security" and opposition to what Beijing describes as bloc confrontation. Georgia's endorsement does not legally replace its NATO commitments, but it places the government inside two competing conceptions of international order without explaining how they can be reconciled. More broadly, Georgian governance has begun to converge with features of the authoritarian model Beijing normalizes: expanding technologically enabled surveillance, concentrating executive control over independent institutions, treating externally supported civil society as a sovereignty threat, and using formally enacted laws to constrict pluralism rather than abolishing it

⁶³ Civic IDEA's broader examination of active Chinese contractors in Georgia documents their involvement in roads, energy and other state-approved infrastructure: <https://civicidea.ge/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Chinese-Companies-in-Georgia-new-.pdf>

⁶⁴ BasisBank's acquisition of Liberty Bank <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/chinese-owned-basisbank-acquires-controlling-stake-georgias-liberty-bank-2026-04-16/> or BasisBank info itself <https://bb.ge/en/for-investors/press-releases/2689-basisbank-successfully-completes-acquisition-of-liberty-bank>

outright. The evidence does not establish that Georgian Dream copied these institutions directly from China; Russia and other authoritarian systems provide more immediate models for several of its laws. The stronger claim is one of political convergence: Georgia is adopting practices that make cooperation with authoritarian partners easier while steadily dismantling the normative and institutional conditions on which its Western partnerships were based.

Finally, the rhetorical shift completes the picture. Georgian Dream now describes Western politicians, ambassadors, legislators, donors and institutions through the language of conspiracy, interference and attempted revolution—invoking a “Global War Party,” a “Deep State,” foreign agents and Western efforts to open a “second front” in Georgia.⁶⁵ Beijing, by contrast, is presented in official discourse as a partner that respects sovereignty, does not impose political conditions and offers cooperation without interference in domestic affairs. Georgian officials have praised Xi Jinping’s leadership and treated expanding party-to-party relations with the Chinese Communist Party as an achievement, even while dismissing EU conditions that Georgia voluntarily accepted as illegitimate external pressure.⁶⁶ This asymmetry is strategically more important than the volume of Chinese investment, which remains modest and has in some years declined.⁶⁷

The attraction of the Chinese relationship is not principally that Beijing has already replaced the West economically; it is that Beijing offers recognition, infrastructure and political legitimacy without linking any of them to competitive elections, independent institutions or protection of civic space. Georgian Dream’s drift toward China is therefore best understood not as a completed geopolitical realignment but as an emerging alignment between the government’s domestic model and the external partners most willing to accommodate it.

The second, and more consequential, is Tehran. The relationship with Tehran is different in scale and function. Iran cannot replace the European Union as a market, the United States as a security partner, or China as a source of infrastructure and technology. The concern is therefore

⁶⁵ On Georgian Dream’s anti-Western rhetorical transformation read Tinatin Khidasheli, “Georgian Dream Shifting from Western Partner to Provocateur” for [Jamestown foundation](https://jamestown.org/entry/georgian-dream-shifting-from-western-partner-to-provocateur), December, 2025 and EDMO analysis of the “Global War Party,” “second front” and Western-interference narratives at <https://edmo.eu/publications/global-war-party-second-front-unprecedented-election-meddling-from-the-west-and-other-propaganda-narratives-dominating-georgian-information-spa/>

⁶⁶ See Civic IDEA’s detailed assessment of the growing contrast between anti-Western and pro-China official rhetoric, including praise of Xi and party-to-party relations: <https://civicidea.ge/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/From-Promise-to-Disparity.pdf>

⁶⁷ Civic IDEA’s analysis based on official Georgian statistics finds that Chinese FDI remained limited and declined despite the government’s expansive rhetoric: <https://civicidea.ge/en/georgias-investment-landscape-comparative-analysis-of-chinese-and-western-investments-2018-2025-part-ii/>

not that Georgia is entering an Iranian sphere of influence. It is that the country is becoming a permissive commercial and political environment for Iranian actors precisely as the United States has renewed its maximum-pressure strategy against Tehran. Nearly 13,000 Iranian-owned or Iranian-linked companies were registered in Georgia by late 2025.⁶⁸ Registration alone proves neither illicit activity nor sanctions evasion, and legitimate trade with a neighboring country is not inherently problematic. The scale and concentration of these networks nevertheless create substantial compliance and enforcement risks for a small jurisdiction whose strategic value to the West depends on being a trusted corridor rather than a weak point in the international sanctions' architecture.

