



EUROPE

Expert Insights

PERSPECTIVE ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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Countering Russia-style autocracy in Georgia

FEBRUARY 2026

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Introduction

In a recent RAND commentary, we wrote about the spectre of Russian influence in Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. To the relief of the Western alliance, Moldova's pro-EU party secured a parliamentary majority in the September 2025 elections, despite Russia's efforts to turn the vote in favour of the pro-Kremlin Patriotic Electoral Bloc.¹ Armenia is continuing its pivot towards the West, although critical parliamentary elections in 2026 might reverse recent progress. Georgia, however, faces a democratic crisis. Despite widespread support for EU membership, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has turned decisively away from the West and towards a full embrace of illiberalism and Russia-style autocracy.² Indeed, over the past two years, GD has shifted from a posture that sought, at least rhetorically, to accommodate the pro-EU ambitions of the Georgian people to an outright embrace of authoritarianism. The 2024 adoption of a Russia-style Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (often called the 'foreign agent' law) and an even more restrictive amendment to the Law of Grants in 2025; continued electoral fraud, most recently in the 2024 parliamentary elections; and ongoing arrests of opposition leaders, journalists and civil

rights activists are just some of the features of the contemporary Georgian political system. In this perspective, we highlight the origins of that system in GD, draw attention to Russian influence, and offer options for increased Western support, which will be vital if Georgia is to be persuaded to reverse course.

Tracing Russian influence across the GD era

Warning signs from GD's early years

Even though Moscow and Tbilisi have not had diplomatic relations since the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, and despite Russia's unpopularity among the Georgian population, GD has been publicly warming to Moscow for years. When GD came to power in the elections of 2012, many in the West welcomed it as the first democratic transfer of power in the country's history. The party was, however, a political project of the new prime minister (PM) Bidzina Ivanishvili, a reclusive oligarch who made a fortune in Russia in the 1990s. This wealth, which was roughly equal to Georgia's GDP at the time of his election, had a significant bearing on his capacity to influence the

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political scene.³ He built the party around loyalists and tempered concerns that he might be pro-Russian by forging a coalition with the liberal, pro-Western opposition to former President Mikheil Saakashvili. In the new government's first years, these pro-Western voices were given prominence. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 and made a significant contribution to NATO operations in Afghanistan as the largest non-NATO contributor of troops and the largest contributor of troops overall on a per capita basis.⁴

Yet from the start there were concerns about GD's direction of travel. One of the first actions by the new government was to pass a large-scale amnesty to redress what was widely seen as the overly repressive criminal justice policies of the Saakashvili era. While this was a broadly popular measure, among those amnestied were several Russian spies and organised-crime figures, which significantly benefited the Kremlin's interests in the country.⁵

Ivanishvili also governed from the shadows. After officially retiring from public life in 2013 he remained 'honorary party chairman' of GD and in so doing became an unelected leader. He continued to hire and fire prime ministers and appointed close personal associates to top government positions – actions that initially drew little comment from Georgia's Western partners but which were autocratic in nature. As we note below, Ivanishvili has a habit of returning to politics around election time, only to retire again and govern through proxies after securing power.⁶

GD also consistently pressured its liberal coalition partners. In 2014, for example, pro-Western Defence Minister Irakli Alasania was forced to resign after

criticising what he described as the politically motivated prosecutions of defence officials. Further arrests followed, and a practice developed in which blackmail, fabricated charges, legal measures and media pressure were routinely employed to sideline Ivanishvili's political rivals. Over time, the government and a sympathetic media shepherded far-right street movements and political parties with pro-Russian and anti-Western views into politics.⁷

By 2016, GD's liberal partners had been marginalised and the coalition was disbanded. However, the party still won a supermajority in that year's parliamentary election led by Giorgi Kvirikashvili, a pro-Western figure, indicating the continued influence of liberal views within the party. Kvirikashvili's government then secured visa-free travel with the Schengen zone in 2017, which was a huge milestone in Georgia's integration with the West and underlined the EU's confidence in the country's prospects. Although EU membership was off the table, the Association Agreement and visa-free travel allowed GD to portray itself as an effective, pro-Western government.

