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Georgia's Authoritarian Turn and the EU's Strategic Dilemma

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Abstract

Georgia has drifted into authoritarianism and pro-Russian alignment under the Georgian Dream (GD) party, despite receiving EU candidate status in 2023. The government has passed repressive laws, rigged the 2024 elections, and violently cracked down on protests, while the public remains strongly pro-European.

The EU faces a dilemma: treating Georgia as lost or supporting its people. The article argues Brussels must act decisively — with targeted sanctions on GD leaders, stronger support for civil society, and clear democratic conditions for EU integration — or risk Georgia becoming another Belarus and a victory for Moscow.

Keywords: Georgia, Authoritarianism, EU, Repressions, Sanctions

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Georgia's Authoritarian Turn and the EU's Strategic Dilemma

For many Europeans, the Georgian government's anti-EU turn is symbolised by Georgian Dream (GD) adopting the "Foreign Agents Law" in May 2024. The warning signs, however, date back to 2012, with GD's rise and its subsequent consolidation of control over state institutions. From his first election, Bidzina Ivanishvili argued that Georgia should cease being a problem in Russia–West relations and praised Armenia's "moderation" under Serzh Sargsyan as a model. The government viewed Ukraine's Maidan with suspicion; in November 2015, then–PM Irakli Gharibashvili publicly distanced Tbilisi from Kyiv's fight against Russian aggression.

In Brussels, "enlargement fatigue" and the post-AA¹/DCFTA²/visa-liberalisation drift left the EU risk-averse and satisfied with Georgia's low-profile discourse, in contrast to Saakashvili's (2004–2012) activism. Despite creeping authoritarianism and intensifying anti-EU propaganda, the Commission granted candidate status in December 2023—despite several elections (in 2018, 2020 and 2021) already marred by irregularities, repression of opponents and media, and frequent attacks on minorities linked to pro-government groups.

Additionally, by 2023 Tbilisi has already edged towards Kremlin positions, as showed by the June 2019 uproar over a Russian ultranationalist MP seated in parliament, Georgian government's Russian-style rhetoric on Ukraine, and a first "foreign agents" bill in spring 2023.

Irony of history: Georgia candidate despite itself

Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine revived the enlargement topic on the EU agenda and created a window for Georgia—ironically under its most anti-European government. After Ukraine and then Moldova applied, Tbilisi followed, reflecting strong public support for the EU. Yet the government often sabotaged its own chances: jailing a leading TV director on the eve of the June 2022 Commission decision; pushing the "foreign agents" law despite EU warnings; and deploying Orbán/Putin-style rhetoric casting Brussels as an oppressor.

On 8 December 2023, the Commission granted candidate status primarily "to the Georgian people" and set 12 conditions for opening accession talks, declining to tie the status to conduct of the October 2024 elections. GD then instrumentalised the status domestically while resuming obstruction—re-tabled and passing the "Russian Law" in spring 2024.

Further steps followed: an "anti-LGBT propaganda" law; tax incentives for repatriated offshore funds; and last-minute electoral rule changes facilitating fraud, all adopted against EU official warnings. Anti-EU propaganda intensified, aiming to delegitimise the Union.

The paradox was stark: a candidate-country government discrediting the very union it purported to join. GD's billionaire leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, accused the EU and the United States of belonging to a conspiratorial "Global War Party" and circulated claims about Western "ruling families," amplified by pro-government media.

¹ AA stands for Association Agreement.

² Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

Escalation after rigged elections: the Russian playbook

GD campaigned on “peace” through denouncing Ukraine and the mythical “Global War Party”, namely the US and EU, held responsible for the war in Ukraine and defending “traditional values” against alleged pressure to generalise same-sex marriage from Brussels. The October 2024 elections were marred before and during voting; GD claimed 53% in a contest that was neither free nor fair. Major opposition forces rejected the results and suspended their mandates. The EU and US declined to recognise the outcome; congratulations came mainly from authoritarian neighbours.