Those risks are no longer hypothetical. Civic IDEA's examination of corporate, customs and trade records identified companies using Georgian registration, intermediaries and commercial channels in arrangements that appeared designed to reconnect Iranian businesses to markets and financial flows from which sanctions had excluded them⁶⁹. A subsequent investigation found that seventy-two Georgia-registered companies imported Iranian oil or petroleum products between 2022 and 2025; some of those companies had connections to Georgian Dream donors, public procurement or former officials.⁷⁰ These findings do not establish that the Georgian government centrally organizes sanctions evasion, and the paper does not claim that they do. But they demonstrate something analytically sufficient and serious: Georgian authorities face identifiable sanctions-compliance vulnerabilities but have provided little evidence of systematic investigation, enhanced due diligence or enforcement proportionate to the risk. For a country seeking to function as the western gateway of the Middle Corridor, the credibility cost is considerable. Corridors do not remain strategically valuable merely because goods can move through them; they must also be trusted not to move sanctioned capital, commodities or technology.

⁶⁸ RFE/RL reported that nearly 13,000 Iranian companies were registered in Georgia and that unusually large numbers shared a limited number of addresses. See the reporting from October, 2025 "Thousands of Iranian Companies Operating in Georgia Raise Sanctions Concerns", <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-businesses-georgia-sanctions-evasion/33568509.html>

⁶⁹ Civic IDEA's 2025 investigation examined Georgian-registered Iranian corporate networks and alleged mechanisms for circumventing sanctions. See the report from July, 2025 "How Iranian Companies Are Using Georgia to Bypass Sanctions" at <https://civicidea.ge/en/georgian-dreams-anti-western-policy-how-iranian-companies-are-using-georgia-to-bypass-sanctions/>

⁷⁰ Civic IDEA's petroleum investigation found that 72 Georgia-registered companies imported Iranian oil and petroleum products during 2022–2025. See report from February, 2025 "Behind the Barrels: Iranian Oil and Political Ties in Georgia" at <https://civicidea.ge/en/behind-the-barrels-iranian-oil-and-political-ties-in-georgia> The findings and identified political connections were subsequently summarized by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5755893-georgia-dream-iran-ties/>

The government's political response deepened the concern even more. When researchers and international media raised questions about Iranian commercial networks, senior Georgian Dream figures largely attacked the researchers and investigative journalists as foreign-directed or treasonous rather than addressing the corporate evidence or explaining what safeguards the state had introduced.⁷¹ That response converts a regulatory question into a geopolitical one. A government confident in its sanctions' controls could publish enforcement data, disclose beneficial ownership checks and demonstrate cooperation with interested parties. Treating scrutiny itself as hostile suggests that political protection from accountability is becoming part of the relationship. It also mirrors the government's wider rhetorical pattern: Western demands for transparency are depicted as interference, while relationships with authoritarian governments are praised precisely because they impose no democratic or institutional conditions.

Against this material background, the sequence of high-level gestures toward Tehran acquires greater significance. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze attended both President Ebrahim Raisi's funeral and President Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration in 2024;⁷² Georgian officials subsequently made further gestures of solidarity with Iran,⁷³ culminating in President Mikheil Kavelashvili's attendance at Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's funeral in July 2026 while Western representation was conspicuously absent.⁷⁴ Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman put it plainly: "European leaders will not have the honor of attending the funeral of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, because they did not stand on the right side of history during the war." An Iranian member of parliament, separately, said Europe had deliberately not been counted among the "civilized nations" asked to attend.⁷⁵ The meaning of these visits lies in the asymmetry and accumulation: as Tbilisi downgraded, insulted and rejected Western partners, it repeatedly chose unusually visible representation in Tehran. Iran's own framing of attendance as a distinction

⁷¹ OC Media documented Georgian Dream officials characterizing public discussion of possible Iran-related sanctions evasion as "treason". <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-says-discussing-iran-sanctions-evasion-in-georgia-is-treason/>

⁷² Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze traveled to Iran twice in 2024: for the funeral of President Ebrahim Raisi and for the inauguration of President Masoud Pezeshkian. Jamestown, cited in reporting on [Georgia's Iranian turn](#).

