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## REGIMES

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AUTOCRATIZATION  
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MYANMAR  
GEORGIA  
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RUSSIA  
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DICTATORSHIP  
RULES-BASED  
GOVERNANCE  
POPULISM  
INTERESTS

- CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE
- TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION
- DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE



## REGIMES

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PLEBISCITE ENGINEERING AND AUTOCRATISATION  
IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION ..... 3**  
*Svitlana Kononchuk*

**REBUILDING THE RULES-BASED ORDER: HOW DEMOCRACIES  
SHOULD RESPOND ..... 12**  
*Dmytro Deineko*

**SECURITY VERSUS PROSPERITY: THE FALSE DILEMMA ERODING GEORGIA'S  
DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE ..... 23**  
*Ana Mikautadze*

**THE TRAITS, PITFALLS AND LIMITS OF AUTOCRACY IN MYANMAR..... 33**  
*Olga Rusova*

**WHY DEMOCRACIES MUST LEARN FROM AUTOCRACIES TO WIN..... 44**  
*Maryna Karlevits*

**RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:  
BETWEEN POPULISM AND NATIONAL INTERESTS ..... 51**  
*Hanna Shelest*

# SECURITY VERSUS PROSPERITY: THE FALSE DILEMMA ERODING GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

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*Once regarded as a frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia is today sliding into authoritarianism, despite immense public support for European integration. This article explores the paradox of a pro-European society tolerating this democratic backsliding. It argues that a combination of internal and external factors has reshaped public priorities from democracy building to security. Russian propaganda, amplified by the War in Ukraine, has successfully triggered deep-rooted fears of war within Georgian society, enabling the ruling Georgian Dream party to use these narratives and patronage networks to consolidate power. This article highlights the risks this process poses to Georgia's European future.*

## From Frontrunner to Crossroads: Georgia's Political Trajectory

The history of modern Georgia spans just 34 years, but it has seen remarkable and turbulent developments in that short span of time. The country regained independence in 1991, shortly before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A democratically elected government came to power, but the transition was extremely challenging, since Georgia's economy had been heavily integrated into the Soviet system, and its collapse caused hyperinflation, shortages, and a severe economic downturn, which resulted in a quick downturn in living standards. Weak state institutions and public discontent fuelled political tensions, particularly between supporters of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his

opponents, which escalated into a violent civil war and a coup d'état. At the same time, with substantial Russian involvement, the war in Abkhazia erupted in 1992. As a result, Georgia lost control over the region, and around 270,000 people were forced to flee their homes and became internally displaced. Back then, Georgia could be depicted as a failed state<sup>1</sup>. This nearly chaotic situation lasted until the mid-1990s, but even the following period was very difficult in terms of economic development and social security.

In 1999, Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe, at which assembly, Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania highlighted Georgia's European identity for the first time, stating: "I am Georgian, and therefore, I am European."<sup>2</sup> Since then, and especially


1 Zaza Bibilashvili, *20 Years of Georgia's Rose Revolution*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2023, <https://www.freiheit.org/east-and-southeast-europe/20-years-georgias-rose-revolution>

2 Georgian Prime-Minister, Zurab Zhvania's speech at the assembly of Council of Europe in 1999, when Georgia became the 41st member of the organisation can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4KX1IVrHg>

after the Rose Revolution in 2003, the Georgian nation-building process has centred around the idea that the country should return to Europe, where it belongs. The new government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili (United National Movement Party) launched a series of profound social, economic, and judicial reforms, aimed at undermining deeply rooted corruption and strengthening public institutions. Cooperation with the EU and NATO intensified, and new formats of partnership with both institutions were established, supporting Georgia in its state transformation through financial assistance and the sharing of expertise. During this period, Georgia became a front-runner not only in terms of the South Caucasus but also within the broader framework of the Eastern Partnership.<sup>3</sup>