Rather than de-escalate, the GD government suspended EU accession talks, triggering mass protests from November 2024. At peaks, over 100,000 gathered in Tbilisi several times. The response was harsh: more than 60 people received politically motivated sentences (including prominent journalists); over 500 were injured amid police and regime-supporter violence, with no officials held to account.

A rapid legislative blitz by a de facto one-party parliament tightened controls, criminalised minor protest acts, and imposed disproportionate penalties (e.g., lengthy terms for minor property damage), while an augmented FARA³-style regime expanded. NGOs and independent media faced sweeping investigations and asset freezes, including via a new “anti-corruption” agency. The system increasingly resembled Belarus.

In spring 2025, a parliamentary commission composed solely of GD figures set out to rewrite recent history, branding a “collective UNM⁴,” recasting the 2003 Rose Revolution as a foreign-backed coup, and blaming Saakashvili for the 2008 war. Its televised proceedings have already helped put multiple opposition leaders behind bars and may precede bans on parties linked to the 2003–2012 government.

Why Georgia still matters to Europe and why “business as usual” is not any more possible

After Georgia’s *annus horribilis*, there is a strong temptation in Brussels and the capitals of EU member states to think that Georgia is lost, and that efforts should instead focus on what can still be saved — namely Ukraine and Moldova. Some suggest that since Georgia has voluntarily turned away from European integration, the EU should accept this new reality and engage with Tbilisi as it would with any other Eurasian country that has no ambition to join the Union — such as Azerbaijan or the Central Asian states.

We believe that this analysis is mistaken, and that other solutions are possible. First and foremost, Georgia is not irreversibly lost. It is entirely logical that the main battle between Europe and the “Russian World” is currently taking place in Ukraine, and that the EU’s security begins at Ukraine’s eastern border. Thus, mobilising material, financial, and human support for Ukraine is a top priority.

³ Foreign Agent Registration Act.

⁴ United National Movement, main opposition party of Georgia, former ruling party (2003-2012).

Moldova faces a serious risk of experiencing a repeat of the Georgian scenario. But the country — and Europe — is fortunate in that it still has a democratic and pro-European government, and it is much easier to defend a democratic government than it is to remove pro-Russian, anti-democratic forces once they have seized power, as in Georgia. European countries have demonstrated clear and strong support for Moldova, as illustrated by the visit of French, German, Polish, and EU leaders to Chișinău at the end of summer 2025.

It is therefore essential to make it clear in Europe that the same battle taking place in Ukraine and Moldova is also being fought in Georgia. Europe's main ally in this fight is the Georgian people, who — despite their government's anti-European propaganda — remain overwhelmingly supportive of Europe. According to opinion polls, the Georgian public is even more pro-European than Moldova's, and it would be a mistake not to take this into account.

Today, Georgian Dream (GD) is largely a proxy force of the Russian Federation. Supporting the Georgian people against GD is part of the same struggle as Ukraine's fight on the battlefield. From Europe's perspective, supporting the Georgian people is far easier and requires fewer resources than achieving military victory over Russian forces in Ukraine. Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia are the secondary fronts — where Western victory is far more realistic, provided European leadership has the political will and understands the strategic importance of these countries.

The idea that Georgia has definitively switched camps and is now part of the authoritarian world — and that, out of pragmatism, the EU should conduct “business as usual” with Georgia, as it does with Azerbaijan or Turkey, to avoid losing economic and transit opportunities — is also inaccurate.

Authoritarian Georgia is (unfortunately) even not Azerbaijan or Turkey. While those two countries are not very democratic, they are deeply committed to pursuing sovereign foreign policies and a “360-degree diplomacy”, transactional and pragmatic in nature. Azerbaijan's leadership has demonstrated its ability to defend its sovereignty from Moscow in recent months; Baku is increasingly open in its support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, is developing a strong energy partnership with the EU, and maintains excellent ties with the Donald Trump administration. Azerbaijan has a relatively strong army, which has proved its capabilities on the ground in conflicts with Armenia in 2020 and 2023.

