

The West's Inflection Point in the Caucasus: Untying the Georgian Knot

John DiPirro
and Laura Linderman

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Significant Policy Decisions & Main Areas of Support	10
Economic and Energy Cooperation.....	12
Energy Cooperation.....	12
Infrastructure and Connectivity.....	13
Trade and Economic Development	15
Investment and Development Assistance	15
Economic Reform Trajectories.....	16
Promotion of Democratic Reforms and Rule of Law	18
Rule of Law and Judicial Reform.....	18
Civil Society Support	19
Political Pluralism and Electoral Reform.....	20
Human Rights and Oversight	20
Approaches to Successive Georgian Administrations	22
Engagement with the Saakashvili Administration was a Double-Edged Investment.....	22
The Misread of Georgian Dream	23
Weaponizing Western Bias	25
Diplomatic Inconsistencies Eroded Leverage	26
Pivot from Partner to Adversary	26
The Current State of Affairs.....	28
From Coalition to Consolidation	28
UNM and GD's Shared Responsibility	29
Complicity and Responsibility	30
Prospects for the Future	32
Rethinking Engagement as a Strategic Investment.....	32

The Opposition Must Offer a Compelling Alternative33

Reevaluating Strategic Assumptions.....33

The Azerbaijan Model: A Cautionary Framework.....34

Democracy Was Never Internalized.....35

Democracy Requires Education, Reform, and Patience36

Conclusions38

Authors’ Bio.....42

Executive Summary

Since the summer of 2019, Georgia has cycled through periods of crisis and partial recovery, with the increasingly kleptocratic and authoritarian Georgian Dream (GD) government developing sophisticated methods to control public discourse and opinion. **The fundamental question that Western policymakers can no longer avoid is: What is more important—a democratic Georgia or a cooperative, friendly Georgia?** For years, these aspirations were aligned, but today they have diverged into mutually exclusive policy pathways, each carrying profound implications for regional stability and the credibility of Western engagement.

While many Western analysts point to Georgian Dream and its founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, as the primary drivers of democratic decline, this view oversimplifies the situation. A fuller understanding must also consider the opposition's failure to offer credible alternatives, the legacy of Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) party, and inconsistent Western engagement, all contributing to instability and strategic ambiguity.

In recent discussions with regional experts, civil society leaders and opposition figures, a common critique emerged: the absence of a coherent, responsive, and consistently updated Western policy toward Georgia. Shifting Western priorities have undermined long-term strategic alignment, especially given evolving global dynamics and the growing influence of powers like Russia and China. Given global shifts—including a more transactional U.S. foreign policy under the Trump Administration and

Europe's growing focus on defense infrastructure—will the West remain committed to Georgia, or has "Georgia fatigue" taken hold?

This analysis examines the history and impact of Western support for Georgia, particularly in economic development, energy cooperation, and democratic reform. While Georgians are ultimately responsible for their national trajectory, the West must reckon with its strategic missteps that have shaped Georgia's current geopolitical position. Western policymakers must recalibrate their approach for an evolving international order and clearly articulate their desired relationship with Georgia. This recalibration requires acknowledging past errors and choosing whether to remedy them or pursue a pragmatic reset in relations.

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia experienced a chaotic and traumatic transition marked by internal conflict, institutional breakdown, and territorial fragmentation. From 1991 to 1993, the newly independent country endured a civil war in Tbilisi and separatist wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in mass displacement and a loss of state authority. Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency, beginning in 1992, brought a degree of stabilization but failed to address endemic corruption, systemic poverty, and unresolved territorial conflicts.¹² As state institutions weakened, democratic reforms reversed, culminating in rigged parliamentary elections in November 2003. These elections catalyzed the Rose Revolution, a peaceful protest movement that ousted Shevardnadze and ushered in a new era under Mikheil Saakashvili.³⁴

From 2003 to 2012, the Saakashvili administration implemented sweeping reforms to modernize the state and align Georgia closer with the West. Backed by the U.S., the government launched an aggressive anti-corruption campaign and pursued neoliberal economic policies that dramatically

¹ Amos Chapple, "The Tbilisi War: Then and Now," *RFE/RL*, December 21, 2021, (<https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-civil-war-slider-gallery-then-now/31617821.html>);

² Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Georgia's 'Rose revolution'," 2004, (<https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Report-on-Georgias-Rose-Revolution.pdf>).

³ PBS News, "Georgian Leader Resigns amid Peaceful Opposition Standoff," November 24, 2003, (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/europe-july-dec03-georgia_11-24).

⁴ "Georgia: President Shevardnadze Resigns," *RFE/RL*, April 9, 2008, (<https://www.rferl.org/a/1105091.html>).

improved Georgia's international economic standing.⁵ However, Saakashvili's tenure was also characterized by growing authoritarian tendencies, including suppression of dissent, manipulation of the judiciary, and human rights abuses, most notably exposed by the 2012 prison torture scandal.⁶ The 2008 war with Russia, following an ill-fated Georgian military response to escalating tensions in South Ossetia, proved decisive for Georgia's trajectory. Russia's invasion, recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and continued military presence not only dealt a severe blow to Georgia's territorial integrity, but also revealed the limits of Western support.⁷

In 2012, power peacefully transitioned to the Georgian Dream (GD) party, marking a significant democratic milestone. Initially welcomed with caution by Western partners, GD pledged to normalize relations with Russia while continuing Georgia's European path. Subsequently, relations with the West frayed, particularly after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. GD's refusal to align fully with Western sanctions and security postures, citing national pragmatism, strained Western relations.⁸ Domestically, the party began

⁵ Richard Bennet, "Delivering on the Hope of the Rose Revolution: Public Sector Reform in Georgia, 2004 - 2009," December 2011, (https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf5601/files/Georgia_CS_Bennet_FINAL%20ToU_1.pdf); U.S. Department of State (Archived Content), "2014 Investment Climate Statement," June 2014, (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/229020.pdf>).

⁶ Claire Bigg, "Mikheil Saakashvili's Polarizing Legacy," *RFE/RL*, October 25, 2013, (<https://www.rferl.org/a/saakashvili-mixed-legacy/25146918.html>).

⁷ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "August 2008 Russian-Georgian War: Timeline," August 8, 2013, (<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/august-2008-russian-georgian-war-timeline>).