As Georgia's Western partnerships deepened, Russia, still viewing the country as within its sphere of influence, undertook disruptive measures, including several gas supply cuts, restricting exports such as wine, and seriously damaging country's economy; and also deporting Georgian citizens from Russia. Despite these pressures, Georgia maintained its pro-Western foreign policy, sought new markets, and diversified energy imports. In August 2008, as a result of the five-day Russia-Georgia war, Georgia lost control over the Samachablo region, resulting in 80,000 additional internally displaced persons.<sup>4</sup>

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***As Georgia's Western partnerships deepened, Russia, still viewing the country as within its sphere of influence, undertook disruptive measures***

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Despite maintaining a pro-Western foreign policy, the government began to suppress opposition parties, the independent media, and NGOs, continuously violating human rights and the rule of law, and shifting from a path of democratisation towards a more authoritarian trajectory, while creating internal turmoil in the country.<sup>5</sup> This situation was further amplified by the global economic crisis and its impact on Georgia's economy.<sup>6</sup> There was an unsuccessful attempt to change the government in 2007, but at that time, opposition groups failed to consolidate and achieve tangible results. In 2012, however, with the support of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who had accumulated his wealth in Russia, the major opposition forces united under the Georgian Dream coalition, and won the parliamentary elections with 54.9% of the vote.<sup>7</sup> This marked the first peaceful transfer of power through elections in Georgia's history – a significant step forward in the democracy consolidation process.

The first few years after the elections were characterised by successful cooperation with the Western institutions, particularly

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- 3 European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), *At a Glance* (EPRS\_ATA(2025)772849), 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/772849/EPRS\\_ATA\(2025\)772849\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/772849/EPRS_ATA(2025)772849_EN.pdf)
  - 4 *Revised figures push number in Georgia displaced to 192,000*, "UNHCR News", 12.09.2008, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/revised-figures-push-number-georgia-displaced-192000>
  - 5 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2012: Georgia*, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/georgia>
  - 6 Maia Otashvili, *Georgia and the Global Economic Crisis*, "FPRI – Recent Findings: Eurasia", May 2013, <https://www.fpri.org/research/eurasia/recent-findings/georgia-global-econ-crisis/>
  - 7 *Elections in 2012*, "IPU PARLINE database: Georgia (Sakartvelos Parlamenti)", 2012, [https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/HTML/2119\\_12.htm](https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/HTML/2119_12.htm)

with the EU. In 2014, Georgia signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, and from 2017 the EU granted to Georgian citizens freedom of movement within the Schengen area. This was an important step forward in EU-Georgia relations, facilitating access to the European market and promoting the smoother integration of Georgia into the EU economy. In 2018, Georgia introduced amendments into the constitution, and added Article 78 on integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, which formally reaffirmed the country's aspiration towards EU and NATO membership.<sup>8</sup>

While the Georgian government demonstrated willingness to implement technical reforms to align with EU standards, it remained reluctant to undertake profound structural changes, aiming to strengthen local governance, public institutions, the judiciary system and to fight high-level corruption. Moreover, instead of encouraging dialogue with civil society, the government only formally communicated with the latter, or in most cases simply excluded and even demonised it<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, it pursued a so-called 'appeasement policy' towards Russia, seeking to balance relations between the West and its northern neighbour, even though Russia continued its occupation of Georgian territories. After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government refused to join international sanctions against the aggressor, calling it Tbilisi's "pragmatic policy"<sup>10</sup>

As the Russian-Ukrainian war intensified, and confusion grew within Western societies, the Georgian government began pursuing a regime consolidation agenda, marginalising civil society, and further fragmenting the opposition. In 2023, they attempted to adopt the Law on Transparency of Foreign Funding, modelled after a Russian 2012 law, which would have labelled NGOs and independent media outlets receiving foreign funding as 'foreign agents.' This move faced strong public opposition, with tens of thousands of Georgians protesting on Rustaveli Avenue, the main street in Tbilisi, ultimately forcing the ruling party to withdraw the bill.



