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The West and Georgia's Crisis

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Executive Summary

Until recently, Georgia was often held up in the West as an example of a relatively healthy post-Soviet democracy. For example, the Atlantic Council report “2024 Atlas: Freedom and Prosperity Around the World” rated Georgia in the top quarter of all nations for the health of its democratic institutions, ahead of countries like Poland and Ukraine. Yet, in advance of this month’s Georgian parliamentary election, claims are being made that the ruling Georgian Dream party is falling under the control of Moscow, and that Georgia is on the edge of sliding into autocracy. Both the U.S. and the E.U. have begun to put sanctions in place against Georgia. What happened?

In this research brief, we give a background analysis of the current challenges to Georgian democracy. We explore the history of Georgia’s democracy over the past several decades, conditions leading into the upcoming election, recent controversies such as the “foreign influence” law put forward by the ruling party, and the Georgian government’s reluctance to take a stronger line against Russia over the Ukraine war.

We argue that a fuller examination supports a more balanced view of Georgia’s situation, one that avoids an extreme black-and-white perspective on Georgian politics and the current election. Claims that the ruling party has fully embraced a Putin-like authoritarianism, or that it has even fallen under Russia’s direct control, seem highly exaggerated given Georgia’s recent history of real — if imperfect — democracy, and evidence of the government’s desire to cooperate with the West and join the E.U.

Unfortunately, it remains true that heated rhetoric on both sides has raised the stakes of the coming elections, and increased the likelihood of a new political crisis that could destabilize Georgia and potentially risk its relationship with the West. The Georgian government has threatened to ban opposition parties after the election, while the

opposition has implied that if they do not accept the results of the elections, they will attempt to overturn them through street demonstrations.

Western governments should seek to avoid playing into this spiral of mutual radicalization between opposing political sides in Georgia and stress the importance of the Georgian people deciding their own future through democratic means. Western analysts should also appreciate the objective imperatives created for Georgian policymakers by Georgia's geographical position bordering on Russia and its economic ties to Russia.

The U.S. and the E.U. can best honor Georgians' right to self-determination by supporting election monitoring by objective international observers, and by committing to respect the election's outcome. Georgian democracy would be hurt, not helped, if the West supports efforts to overturn an election result due to dissatisfaction with its outcome.

Introduction

In the recent Atlantic Council report "2024 Atlas: Freedom and Prosperity Around the World," Georgia was rated as "free" and ranked in the top quarter of all nations, ahead of countries like Poland and Ukraine, for the health and freedom of its democratic institutions.¹ Until very recently, this positive assessment of Georgian democracy was hardly unusual. The foreword to a 2020 volume, *Georgia: From Autocracy to Democracy*, edited by Stephen Jones and Neil MacFarlane, two respected experts on Georgia, stated that "Georgia, despite the immense challenges it faced, has become the strongest and most stable democracy in the former USSR (leaving aside the Baltic republics)."²

¹ Dan Negrea, Joseph Lemoine, and Ignacio Campomanes, eds., "2024 Atlas: Freedom and Prosperity Around the World," Atlantic Council, February 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2024-Atlas-Freedom-and-prosperity-around-the-world.pdf>.

² Stephen F. Jones and Neil MacFarlane, *Georgia: From Autocracy to Democracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 6.

Yet, as we write this a few weeks before the highly anticipated Georgian parliamentary elections on Oct. 26, there are widespread claims that Georgia is in imminent danger of a collapse into autocracy. Critics claim that the ruling Georgian Dream party is steering a course to make Georgia a pawn of Moscow and institute a Putin-style dictatorship through measures like a new requirement for non-governmental organizations, NGOs, to register as entities “pursuing the interests of a foreign power” if they receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad.³ Testifying recently before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Eka Gigauri, the head of Transparency International Georgia and a former senior security official in a previous Georgian government led by Mikheil Saakashvili, stated that:

The authorities continue to push the red line as they proceed to enforce the repressive legislation to establish a Russian-style system of governance. For every citizen of Georgia, the upcoming elections on Oct. 26 are essentially a referendum on a clear choice between a democratic, prosperous European future and the misery of being a Russian satellite.⁴

In this brief, we seek to provide a deeper contextual background to the current strains in Georgian politics.

- In Section 1 of this paper, we describe Georgia’s difficult post-Soviet history of civil strife, war, and setbacks in the country’s development of democracy and the rule of law. Despite this history, Georgia has managed to achieve a real, if imperfect, democracy. The West should not take actions that risk encouraging a return to political instability.

³ 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>.

