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**Research Report**

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# SWP Comment

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## Georgia at a Crossroads

**Democratic Backsliding and Turning Away from Pro-Western Course**

*Franziska Smolnik and Giorgi Tadumadze*

Georgia is at a turning point due to democratic backsliding in domestic policy and a reconfiguration of external relations influenced by regional and global geopolitical turbulence. In addressing this challenge, the EU should: consider carefully whether using communication channels will promote Georgia's democracy and future in Europe; assess the implications of cooperation for the broader population; and strengthen the resilience of Georgian civil society. Progress in the accession processes of other EU candidate countries could weaken EU-skeptical voices in Georgia and help solidify public support for the country's European aspirations.

In spring 2024, the Georgian Dream (GD) government, in power since 2012, reintroduced and passed its law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence". And in October it held controversial parliamentary elections. Both events attracted criticism at home and abroad, and are symptoms, not causes, of the political crisis in Georgia. Yet they represent key milestones in Georgia's development, specifically flagging the relationship between Georgian state and society, the application of authoritarian practices, and Tbilisi's alienation from its European partners. The latter has become particularly notable by GD's decision in late November 2024 to formally suspend the EU accession process until 2028. These events were accompanied by public protest. Demonstrations against the decision to halt EU integration are still ongoing. Domestic political developments in Tbilisi are playing out within a broader upheaval in European security and

the international order. This has specific repercussions.

### Realigning domestic and foreign policy: Measures, narratives, symbols

GD's concrete measures, targeted narratives, and political symbolism shed light on its political course.

#### Measures

The 2024 parliamentary elections accelerated Georgia's political realignment and deepened its domestic political crisis. All four elected opposition parties protested over the conduct of the election. Three of them requested that their mandates be annulled, with the fourth boycotting parliamentary work. As a result, only GD members are



represented in the newly constituted parliament. In February 2025, three deputies split from the GD parliamentary group. They now operate as the nominal opposition, under the label of the European Socialists party. The lawmakers of yet another party, known as People's Power, have performed the same nominal move already twice — having first spun off in 2022 as an offshoot of GD.

Mikheil Kavelashvili was sworn in as president in late 2024, succeeding Salome Zourabichvili, whose standing as a counterweight to GD had grown in recent years. Kavelashvili's inauguration drew criticism from opposition politicians and major segments of the independent civil society. They deem the new parliament illegitimate — a decisive body in electing the president following a constitutional reform that replaced the direct popular vote with an electoral college. The induction of Kavelashvili, who is notorious for his EU-hostile and anti-liberal posture, appears to reaffirm GD's foreign policy realignment.

There have been multiple accusations about police officers and unidentified law enforcement agents exercising disproportionate force against demonstrators during the street protests. Hundreds of protesters, including journalists and activists, have been detained. Parliament rapidly passed a succession of laws that hinder legal protest, broadening the scope of punishable offences, increasing fines for protest-related offences, and extending the duration of administrative detention from 5 to 60 days. A decree classifying "highways of state and international importance" as strategic infrastructure further restricts the physical space for legal protest. Critics of the current political leadership view this as an attempt to curb protest and mobilisation.

Recently, the government has stepped up its efforts. For example, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) came into force on 31 May 2025. The new law represents, as GD says, a "direct Georgian translation" of the American FARA. But it is no less controversial than its forerunner, the law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence". The

ruling elite has also taken numerous steps to tighten regulation of the media. Independent observers believe that the recent initiatives further shrink the space for independent reporting and civil society activity, an assessment shared by international human rights organisations.

As well as rupturing ties with the EU, domestic political developments in Georgia have seriously strained relations with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). PACE has put off full recognition of the Georgian delegation, citing democratic backsliding, human rights violations during the protests, and concerns over the conduct of the parliamentary election. In response, the Georgian delegation suspended its participation in PACE.

## Narratives

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, GD has been disseminating the narrative that there exists a "global war party", seeking to drag Georgia into a war with Russia and demanding that Tbilisi open a "second front". GD has claimed credit for meeting this pressure with a policy of restraint, and thus for keeping Georgia out of a war with Russia.

The ruling elite has refined its narrative over time. Where it used to refer to a "global war party", GD now increasingly speaks of a "deep state" — an omnipresent (shadow) state within a state, supposedly exerting global influence. Whichever term is used, it remains unclear which actors GD is specifically alluding to. According to GD, the "deep state" operates everywhere, and is particularly active where GD faces vocal criticism — for example in Strasbourg, after the European Parliament in February 2025 passed a strongly critical resolution denying the legitimacy of the GD government.