***While the Georgian government demonstrated willingness to implement technical reforms to align with EU standards, it remained reluctant to undertake profound structural changes, aiming to strengthen local governance***

In 2024, it reintroduced a more detailed and comprehensive version of the law, manipulated the parliamentary elections, and even announced its intention to halt EU accession negotiations — despite Georgia being granted candidate status in 2023 (even though the country did not fulfil the 12 preconditions, the so called '12 priorities set by the EU'). Since October 2024, protests in Tbilisi and other major cities have been ongoing, demanding new parliamentary

8 Constitution of Georgia, "Constitutional Court of Georgia", 2018 edition, <https://www.constcourt.ge/en/court/legislation/constitution-text>

9 Transparency International Georgia, *Government's Coordinated Attack on Civil Society Harms Democracy in Georgia*, Transparency International Georgia, 28.10.2022, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/governments-coordinated-attack-civil-society-harms-democracy-georgia>

10 Joshua Kucera, *Georgia says it won't join international sanctions against Russia*, Eurasianet, 25.02.2022, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-says-it-wont-join-international-sanctions-against-russia>,

elections and the resumption of EU accession talks. However, the government has intensified its suppressive measures, and as the protests have weakened, introduced new penalties and legislation aimed at curbing dissent and clearing the ground for its agenda, encountering relatively little resistance from the broader public<sup>11</sup>.


### **When Fatigue Meets Manipulation: Public Opinion and Hybrid Influence**

To understand the peculiarity of the current stance of Georgian society, it is useful to examine polling data from 2009 to 2023, which reveal how attitudes and perceptions towards the European Union have evolved. As mentioned earlier, the project of Georgian national identity building has long been centred on the idea of Europeanness. Georgians have widely believed that rapprochement with the EU would have a positive impact on the country's democratisation, economic development, institutional strengthening, rule of law, and living standards.

Europe in general, and the EU in particular, were recognised as Georgia's key international partners. Some Georgians even viewed potential EU accession as a means to restore the country's territorial integrity. Even in 2009, when EU–Georgia relations remained within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, and when the EU itself was experiencing enlargement fatigue, 88% of the Georgian population expressed positive or neutral attitudes towards the EU, while only 3% perceived

it negatively.<sup>12</sup> Supporters of Georgia's EU membership primarily associated it with economic prosperity, national security, and the restoration of territorial integrity.<sup>13</sup>

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***Georgians have widely believed that rapprochement with the EU would have a positive impact on the country's democratisation, economic development, institutional strengthening, rule of law, and living standards***

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However, the trend has slightly changed since the signing of the Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU in 2014, after which many Georgians expected immediate, tangible improvements in their daily lives, while the EU appeared to be a slow-moving and bureaucratically ineffective partner. Additionally, the EU's limited response to Russia's aggression in Crimea raised doubts about its credibility and its commitment to regional security. This period was also marked by the rise of pro-Russian conservative actors, like the Alliance of the Patriots of Georgia and media channels like TV Obieqtivi and Alt-Info, which were persistently trying to demonise the EU, and to deeply damage its reputation with false narratives – claiming that the EU demanded that Georgians abandon their traditions and Orthodox Christian values, adopt LGBTQ+-supporting legislation, and strongly promote non-traditional lifestyles<sup>14</sup>.

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11 See for example, Caucasus Barometer data 2024, which shows that 69% of Georgian Society treats Russia as the number one enemy of Georgia, 2024, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/MAINENEM/> and the same year's data show that 70% of the population support Georgia's EU membership, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/EUSUPP/>

12 EUPERC, *Caucasus Barometer: Survey Data (2009–2023)*, [https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu\\_ge/EUPERC/](https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUPERC/)

13 EUHLPIMP, *Caucasus Barometer: Survey Data (2009–2023)*, [https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu\\_ge/EUHLPIMP/](https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUHLPIMP/)