However, within a year Kvirikashvili had also been forced to resign and GD began to diverge from its avowed pro-Western course. His exit is believed to be linked to his support for the construction of Anaklia, a deep-water port project on the Black Sea. For Kvirikashvili, the port represented an anchor for Western interests in Georgia, and a chance to improve the prospects of a poor and conflict-scarred region.⁸ This view was not shared by the party. Instead, the project came to exemplify Georgia's strategic reorientation, as highlighted in Box 1.

Box 1. Anaklia – a metaphor for Georgia’s strategic reorientation

Anaklia is a deep-sea port development project on the coast near Abkhazia that, to Kvirikashvili, represented a potential foothold for Western interests in Georgia and a chance to improve the economic prospects of the region.⁹ In 2016, his government awarded the construction contract to a US–Georgia consortium. This decision was made in the face of opposition from Russia and, as it turned out, Ivanishvili, who suggested developing the port at nearby Poti instead. (It was later revealed that he held an interest in the company that owned the Free Industrial Zone in Poti.)¹⁰

Although GD publicly backed the project even after Kvirikashvili’s resignation, it refused to underwrite the consortium’s loans which would have unlocked international financing.¹¹ As a result the project began to fall apart and it deteriorated further when GD brought flimsy charges against the main Georgian backers of the consortium, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze.¹² Despite significant pressure from Washington, including an intervention from then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Anaklia project was paused.¹³

In a sign of GD’s turn away from the West, the project was then awarded in 2024 to the China Communication Construction Company, which had been blacklisted by the US Department of Commerce for building islands for military purposes in the South China Sea.¹⁴ It has been argued that the Anaklia project could provide China with dual-use infrastructure in the Black Sea littoral, and a site from which to cause disruption on Europe’s eastern flank.¹⁵ However, despite the formal commencement of construction in January 2025, no work has taken place at the site and it remains unclear if the port will ever be developed.¹⁶

Indeed, although Georgia and China signed a strategic cooperation agreement in 2023, Georgia has yet to meaningfully benefit from the relationship. Tbilisi has acquired surveillance technologies from Beijing that have been deployed during pro-EU protests, but bilateral trade has declined. Beijing has also voted in favour of Moscow at the United Nations on the return of internally displaced Georgians in Russia-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

What has prevented Georgia from working with the United States and China on Anaklia? One explanation is that the China deal was merely a performative gesture, signalling Georgia’s shifting geopolitical allegiances. Another is that Moscow holds de facto veto power over such projects – and therefore on GD decision making. Russia began construction of its own new naval base at Ochamchire in Russia-occupied Abkhazia, close to Anaklia, in 2023, which shows its determination to retain a presence in the region after its Black Sea Fleet was expelled from Ukraine-controlled waters.¹⁷

The Kremlin’s influence in Georgia became glaringly apparent in 2019, when Russian parliamentarian Sergei Gavrilov was invited to a meeting of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in the

Georgian parliament, where he delivered a speech in Russian on the unity of the two countries.¹⁸ Gavrilov had voted to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and his speech provoked violent protests

which ended when GD promised political concessions (on which they later reneged) and Irakli Kobakhidze, the speaker of parliament who had invited him, stepped down.¹⁹ True to party form, Kobakhidze would later return and is now prime minister.

Accelerating towards autocracy in the 2020s

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's return to the Kremlin's orbit became practically undeniable. While the government formally supported Western-backed UN resolutions in New York City, pro-government television stations Imedi and PostTV (owned respectively by a business partner of Ivanishvili and a GD parliamentarian) broadcast pro-Russian content and conspiracy theories.²⁰ The rise of anti-Western propaganda deployed by GD and its proxies marked the beginning of what could be termed government by conspiracy theory. The party, including Ivanishvili himself, now routinely promote the notion that shadowy Western forces in the form of a 'Global War Party' (also known as a 'deep state'), are pressuring Georgia to open a second front in the war in Ukraine which, it is implied, would include an effort to retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Russia.²¹ According to this narrative, the party's refusal to allow Georgia to be drawn into this conflict explains the West's criticism of the country, and why negotiations to join the EU were halted. This conspiracy has featured prominently in government communications since 2022.²²

The momentary optimism that accompanied the day of national celebration in December 2023, when Georgia was granted candidate status by the EU, has given way to a sense of horror and foreboding as the Georgian authorities

Efforts to suffocate Georgian civil society and undermine the opposition with conspiracy theories intertwined to mould the outcome of recent elections.