⁴ *Anti-NGO Laws and Other Tools of Democratic Repression, Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 118th Cong. 2 (2024) (statement of Eka Gigauri, Executive Director, Transparency International Georgia).

- In Section 2 of this paper, we describe the situation around the upcoming Oct. 26 election, which has raised the disturbing risk of a collapse in democratic norms.
- In Section 3, we discuss one major issue that has caused controversy leading into the election, namely the “foreign influence” law put forward by the ruling Georgian Dream party. We explain the context of this law, which is related to the prominent political role of some foreign-funded NGOs. These organizations have deep connections to Western shapers of public opinion, elected officials, and governments, and strong incentives to present the Georgian political situation through their own lens.
- In Section 4, we analyze another major issue driving tensions between the Georgian Dream party and the West, namely the charge that the ruling party is bringing Georgia too close to Russia.

This paper argues that a fuller perspective on Georgian politics shows a democracy under considerable strain but one that can survive the election process and remain open to the West. Fundamentally, Georgian democracy will not benefit from Western support for efforts to overturn legitimate election results through extra-constitutional means. The West should stick firmly to the principle that only a majority of the Georgian electorate has the right to determine the country’s future in free and fair elections, and insist on election monitoring by qualified, objective, and nonpartisan international observers whose findings are respected.

In recent months, the Georgian government has threatened to take undemocratic measures after the elections including, most notably, a ban on leading opposition political parties, while the opposition has implied that, if they lose, they may allege fraud and attempt to overturn the election results through street demonstrations. If opposition parties are actually banned, it would clearly justify a reevaluation of Western relations with Georgia, such as halting the E.U. accession process. But we should also recognize

that movements to overthrow elected governments through street power are very likely to lead to authoritarian responses.

Section 1: Georgian politics since independence

Georgia has experienced a difficult political history since its independence from Soviet rule in 1991. In the early 1990s, Georgia experienced several episodes of civil war between opposing political factions. The country was dominated by highly criminalized nationalist militias for several years thereafter. Georgia, which had once been one of the most prosperous Soviet republics, experienced steep economic decline and mass poverty, which persists to this day. Order was ultimately restored under the leadership of former Georgian Communist Party chief (and Soviet Foreign Minister) Eduard Shevardnadze, but his rule involved high levels of corruption, cronyism, economic stagnation, and significant manipulation of election results.

Mass street protests against rigged elections — the “Rose Revolution” — led to Shevardnadze’s ouster in 2003 and to the eight-year administration of his successor, Mikheil Saakashvili. Assisted by copious Western aid, Saakashvili introduced a reform program that improved the Georgian economy and basic aspects of state performance. However, Saakashvili’s reform program — semi-authoritarian, free market liberalization — followed a playbook inspired more by Dubai and Singapore than the European Union.

This style of reform went hand in hand with large-scale violations of the rule of law including, for example, mass expropriations. The government also suppressed protests with considerable brutality while senior officials engaged in severe violence against political opponents.⁵ Plea bargaining — introduced in 2004 as a means to shake down

⁵ See a description of such incidents outlined in the European Court of Human Rights ruling *Saakashvili v. Georgia*, May 23, 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#%7B%22fulltext%22:%5B%22saakashvili%20v.%20georgia%22%5D,%22itemid%22:%5B%22002-14330%22%5D%7D>; Jane Buchanan, “Crossing the Line: Georgia’s Violent Dispersal of Protestors and Raid on Imedi Television,” Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/12/19/crossing-line/georgias-violent-dispersal-protestors-and-raid-ime-di-television>; Thomas de Waal and Anna Dolidze, “A Truth Commission for Georgia,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 5, 2012,

corruption suspects and generate revenue for the budget — served as an all-purpose incarceration machine, tripling the number of prison inmates until Georgia's prison population became one of the highest worldwide.⁶ One Western observer commented at the time:

Penal excess and the abuse of the wider criminal justice system have, since the Rose Revolution of late 2003, been central to understanding Georgian politics and society. It can be said that the model of governance, and even economy, adopted in the post-revolutionary period by the administration of Mikheil Saakashvili depends on this system.⁷

In 2008, Georgia was offered the prospect of eventual NATO membership, though at an indeterminate date and with no immediate Membership Action Plan.⁸ However, Saakashvili's attempt to recover the separatist territory of South Ossetia by force in Aug. 2008 led to a disastrous defeat at the hands of Russia. The territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — de facto outside the control of Tbilisi since before or shortly after Georgia's independence — have remained so to this day.