14 Media Development Foundation (MDF), *Anti-Western Propaganda in Georgia*, Media Development Foundation, 2017, <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/eng/AntiWest-2017-ENG.pdf>



Since 2017, the situation has been gradually changing. The introduction of visa-free travel to the Schengen Area served as a visible symbol of integration, restoring optimism and reinforcing trust in the EU. Cooperation over educational, cultural, and youth programmes expanded, while EU financial assistance (amounting to roughly 938.4 million euro between 2014 and 2020) further deepened engagement. As a result, public support for the EU rebounded, reaching 44% in 2017, and continuing to rise in the following years, signalling that despite the abovementioned temporary fatigue and disinformation efforts, the European orientation remains deeply rooted within Georgian society, but the problems still remain.

Even the 2025 Eurobarometer study shows that only 37% of the population are well or very well informed about the European Union, while others have only general or limited knowledge. Accordingly, they might have false expectations from the EU (e.g. that the EU has the possibility to solve all the socio-economic and security problems Georgia faces), and when these expectations are not met, they can easily become a target for manipulation. This can explain the decline in the view of the EU as a very or fairly positive actor over the last two years, from 54% to 43%.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the informational methods and tools used in the Russian hybrid war have been refined and become increasingly context-tailored in Georgia, resulting in deeper collision and confusion within society. Russian disinformation campaigns have become largely oriented

towards ultra-nationalistic narratives, portraying Georgians as exceptional people, who have nothing to learn from their Western partners, whose history and culture are so rich that no other countries/organisations have the right to interfere in their affairs or offer them any advice.



***Russian disinformation campaigns have become largely oriented towards ultra-nationalistic narratives, portraying Georgians as exceptional people, who have nothing to learn from their Western partners***

Russia is targeting the segment of society which still experiences nostalgia for the Soviet era, due to the false impression of higher standards of living or their better social status in the Soviet past. Russia is continuously seeking to distort perceptions of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it attempts to exaggerate the role and status of Georgians within the ex-USSR, and some groups of Georgian society (mainly people in their mid-fifties and above) believe that they were well-treated under Soviet rule, and therefore think that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a bad thing for the country.<sup>16</sup> These false narratives, coupled with anti-Western messages about the EU, claiming that they are demanding that Georgians abandon their traditions and Orthodox Christian values and embrace an LGBTQ+ lifestyle, have been relatively successful from a propaganda standpoint. However, they have not gained widespread

15 *Annual Surveys 2023 & 2025: Georgia*, "EU Neighbours East", 2023–2025, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2023-georgia/>; <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2025-georgia/>

16 *Caucasus Barometer*, "USSR Dissolution-by Age Group 2019", CRRG Georgia, 2019, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019ge/USSRDISS-by-AGEGROUP/>


support, especially among the younger generations, who remain strongly in favour of Georgia's EU membership<sup>17</sup>.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the hybrid strategy was once again modified, now casting the West as a traitor. Shortly after the beginning of the war, Russian propagandists started promoting the narratives that Ukraine had been 'abandoned by the West' and was fighting alone, that the West and particularly Europeans solely care about their own well-being and would rather sacrifice Ukraine than give up their privileges. There was a hidden message behind this narrative, aimed at war-fatigue in Georgian society: "If the West abandons Ukraine, it will abandon you even more easily in the face of Russian aggression."