The "global war party" and "deep state" are major narratives in the ruling GD's Euroscepticism. Although the party had already positioned itself increasingly firmly against a liberal "Europe" and instead espoused a "true" conservative version, its decision to suspend the EU accession process raises

more fundamental questions about the country's foreign policy orientation.

## Symbolism

Change is also apparent in the iconography. After Mikheil Saakashvili became president in 2004, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation had a symbolic underpinning: the ruling elites used the EU flag extensively. It was displayed next to the Georgian flag in key government institutions, including parliament. This did not reflect the real state of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Although the flag also symbolised the Council of Europe, of which Georgia is a member, its use epitomised the political ambition to bring Georgia into the EU, which was shared among the ruling elite (including GD for a long time) and among large segments of society.

The visual decor for Mikheil Kavelashvili's inauguration emblemises the shift. The stage was filled with Georgian flags, white with five red crosses, with the EU's blue and yellow nowhere to be seen. The EU flag is still omnipresent in Tbilisi. But now it is more likely to be seen in political graffiti or at protests, rather than in government buildings and official ceremonies. This change in political imagery is part of GD's political communication. It underscores the narrative that Georgia must reassert its national interests, sovereignty, and identity.

The symbolic dimension also figures in GD's foreign policy, where a realignment is underway. The ruling elite has engaged in performative acts, such as highly publicised trips to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Central Asia, and China. Yet, little is known about the cooperation agreement, worth six billion US dollars, that Prime Minister Kobakhidze brought back from his trip to the UAE in late January 2025. The bilateral relationship with China still appears to fall short of GD's official assertions, despite considerable progress in recent years. Georgia signed a strategic partnership agreement with China in 2023. Rather than an American consortium, as

initially foreseen, a Chinese-Singaporean group will now build the deep-sea port in Anaklia. And economic, cultural, and educational ties are expanding.

Tbilisi is further normalising economic and trade relations with Russia — areas where the EU has fallen short of expectations. This development points to a foreign policy reorientation. For many years, Tbilisi aspired to integrate with Europe — and eventually to join the EU. Now, new entanglements in foreign policy are overwriting this long-standing aspiration, rendering Georgia's future, in the words of Georgian commentators, "Eurasian" or at least "multi-vector".

## Geopolitical resonance

The developments in Georgia are unfolding at a time of geopolitical disruption and rapid global change: Russia launches a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, undermining the European security order and straining global security, autocracy proliferates worldwide, and US (foreign) policy under President Trump is changing course. These transformations find tangible resonance in GD's actions and rhetoric.

So far GD appears to have failed to reestablish the once close partnership it enjoyed with Washington, despite having announced an immediate reset of bilateral relations with the new Trump administration. Their shared right-wing conservative positions allegedly offered a basis, the ruling party had propagated. Furthermore, GD portrayed Trump's election pledge to end Russia's war against Ukraine within 24 hours as aligning with its creed of preventing a "second front". Although a truly new start is still up in the air — and has not become more tangible after the adoption of the critical MEGOBARI Act by the US House of Representatives — GD is still seeking to capitalise on the indirect alignment of positions with Washington.

For example, Trump's administration has severely curtailed the work of USAID. Senior White House staff asserted that USAID was

a “criminal organization”, a “front organization” built to disseminate radical left-wing ideas abroad. Funding for Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has also been slashed.

These actions fit well with GD’s narrative that Georgia must protect itself from foreign influence and “liberal ideologies”. And its talk of a “deep state” also aligns with the rhetoric of the US Republicans and their supporters. The shift in US policy expedites GD’s domestic political course and could even leave the Georgian leadership feeling that its views on the regional order and global power relations had been reaffirmed.

GD does not appear to regard the EU as a central pole in this new configuration; at least not as a liberal-normative power with sufficient appeal and influence. This is because, from GD’s perspective, the EU’s security is challenged and Euro-Atlantic solidarity is crumbling. Georgian political pundits point this out. Moreover, to resume accession talks with the EU Tbilisi must revoke its recent legislative changes and implement comprehensive reforms. This would essentially mean a clear reversal from the current course. There is currently little sign of Georgia’s leadership being willing to complete such a turn, nor does the geopolitical landscape provide incentives for GD to do so.