In his last years in power, Saakashvili's United National Movement, UNM, government became increasingly authoritarian and more willing to use force against protesters.⁹ However, in 2012 the Georgian Dream party, GD, replaced the UNM government in a peaceful transition of power following an electoral defeat. A number of UNM officials

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/12/a-truth-commission-for-georgia?lang=en¢er=europe>.

⁶ "Plea Bargaining in Georgia," Transparency International Georgia, February 2010, <https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/TI%20Georgia%20-%20Plea%20Bargaining%20in%20Georgia%20ENG.pdf/>.

⁷ Gavin Slade, "Georgia: Politics of Punishment," openDemocracy, September 30, 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/georgia-politics-of-punishment/>.

⁸ "Bucharest Summit Declaration," NATO, April 3, 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

⁹ "Georgia Must Investigate 'Excessive Use of Force' Against Protestors," Amnesty International, May 26, 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pre01/271/2011/en/>; "Amnesty International Annual Report 2011: Georgia," RefWorld, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/amnesty/2011/en/79381>; "Human Rights Watch World Report 2010 — Georgia," Human Rights Watch, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/georgia>.

then moved into prominent NGOs. Sergi Kapanadze, for example, the former deputy foreign minister under Saakashvili, now heads the NGO think tank Georgia's Reforms Associates, GRASS; Nodar Kharshiladze, the former defense minister under UNM, now leads the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center; and Eka Gigauri, a former senior official in the customs and border police under UNM, leads Transparency International Georgia.¹⁰

Saakashvili eventually moved to Ukraine and was appointed by then-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko as governor of Odessa (2015–16). Saakashvili was later sacked and expelled from Ukraine, and in October 2021 secretly returned to Georgia. He was arrested so he could serve the sentence he received in an earlier trial for abuse of office, and to this day remains under a form of house arrest. The GD government has come under considerable Western pressure to release him on human rights grounds.¹¹ However, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that no violation of any procedural or other human rights alleged in Saakashvili's application occurred, confirming that the trial was fair.¹² Separately, it ruled that there were no human rights or health grounds to release Saakashvili.¹³

Since coming to power in 2012, all GD governments have been dominated, either openly or behind the scenes, by GD's founder, leader, and financier, Bidzina Ivanishvili (prime minister, 2012-13). Ivanishvili is a businessman and Georgia's richest man, having made

¹⁰ "Founders," Georgia's Reforms Associates, <https://grass.org.ge/en/grass-is-gundi/damphudzneblebi#>; "Nodar Kharshiladze," Georgian Strategic Analysis Center, <https://gsac.ge/en/our-people/nodar-kharshiladze/>; "Eka Gigauri," Transparency International Georgia, <https://transparency.ge/en/content/stub-317>.

¹¹ "Parliament Urges Georgia to Pardon and Release ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili," European Parliament, February 15, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230210IPR74803/parliament-urges-georgia-to-pardon-and-release-ex-president-mikheil-saakashvili>.

¹² "Criminal Conviction of Former President of Georgia. No Violation of Fair Trial," ECHR Case Law, May 24, 2024, <https://www.echrcaselaw.com/en/echr-decisions/criminal-conviction-of-former-president-of-georgia-no-violation-of-fair-trial/>.

"Case of Saakashvili v. Georgia," European Court of Human Rights, August 23, 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-233761%22%5D%7D>.

¹³ "ECHR Has Rejected Saakashvili's Request for Transfer to Poland for Treatment – Georgian Justice Minister," Agenda.GE, May 12, 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/1874#gsc.tab=0>.

a fortune in Russia in the 1990s before transferring it to the West and Georgia.¹⁴ In 2012, Ivanishvili's personal wealth was more than the entire Georgian state budget for that year, giving him immense influence.¹⁵ Ivanishvili initially backed the Rose Revolution, and for several years afterward played a prominent role in financially supporting reforms and repairs to dilapidated public infrastructure by the Saakashvili government.¹⁶ However, he broke with Saakashvili several years into his rule. Ivanishvili has been a controversial figure, but Georgian Dream has been able to retain its parliamentary majorities through elections in 2016 and 2020.

The parliamentary elections of 2020 led to a significant political crisis with considerable implications for future developments in Georgian politics. The election was marred by allegations of voter intimidation and controversy over election rules. However, a key international monitoring mission by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, certified that GD had comfortably won the largest share of votes, stating that the elections:

Were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected. Nevertheless, pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process. The elections were conducted under a substantially revised legal framework that provided a sound basis for holding democratic elections, but further efforts to address shortcomings are needed.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Profile: Bidzina Ivanishvili," *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/>.