have moved to ban opposition parties and consider expelling EU ambassadors.²³ That year, GD mirrored Putin's playbook outright, introducing a Russia-style law that requires organisations receiving foreign funds to submit to restrictive oversight and declare themselves to be 'foreign agents' – a phrase that essentially means 'spies' in colloquial Georgian.²⁴ Mass protests forced then-PM Gharibashvili to withdraw the bill but, again, it was revived and forced through by his successor Kobakhidze months before the parliamentary elections. This bill aimed to dismantle Georgia's civil society and media, which have depended largely on international support and have served as a bulwark against authoritarianism since the 1990s.²⁵

Efforts to suffocate Georgian civil society and undermine the opposition with conspiracy theories intertwined to mould the outcome of recent elections. Campaigns for both the 2024 parliamentary elections and 2025 local elections

featured banners contrasting the destruction in Ukraine with the recently beautified townscapes in Georgia under the slogan ‘No to war: choose peace.’²⁶ The purpose of this kind of narrative, as described by Peter Pomerantsev in relation to Russia, is not to convince the public that the government is right, but to muddy the waters.²⁷ The ‘Global War Party’ conspiracy is meant to persuade Georgians to doubt the evidence that Russia launched an unprovoked war in Ukraine and, indeed, that it is not responsible for the occupation of 20 per cent of their own country. Similarly, the ‘second front’ narrative is meant to turn Georgian public opinion against the West by implying that it is punishing them for not going to war against Russia.

The 2024 elections were regarded by many voters as a process that would determine Georgia’s foreign policy trajectory, whether towards the West or towards Russia, even though a clear majority of Georgians favour EU accession.²⁸ In the event, Ivanishvili returned to politics once more and, despite campaigning on a notionally pro-EU platform, gave a campaign speech threatening to outlaw opposition parties, to ban ‘LGBT propaganda’ and to arrest those he accused of ‘handing Georgian territory to Russia’ in 2008, blaming the ‘Global War Party.’²⁹ Against a fragmented opposition, GD won the election, although observers identified a series of violations and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy concluded that the party drew on all administrative resources to assure victory, including coercive, regulatory, institutional, media and financial measures.³⁰ The European Parliament also stated that they did not reflect the will of the Georgian people and called for new elections under international supervision.³¹ Overall, the election demonstrated that GD’s long consolidation of power had reached the point of state capture.

After the election, the pace of Georgia’s pivot to Russia-style autocracy intensified. In November 2024, Kobakhidze announced that GD was pausing efforts on EU integration for four years, which prompted a public backlash and further protests. In response, the European Parliament stated that it would ‘continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgian people and assist civil society and pro-democratic movements to steer the country back towards a democratic and European path.’³² However, in 2025 the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs closed its Information Centre on EU and NATO and dismissed dozens of diplomats for signing an open letter criticising the decision to pause integration.³³

In 2025, the Georgian state pursued its anti-Western course still further. Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Khvtisiashvili signed a book of condolences at the Iranian embassy dedicated to ‘the memory of martyrs who died during the Israeli regime’s armed attack against Iran’s territorial integrity.’³⁴ This followed Kobakhidze’s attendance at the funeral of Iranian President Hasan Rouhani in 2024, where he was seen with then-Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah’s then-deputy, Naim Qassem.³⁵ Georgia’s speaker of parliament increased tensions with several European countries by accusing Ukraine of ‘a stab in the back’ for its role in co-authoring an OSCE resolution critical of Tbilisi’s democratic backsliding; the Swedish government of attempting to foment a revolution in Georgia; and the British Embassy of wanting to subvert the country’s local elections.³⁶ In October, Germany recalled its ambassador, Peter Fischer, in what it described as a ‘very clear diplomatic signal’ and urged the Georgian authorities ‘to avoid personal attacks’ on him.³⁷ Fischer returned to his post following consultations between Tbilisi and Berlin,

but diplomatic relations between Tbilisi and Western capitals remain strained.³⁸

GD's latest attempts to consolidate power, suppress civil society and censor opponents have also culminated in the arrest of pro-Western opposition leaders, journalists and civil rights activists.³⁹ Notably, Georgian journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, who was awarded the Sakharov Prize, the EU's top human rights honour, has been imprisoned.⁴⁰ On a visit to Georgia in November 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) stated that the 'foreign agent' law, the Law on Grants and the current Administrative Offences Code of Georgia are 'incompatible with European standards and norms' and should be repealed. It further warned that the continued prosecution of opposition politicians 'would effectively establish dictatorship in Georgia.'⁴¹

Overall, GD has overseen a shift to autocracy that has intensified despite consistent and determined public opposition. The ambition of the Rose Revolution has faded and the democratic institutions and civil society organisations that were established in the early 2000s have been weakened. The party takes its inspiration from Russia and is determined to ingratiate itself with Europe's adversaries. Western efforts to encourage GD to change course have so far fallen short.