Another important line in terms of anti-Western disinformation narratives is accusing the West and Ukraine of attempting to draw Georgia into the war by opening up a 'second front' against Russia. This narrative echoes the position of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and has been successfully exploited by the GD government, to justify its decision not to join in with the anti-Russian sanctions. According to Sergey Narishkin, head of the SVR, the West has been pressuring the Georgian government into a military conflict with Russia, in order to relieve pressure on Ukraine and further exhaust the strength of the Russian military<sup>18</sup>. These narratives were further strengthened when the EU

did not grant Georgia candidate status along with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. The Russian propagandists directly linked this decision to Georgia's refusal to 'open a second front', and portrayed it as a punishment for non-obedience. The overall aim of this narrative was to convince the population of the country that the West wants to drag Georgia into a war.<sup>19</sup>

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***the government officials were repeatedly pushing the 'second front' conspiracy theories in their speeches, to deflect public criticism and shift blame onto the EU for their own failures***

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Not only the propagandists, but also the government officials were repeatedly pushing the 'second front' conspiracy theories in their speeches, to deflect public criticism and shift blame onto the EU for their own failures. For example, Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili said on July 29th, 2022 that "...despite many attempts, provocations, and direct calls, our team avoided the biggest danger that could happen to our people and our country, which is war."<sup>20</sup> This was not an isolated incident. The government has repeatedly used this propagandistic message to indirectly discredit the West, and particularly the EU, in the eyes of the Georgian public.

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17 Caucasus Barometer. "EU Membership Support by Age Groups 2024" CRRG Georgia, 2024 <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/EUSUPP-by-AGEGROUP/>

18 West tries to persuade Tbilisi to open 'second front' against Russia — intelligence chief, TASS, 4.04.2023, <https://tass.com/society/1599071>

19 T. Chikhladze, S. Shiukashvili, *Pro-Russian Disinformation Narratives in Georgia Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, "Caucasus Analytical Digest", 2023, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-94107-8>

20 PM: Despite Provocations, Our Team Avoided Biggest Danger, War, "Georgia Today," 29.07.2022, <https://georgiatoday.ge/pm-despite-provocations-our-team-avoided-biggest-danger-war/>

## 2024 Parliamentary Elections: Emergence of the False Dilemma

“Say No to War, choose Peace” was the main slogan of the GD party during the 2024 Parliamentary elections in Georgia. Even this slogan alone illustrates how masterfully the Georgian Dream manipulated the fear of war, to mobilise the populace into voting for them. It portrayed the country’s foreign policy as peace-oriented, and the position of the GD government as the sole guarantor of national security, subtly and covertly pointing out that the process of European integration could lead to open confrontation with Russia, and ultimately result in war. Their main goal was to create a false dilemma, ‘Security vs. Eurointegration’, which was driven by the unsubstantiated claim that the EU and the West sought to open a second front in Georgia, so as to undermine Russia and force it to divert military resources from Ukraine.

To further deepen fear within the society, which was already targeted by the ‘second front’ narratives, the GD used controversial banners, later adapted into video clips, following the consistent principle: on one side were the images of war-torn Ukraine, with the crossed out electoral ballot numbers of the four opposition parties which were most likely to enter Parliament – Coalition for Change (4), Unity-UNM (5), Strong Georgia (9), and Gakharia For Georgia (25) – as if they were associated with war, and on the other side were the images of a prosperous Georgia, emphasising that it was at peace under

GD rule, with the GD’s ballot number (41) highlighted.<sup>21</sup> These visual aids served as a chilling warning, with the hidden message being: “This is what happens when a country follows the West’s guidance and opens a front against Russia.”



***GD has even co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church, one of the country’s most trusted institutions, increasing its state budget allocation to over GEL 60 million in 2024, to promote their pre-election messages***

At the same time, GD was using all other mechanisms at its disposal to mobilise more votes in support of it, like bribing and intimidating voters, especially those who work in the public institutions or receive public assistance from the state (the latest data show that the number of recipients of social assistance in Georgia totals 696,359 people<sup>22</sup>, around 19% of the entire population). GD has even co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church, one of the country’s most trusted institutions, increasing its state budget allocation to over GEL 60 million in 2024, to promote their pre-election messages and ‘peace and security’ narrative. The party was actively using loyal media outlets and social media, including so-called ‘troll factories’<sup>23</sup> to deepen social rifts, and influence undecided voters, who were already confused by the contradictory