¹⁵ Julia Ioffe, "He Owns the Place," *Forbes*, July 16, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/global/2012/0326/billionaires-12-europe-georgia-bidzina-ivanishvili-he-owns-the-place.html>.

¹⁶ Wendell Steavenson, "The Prisoner and the Oligarch: The Struggle for Georgia's Future," *The Economist*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2024/02/05/the-prisoner-and-the-oligarch-the-struggle-for-georgias-future>.

¹⁷ "ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report," OSCE Office for Democracy and Human Rights, March 5, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/461776>; "Fundamental Freedoms Respected in Competitive Georgian Elections, but Allegations of Pressure and Blurring of Line Between Party and State Reduced Confidence, International Observers Say," OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, November 1, 2020, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2020/fundamental-freedoms-respected-i>

Nonetheless, the opposition refused to accept the election's results, refused to enter Parliament, and launched mass protests. The E.U. eventually dispatched its council president, Charles Michel, to mediate between the opposition and GD.¹⁸ The resulting deal included provisions for judicial reform; changes to electoral representation rules; an amnesty for opposition members charged with fomenting violence in street protests; a guaranteed opposition share of the leadership of parliamentary committees; and a provision for automatic and new parliamentary elections if the ruling party received less than 43 percent of the vote in upcoming municipal elections.¹⁹ While pragmatic, this agreement could be seen as more of an externally administered solution than a fully democratic one. Although the deal succeeded in ending the immediate crisis, it did not last. UNM deputies refused to sign the deal and boycotted Parliament. In response, GD declared the deal failed and withdrew from it.²⁰

During this extended 2020–21 political crisis, some Western-funded NGOs played a leading role in supporting the opposition's protests against the election results and in lobbying the West for support to overturn them. Thus, in April 2021 a group of Western-funded NGOs — including Transparency International Georgia, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the Open Society Georgia Foundation, and Liberal Academy Tbilisi — wrote to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee asking for U.S. support to force the Georgian Dream government to share power with the opposition and implement reforms.²¹

n-competitive-georgian-elections-but-allegations-of-pressure-and-blurring-of-line-between-party-and-state-reduced-confidence-international-observers-say.

¹⁸ Vlad Makszimov, "Michel Seeks to Mediate Georgian Political Crisis," Euractiv, March 1, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/michel-seeks-to-mediate-georgian-political-crisis/>.

¹⁹ "A Way Ahead for Georgia," European External Action Service, April 16, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/210418_mediation_way_ahead_for_publication_0.pdf.

²⁰ "Ruling Georgian Dream Leaves E.U.-Mediated Agreement," Agenda.GE, July 28, 2021, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2131#gsc.tab=0>.

²¹ "Non-Governmental Organizations Address Senators With a Letter, Calling for Greater U.S. Involvement in Resolution of Crisis in Georgia," Civil Society Foundation, April 13, 2021, <https://csf.ge/en/nongovernmental-organizations-address-senators-with-a-letter-calling-for-greater-us-involvement-in-resolution-of-crisis-in-georgia/>.

In June 2022, after the invasion of Ukraine, the E.U. accepted Ukraine and Moldova as candidates for membership but did not extend this to Georgia. The E.U. Commission said that it required further reform in the areas of governance, justice, tackling organized crime, respecting human rights and minorities, and the rule of law.²²

But by the E.U.'s own assessment of technical progress, Georgia was well ahead of Moldova and Ukraine in its progress toward membership requirements at that time.²³

The E.U. was not alone in its assessment of Georgia's progress toward democracy. In its 2024 "freedom score" rankings, the Atlantic Council ranked Georgia as "free," with a score ahead not just of other applicants to join the E.U., such as Ukraine, but of two existing members of the E.U. — Poland and Hungary.²⁴ Other U.S. NGOs have given similar assessments. For example, the 2023 Transparency International "Corruption Perceptions Index" ranked Georgia 49th in the world, ahead of E.U. members Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria.²⁵ Similarly, the 2023 World Justice Project "Rule of Law Index" ranked Georgia 48th, ahead of E.U. members Bulgaria and Hungary, and ahead of E.U. applicants Ukraine and Moldova.²⁶

Despite a difficult post-Soviet history, therefore, Georgia has managed to emerge in recent decades with something close to an intact democracy. Despite Saakashvili's authoritarian tendencies, the UNM government did step down in 2012 in response to a fair election. It also appears that the Georgian Dream government won legitimate elections in 2016 and 2020. Still, there is the risk that the upcoming 2024 elections could be even more destabilizing than past Georgian elections and could pose a significant threat to Georgia's tentative grip on its democracy. Tensions between the

²² "Opinion on the E.U. Membership Application by Georgia," European Commission, June 17, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/OANDA_22_3800.