⁸ Robert H. Wade and Tato Khundadze, "Georgia in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Balancing between West, Russia and China," *Global Policy Journal*, March 31, 2025, (<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/31/03/2025/georgia-russo-ukrainian-war-balancing-between-west-russia-and-china>); Mariam Razmadze, "Georgian Dream: We Are Not Going to Trade the Country's Sovereignty and Security," *Georgia Today*, May 24, 2024, (<https://georgiatoday.ge/georgian-dream-we-are-not-going-to-trade-the-countrys-sovereignty-and-security/>).

consolidating power, undermining democratic checks and balances and increasingly targeting civil society and independent media. These trends culminated in the controversial “foreign agent” law⁹ and a wider authoritarian drift, leading to suspended EU accession talks in 2024. Georgia now stands at a crossroads, torn between its European aspirations and its ruling party’s illiberal tendencies.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Georgia: ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill Tramples on Rights,” March 7, 2023, (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-tramples-rights>); Marc Goedemans, “What Georgia’s Foreign Agent Law Means for Its Democracy,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 21, 2024, (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-georgias-foreign-agent-law-means-its-democracy>).

Significant Policy Decisions & Main Areas of Support

Over the past decades, Western policy toward Georgia – specifically from the U.S. and EU – has been marked by a series of strategic missteps that, while well-intentioned, contributed to democratic backsliding. This analysis identifies four core failures that have shaped the current landscape:

First, an inconsistency in balancing values and interests. During the Saakashvili era, Western support for Georgia's strategic alignment often came at the expense of confronting its democratic shortcomings. This selective tolerance of undemocratic behaviors eroded Western credibility, setting a precedent for future governments to manipulate 'pro-Western' rhetoric while consolidating control.¹⁰

Second, misreading domestic political dynamics. Western actors failed to grasp the depth of public disillusionment with the UNM and underestimated Ivanishvili's influence. Early mistrust and limited engagement with GD leadership eventually evolved into a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing the perception that the West was biased. Ties with UNM figures and inconsistent criticism of ruling parties undermined Western neutrality and moral authority.

Third, an overemphasis on technical assistance. While billions were invested in capacity-building and institutional reform, Western policy often assumed that technical development would naturally foster democratic

¹⁰ Ani Chkhikvadze, "How Georgia Sided With Its Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2024, (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/georgian-dream-tbilisi-protests-foreign-agent-bill-russia-war-ukraine/>).

norms. In practice, this enabled both UNM and GD governments to become more efficient in undemocratic practices, creating dependency without fostering accountability or lasting reform.

Fourth, vulnerability to policy shifts and reactive approaches. Changes in U.S. and EU leadership, which resulted in the U.S.-Russia "reset" or reduced focus on democracy promotion, left Georgia exposed to strategic neglect. Western engagement failed to appropriately respond to mounting Russian aggression, and long-standing threats were only taken seriously after significant geopolitical setbacks. Moreover, the West often responded to democratic backsliding with delayed or inconsistent measures. Strong rhetoric rarely matched decisive action, emboldening GD and reinforcing the notion that Western pressure could be ignored. A more proactive and coherent strategy might have limited this autocratic drift.

These failures culminated in a strategic paradox that now defines Western engagement with Georgia: the choice between prioritizing democratic principles or maintaining cooperative relations. This fundamental tension, explored in detail below, represents the central policy challenge facing Western capitals as they recalibrate their approach to a Georgia that no longer fits traditional frameworks of partnership.

Economic and Energy Cooperation

For more than twenty years, Western economic engagement in Georgia has positioned the country as a strategic transit hub between Europe and Asia. Despite successes in infrastructure and investment, the effectiveness of this support has been uneven, often hindered by political instability, incomplete reforms, and shifting geopolitics. The disconnect between ambitious visions and implementation also fueled anti-Western narratives promoted by GD. These economic policy failures now force a reconsideration of whether Western engagement should prioritize democratic governance or accept transactional cooperation with an increasingly authoritarian regime.

Energy Cooperation

Energy projects have been at the heart of Western strategic engagement in Georgia, especially efforts to secure alternative routes for Caspian energy that do not transit through Russia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline (SCP) represent the most successful examples of this cooperation. The BTC, as the second-largest oil pipeline in the post-Soviet space, significantly enhanced Georgia's geopolitical profile and brought valuable revenues.¹¹

The SCP, connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia, not only increased energy security in the region but further solidified Georgia's role as a key

¹¹ Svante E. Cornell, Vladimir Socor, and Mamuka Tsereteli, "Geostrategic Implications of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline," in S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2005. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13143>).

transit corridor. The SCP remains a rare instance wherein Western-backed infrastructure directly advanced both strategic and economic goals.

Looking forward, projects like the Black Sea Energy Cable, which aims to connect Georgia's energy grid to Europe, offer transformational potential. However, progress has been slowed by a combination of factors, including ongoing research on Black Sea topography,¹² high investment costs, and financial risks, technical and logistical challenges, as well as geopolitical instability. While the project involves multiple stakeholders, Western financial institutions like the World Bank have provided key preparatory funding, making it domestically perceived as part of broader Western-backed infrastructure initiatives. The slow progress has fostered a narrative which cast doubt on the feasibility of major Western-supported energy ventures.. While renewable energies like wind power hold promise for reducing Georgia's dependency,¹³ the lack of sustained Western investment in this area has left an opportunity unrealized, creating a gap that UAE investors are now attempting to fill. Strategic support here could reinvigorate the West's influence.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

Beyond energy, Western involvement in infrastructure and regional connectivity has had mixed outcomes. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port project

¹² World Bank, "Global Economic Prospects," January 2024, (<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099050224150515950>); Georgian State Electrosystem, "Georgia-Romania Black Sea Submarine Cable, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, Terms of Reference," n.d., (https://www.gse.com.ge/sw/static/file/GE-RO_Submarine_Cable_ESIA_TOR.pdf).

¹³ Vato Bzhalava, "The Black Sea Submarine Cable Project," *GFSIS*, October 3, 2024, (<https://gfsis.org/en/the-black-sea-submarine-cable-project-a-strategic-opportunity-for-georgia-and-europes-energy-future/>); World Bank, "World Bank Approves \$35 Million Investment for Black Sea Submarine Cable Project Preparatory Activities," May 21, 2024, (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/21/world-bank-approves-35-million-investment-for-black-sea-submarine-cable-project-preparatory-activities>).

once symbolized Georgia's potential as a global logistics hub. While a consortium sought Western investment and attracted considerable interest, concrete financial backing from Western investors did not fully materialize. The project later stalled amid political controversy and perceived interference by Russian interests. The project's suspension not only represented a missed opportunity for Western engagement, but created potential space for alternative financing sources. The Georgian government remains committed to moving forward with the port project, though the specific role and involvement of potential Chinese partners remains undetermined and unclear at this stage.¹⁴ The handling of the project has fueled concerns over both the concentration of major infrastructure decisions within a small circle of politically connected actors and shifting geopolitical considerations.