⁷³ In 2025, Georgia's deputy foreign minister visited the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi and signed a condolence book for those killed in the US-Israel strikes on Iran. [Civil Georgia](#), 2024

⁷⁴ President Mikheil Kavelashvili attended the state funeral of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran, 3-9 July 2026, following Khamenei's assassination on 28 February 2026. [civil.ge](#), Euronews, [Jamestown](#) "Georgia Weighs Diplomatic Cost of Mourning Khamenei", 3-4 July 2026.

⁷⁵ Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei stated on 30 June 2026; Iranian parliamentarian [Mojtaba Zarei](#) statement [Iran International](#), 30 June 2026, cited in Interpressnews.ge, 1 July 2026; Brussels Signal, 3-4 July 2026.

between governments that had stood on the “right side of history” and those that had not gave Georgia’s presence meaning, therefore carrying a message regardless of whether Tbilisi intended every implication Tehran attached to it. Combined with weak transparency surrounding Iranian commercial networks, the diplomacy suggests a growing willingness to absorb Western reputational and sanctions risk in exchange for relations with a regime positioned directly against Georgia’s supposed strategic partners.

The irony sharpens when analyzing the region today. Armenia, for decades the region's most Russia-dependent state, hosting a Russian military base and anchored to Moscow's security architecture, has spent the last two years moving toward Washington and Brussels, culminating in the TRIPP agreement and a strategic partnership with the United States.

On 2 December 2025, the EU and Armenia adopted a new Strategic Agenda for the partnership, replacing the 2017 Partnership Priorities. In April 2026, the Council established a civilian EU partnership mission (EUPM Armenia) under the CSDP, and Armenia's armed forces received their first deliveries under the European Peace Facility, worth €30 million. On 4-5 May 2026, Yerevan hosted the first-ever EU-Armenia summit,⁷⁶ at which the two sides signed a Connectivity Partnership and the EU pledged €52 million along with proposed tariff-free access for 80 percent of Armenian exports. A Visa Liberalization Action Plan, handed over in November 2025, is already showing progress in its first review⁷⁷. Armenia's foreign minister has said Yerevan intends to formally apply for EU candidate status.⁷⁸

Azerbaijan tells a different but equally telling story. Baku has never sought EU membership and shows no sign of wanting it, yet its relationship with Brussels has deepened on its own terms: the two sides are negotiating a new Comprehensive Agreement to replace the outdated 1999 partnership framework, alongside Partnership Priorities for 2026-2030,⁷⁹ and European Council President António Costa visited Baku in March 2026 to advance both tracks.

⁷⁶ Council of the EU, "Joint Declaration Following the First Armenia-EU Summit," 5 May 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/05/05/joint-declaration-following-the-first-armenia-eu-summit/>

⁷⁷ European Commission, "Commission Presents Action Plan on Visa Liberalisation with Armenia," 5 November 2025, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-action-plan-visa-liberalisation-armenia-2025-11-05_en

⁷⁸ ARKA News Agency, "Mirzoyan: Armenia May Soon Apply for EU Membership," 20 October 2025, <https://arka.am/en/news/politics/mirzoyan-armenia-may-soon-apply-for-eu-membership/>

⁷⁹ Vasif Huseynov, "European Union and Azerbaijan Deepen Strategic Cooperation," Jamestown Foundation, 24 March 2026, <https://jamestown.org/european-union-and-azerbaijan-deepen-strategic-cooperation/>

Energy remains the anchor.⁸⁰ Azerbaijan exported roughly 25 billion cubic meters of gas in 2025, about 13 bcm of it to the EU, and in January 2026 began new deliveries to Germany and Austria via the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline. With Washington, the shift has been just as concrete. The 8 August 2025 White House agreement was followed by President Trump's suspension of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, the Cold War-era restriction that had constrained US security assistance to Azerbaijan since 1992, and by active negotiations over a direct American stake in Azerbaijan's pipeline infrastructure.⁸¹

Georgia, for decades the region's most reliably pro-Western state, has spent the same two years drifting toward Beijing and Tehran while the door to the West stood open.