## Public sentiment

How does Georgian society view these developments? How strong is popular support for GD? And for the political opposition? And how strong is public approval of the protests? It is difficult to give a definite answer to these questions, given the dearth of recent opinion polls. In the past, credible surveys were conducted by the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, both of which are US-funded. They commissioned representative surveys and published findings on attitudes towards parties and leaders, foreign policy preferences, and political views in general. Regular polling made it possible to follow

trends over time. In the meantime, however, these surveys have also fallen victim to the cuts in US development funding.

It is striking how little the political opposition has been visible over the past few months. The parliamentary elections already left an impression that the opposition parties were strategically ill-prepared for the ensuing scenarios. Although they did seek common ground before and after the election, primarily to gain leverage through unity in their opposition to GD, their efforts appear to have been largely unsuccessful. In fact, the opposition is entrenching its image as notoriously divided and fragmented.

The United National Movement (UNM) of former President Saakashvili is not a choice for many Georgians outside its traditional voter base. It had, in the eyes of many, lost credibility for its authoritarianism, especially during the final phase of Saakashvili’s presidency in 2013. The other parties, too, have failed to gather broad public backing. Salome Zourabichvili pushed for strategic cohesion, seeking to establish herself as a unifying pole for the opposition. However, she has largely fallen out of sight since she departed from the presidential palace. As a consequence, the political opposition lacks credible leadership and strategic orientation.

According to the opinion poll conducted by the Georgian Institute of Social Studies and Analysis (ISSA) in January 2025, almost two-thirds of respondents feel the country is moving in the wrong direction. Nearly 78 per cent blame GD for the political crisis. Polarisation is evident in other areas, such as whether the government and the president are legitimate. Although a majority of respondents support the protests, non-governmental organisations — which were prominent in the anti-government protests — achieve only a small net positive rating (35.9 per cent positive as against 29.5 per cent negative). However, as in the past, socio-economic worries overshadow other domestic policy issues. The survey identifies high prices (46.5 per cent) and unemployment (42.1 per cent) as the most pressing problems by a wide margin.

Georgian economists hold a fairly pessimistic outlook on future prospects, due to the political situation and specifically the halted EU accession process. At the same time, the business community has responded reservedly to the political developments. The strikes that accompanied the demonstrations were brief and drew only limited turnout.

Earlier surveys revealed differences between urban centres (above all the capital Tbilisi) and rural areas. For example, according to the Caucasus Barometer of April – May 2024, respondents in Tbilisi regarded political instability as the most important issue and expressed greater dissatisfaction with the country's domestic political direction than those in other regions. There were also differences between the generations, with GD enjoying less support among the youth. These factors have likely remained relevant.

## Implications for the EU

Developments in Georgia raise pressing questions for the EU, whose leaders need to quickly come up with credible answers.

The Georgian case spotlights the limited political impact of the EU's transformative approach even in its own neighbourhood. In 2021, the GD government rejected the EU's Macro-Financial Assistance, which was conditional on Tbilisi making progress on reforms. This demonstrates that the EU's leverage is weak if the partner lacks political will. In recent months, too, Brussels's responses to GD's trajectory have so far failed persuade GD to revert course. These have included freezing bilateral budget support, halting aid from the European Peace Facility, and suspending visa-free travel for Georgian officials and diplomats. Some EU member states have also imposed entry bans on individual officials and made cuts to development cooperation. The EU member states have been unable to agree on more comprehensive steps, such as EU-wide sanctions on individuals, which would have required unanimity among all 27 members.

Even below the level of full EU-wide consensus, coherence and clear strategy have often been lacking.

## What next?

The EU suspended high-level contacts in summer 2024, in response to Georgia's democratic backsliding. It remains open whether the EU will recognise the GD government as legitimate. The Weimar Triangle of Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw, for example, has avoided doing so in its statements. By reducing their contact to a minimum, Western partners constrain Georgia's international leeway and reinforce doubts over the conduct of the election. But this may also risk further eroding the EU's already diminishing influence.

The Trump administration appears to have at least lifted Washington's "contact ban". In spring 2025, the US ambassador in Tbilisi met the GD foreign minister and the minister of economy, who also serves as the first deputy prime minister. The differences between Brussels and Washington have also become more apparent under Trump.

Given this dynamic, the EU's continued refusal to engage in direct communication and dialogue could push it further to the sidelines and do a disservice to its declared aim of supporting Georgian society's aspiration to forge closer ties with the EU and strengthening democracy in the country. Brussels should therefore consider carefully when, how, and where it might restore direct political and diplomatic channels in order to promote its own interests and back Georgia's democracy and future in Europe. However, in order to ensure such communication, the EU should adopt a clear position and demonstrate maximum unity, preventing its institutions and member states from being pitted against each other. In any case, restoring communication should in no way herald the comeback of "business as usual".