²³ For the E.U.'s assessment of these countries' progress toward the *acquis*, see "European Commission Publishes Analytical Reports on Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia's Alignment With the E.U. *Acquis*," European Commission, February 2, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_123.

²⁴ Negrea, Lemoine, and Campomanes, "2024 Atlas."

²⁵ "Corruption Perceptions Index," Transparency International, 2023, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>.

²⁶ "Rule of Law Index," World Justice Project, 2023, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2023>.

governing party and the opposition and significantly increased U.S.–Russia hostility has strained Georgian politics. In the following sections we discuss the 2024 elections and the two major contributors to controversy surrounding them: the “foreign influence” law and the charges that the Georgian Dream party has grown too close to Moscow.

Section 2: The 2024 elections

Some 27 parties have officially registered for the Oct. 26 parliamentary elections, where the newly instituted fully proportional electoral system will require a 5 percent vote threshold for a party to take their seats in Parliament.²⁷ The political opposition will be dominated by four pro-Western coalitions alongside numerous individual parties. There is the UNM-led “Unity to Save Georgia” coalition, as well as the “Strong Georgia” and “Coalition for Change” blocs, the latter of which is led by several former UNM officials. The “For Georgia” coalition led by Giorgi Gakharia, a former GD prime minister from 2019–21, polls at roughly the same level as “Strong Georgia” and “Coalition for Change.”

If the opposition parties united, they could defeat GD, whose support has declined in recent years (although, according to opinion polls, GD is still the strongest individual party and retains some 40 to 50 percent support).²⁸ The opposition is, however, deeply divided along lines of personality, policy, and attitudes toward Mikheil Saakashvili and the UNM’s authoritarian record in government before 2012. After Saakashvili was

²⁷ “Registration of Political Parties for October 26 Parliamentary Elections Is Concluded,” CESKO, August 31, 2024, <https://cesko.ge/en/siakhleebi/pres-relizebi/singleview/11033820-ts eskoshi-26-oktombris-parlamentis-ar-chevnebis-tvis-partiebis-registratsia-dasrulda>.

²⁸ According to a recent Stratfor analysis, “Polling ahead of the Oct. 26 election has shown a wide array of possible results, but polling averages have steadily projected GD to receive between 40 to 50 percent of the vote.” See, “What’s at Stake in Georgia’s Oct. 26 Election,” Stratfor, October 4, 2024, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/whats-stake-georgias-oct-26-election>; “Edison Research: If the Parliamentary Elections Were Held Tomorrow, 34% of the Respondents Would Vote for ‘Georgian Dream’, 19.2% – ‘Unity: National Democratic Party, Strategy of Building, European Georgia’, 10.6% - ‘For Georgia - Giorgi Gakharia,’” InterPressNews, September 13, 2024, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/133349-edison-research-if-the-parliamentary-elections-were-held-tomorrow-34-of-the-respondents-would-vote-for-georgian-dream-192-unity-national-democratic-party-strategy-of-building-european-georgia-106-for-georgia-giorgi-gakharia/>; “New Election Poll Puts Ruling Georgian Dream Party at 59.3%,” Agenda.GE, August 15, 2024, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2024/40196#gsc.tab=0>.

arrested on his return to Georgia in 2021 and convicted of abuse of power, President Salome Zourabishvili declared that she would never pardon him.²⁹ Saakashvili's release is one issue that divides the opposition parties in particular. While the UNM demands Saakashvili's release, other opposition parties oppose it. This is one reason President Zourabishvili's attempts to create a united opposition front have met severe obstacles. According to a report for the German Marshall Fund of the U.S., "The former ruling UNM is widely viewed as a poison pill, with other parties refusing to unite with them. UNM is the largest opposition party and has a loyal base but is toxic to many voters due to past grievances from the party's time in power."³⁰

Despite the above differences, Georgia's opposition blocs and parties are agreed in accusing the Georgian Dream government of three cardinal sins:

- Policies and statements that are derailing the country's pathway toward the E.U.
- Enhancing the autocratic nature of the state at the expense of society and the political opposition.
- Seeking to appease Russia in various ways and drawing Georgia too close to Moscow.

The political opposition has also agreed on framing this election as a basic referendum on Georgia's future.³¹ Tinatin (Tina) Bokuchava, the chair of the UNM, has summed it up as a choice "between a free, prosperous European future, or a Putin-style authoritarian government that plans to eradicate the opposition ... and push away the West."³² Some

²⁹ "Georgian President Says Saakashvili Is Special Prisoner but Won't Be Pardoned," Reuters, November 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-president-says-saakashvili-is-special-prisoner-wont-be-pardoned-2021-11-03/>.