The EU's Black Sea Connectivity Strategy, part of its Global Gateway initiative,¹⁵ underscores Brussels' increasing interest in the Middle Corridor (also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) route bypassing Russia via Georgia. However, logistical bottlenecks, customs inefficiencies and growing regional instability have slowed progress. The West's failure to develop a comprehensive, Georgia-inclusive logistics framework remains a key shortcoming as regional powers like Turkey, China, and Russia outpace the West in economic statecraft.

¹⁴ "Anaklia: The Port of the Future Stuck in the Political Quagmire of the Present," *Jam-News*, September 27, 2024, (<https://jam-news.net/anaklia-port-project-story/>).

¹⁵ European Commission, "Global Gateway: Team Europe's First Meeting of the Global Gateway Board," December 11, 2022, (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/global-gateway-team-europes-first-meeting-global-gateway-board-2022-12-11_en); Mamuka Tsereteli, "U.S. Black Sea Strategy: The Georgian Connection," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, February 9, 2024, (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/joint-center-publications/item/13508-us-black-sea-strategy-the-georgian-connection.html>).

Trade and Economic Development

On trade, Georgia's alignment with the EU through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) has had underwhelming results. Although trade volumes have grown nominally, the EU's share of Georgian exports has actually declined from 2014 to 2023. Key barriers include low production capacity, high compliance costs with EU standards (particularly sanitary rules) and poor export diversification.¹⁶ GD's pivot away from pro-growth reforms further curtailed the DCFTA's transformative potential.

The U.S.-Georgia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA)¹⁷ has yielded few tangible results, and the lack of a U.S.-Georgia free trade deal has fueled GD's narrative of Western neglect. Ironically, Western hesitation – driven by governance concerns – has contributed to the very alienation it sought to prevent.

These economic shortcomings underscore the central dilemma facing Western policymakers: whether to continue conditioning economic engagement on democratic performance, or to pursue the kind of transactional relationship that prioritizes connectivity and strategic cooperation over governance standards. The mixed results of values-based economic engagement have strengthened the case among some policymakers for a more pragmatic approach that accepts Georgia's current political trajectory while securing Western strategic interests.

Investment and Development Assistance

Western development aid, particularly from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and USAID, has supported both infrastructure and human capital. The first MCC compact (2006–2011) focused on roads and

¹⁶ Tamara Kovziridze, "Georgia's Near-Frozen Trade Relations with the EU," January 8, 2025, (<https://www.politicsgeo.com/article/114>).

¹⁷ United States Trade Representative, "Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Between the United States of America and Georgia," June 2007, ([https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/U.S-Georgia%20TIFA%20\(English\).pdf](https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/U.S-Georgia%20TIFA%20(English).pdf)).

energy infrastructure, while the second (2013–2019) shifted to education, including rehabilitating schools, training teachers and promoting STEM education.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the EU, through instruments like the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) has funded economic modernization and public sector reform.¹⁹

Yet Georgia's political volatility undercut these efforts, making Western investors wary. Increasingly, USAID has been cast as a hostile actor in government rhetoric, diluting its effectiveness and creating a chilling effect on both domestic partners and external donors.²⁰ Perceptions of Western economic engagement being detached from political realities thus continued to limit its transformative potential.

Economic Reform Trajectories

Georgia's economic trajectory has also shifted significantly between administrations. Under Saakashvili's UNM, Georgia embraced rapid market liberalization and a radically free-market agenda. Tax rates were slashed, while state-owned enterprises were privatized and regulatory

¹⁸ Millennium Challenge Corporation, "MCC Nears Completion of Successful \$395.3 Million Compact with Georgia," March 31, 2011, (<https://www.mcc.gov/news-and-events/release/mcc-nears-completion-of-successful-395-3-million-compact-with-georgia/>); Millennium Foundation, "Millennium Challenge Corporation II Compact Contributed to the Development of Human Capital in Georgia," October 18, 2023, (<https://millennium.org.ge/eng/news/Millennium-Challenge-Corporation-II-Compact-contributed-to-the-development-of-human-capital-in-Georgia/47>).

¹⁹ European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI)," 2021, (https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2020-06/db_2021_programme_statement_european_neighbourhood_instrument_eni.pdf).

²⁰ "GD Accuses U.S. Embassy, USAID, Ned, EED, Foreign-Funded CSOs of Coordinated Work against Georgia," *Civil Georgia*, February 6, 2025, (<https://civil.ge/archives/660501>).

barriers minimized. These reforms led to robust GDP growth, although wealth inequality and rural poverty persisted.²¹

Under Ivanishvili's GD, economic policy moved toward state intervention and welfare expansion. While some liberal elements were retained, GD introduced universal healthcare, expanded social benefits and enacted labor protections. Georgia's GDP grew nominally, but much of the increase was due to inflation, and structural issues such as unemployment, inequality and external debt remained unresolved. Critics argue that GD's economic model prioritizes short-term stability over long-term reform, reinforcing donor dependence while avoiding politically risky overhauls.²²

²¹ Gia Jandieri, "Tax Reforms in Georgia 2004-2012," *Business Media*, July 30, 2019, (<https://bm.ge/en/news/tax-reforms-in-georgia-2004-2012/37694>); "Bendukidze – State Minister with Big Mandate to Reform," *Civil Georgia*, December 16, 2004, (<https://civil.ge/archives/106822>).

²² "'Bidzina Ivanishvili Expanded the Economy from Gel 28 Billion to Gel 90 Billion over the Past 12 Years,'" *Factcheck.ge*, January 13, 2025, (<https://factcheck.ge/en/story/43348-bidzina-ivanishvili-expanded-the-economy-from-gel-28-billion-to-gel-90-billion-over-the-past-12-years>); Bill Harney, "Political Economy Under Georgian Dream: Factors, Policies and Consequences," October 16, 2018, (<https://gfsis.org/ge/files/library/pdf/English-2664.pdf>).