Reversing Georgia's authoritarian trajectory

Georgia's future is not set in stone. Despite the rise of autocracy and the spectre of Russian influence, opposition and independent media continued their efforts in advance of the 2024 parliamentary elections and succeeded in

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exposing corruption and wrongdoing by GD officials.⁴² Public opinion has also remained resolutely pro-Western. Furthermore, historical experience, recent protests and polling show the Georgian people's enduring commitment to democratic renewal and a European path.⁴³

However, Russia's influence in the country is increasingly difficult to untangle and greater European action is urgently required. Most obviously, the Georgian experience shows that Russia is actively seeking to undermine the Western aspirations of European peoples beyond Ukraine. Georgia is therefore a crucial front in Europe's civilisational confrontation with Russia and, despite the scale of resources given by allies to Ukraine, the needs of Georgians should not be forgotten. Continued support from across the European alliance – implying significant resources commensurate with the need to weaken GD's authoritarianism and Russian influence over the long term – should be offered to the Georgian people.

Options for the UK and EU member states

Impose targeted financial sanctions and visa bans

Practically speaking, the UK and the EU's member states – especially those with significant commercial ties to Georgia – could impose sanctions that significantly increase costs for those who undermine Georgia's European alignment. Targeted sanctions could be imposed on kleptocrats, the owners of media organisations spreading disinformation, GD parliamentarians who voted for the 'foreign agent' law, judges, and police officials who abuse their authority. The EU and UK could in addition, impose visa bans on European travel for GD officials and their families.

Europe could also introduce legislation comparable to the United States' MEGOBARI Act (Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence), which seeks to 'counter the influence of the Chinese Communist Party, the Iranian Regime, and the Russian Federation in the nation of Georgia' and calls for sanctions against government officials supporting 'Russian-style foreign agent legislation or undermining or suppressing lawful popular or civil society opposition.'⁴⁴ It also includes provisions to improve bilateral cooperation and visa policy for Georgians if democratic backsliding is reversed.⁴⁵

Redouble support for Georgian civil society and independent media organisations

Although the EU's current regional focus is on accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine, support for Georgian civil society organisations could still be extended given the withdrawal of USAID from the country.⁴⁶ This would include developing the means that enable them to

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operate under more difficult and hostile conditions. In addition, donors could bolster programmes such as the Human Rights and Democracy Thematic Programme, the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) and the rapid response pillar of the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument.⁴⁷

Resources could also be allocated to sustain independent reporting. Independent online media still operating in Georgia could be financed through dedicated trust funds or via the European Endowment for Democracy, and contingency plans for journalist relocation and remote work can be developed in the event of violent crackdowns.⁴⁸ Additionally, as the proliferation of government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) continues, mapping and awareness efforts will be needed to ensure that independent non-profit organisations are not crowded out of donor funding.⁴⁹

Countering foreign information manipulation and interference

Robust counter-disinformation campaigns and foreign interference and manipulation (FIMI) activities that adapt to Russian misinformation tactics should be deployed to build resilience within Georgia's information ecosystem.⁵⁰ This would involve deepening understanding of the disinformation challenges in the country and promoting the visibility of the EU's flagship counter-FIMI programme, EUvsDisinfo.⁵¹ It would also include fostering broader collaborative networks among media professionals, civil society organisations, local government and public authority officials; enhancing the capacity of stakeholder groups to identify and counter disinformation and promote fact-based dialogue; and engaging the public in awareness campaigns (e.g. public forums, campaigns and social media engagement).

Despite the challenges, European allies should remain alert to opportunities to support Georgia's democratic efforts, whether through international election observation missions or initiatives that encourage diversity and

pluralism.⁵² Independent mapping and awareness efforts will be required to ensure that GONGOs cannot pass fraudulent elections off as legitimate.