The South Caucasus has not simply lost its old alignments; the two states most associated with those old alignments have, in effect, traded places. A regional order built on the assumption that Georgia is the anchor and Armenia the outlier can no longer take either assumption for granted.

VI. What Still Holds

Every section so far has described a government narrowing its own options: sidelined from TRIPP, frozen out of enlargement, sanctioned by its own former patron, drifting toward Beijing and Tehran, and sustaining the drift through a captured domestic information space. Georgian society is the one thing missing from that list, and it is the single most important factor standing between dictatorship, or full Russian control, and a sovereign Georgia.

What began in late November 2024 as a reaction to the government's announcement that it would suspend EU accession talks has not stopped. Daily demonstrations in Tbilisi were, at the time of writing, approaching six hundred consecutive days, one of the longest sustained civic mobilizations anywhere in Georgia's post-Soviet history.⁸² On 4 October 2025, tens of thousands gathered for a single rally that organizers called the “Revolution of Flags.” Protesters have

⁸⁰ Matin Mammadli, "Azerbaijan-European Union Relations: Current State and Prospects," Euronews, 2 April 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/04/02/azerbaijan-european-union-relations-current-state-and-prospects>

⁸¹ Nadira Tudor, "US Eyes Stake in Azerbaijan's Pipelines as Economic Ties Enter New Phase After Trump-Brokered Deal," Euronews, 4 June 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/06/04/us-eyes-stake-in-azerbajians-pipelines-as-economic-ties-enter-new-phase-after-trump-broker>

⁸² [Civil Georgia](#), "Rustaveli Avenue Protesters Address EU, Member States in Open Letter As Resistance Nears 600 Days," 2026;

addressed open letters directly to the European Union and its member states, refusing to let Brussels quietly close Georgia's accession file even as their own government insists it is.

The government's response has been to escalate rather than negotiate. There is an estimate of 1,600 people detained or arrested over the course of the crisis, most of whom were convicted on criminal charges arising from protest activity.⁸³ New legislation has placed foreign funding for civic groups under direct government control, imposed stigmatizing “foreign agent” labels on organizations that accept it, and threatened activists with fines and prison terms severe enough that forced many to leave the country and continue their fight from abroad.

However, none of this has produced the outcome the government evidently hoped for. Two years into a crackdown with real financial, legal, and physical costs for the people involved, the protests have not dissolved into exhaustion, and the demand at their center, a European Georgia restored to the accession track its government abandoned, has not narrowed into something more modest. This is the fact that should anchor any recommendation that follows: whatever Georgian Dream's government does next, it does not have the consent it claims, and it has not been able to manufacture that consent through two years of trying.

VII. The Way Out

The dead end described above is not irreversible, and the argument of this paper is not that Georgia's Western orientation has failed; rather, it is that Georgia's government has abandoned it, against the demonstrated preferences of the Georgian people. That distinction should shape what Washington, Brussels, and Georgians themselves do next.

For Washington, TRIPP carries a specific lesson: irrelevance is a choice the United States allowed to happen by default, not a fact about Georgia's importance to American interests in the South Caucasus. Washington retains tools it has barely used with any consistency: individual sanctions, including financial and visa restrictions targeting officials responsible for democratic backsliding, explicit conditionality attached to what remains of bilateral cooperation, and direct diplomatic engagement that treats Georgia's trajectory as a first-order question rather than an afterthought to some other issues. Exactly as we have heard from Secretary Rubio on 3 June 2026,

⁸³U.S. Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, "Georgia: One Year of Protests Over EU Ascension," <https://www.osac.gov/Content/Report/0d9c9ccc-2fd6-496f-a29d-292928a14d3b>

at the House hearing: "I hope that in the case of Georgia we will see a change in the current trajectory."⁸⁴ These instruments have been used effectively elsewhere; what has been missing in Georgia's case is the sustained political will to deploy them. Georgian Dream's own behavior makes the case for using them.