Promotion of Democratic Reforms and Rule of Law

Western assistance to Georgia has long prioritized support for democratic governance, rule of law and civil society. These efforts were often undermined by lacking political will, elite resistance, and a deteriorating media/civic environment. Moreover, the Western assumption that democratic values would naturally follow institutional strengthening proved a longer process than anticipated. These systematic failures in democracy promotion have led directly to the current policy dilemma facing Western capitals: whether to prioritize democratic principles or maintain cooperative relations with an increasingly authoritarian government.

Rule of Law and Judicial Reform

The EU has been a long-standing partner in reforming Georgia's judiciary. Since the early 2000s, EU support has included legal drafting, court modernization and the promotion of judicial independence. Through mechanisms such as the Association Agreement and the Support to Judicial Reform in Georgia project (since 2017), the EU supported Georgia to align legal norms with European standards.²³ However, recent judicial appointments and structural changes raised serious concerns about judicial independence and politicization.

The U.S., primarily through USAID and the Department of Justice, has also invested heavily in rule of law, supporting technical development, judicial training and anti-corruption efforts. Programs have targeted increased

²³ Council of Europe, "Support to the Judicial Reform in Georgia," n.d., (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/tbilisi/support-to-the-judicial-reform-in-georgia>).

access to justice for vulnerable groups and encouraged oversight institutions. Yet, like the EU, U.S. efforts have struggled to confront entrenched interests within Georgia's legal system, revealing the limits of technical solutions when political will is lacking.²⁴

Civil Society Support

The EU and U.S. have both heavily invested in building Georgian civil society. EU initiatives like the Civil Society STAR Initiative, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and EU4Dialogue have enhanced the resilience and reach of civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly in areas such as human rights, media independence and public engagement.²⁵ Meanwhile, the U.S., through USAID programs such as the Elections and Political Processes Support and Economic Governance Program, has promoted civic advocacy and accountability at national and grassroots levels.

However, under GD, CSOs have faced increasing government hostility. Western-funded organizations are often portrayed as foreign agents or opposition fronts.²⁶ This toxic rhetoric, with legislative threats and reduced political access, curtailed the effectiveness of civil society.

²⁴ Sopho Verdzeuli, *Judicial System Reform in Georgia 2013-2021*, Tbilisi: Georgian Young Lawyers Association, 2021,

(<https://gyla.ge/files/news/%E1%83%A4%E1%83%9D%E1%83%93%E1%83%98/2021/JUDICIAL%20SYSTEM%20REFORM-2.pdf>).

²⁵ European External Action Service, "EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Georgia 2018–2024 (updated in 2021)," 2021,

(<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/cs-roadmap-2021-24-final.pdf>).

²⁶ "GD Accuses U.S. Embassy, USAID, NED, EED, Foreign-Funded CSOs of Coordinated Work Against Georgia," *Civil Georgia*, February 6, 2025,

(<https://civil.ge/archives/660501>).

Political Pluralism and Electoral Reform

Support for political pluralism has been a core pillar of Western democracy assistance. The EU, often in partnership with the United Nations Development Program, has funded parliamentary reforms, facilitated legislative transparency and mediated between political factions (notably the 2021 “April 19th Agreements”), aimed at enhancing electoral competitiveness.²⁷ Yet, many of these gains were rolled back, and continued EU support for figures like Saakashvili has undermined perceptions of neutrality.

The U.S. has taken a similarly comprehensive approach, linking aid to electoral reforms and democratic standards. USAID has partnered with Georgia’s Central Election Commission (CESKO), promoting underrepresented groups and safeguarding election security. Nonetheless, Western diplomacy often appeared reactive, its condemnations and conditionalities rarely matched by strong incentives or consequences.

Human Rights and Oversight

Western donors have also played a central role in protecting human rights. The EU’s “Human Rights for All” program focused on minority protections, police oversight and legal safeguards, while also building CSO capacity to

²⁷ “Georgian Dream Quits EU-Brokered Deal,” *Civil Georgia*, July 28, 2021, (<https://civil.ge/archives/434256>); “Shalva Papuashvili: When Working on the Document Known as the ‘April 19 Agreement,’ It Became Clear That the Goal of the Friends Working as Mediators Was More than Just Being Intermediaries between the Two Sides - Points Were Appearing in the Text That Neither Party nor Any ‘NGO’ Had Requested,” *Interpress News*, May 14, 2025, (<https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/139659-shalva-papuashvili-when-working-on-the-document-known-as-the-april-19-agreement-it-became-clear-that-the-goal-of-the-friends-working-as-mediators-was-more-than-just-being-intermediaries-between-the-two-sides-points-were-appearing-in-the-text-that-neither-party-nor-any-ngo-had-requested/>).

monitor abuses.²⁸ The U.S. State Department has consistently highlighted abuses through annual human rights reports, while USAID has funded defenders and legal reforms aimed at advancing freedom of expression, LGBTQI+ rights and judicial redress.

Regardless, rising authoritarianism has eroded these gains. Both the EU and U.S. now face the challenge of sustaining human rights programming in an increasingly hostile political environment. While support continues, its impact has been blunted by selective enforcement, growing state repression and the co-opting of oversight institutions. Although Western donors laid foundations for progress, inconsistent policy, elite resistance and strategic ambiguity constrained long-term success. The result is a precarious status quo wherein Western influence remains critical but increasingly contested.

²⁸ United Nations Development Program, "Human Rights for All - Phase 3," December 4, 2024, (<https://www.undp.org/georgia/projects/human-rights-3>).

Approaches to Successive Georgian Administrations

Engagement with the Saakashvili Administration was a Double-Edged Investment

Western support for Saakashvili's government was rooted in genuine aspirations for reform, modernization and the consolidation of democratic institutions in post-Soviet Georgia. Saakashvili's administration, with its compelling narrative of transformation and alignment with Euro-Atlantic values, proved highly effective at lobbying for and securing international backing. This external support helped implement sweeping public administration, infrastructure, and economic liberalization reforms. However, beneath this veneer of progress, the government simultaneously engaged in repressive practices and systematic rights violations.²⁹ Western actors, eager for a democratic success story in a region beset by authoritarian relapse, frequently downplayed or ignored these abuses. While this was particularly true of some U.S. policymakers, this enthusiasm was not universal; key European partners, notably Germany, harbored significant skepticism regarding Saakashvili's authoritarian tendencies and governing style in his later years in power. Georgia's symbolic value as a Western-aligned state during times of regional upheaval (particularly following the 2008 Russian invasion) often eclipsed critical scrutiny of its internal dynamics.