21 S. Kincha, *Georgian Dream Launches Campaign Ads Using Images of War-Torn Ukraine*, “OC Media”, 26.09.2024, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-launches-campaign-ads-using-images-of-war-torn-ukraine/>

22 “საარსებო შეწყვეტის მიმდებარა რაოდენობა 700 ათასს აღწევს – რამდენი ადამიანი ითხოვს სახელმწიფო დახმარებას?” [The number of social assistance recipients reaches 700,000 – how many people request state support?], Resonance Daily, 07.02.2025, [https://www.resonancedaily.com/index.php?id\\_rub=4&id\\_artc=221685](https://www.resonancedaily.com/index.php?id_rub=4&id_artc=221685)

23 Irakli Jgharkava, *Why It Matters: Georgia’s Troll Scandal Explained*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 20.12.2019, <https://gfsis.org/en/why-it-matters-georgias-troll-scandal-explained-2/>

narratives coming from the ruling party, the opposition, the media, and various social groupings<sup>24</sup>.

Georgian Dream has also managed to lower public trust in opposition parties, intentionally aligning each party leader with the previous government, labelling them as 'Natsis' (a term commonly used in Georgia to refer to the representatives of the United National Movement), and stressing the point of how unbearable the nine-year-long governance under Natsi rule had been. On the other side, the opposition remained deeply fragmented, uniting only under the umbrella of four separate coalitions. Although their pre-election messages were mostly identical, mutual distrust and fear of being labelled as a Natsi led each coalition to pursue its own strategy.



***the EU has not managed to give a coordinated response to the current crisis in Georgia***

To address the 'Security vs. Eurointegration' dilemma, imposed by GD, the opposition parties tried to reframe it as 'The EU vs. Russia', emphasising the social and economic benefits, high standards of democracy and human rights protection associated with the EU, contrasted with the poor standards of living, decadence and authoritarian rule associated with Russia. They deliberately avoided addressing the security aspect of the government-imposed dilemma, to prevent drawing further attention to this false narrative, and sparking deeper discussion on this issue. However, for society, having experienced several devastating internal

conflicts and wars within the last 30 years, and still trying to recover from that trauma, there was no viable argument which could counterbalance the appeal of the security argument. Thus, GD managed to cultivate a deep-seated fear, on this fertile ground and, despite becoming oppressive and openly non-democratic, it gradually created a public environment that accepts or at least cohabitates with the authoritarian regime, while maintaining a pretence of following its own European path.

### **The EU Misses its Opportunity**

While the Georgian government took every measure to distort the EU's image and deepen anti-Western sentiment, by introducing legislation to suppress critical voices in civil society and the independent media, imprisoning hundreds of protesters, and building new partnerships with China and the UAE to replace EU investments and also to consolidate control, the EU's responses remained limited and largely belated. Its actions amounted mostly to mere rhetoric, with no substantial measures attached. This passivity was interpreted by the Georgian Dream government as permission to intensify its repression and dismantle what remained of the opposition.

While some EU member states took their own targeted measures, including travel bans and financial restrictions on GD officials, state-backed businessmen, judges, and media-owners, the EU has not managed to give a coordinated response to the current crisis in Georgia. In January 2025, it imposed travel restrictions on the holders of diplomatic passports, but this was just a symbolic act, because these citizens could use their ordinary passports for visa-free travel within the Schengen area.

24 "სოციალური მედიის მონიტორინგის პირველი შუალედური ანგარიში (First Interim Report on Social Media Monitoring)," ISFED, 2024, <https://www.isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-pirveli-shualeduri-angarishi-27-agvisto-20-seqtemberi?ref=oc-media.org>

The EU failed to impose economic sanctions in July 2025, due to internal contradictions. Brussels's inability to agree on the sanctions have led GD to intensify their anti-EU narratives, and even to blame the EU ambassador for the attempted coup d'état on October 4th, 2025. The absence of meaningful accountability reinforces GD's authority. "Its strategy appears clear: to exhaust the patience of the EU and other Western partners until 'Georgia fatigue' sets in — a situation where street protests fade and Brussels accepts authoritarian consolidation as a fait accompli."<sup>25</sup>