Conclusion

Despite the cacophony of conspiracies and disinformation promoted by GD leaders and government-aligned media, pro-Western sentiment among most Georgians has remained remarkably steadfast. However, their resilience in the face of repression perpetrated by a party inspired by Russia-style autocracy is being tested, and the task of supporting them is as challenging today as it has been for the past 30 years. If the real Georgian dream – that of a democracy integrated with the West – is to survive, increased political will and practical ambition will be required from Europe. Checking Russian influence and creeping authoritarianism is the strategic objective of our time, and Georgia is on the frontline of that confrontation.

Robust counter-disinformation campaigns and foreign interference and manipulation activities that adapt to Russian misinformation tactics should be deployed to build resilience within Georgia's information ecosystem.

Notes

- ¹ Kennedy and Dunbar (2025).
- ² Caucasus Research Resource Centres (2024); Rainsford and Kirby (2025).
- ³ Demytrie (2025).
- ⁴ NATO (2013).
- ⁵ BBC (2013).
- ⁶ Atasuntsev (2024).
- ⁷ Kakachia (2015).
- ⁸ Hess and Otarashvili (2020); Rukhadze (2015).
- ⁹ Hess and Otarashvili (2020); Rukhadze (2015).
- ¹⁰ Reuters (2016); Grass Reformanda (2021); Civil Georgia (2021).
- ¹¹ Lomsadze (2019).
- ¹² Georgia Today (2022).
- ¹³ Accent News (2019).
- ¹⁴ Menabde (2024).
- ¹⁵ Hutchings (2021); Sautin (2018).
- ¹⁶ Civic Idea (2025).
- ¹⁷ Chatterjee (2023).
- ¹⁸ OC Media (2019a).
- ¹⁹ BBC (2019); OC Media (2019b).
- ²⁰ Civil Georgia (2022b); Civil Georgia (2025a); Civil Georgia (2025b).
- ²¹ Civil Georgia (2022a); Civil Georgia (2025c); Civil Georgia (2025d); Gavin (2024); Civil Georgia (2024a).
- ²² Kadagishvili (2025).
- ²³ Bellamy (2023).
- ²⁴ Kirby (2023).
- ²⁵ Deutsche Welle (2024).
- ²⁶ Civil Georgia (2024b).
- ²⁷ Tolson (2015).
- ²⁸ Seskuria (2024); Civil Georgia (2024c); van der Made (2024); Com monspace EU (2025).
- ²⁹ Gavin (2024).
- ³⁰ OSCE (2024); Gutbrod (2024); International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (2024).
- ³¹ European Parliament (2024a).
- ³² European Parliament (2024c).
- ³³ US Embassy Tbilisi (2024); Light (2025); Civil Georgia (2024c); Georgia Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024).
- ³⁴ OC Media (2025a).
- ³⁵ OC Media (2024).
- ³⁶ Interpressnews (2025a); Interpressnews (2025b), Interpressnews (2025c).
- ³⁷ Jozwiak (2025); European Parliament (2024a); Georgia Today (2025a).
- ³⁸ Georgia Today (2025b).
- ³⁹ Formula (2025b).
- ⁴⁰ Cook (2025).
- ⁴¹ Civil Georgia (2025e).
- ⁴² Transparency International (2022); Yusif and Mikhelidze (2024).
- ⁴³ Civil Georgia (2023b); Civil Georgia (2025f).
- ⁴⁴ U.S. Congress (2025).
- ⁴⁵ Passage of the MEGOBARI Act was blocked in 2025 by GOP Senators Rand Paul and Markwayne Mullin (OC Media 2025b) (Kelly 2025).
- ⁴⁶ Thornton (2025).
- ⁴⁷ European Commission (2025).
- ⁴⁸ European Endowment for Democracy (2025); Devdariani (2025).
- ⁴⁹ Eurasianet (2025).
- ⁵⁰ EU Neighbours East (2025).
- ⁵¹ EUvsDisinfo (2025).
- ⁵² Max Planck Foundation (2025).

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About this paper

Over the last two years, the Georgia Dream party has turned decisively away from the West, embracing illiberalism, despite the pro-European aspirations of the majority of Georgia's people. In this perspective, we trace the origins and trajectory of this turn and offer options for increased Western support, which will be crucial if the country is to avoid a future of Russia-style autocracy.

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