This one-sided approach had severe domestic consequences: during Saakashvili's nine-year rule, Georgian dissatisfaction with political

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2014: Georgia," January 21, 2014, (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/georgia>).

suppression and economic inequality grew, deepening societal polarization. Citizens found themselves divided between allegiance to the ruling UNM and a fragmented opposition. When Bidzina Ivanishvili, a wealthy but politically inexperienced outsider, emerged with resources and intent to form a credible opposition, his movement rapidly gained traction. The public's growing weariness with UNM created fertile ground for change. Ironically, the dominance and excesses of Saakashvili's government (partially enabled by Western support) contributed to the birth and rise of GD, a process finalized in the 2012 election. That election proved decisive; the ruling party lost so overwhelmingly that the results could not be credibly manipulated, and subsequent, heavy U.S. pressure on Saakashvili to accept the outcome and leave peacefully was the critical final step in ensuring the transfer of power.

The Misread of Georgian Dream

The 2012 electoral victory of Georgian Dream, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, marked a peaceful transfer of power but was met with an ambivalent and deeply divided reception in Western capitals. On one hand, the vote was welcomed as a democratic milestone, particularly among observers who had grown deeply critical of the Saakashvili administration's democratic backsliding. On the other, genuine caution was prompted by Ivanishvili's vast wealth acquired in Russia and his stated desire to normalize ties. These underlying suspicions, however, were actively stoked by the well-connected UNM old guard. Leveraging years of cultivated friendships, defeated UNM figures effectively channeled a partisan narrative to their contacts in Western capitals, a viewpoint that resonated particularly with policymakers whose understanding of Georgia lacked depth. The GD government, for its part, was initially slower and less adept at navigating the corridors of Western power, allowing these critical narratives to take root and complicating the West's analysis of what was already a broad and

ideologically diverse ruling coalition whose future trajectory was difficult to predict..³⁰

This wariness led to a fundamental misjudgment. Western engagement continued largely as technical assistance and democracy-promotion, assuming that the GD-led government shared its predecessor's liberal democratic aspirations. This assumption proved partially flawed, though the reality was more complex than a simple binary. While several coalition partners within GD maintained genuine commitments to democratic governance from 2012-2018, Ivanishvili's personal worldview – which ultimately proved dominant – was not rooted in democratic ideology, but rather in transactional politics shaped by post-Soviet, oligarchic norms. From that perspective, democracy was merely performative: useful for appearances and securing access to Western platforms, but not a genuine governing principle. This partially explains GD's repeated miscalculations of civic resistance, especially in the face of regressive legislation. Moreover, the assumption that the UNM had operated from purely liberal democratic motivations was itself problematic, given that party's own authoritarian tendencies during its tenure and the increasingly divided Western reception it faced by 2010-2012, with some leaders growing deeply skeptical of Saakashvili personally.

The West's failure to adapt its strategy had lasting consequences. GD sought not just recognition, but a deference akin to what UNM had enjoyed. Instead, it encountered criticism, perceived slights and continued Western support for civil society actors who often challenged official policies. Yet this dynamic was not entirely new – UNM leaders had similarly viewed

³⁰ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "Family of Georgian Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili Has Unreported Real Estate in Russia," August 9, 2024, (<https://www.occrp.org/en/scoop/family-of-georgian-oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-has-unreported-real-estate-in-russia>); Forbes Georgia, "Georgian Billionaires," October 31, 2021, (<https://forbes.ge/en/georgian-billionaires/>); "Ivanishvili Speaks of Relations with Russia," *Civil Georgia*, December 24, 2012, (<https://civil.ge/archives/122491>).

Western support for civil society as problematic during their tenure, though they did not develop anti-Western rhetoric in response. The West's relatively muted reaction to GD's judicial overreach against former UNM officials also complicated the narrative of consistent Western standards. This reinforced a narrative within the ruling party that the West was biased and aligned with their political opponents. GD perceived civic activists and opposition figures as externally empowered to undermine its legitimacy. Whether this interpretation was accurate or not, it entrenched distrust and bred defensiveness within the ruling elite.

Weaponizing Western Bias

As suspicions grew, GD capitalized on its sense of alienation by framing the West as an untrustworthy partner and a partisan actor. This defensive posture fueled one of the party's most successful propaganda campaigns: the demonization of the UNM's time in power, often labeled the "nine bloody years." Rather than offer a superior vision for governance, GD relied heavily on differentiating itself from the past regime, positioning itself as the lesser evil. This strategy resonated with segments of the population who harbored grievances from the Saakashvili era. It allowed the ruling party to maintain power with limited democratic performance by framing itself as correcting UNM's failures.

Compounding this narrative were Western policy missteps. By continuing to reference Saakashvili's "wrongful imprisonment" in statements meant to address broader democratic backsliding, international actors inadvertently reinforced GD's talking points.³¹ These misaligned priorities gave the impression of favoritism toward the former president and undermined the credibility of Western concerns about rule of law or repression. This empowered GD to effectively portray itself as the victim of selective

³¹ European Parliament, "Joint Motion for a Resolution on the Democratic Backsliding and Threats to Political Pluralism in Georgia," October 8, 2024, (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-10-2024-0070_EN.html).

international outrage, redirecting attention from its own authoritarian tendencies to the alleged hypocrisy of its critics.³²

Diplomatic Inconsistencies Eroded Leverage

Western policy toward Georgia under GD was marred by inconsistency. While rhetorical criticism was frequent, particularly in response to attacks on civil society, electoral manipulation, or authoritarian alignment, these rebukes were seldom followed by concrete consequences. *This approach allowed GD to test boundaries with minimal risk.* Over time, the government became adept at exploiting the West's reliance on diplomatic pressure over action. The repeated cycle of stern warnings followed by inaction weakened Western leverage and signaled to both the public and GD leadership the unlikelihood of serious repercussions.

These inconsistencies were exacerbated by the West's continued treatment of Georgia as a maturing democracy, rather than openly acknowledging its democratic backslide. By not recalibrating their approach, Western actors applied democratic norms to a government operating with fundamentally different incentives and understandings of governance. This mismatch allowed GD to retain the trappings of democratic legitimacy while systematically eroding the substance of democratic practice.