³⁰ Laura Thornton and Tamara Sartania, "Georgia's 2024 Parliamentary Election: Pre-Election Risk Assessment," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 31, 2024, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Georgia%20Election%20Analysis.pdf>.

³¹ Gabriel Gavin, "Georgia on Path to Putinism, Opposition Leader Says as Ruling Party Threatens Total Ban," *Politico EU*, August 21, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-opposition-united-national-movement-tina-bokuchava-putinism-european-union-georgian-dream-party-elections/>.

³² Gavin, "Georgia on Path to Putinism."

have even implied that election results must be overturned through extra-constitutional means if necessary. Zurab Japaridze, an opposition politician, recently stated: “This government must be replaced. ... The streets and protests is the only way. I don’t know how much readiness there is now, but in any case we are already consulting with other parties and the civil sector.”³³

This sort of black-and-white framing has had success in certain sections of Georgian society, and even greater success among U.S. and E.U. policymakers and journalists. But its appeal in the Georgian population as a whole is more questionable.³⁴ As one Georgia-based Western researcher and Georgian Dream critic recently wrote, “this approach risks overlooking the deeper concerns of many Georgians and playing into the ruling Georgian Dream party’s divisive rhetoric.”³⁵ As Irakli Kupradze, secretary-general of Strong Georgia, has said on this point: “A part of the opposition has swallowed this bait and reduced the election only to its geopolitical significance, which we believe is wrong.”³⁶ Georgia has made notable economic gains under the Georgian Dream government but it still remains a poor country.³⁷ For this reason, many ordinary Georgians are likely to view the elections in terms of domestic economic issues. According to a 2023 survey commissioned by the U.S. National Democratic Institute:

Poverty and economic problems are identified as main contributors to a sense of insecurity – a finding that transcends party lines. Although a plurality acknowledges improvement in healthcare, freedom of speech, and women’s rights and education, every second Georgian says the situation regarding poverty

³³ “Domestic Reactions to Reintroduction of Draft Law on Foreign Agents,” Civil Georgia, April 3, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/589755>.

³⁴ Joshua Kucera, “Georgian Rural Voters Care More About Grape Prices Than Geopolitics,” RFE/RL, October 2, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-wine-rural-voters-october-elections-/33140698.html>.

³⁵ Hans Gutbrod, “In a Pivotal Election, Georgia’s Opposition Must Look Past Russia vs. E.U.,” openDemocracy, July 16, 2024, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/georgia-elections-opposition-russia-eu/>.

³⁶ Dato Parulava, “The Men With Their Mouths Sewn Shut Magnify Georgia’s ‘Existential’ Election,” *Politico EU*, September 9, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/shukruti-chiatura-georgia-tbilisi-parliamentary-election-russia-europe/>.

³⁷ “Georgia Overview: Development News, Research, Data,” World Bank, April 9, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview>.

and crime has worsened. One in ten Georgians can't afford food, while one in four can only afford food, but nothing else. This number is even more distressing in ethnic minority regions, where a quarter of residents reportedly struggle to provide food for their families.³⁸

In addition, the GD government has previously supported — and in its statements still does support — Georgia's moving closer to the West via E.U. membership. The GD government has actively promoted its March 2022 application to join the E.U. by carrying out several of the reforms that the E.U. has asked for. In December 2023, Georgia achieved candidate status on the condition that reforms continue.³⁹ Even in the face of increasing tension with the West, Ivanishvili has continued to support E.U. accession for Georgia.⁴⁰

Despite these glimpses of potential common ground, the stark geopolitical terms in which the election is being cast — the West vs. Russia — has raised the election's stakes and increased the likelihood that the election may lead to a new political crisis with mass protests aimed at overthrowing the government. Therefore, it is vital that the West back and respect genuinely scrupulous, impartial, and objective international monitoring of the elections.

Section 3: The NGO law and the present crisis

In 2023, the ruling GD party submitted a law to Parliament — On Registration of Foreign Agents — stipulating that any NGO that received more than 20 percent of its funding from abroad would have to register this fact publicly, and would be subject to

³⁸ "Taking Georgians' Pulse: Findings from October–November 2023 Face-to-Face Survey," National Democratic Institute, December 2023,

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_GGF%20poll_October_2023_Eng_VF.pdf.

³⁹ "European Council Conclusions, 14 and 15 December 2023," European Council, December 15, 2023,

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/15/european-council-conclusions-14-and-15-december-2023/>.