In contrast, a Georgia detached from Europe risks becoming a state with limited sovereignty — like Belarus — rather than a state like Azerbaijan. Militarily, after 13 years of GD rule, Georgia has essentially dismantled its army and lost the capacity to defend itself. Since 2012, and especially after the invasion of Ukraine, the country has aligned itself with Russian policy — repeating Moscow's anti-Western rhetoric word for word, and adopting its repressive methods towards the opposition, media, and civil society.

The GD regime is actively sabotaging its historic chance to move closer to the EU in order to prove its allegiance to Moscow. The government has embraced the Russian narrative on the outbreak of the 2008 war, even if it means giving up forever the possibility of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. It labels liberal and democratic governments as “foreign agents,” and refers to the 2003 Rose Revolution as a foreign-orchestrated coup.

Given the extreme hostility of the Russian regime towards “colour revolutions”, we are witnessing a clear alignment of the Georgian regime with Kremlin rhetoric. More than Azerbaijan or Turkey, Georgia risks becoming a second Belarus — or an Armenia of the 1990s and 2000s.

Following the recent rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the likely signing of a peace agreement between the two, which would significantly reduce Russian influence in both countries, it is in the strategic interest of Europe and the United States not to abandon the third country of the South Caucasus — Georgia — to Moscow. Especially since Georgia has historically been the undisputed champion of European integration in the region.

What Europe Can and Should Do: Smart sanctions and targeted pressure

Of course, the work of political change must be carried out by Georgian society itself, but the EU can at least refrain from accommodating the current situation and, at best, move forward by giving a boost to the country’s pro-European and pro-democratic forces, which remain numerous.

What could help the democratic struggle in Georgia is the introduction of sanctions against the leadership of Georgian Dream (GD), which functions as a proxy force of the Russian Federation in Georgia. The same applies to propagandists who dedicate their time to producing fake news about Europe; to law enforcement officials directly carrying out repression and fabricating testimonies in court to falsely accuse protesters of violence against the police; to judges handing down politically motivated sentences in violation of judicial procedures; and to election officials responsible for manipulating electoral results.

So far, Hungary and Slovakia — the two EU supporters of the Georgian regime — have blocked EU sanctions, which require unanimity. This has been used as a justification for why personal sanctions have not yet been imposed. However, the sanctions adopted against Russia show that Budapest and Bratislava’s resistance can be overcome if there is political will. Likewise, if the blockade persists, individual EU member states can adopt sanctions independently, forming coalitions to establish a joint sanctions list.

Even if EU fund transfers to Georgia are frozen, the Georgian government continues to compensate for this loss by receiving grants and loans from International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF, the World Bank and others. European governments and the US, through their voting power, can influence IFI policies to increase pressure on a hostile government.

The Georgian government is violating numerous provisions of the Association Agreement, including its preamble and chapters on the rule of law. The EU could very well threaten to suspend the Association Agreement, as well as the DCFTA, and if Tbilisi fails to respond appropriately, the EU could temporarily suspend their implementation.

The EU has announced €120 million in funding for civil society and independent media in Georgia, but this money is struggling to reach its intended recipients due to Georgian legislation (the Georgian version of FARA) that makes the transfer and use of such funds very difficult. The EU should explore alternative and creative ways to get this funding into the hands

of those who need it, in order to help society resist the government's attempt to silence all dissenting voices.

EU policy toward Georgia is sometimes opaque, lost in the labyrinth of Brussels bureaucracy. It is difficult to identify a focal point or interlocutor in charge of the Georgian file. It is unclear which team, under which European Commissioner, is taking the lead. It would be useful to simplify and clarify the distribution of responsibilities. Likewise, a major EU member state should be identified to play the role of policy leader towards Georgia. The Baltic states are doing everything within their power to keep Georgia high on the agenda, but deep involvement by a larger EU member would be a major advantage.