Pivot from Partner to Adversary

The culmination of these dynamics resulted in GD's strategic reframing of the West as a geopolitical adversary. This steady transformation was built upon years of tension, misperception and mutual disillusionment. The government's narrative was reinforced by three key elements: longstanding Western favoritism toward the UNM; criticisms accompanied by inaction;

³² Wojciech Górecki, "A Journey into a Glorious Past: Three Terms of Georgian Dream," *Center for Eastern Studies*, October 8, 2024, (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-10-08/a-journey-a-glorious-past-three-terms-georgian-dream>).

and a ruling elite willing to exploit nationalist sentiment to preserve its grip on power.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provided an ideal backdrop for GD's pivot away from the West. Rather than incentivize pro-Western solidarity, Western expectations of alignment were portrayed by GD as an effort to "drag Georgia into war." While these expectations did not include direct Western demands for military action, they did involve pressure to join the international sanctions regime against Russia. For example, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament recalled pressure from the U.S. Ambassador in early 2022 to join the sanctions. Ukrainian officials were even more direct, with the Secretary of the National Security Council calling on Georgia to open a "second front" to divert Russian forces. The GD government seized on these calls, conflating Western expectations on sanctions with the more extreme calls for military action from Kyiv. This narrative was effective, as memories of Russia's 2008 invasion and occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained fresh. Thus, when framed as a choice between "war and peace," GD's anti-Western rhetoric gained traction, especially among citizens fearful of renewed conflict. The shift allowed the government to present itself as a bulwark of national stability, even as it moved further from democratic principles..³³

³³ Tato Khundadze and Robert Wade, "Georgia in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Balancing between West, Russia and China," *Global Policy Journal*, March 31, 2025, (<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/31/03/2025/georgia-russo-ukrainian-war-balancing-between-west-russia-and-china>); "Georgian Dream's Conspiracist Brainwashing Works – Research," *Civil Georgia*, March 18, 2025, (<https://civil.ge/archives/669807>).

The Current State of Affairs

From Coalition to Consolidation

The GD government of today bears little resemblance to the broad coalition that was elected in 2012, promising reform, accountability and a departure from the authoritarian practices of its predecessors. Whether GD's current authoritarian character was latent or emerged over time is debatable. Some argue that the party's kleptocratic instincts were present from the beginning, carefully concealed beneath a democratic façade. Others believe that the pressures of maintaining power in a competitive political environment gradually eroded any commitment to democratic governance. Whatever the origins, what is clear is that GD has transformed into an openly repressive political force. Its newly acquired 'conservative' ideological mask serves primarily to legitimize power retention and suppress dissent.

However, attributing the present crisis solely to GD would be overly simplistic. Georgia's democratic malaise is also the result of a weak, fragmented and often ineffectual resistance. Opposition parties have repeatedly failed to offer a credible and coherent alternative to the ruling party. Their lack of sustained citizen outreach, poor organization and inability to articulate viable policy platforms have left many Georgians disillusioned. This reflects not just the ruling party's increasing electoral manipulation but also a deep crisis of political leadership across the spectrum. For many citizens, the choice between GD and its opponents is one of relative disinterest or distrust and lacks distinct preference.

UNM and GD's Shared Responsibility

Both the UNM and GD bear responsibility for Georgia's current political state. Under the UNM, Georgia made strides in aligning with the West and implementing reforms. The party's embrace of modernization and its success in dismantling entrenched corruption (in some sectors) was widely lauded. However, these gains were frequently undermined by the government's authoritarian excesses, including abuse of the legal system, violence against protesters, human rights violations in prisons, and expropriation of private businesses. These practices, with a centralized, aggressive governing style, deeply alienated segments of the population. The phrase "nine bloody years" is more than a political slogan. It reflects the lived experience of many Georgians and remains a powerful memory that GD has effectively weaponized.

GD, for its part, was elected on the promise of doing things differently. Initially, the party delivered reforms and benefited from broad public goodwill. Over time, however, it followed the same trajectory as the UNM: consolidating power, curtailing dissent and prioritizing political survival over public service. Rather than adapt to declining popularity with humility or policy shifts, GD instead embraced increasingly autocratic tactics. The ruling party began to rely on disinformation, fearmongering, legal repression and the marginalization of all opposition voices. This included civil society, independent media and political groups alike. This deepening democratic backsliding was extensively documented by domestic and international observers, including before the 2024 parliamentary elections.³⁴

³⁴ Factcheck.ge, "The OSCE/ODIHR Clearly Stated in Their Report, Both in Writing and Verbally, That These Elections Were Legitimate, That Georgia Has an Elected Government...", November 6, 2024, (<https://factcheck.ge/en/story/43303-the-osceodihr-clearly-stated-in-their-report-both-in-writing-and-verbally-that-these-elections-were-legitimate-that-georgia-has-an-elected-government>); Mariam Chikhladze, "Legitimacy Crisis: How Georgia's Elections Were Rigged?," *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, December 10, 2024, (<https://epde.org/reports/legitimacy-crisis-how-georgias-elections-were-rigged/>).

GD's obsession with control is fueled, in part, by fear of future persecution akin to GD's own persecution of UNM and the broader opposition.³⁵ Rather than risk such a fate, they have resolved to hold onto power at all costs. This calculus—rooted in fear, mistrust, and a zero-sum governance view—produced a regime no longer even gesturing toward democratic accountability. The state's primary concern has shifted from governing to defending its own permanence.

Complicity and Responsibility

While the core responsibility for Georgia's democratic decline lies with those in power, it is important to recognize the broader context in which this regression occurred. GD is responsible for its own actions, i.e. cracking down on protesters, spreading disinformation and undermining democratic institutions. However, domestic opposition and international donors who stood by or looked away must also consider how their inaction enabled this outcome. Domestic political failures, international miscalculations, and systemic weaknesses helped create an environment where the party's worst instincts flourished. The opposition's inability to build sustained public trust, international actors' inconsistent policies, and a civil society often caught between foreign funding and local skepticism also played a role. In this sense, there is a shared accountability – not an equivalence, but an interdependence – in the development of Georgia's crisis. GD has prioritized power over democracy, but it did so in an environment that tolerated, enabled and, at times, inadvertently encouraged its transformation.