⁴⁰ In a recent speech which otherwise contained significant anti-Western sentiments, Ivanishvili still concluded by stating: "I promise that having overcome these difficulties, with sovereignty and dignity intact, in 2030, Georgia will join the EU." See, "Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repression," Civil Georgia, April 29, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/602348>.

monitoring by the Justice Ministry. A slightly modified version was passed by Parliament in the spring of 2024.⁴¹ It does not place direct limits on NGO activity, but led to legitimate fears in both Georgia and the West that the government would harass foreign-funded civil society organizations.

The government claimed that this law corresponded to Western laws like the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, which requires registration and transparency of NGOs that act as agents for foreign governments. The opposition, however, claimed that the law imitates Russia's "foreign agent" law and is intended to take Georgia toward authoritarian rule under Russian domination.⁴² The Georgian law does not function like Russia's contemporary foreign agent regime, which is extremely repressive, expands far beyond NGOs to target any individual or entity designated by the government, does not require any foreign funding to be triggered, and subjects targeted entities to extremely onerous restrictions on their civil rights.⁴³ Tying the Georgian law exclusively to Russia also seems politically motivated given that dozens of countries, from Ireland to Israel to India, have passed laws requiring transparency of foreign funding for their NGO sector since the 1990s. Even the E.U. is currently preparing similar legislation.⁴⁴

Despite the lack of substantive similarity to Russia's current foreign agent regime, the moniker "Russian law" proved highly effective in mobilizing Georgians, who fear Russian

⁴¹ In the 2024 version, the term "agents of foreign influence" was substituted with "organizations pursuing the interest of a foreign power." See, "Georgia — Draft Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence," Venice Commission, May 13, 2024, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF\(2024\)021-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF(2024)021-e).

⁴² Russia's original law, Introducing Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation in Part Regulating Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations, which Carry Out Functions of Foreign Agents, was passed in 2012 and has been amended several times since.

⁴³ "Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents,'" Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents>.

⁴⁴ "Laws Designed to Silence: The Global Crackdown on Civil Society Organizations," Amnesty International, February 21, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/9647/2019/en/>; Kendra Dupuy and Aseem Prakash, "Why Restrictive NGO Foreign Funding Laws Reduce Voter Turnout in Africa's National Elections," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 51, no.1 (January 2020): 170–189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019897848>; "Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing Harmonised Requirements in the Internal Market on Transparency of Interest Representation Carried Out on Behalf of Third Countries and Amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937," European Commission, December 12, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52023PC0637>.

influence but would hardly protest solely in support of NGOs, which do not command the public's trust. The West, including governments, the media, and commentators, parroted this claim.⁴⁵ The opposition launched mass protest movements against the law, which triggered violent police intervention when protesters attempted to storm the Georgian Parliament.⁴⁶

To see the government's motivation for proposing the law, it is important to understand the role played by Western-funded NGOs in Georgian society. The NGO sector in Georgia is heavily Western-funded, with more than 90 percent of all funding for NGOs and civil society organizations coming from international donors or foreign aid, mostly linked to the E.U. or U.S.⁴⁷ Because of the weakness of the Georgian state and neoliberal policies instituted by successive governments, numerous roles that would normally be undertaken by state institutions have been farmed out to NGOs in civil society.

In this poor country, this has created a well-funded NGO sector that supports, directly or indirectly, a sizable proportion of the Georgian well-off professional classes. NGOs also act as a channel through which selected members of those classes can move to work or study in the West. The perspective of NGO-linked commenters has had an outsize effect on Western media and government perceptions of Georgian affairs. All too often, key E.U. and U.S. figures have relied uncritically on the nexus of Western think tanks and Georgian NGOs for much of their analysis.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ "U.S. Condemns Georgian Parliament's Passing of Foreign Influence Bill," Reuters, May 28, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-condemns-georgian-parliaments-passing-foreign-influence-bill-2024-05-28/>; "Georgia: Statement by the High Representative With the European Commission on the Final Adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," European External Action Service, May 28, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-european-commission-final-adoption-law-transparency-foreign_en; "Urgent Opinion on the Law of Georgia 'On Transparency of Foreign Influence,'" OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, May 30, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/d/569922.pdf>.

⁴⁶ "U.S. Condemns Georgian Parliament's Passing"; "Georgia: Statement by the High Representative"; "Urgent Opinion on the Law of Georgia."

⁴⁷ "Civil Society Brief: Georgia," Asian Development Bank, June 2020, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/611941/civil-society-brief-georgia_0.pdf.