This is a government that has sent Washington a letter RFE/RL characterized as threatening and insulting, and yet when President Trump sent a routine thank-you note in July 2026 acknowledging Georgia's Independence Day congratulations, three sentences of routine diplomatic courtesy,⁸⁵ the same government treated it as a breakthrough. Prime Minister Kobakhidze called it "an important signal" pointing toward "a swift reset of Georgian-American relations," and said Tbilisi wanted to "completely reset relations, restore the strategic partnership, and do all this from scratch." A courtesy letter became, in Georgian Dream's telling, the opening of a new era.⁸⁶ A government that manufactures a crisis from every act of engagement it receives, however symbolic, is not indifferent to Washington's opinion of it; it wants that recognition badly enough to build a public narrative around it. What it does not want is to earn that recognition on Washington's terms, through the reforms, transparency, and accountability that would make normalization more than symbolic. That gap, between how much Georgian Dream craves Washington's validation and how little it will do to deserve it, is exactly the leverage Washington has so far declined to use.

Washington may in fact be the last outside actor still capable of shifting that trajectory. Brussels moves by consensus and by process; the United States does not have to. Democracy promotion doesn't need to dominate Washington's current foreign policy agenda, and Georgia doesn't need to be treated as an exception, for this argument to hold. What it requires is recognizing that a government hedging between Washington, Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow at once simply cannot be a reliable partner in a wider Caspian-Black Sea region that matters to American interests under any administration. Only a democratic, European Georgia can be that partner, regardless of what its formal alliance commitments still say on paper.

⁸⁴ Georgia Today, "Rubio Hopes for a Change in Georgia's Trajectory and Behavior Amid Efforts to Improve US Ties," 4 June 2026, <https://georgiatoday.ge/rubio-hopes-for-a-change-in-georgias-trajectory-and-behavior-amid-efforts-to-improve-us-ties/>

⁸⁵ Civil Georgia, "Trump 'Looking Forward to Strengthening Cooperation' in Response to Kobakhidze's Independence Day Message," 18 July 2026, <https://civil.ge/archives/744975>

⁸⁶ SOVA, "Irakli Kobakhidze: Trump's Letter Strengthens Hope for a Reset in Georgia-US Relations," 18 July 2026, <https://sovanews.tv/en/2026/07/18/irakli-kobakhidze-trumps-letter-strengthens-hope-for-a-reset-in-georgia-us-relations/>

For Brussels, the temptation will be to treat Georgia as a closed file: a candidate that disqualified itself and can be revisited, if at all, only after some future change of government. That temptation should be resisted, not out of sentimentality but out of strategy: keeping the accession framework alive, sustaining support for independent media and civil society even as the government tries to strangle both financially, and refusing to let Tbilisi's self-imposed freeze become the EU's own final word, preserves the one lever, a credible European future, that Georgian society has never stopped fighting for. Concretely, that means directing whatever funding channels survive the foreign agents law toward the outlets and organizations still standing, keeping technical accession work alive at the working level even where political negotiations cannot proceed, and treating individual accountability measures against those responsible for the crackdown as a complement to, not a substitute for, the accession process itself.

There is a broader lesson here, one that extends well beyond Georgia — progress and consistency have to be rewarded with concrete, timely decisions, not simply with praise. For more than a decade, Georgia was called a front-runner in the EU's Eastern Partnership and NATO's most loyal non-member security contributor in the region. What it was not given, for that same decade, was a decision. Russian propaganda's most effective line against Georgia's Western orientation was never that the EU or NATO were bad, or that their prosperity and security were undesirable. It was narrower and more corrosive: that Georgia would never actually be let in, that the door was open in theory and closed in practice. That argument only worked because for over ten years it was difficult to refute. A public that had marched under EU and NATO flags for a decade could not get a straight answer to the simplest question: when, or what else, was required of us for membership. The answer was almost always some version of "not yet," particularly from European capitals. Non-delivery became, in the end, a symbol of broken promises rather than of patience rewarded, and Russian propaganda and Georgian Dream exploited exactly that gap.

Brussels should treat this as an active warning, not a historical footnote. Moldova and Armenia are being praised today for reforms, for democratic resilience, for concrete steps toward Europeanization, and that praise is deserved. But praise without matching comprehensible decisions runs the same risk it ran in Georgia: it becomes something the next government, or the next election, can turn against the very publics that earned it. What should worry Brussels most is that Georgia entered its authoritarian turn with something close to societal consensus behind EU and NATO membership, and Georgian Dream managed the turn anyway. In Moldova and

Armenia, public opinion on that question is still genuinely split. An election that goes the wrong way in either country would not need to overcome the kind of overwhelming consensus Georgian Dream did. It would need far less. If Brussels wants a different outcome than Georgia's, the lesson is not to praise more; it is to take decisions faster.