³⁵ Johanna Popjanevski, *Retribution and the Rule of Law: The Politics of Justice in Georgia*, Washington and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, June 2015, (<https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2015-popjanevski-retribution-and-the-rule-of-law-the-politics-of-justice-in-georgia.pdf>).

The West's approach to successive Georgian administrations reveals a pattern of strategic misjudgments and uncritical optimism. Support for Saakashvili overlooked domestic repression, while engagement with GD failed to grasp the fundamentally different values and motivations of the new ruling class. In hindsight, these approaches failed to promote democratic norms and contributed to Georgia's democratic erosion and growing anti-Western sentiment. By not recognizing shifting political realities and failing to adapt paradigms of engagement, the West lost leverage, became a scapegoat in Georgia's internal political theater, and contributed to negative implications for Georgia's democratic future and the credibility of Western support in the broader region.

Prospects for the Future

Rethinking Engagement as a Strategic Investment

One of the remaining avenues for constructive engagement is through economic investment. Unlike traditional values-based diplomacy, which has lost traction with GD, economic partnerships still hold strategic appeal. The ruling party remains interested in infrastructure development, trade routes and connectivity projects that could be portrayed domestically as national accomplishments. However, the reliability of such engagement is increasingly undermined by Georgia's growing entanglements with revisionist, anti-Western states, notably Russia, China, and Iran. These relationships complicate the calculus for any Western economic commitment, raising questions about transparency, long-term stability, and alignment with broader geopolitical goals.

Given this context, Western actors must reassess their investment strategies. Future engagement should consider economic viability and include risk mitigation mechanisms that account for Georgia's democratic backsliding and regional entanglements. This necessitates a dual approach: pursuing strategic projects with the government while simultaneously reinforcing the democratic and civic institutions that ensure long-term alignment. Strategic infrastructure projects like the Black Sea Submarine Cable and the Middle Corridor must be approached with a dual objective: *support Georgia's connectivity and ensure these corridors are not co-opted by hostile powers*. This necessitates a blend of financial incentives, political backing, and conditionality tied to governance benchmarks to ensure such investments align with long-term democratic and security interests.

The Opposition Must Offer a Compelling Alternative

Opposition groups have an opportunity to redefine themselves, not as reactive critics of GD, but as proactive architects of a new political vision. To be effective, they must pivot from pleading for international support to presenting themselves as credible partners. Rather than reinforcing the optics of dependency through a revolving door of visits to Washington and Brussels, they must build a persuasive case that aligns Western economic, political, and strategic interests with the outcomes their governance could deliver. Georgia's opposition must articulate a vision that the West cannot ignore, integrating democracy, economic liberalism, and regional stability in a coherent and actionable proposal. This shift requires more than rhetoric. It demands a professionalization of political operations, genuine policy development, outreach to disenfranchised communities and disciplined coalition-building. Most importantly, it requires that opposition actors present themselves not as transient reactionaries but as trustworthy stewards of the country's future. Without this transformation, the credibility gap between the public, the opposition, and the international community will only widen. However, for this to succeed, Western partners must meet them halfway, creating a second track of engagement dedicated to supporting these credible, pro-democratic actors.

Reevaluating Strategic Assumptions

Before any coherent policy approach can be adopted, Western allies must re-examine their own assumptions about Georgia. Is Georgia still strategically important to the West? And if so, why? For years, Georgia's value was premised on its aspirational democracy, strategic geography, and commitment to European integration. However, contradictory signals from Western capitals and within Georgia blurred this once-clear rationale. While rhetoric around support for Georgian sovereignty continues, the depth and durability of Western strategic interests have become increasingly opaque.

This ambiguity has consequences. Without a clearly defined policy toward Georgia, Western responses will remain reactive and inconsistent. Moreover, the ongoing war in Ukraine, U.S. policy of isolating Iran, and broader regional instability compete for diplomatic and strategic bandwidth, leaving Georgia marginalized in policymaking circles. A serious reassessment is needed, one that does not default to nostalgia for the Rose Revolution but rather addresses the current political realities and recalibrates engagement accordingly.

The Azerbaijan Model: A Cautionary Framework

One potential path forward involves adopting a transactional model similar to those pursued with Azerbaijan and various Central Asian states, centered on economic and security cooperation while downscaling focus on democratic governance. Such an approach would require Western policymakers to recognize and accept the kleptocratic nature of the Georgian Dream government, effectively abandoning over two decades of investment in democratic development.

However, the applicability of this model to Georgia is highly questionable. Unlike in Central Asia or Azerbaijan, where reform processes to improve state efficiency have been real but never intended to result in democracy,³⁶ Georgia has experienced substantive, albeit uneven and flawed, democratic development. Moreover, a strong public demand for democratic governance exists in the country. These reforms established tangible expectations for good governance and rule of law that continue to shape political consciousness and civil society expectations.

³⁶ See eg. S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Uzbekistan's New Face*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018; Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Albert Barro, *Political and Economic Reforms in Kazakhstan under President Tokayev*, Washington & Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Roads Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, November 2021; Svante E. Cornell, "Azerbaijan: Reform Behind a Static Façade," *The American Interest*, October 17, 2019.

Furthermore, a purely transactional approach falls short of delivering the reliability that Western strategic interests require. True stability and reliability demand not only economic alignment but also normative convergence, which is more likely to be found in pro-democratic forces rather than in a government willing to engage with revisionist powers like Russia and China. A transactional model risks fostering disillusionment and anti-Western sentiment among those segments of Georgian society who have long viewed Euro-Atlantic integration as Georgia's strategic and civilizational future.

In a region vulnerable to Russian and Chinese influence, a government willing to engage with authoritarian powers cannot offer the consistency required for long-term strategic cooperation. The Azerbaijan model, while potentially offering short-term stability, ultimately undermines the foundations for sustainable partnership.

Democracy Was Never Internalized

Perhaps the most critical and uncomfortable realization is that democracy has never truly taken root in Georgia.

Over the past three decades, successive governments have all actively avoided cultivating a democratic culture. While each presented democratic credentials to foreign partners, internally they preferred a disengaged and uninformed public. Under Saakashvili, reforms were implemented with force and top-down control, resulting in compliance rather than consent. Under GD, democratic institutions became window dressing; eventually even the illusion of democratic intent subsided.