The EU's objectives stem from normative claims and geopolitical interests. Here, Georgia poses a challenge to the EU: How to balance these objectives through foresighted

policies that are both consistent and adaptable?

Georgian civil society organisations view the EU as a partner with a normative orientation. They advocate for objectives such as rule of law, minority rights, and media freedom, which are on the EU's agenda and in its Association Agreement with Georgia. Consequently, they judge the EU according to its normative standards and its handling of current developments in Georgia.

Brussels has begun redirecting financial aid originally earmarked for the government to benefit Georgian civil society organisations instead. Civil society and independent media are under heavy pressure, facing state restrictions on their activities and loss of USAID funding. It therefore makes sense for the EU to step up its financial support for civil society to fill the gap. The assistance should involve minimal bureaucracy and respond to criticisms of past programmes. For example, EU donors should avoid mistakes such as concentrating initiatives in the capital, imposing bureaucratic burdens on grassroots organisations and lower-budget projects, or overlooking the urgent needs of local communities. In the interests of promoting civil society resilience, measures should strengthen independent sustainability rather than fostering dependency.

At the same time, GD's recent legislative initiatives shrink the space for EU engagement. European donors are compelled to continually reassess their room for manoeuvre and consider how to preserve it. To this end, targeted mobility programmes could help civil society actors from Georgia, the EU, and other Eastern Partnership countries to exchange best practices and share lessons learned from operating under similar political and legal frameworks.

Cooperation can also help prevent alienation between the Georgian society and the EU. Decades of intense exchange have established strong ties and shared values with the Georgian population and civil society. According to the EU Neighbours East Survey from March 2024, 60 per cent of respondents in Georgia have a

positive image of the EU, and over 80 per cent say they trust it. A number of European countries, including Germany, have reduced their cooperation — in particular with government and state structures — in response to the political developments. The challenge is to steer these steps, for example in education or development cooperation, so that they inflict minimal harm on Georgian society and its ties with the EU.

The EU should make greater use of strategic foresight. This would enable European leaders to be better prepared for possible future scenarios, to develop specific action plans, and to foster internal consensus for their implementation. Where unanimity among all 27 member states cannot be achieved, a maximally broad coalition should form between willing partners. The bleaker future scenarios could include even tighter restrictions on cooperation with civil society and independent media or even a ban on opposition parties. GD representatives have repeatedly floated the possibility of such a ban since 2024. This threat has been concretised recently, with GD setting up a parliamentary inquiry to investigate UNM's actions in government (2004 – 2012) and subsequently in opposition.

## **Beyond the bilateral**

For a long time, Georgia was the closest partner of the EU — and of NATO — in the South Caucasus. The country emblemised a stronghold for Europe's regional initiatives and was a regional advocate of closer ties with the EU. Political developments within Georgia and between Brussels and Tbilisi not only affect their bilateral relationship, but also have a broader impact on the EU's role and future engagement in the wider region.

We should also view the Georgian case in light of Europe's stability and future security order. History has shown that Russia's destabilising imperialism is also directed at the South Caucasus. It is in the EU's interest to curb this destabilising influence, or at least to help countries in the region to reduce their dependency on Rus-

sia. Moreover, other actors that do not share the EU's normative profile are gaining political weight in the neighbourhood. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed transport and transit routes. This in turn has heightened the EU's focus on the South Caucasus and Georgia in economic connectivity. Normative issues (such as legal certainty), heterogeneity of players, and regional stability all play a role here as well.

What role can the EU play for Georgia and the region? This will depend not only on the instruments and measures the EU employs in the bilateral relationship, but also significantly on how credibly the EU acts in a rapidly changing global order and how the region perceives its agency. This is especially true in an environment where various actors — often not like-minded with the EU — are trying to expand their foothold, and where Russia is seeking to extend its hegemonic claims to the South Caucasus.

The EU's attractiveness and credibility could also increase indirectly if it showcases progress on integrating other membership candidates. To this end, Brussels should vigorously press on with their accession processes. This could strip away the argumentative basis for GD's EU-hostile rhetoric and counter it with a positive narrative. The EU must therefore keep an eye on both the positive and negative repercussions of its policies in different regions.

To position itself as a strong and resolute partner and successfully convey this image in the region, the EU needs to show greater unity, make credible offers, and adopt consistent and effective measures. Only then can the EU retain its relevance as an external actor — both for Georgia and in its own neighbourhood.



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