***Since USAID withdrew, and the government-imposed legislation to limit international funding (even on the individual level), most of these organisations have been barely functional***

Another problem in Georgia is the gradual disappearance of civil society agents. Georgian NGOs, think tanks and independent media outlets were previously largely dependent on international donor funding. Since USAID withdrew, and the government-imposed legislation to limit international funding (even on the individual level), most of these organisations have been barely functional; the major ones are paralysed, due to frozen bank accounts, and regional CSOs are shutting down. Their demand for help remains unanswered by the EU, unable to establish the legal framework to support the civil society.

Currently, the EU is on the brink. If it continues to overlook authoritarian consolidation in Georgia and remains reactive rather than proactive, it risks permanently damaging

its reputation as a normative power in the region. 'Letting Georgia go' would signal the failure of the EU's democratisation agenda, and could encourage other authoritarian powers in its neighbourhood.

## **Policy Recommendations for the EU**

Since the crisis in Georgia represents a systemic failure of the EU to reassert itself as a normative power in the region, restore its reputation, halt, or even reverse authoritarian consolidation not only in Georgia, but inside and in the near neighbourhood of the EU, it must develop a well-thought out and structured strategy, which includes the following steps:

- Address its own institutional inertia, and find ways to overcome fragmentation: with the ongoing enlargement and internal diversification, the existing decision-making mechanisms have proven obsolete, resulting in slow and belated responses to the crises in the neighbourhood. To effectively regain its normative power, the EU must become rapid and flexible, and consider reforming or circumventing the unanimity rule. Besides, prioritising this reform could divert the focus from other urgent crises, but in the long run these reforms will serve the EU's empowerment.
- The EU's rhetoric must be replaced by effective, targeted sanctions, capable of delivering tangible results and undermining authoritarian consolidation. These could be related with economic sanctions or suspension of the visa-free regime for government officials, the representatives of propaganda media outlets and state-loyal or -patronised businesses which support political repression and the authoritarian agenda in Georgia.

<sup>25</sup> Chkhikvadze, Vano, *Rowing Nowhere Will Surely Sink Georgian Democracy*. GEOpolitics, Issue №23, October 2025, <https://politicsgeo.com/rowing-nowhere-will-surely-sink-georgian-democracy/>



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***The EU's rhetoric must be replaced by effective, targeted sanctions, capable of delivering tangible results and undermining authoritarian consolidation***

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- Empower Civil Society: since the civil society is the backbone of its support in the country, the EU has to act flexibly and develop context-tailored strategies, to restore funding to the Georgian CSOs and the independent media. Delaying action risks leaving the sector without representation, weakening, or even undermining the EU's democratisation agenda in Georgia. On the other hand, circumventing Georgian legislation to restore funding would be seized upon as evidence of foreign interference by the government, but still the diplomatic risk that this carries is minimal. The ruling party has already exhausted its range of anti-EU rhetoric, repeatedly and repetitively portraying the EU as an actor attempting to interfere in Georgia's domestic policy. As a result, the marginal diplomatic cost is negligible, since there is little left that could further deteriorate the EU's relationship with the current government.
- Improve strategic communication and address the problem of information asymmetry: the knowledge gap about the

EU, its institutions, its scope, and capacity may further fuel anti-EU narratives and manipulate Georgian society. The EU must also highlight its already supported and financed projects in Georgia, to increase public awareness of the potential losses associated with abandoning the path to European integration.

- Promote educational and exchange programmes: Education remains one of the few areas where the EU can continue working without direct confrontation with the Georgian Government. The EU should leverage this soft power tool, to enable more of the Georgian youth to experience the EU, understand its core values, and explore the idea of European identity. Thus, the EU can cultivate another backbone of influence within Georgian society.

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