The result is a society that, while outwardly supportive of European integration,³⁷ lacks the civic foundations necessary to defend and sustain a

³⁷ International Republican Institute, "IRI Georgia Poll Shows Political Threat from Russia, Concerns with the Presence of Russian Citizens, High Political Polarization,"

democratic future. Efforts to mobilize public support for EU candidacy between 2022 and 2024 largely failed because they were rushed and superficial. Well-intended civic groups and political actors attempted to manufacture “demand for Europe” without the long-term work of civic education and community engagement. When the moment came for the public to defend democratic principles, they lacked both the tools and the understanding to act decisively.

Democracy Requires Education, Reform, and Patience

If the West is serious about supporting democracy in Georgia, it must begin at the foundation. This means committing to civic education at every level, from schools to universities across rural towns and urban centers. Democratic literacy cannot be a luxury or an afterthought; it must be a national priority. Simultaneously, legal and institutional reforms (particularly anti-corruption measures and judicial independence) must be pursued not just as conditions for EU candidacy but as genuine prerequisites for a functioning state. This is not a short-term effort.

Internalizing democratic values requires generational commitment. Western actors must recognize their own role in encouraging donor dependence and favoring technical fixes over value-driven engagement. If democracy is to flourish in Georgia, Western support must shift from checklists and compliance to long-term investment in democratic norms and institutions. This means funding civic education, supporting local journalism, and empowering grassroots political participation, even when it yields uncomfortable or unpredictable results.

All of this leads to a sobering question: Can the West accept that Georgia may not be a reliable ally for the foreseeable future? Absent a revolutionary shift in leadership or a dramatic resurgence of citizen activism, the current

regime appears committed to autocratic governance. The international community must prepare for Georgia possibly remaining outside the democratic fold for years. Engagement must therefore be cautious, principled, and grounded in long-term objectives, rather than short-term symbolism.

Conclusions

The West now faces a strategic decision: What is more important: a democratic Georgia or a cooperative, friendly Georgia? For years, these two aspirations were aligned. Supporting Georgia's democratic development meant strengthening an ally in a volatile region. Today, that alignment has diverged. The pursuit of democracy now places Western interests at odds with the GD government. This fundamental divergence requires clarity of purpose, because the policy pathways that follow are mutually exclusive and fraught with difficult trade-offs.

The current Georgian Dream government favors a transactional model of engagement with the West, one centered on economic cooperation and security guarantees while abandoning commitments to democratic governance. However, such an approach would overlook a crucial internal dynamic: despite systematic government repression, electoral manipulation, and sustained anti-Western rhetoric, an estimated 800,000 to 1 million Georgian citizens continue to support Western-style democratic governance. This figure, likely to grow with generational turnover, reflects a significant portion of society whose European aspirations remain deeply rooted. Ignoring this segment would not only undermine long-standing commitments but would also risk fostering disillusionment and anti-Western sentiment among those who have long viewed Euro-Atlantic integration as Georgia's strategic and civilizational future.

Given these considerations, the United States and the European Union would be best served by adopting a dual-track policy. On one track, they would maintain engagement with the Georgian Dream government in areas

of mutual interest, including economic development, regional connectivity, energy cooperation, and security. In practical terms, this could take the form of a conditional engagement framework where the U.S. and EU engage with the current government on strategic matters, and pursue technical cooperation aimed at improving governance and public sector efficiency, while requiring concrete assurances that opposition parties and civil society organizations can operate freely and without fear of persecution. On the other track, they would actively support pro-democracy forces and civil society actors, thereby ensuring that the path to European integration remains viable should Georgia recommit to democratic reform.

In practical terms, this could take the form of a conditional engagement framework where the U.S. and EU engage with the current government on strategic matters, while requiring concrete assurances that opposition parties and civil society organizations can operate freely and without fear of persecution. This would not resolve the deeper democratic crisis, but it could restore a measure of political balance and ease current tensions. Such a strategy does entail reputational and strategic risks for Washington and Brussels, particularly if perceived as legitimizing autocratic rule. However, it would offer a clear and principled position—one that acknowledges current realities while preserving the historical foundations of Western engagement and providing the Georgian people with a definitive understanding of where the West stands.

Over the past two decades, a complex network of foreign assistance, political support, and strategic engagement with Georgia has been guided by the assumption that shared democratic values would naturally produce shared interests. This framework shaped Western policy during the Saakashvili era and beyond, driven by the belief that Georgia's path to Euro-Atlantic integration was both inevitable and linear. Yet, that framework has proven insufficient for a Georgia whose ruling party no longer upholds its democratic commitments, as policies from an era of democratic optimism

were not designed to confront a government that weaponizes anti-Western rhetoric, distorts facts, and misrepresents allies to retain power.

Georgia's current political crisis is not from one party or moment but culminates years of missed opportunities, misjudged partnerships, and growing detachment between political elites and the public. GD's authoritarian turn, the UNM's legacy of repression, a weak opposition, and inconsistent international engagement have all shaped a bleak democratic landscape. As Georgia faces a pivotal juncture in its democratic trajectory, it is vital to confront not only the immediate dangers of authoritarianism, but also the structural and collective failures that allowed it to take root.

Crucially, any negotiated solution, whether democratic or pragmatic, must be accompanied by meaningful incentives for opposition groups and civil society. Token promises of safety or space are no longer enough. To remain at the table, these actors would need guarantees of real political opportunity, protection from state harassment, and pathways for meaningful reform. Without this, trust in any settlement would quickly erode. Moreover, Western partners must acknowledge their role in enabling the current impasse through inconsistent messaging, donor over-reliance, and failing to invest in Georgians' democratic capacity.

To move forward effectively, it is imperative that the U.S. and EU develop a flexible, multi-tiered policy framework – one that can adapt to Georgia's political volatility while remaining grounded in strategic clarity. Such a framework must outline possible contingencies and corresponding responses, with calibrated engagement tools based on democratic performance, geopolitical alignment, and civic resilience. Without such foresight and coordination, Western policy will remain reactive and ultimately ineffectual.

Finally, it must be stressed that no amount of foreign policy ingenuity can substitute for domestic civic will. The fate of Georgia's democracy lies not in Washington, Brussels, or even Tbilisi's ruling circles, but in the hands of

the Georgian people themselves. The past three decades have shown that while international allies can provide support, direction, and incentives, they cannot choose for Georgia; and they cannot impose democracy from the outside. If Georgia is to become a true democracy, its citizens must decide that such a future is worth fighting for. The responsibility and the opportunity belongs to the public. **It is up to them to determine what kind of nation they wish to become.**

Authors' Bio

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