For Georgian political and civic actors, the argument of this paper points to an uncomfortable but important conclusion: neither Washington's leverage nor Brussels' patience can substitute for a credible domestic alternative. The resistance described earlier in this paper is, in effect, the only functioning proof available to outside partners that Georgian democratic aspiration survives its government. But the aspiration is not, by itself, a plan for power.

That homework belongs to Georgians themselves, not to Washington or Brussels, and it cannot be outsourced to the next round of protest alone. Everything documented in this paper, the exclusion, the crackdown, the dead end, ultimately requires a political change, and political change is won through political parties, not around them. The posture common across much of Georgia's civic space for the past two years, "*I'm not a politician, just a citizen, let someone else deal with it.*", is not a strategy; it is an abdication. Turning civic resistance into political victory means political parties accepting responsibility for the fight, converting protest into an electoral campaign for power, and doing so without the hesitation that has cost the opposition previous elections. If the stakes really are what this paper argues they are, not a normal contest between parties but the country's democratic and Western future, then Georgia's political actors need to act like it: setting aside the differences that would matter in any ordinary election, and proving, through conduct rather than declarations, that this fight is about saving the country and not about which party leads it afterward.

None of that is possible without an opposition that is a genuine, tested force rather than a coalition assembled only for the cameras, and without a transition plan serious enough that external partners can respond to a democratic opening the moment one appears, rather than improvising one after the fact, as they have too often done elsewhere in the region. A democratic alternative must also demonstrate that restoring Georgia's Western course does not mean seeking confrontation with Russia; it means rebuilding the alliances and institutions that allow Georgia to manage the Russian threat without submitting to it.

This does not happen in a vacuum. The region is undergoing the most consequential realignment it has seen since 1991, and every serious actor in it, Washington, Brussels, Ankara,

Baku, Yerevan, is treating this as a moment that will not repeat. Georgia is the one country that, for three decades, made that realignment possible: the anchor of reform, of democracy, of a stable Western partnership others could build routes and treaties around. Georgia that continues drifting is not merely one country that loses out. The region loses its connective tissue at precisely the moment it needs it most, while the Kremlin is handed an opening to restore the foothold that a strong, sovereign and Western-oriented Georgia spent three decades denying it. That this has not happened yet is not to the government's credit. It is because Georgian society itself has spent two years in the streets, refusing, at real cost, to let its own government hand that opening over.

Georgia's choice is therefore not between war and submission, as the government's rhetoric insists. It is between a policy of disciplined resilience, cautious toward Russia, anchored in democratic institutions and reinforced by Western partnership, and a policy of unilateral accommodation that isolates Georgia from its allies, weakens its democratic resilience, and dismantles the domestic barriers to Russian influence. Moscow has offered no reciprocal security concession: it has not withdrawn a soldier, reversed recognition, stopped borderization, or implemented the 2008 ceasefire agreement. Georgian Dream has reduced Georgia's capacity to resist Russia without reducing Russia's capacity to coerce Georgia. It has simply given Moscow a less constrained environment in which to consolidate its position.

Georgia has not lost the assets that once made it indispensable: its Black Sea coastline, strategic infrastructure, institutional experience, overwhelmingly European society, and capacity to anchor a corridor beyond Russian control. What it has lost, for now, is a government willing to transform those assets into national strength rather than trade them for regime security and authoritarian partnership. Georgian Dream has weakened Georgia's capacity to resist coercion, but it has neither extinguished the country's democratic resistance nor erased the societal consensus behind its European future. That distinction keeps Georgia's trajectory open. Georgia may no longer be in the room where the South Caucasus is being reorganized, but it remains central to whether the emerging regional order is resilient and Western-connected or vulnerable to authoritarian veto. Getting Georgia back into that room therefore requires more than restoring diplomatic relations: it requires restoring the democratic institutions, strategic trust, and domestic political agency that made its geography matter in the first place.

Georgia's geography made its strategic role possible; democracy, reliability and trust made it consequential. Those are the assets that must now be rebuilt.

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