Visa Free travel: a strategic lever, not a blunt tool

Finally, last but not least, the question of suspending visa-free travel is already on the table. A suspension is even more likely, given that the interior ministries of several countries have been calling for it for some time, citing numerous cases of Georgian nationals violating the terms of visa-free travel and the exponential increase in illegal immigration since its introduction. The draconian laws adopted by the Georgian regime, the repression and human rights violations — including against minorities — mean that, on paper, all the conditions for suspending visa-free travel are already met. But it is clear that such a decision would be — and always will be — a political one.

The EU must find the right balance between the effectiveness of such a measure and the risk of punishing the entire population without truly affecting the government's behaviour. The possibility of suspending visa-free travel should have been raised much earlier, if the EU wanted to be effective. This threat should have been brandished before the October 2024 parliamentary elections, at the very least to demand their free and fair conduct. It could have been effective when GD lawmakers voted on the foreign agents' law, or at the height of mass protests in December and January, after GD suspended the EU integration process.

The regime had two years to prepare its own narrative, which it now uses: "The Georgian people are being punished by the 'Global War Party' for refusing to participate in the war against Russia, and for their commitment to traditional family values — made up of a mother and a father." GD now explains that Georgians must choose between peace and visa-free travel with the EU, between gender reassignment and the preservation of traditional gender roles.

At this stage, the effects of suspending visa-free travel for all Georgian citizens are difficult to predict — not to mention the risk that reintroducing it later, under a new government committed to repairing relations with the EU, would prove very difficult, given how sensitive immigration issues are across EU member states.

It would be far more sensible to target specific categories — those affiliated with or directly benefiting from the regime: public employees, GD members, regime enablers, etc. If the decision comes after the regime has already crushed the resistance, arrested or forced into exile the most active members of civil society, then the measure will have no effect and will merely amount to collective punishment for the entire population.

If the EU truly wants to influence the political process, timing is essential. Sanctions that come too late, in response to regime actions that have already solidified, are generally ineffective, and often only make life harder for ordinary citizens.

Conclusion: Georgia is still worth fighting for

The unfolding crisis in Georgia is not just a domestic tragedy; it is a test of Europe's geopolitical resolve, its credibility as a normative power, and its ability to defend democracy, and – at the end of the day—its own security. While the Georgian government has turned decisively towards authoritarianism and alignment with Russia, the Georgian people remain overwhelmingly pro-European — and continue to demonstrate this commitment with courage, resilience, and an extraordinary willingness to protest and resist for over 300 days now.

To abandon Georgia now would not only betray those citizens who continue to risk their safety for a European future, but it would also signal the EU's defeat in front of Moscow on a secondary (after Ukraine), but still important front. The EU must therefore act with clarity, unity, and speed while Russia is mired in Ukraine. Armenia and Azerbaijan are already reducing Russia's influence with the help of the US and Turkey.

This means:

- Targeting the regime – not the population – with smart, timely sanctions;
- Supporting civil society with creative funding mechanisms that bypass regime obstacles;
- Reorganising EU policy structures to improve leadership and coherence in its approach to Georgia;
- Making visa-free suspension a credible and strategic threat – not just a bureaucratic process;
- And above all, linking any further steps in the accession process to clear democratic benchmarks—particularly the restoration of free elections and the release of political prisoners.

Georgia is not yet lost — but the window for effective action is rapidly closing. The EU's failure to respond meaningfully to Georgia's democratic backsliding in the past contributed to today's crisis. Continuing on this path of caution and delay would not amount to neutrality — it would amount to complicity.

Europe must decide what kind of power it wants to be — and whether it is prepared to stand not only with Ukraine and Moldova, but also with Georgia, before it is too late.

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