⁴⁸ To take just one of many examples as an illustration, the E.U. Parliament has been influenced to list David Kezerashvili as a "persecuted journalist" being oppressed by the GD government. Kezerashvili is a

From the beginning of Georgian independence, Western governments and organizations decided to concentrate on NGOs as a key area and tool of Western influence and reform in the former USSR. But while they are tremendously significant among the educated classes and in the reporting of Western analysts, their roots in Georgian society are questionable. According to a recent Asian Development Bank report:

Another problem for civil society organizations [CSOs] is the lack of public trust, due to the mismatch between the issues CSOs work on and the issues considered important by the public. According to a 2017 public opinion survey, 23 percent of the Georgian population trusted CSOs, 10 percent fully distrusted them, and 39 percent did not express any opinion one way or the other.⁴⁹

Other longitudinal survey projects back up this low public trust in NGOs.⁵⁰ As Stephen Jones, founding director of Georgian studies at Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, has put it: "Civil society in Georgia is both strong and weak. It's very visible, and we hear it in the West — that's important. On the other hand, it doesn't have that much support in Georgian society as a whole."⁵¹

A decisive element that defines the conflict between NGOs and the ruling party is the partisan role that many NGOs have taken. As previously discussed, many opposition UNM party members have moved directly into the NGO sector, and various NGOs have

former Minister of Defense under UNM, who owns the pro-UNM TV station "Formula" and lives in a £18 million London mansion. He has shown up in the Panama Papers and is being investigated by the German, U.K., and Georgian authorities for transnational financial fraud, running "call centers" in Georgia, from which elderly Europeans are defrauded of large sums of money. See "Violations of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Georgia," P9_TA(2022)0239, adopted June 9, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0239_EN.html; Marika Dudunia and Kelly Bloss, "Former Georgian Defense Minister Caught Up in Online Scam Investigation," OCCRP, September 6, 2024, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/former-georgian-defense-minister-caught-up-in-online-scam-investigation>.

⁴⁹ "Civil Society Brief: Georgia."

⁵⁰ "Analysis | Trust in Institutions Continues its Steady Decline in Georgia," OC Media, March 16, 2020, <https://oc-media.org/features/analysis-trust-in-institutions-continues-its-steady-decline-in-georgia/>.

⁵¹ Andy Heil, "Georgia's Shame Movement Is Getting Protesters Out On the Streets. But Is It Enough to Trouble the Government?," RFE/RL, July 1, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-shame-movement-dighmelashvili-protests/31924835.html>.

been agitating for the overthrow of the government. For example, in summer 2022, Western-funded NGOs demanded that the GD-led government resign from power immediately without new elections, and that it be replaced by a new “technocratic” caretaker government to guide Georgia toward membership of the E.U.⁵² At least some of the NGOs making this demand were funded by E.U. and U.S. taxpayers, for example, via the European funding of the NGO “Shame Movement.”⁵³ According to a report for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty:

If Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and his cabinet don’t resign to make way for a caretaker government ‘of national consent’ by July 3, the Shame Movement has vowed to raise protests that have already mobilized tens of thousands of Georgians to a ‘larger stage.’ ... Shame and its NGO allies are gambling that they can leverage their limited foothold on Georgian society into a sustained push to reform and ‘de-oligarchize’ their Black Sea nation of nearly 4 million people.⁵⁴

More recently, the Georgian government has alleged that the U.S. was encouraging regime change in Georgia by funding USAID training of Georgians by Serbian activists who had played a part in toppling the government of President Slobodan Milosevic.⁵⁵

It is also true, however, that the “foreign influence” law requires registration of all civil society organizations receiving foreign funding, which spreads far beyond the most politically active NGOs. Regardless of the Georgian government’s motivation for the law, Washington has reacted strongly. In response to the passage of the law and the police response to protests against it, the U.S. announced sanctions against, and visa restrictions on, members of the Georgian government; a comprehensive review of the U.S.–Georgia relationship; postponed joint military exercises; and suspended \$95

⁵² Heil, “Georgia’s Shame Movement”; “Georgian Dream, Opposition, Activists Debate Interim Government,” Civil Georgia, June 28, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/498494>.

⁵³ “Donor Organizations,” Shame Movement, <https://shame.ge/en/funding>.

⁵⁴ Heil, “Georgia’s Shame Movement.”

⁵⁵ Tata Shoshiashvili, “Georgia’s Ruling Party Accuse USAID of Preparing Activists for Revolution,” OC Media, October 2, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/georgias-ruling-party-accuse-usaid-of-preparing-activists-for-revolution/>.

million of assistance that “directly benefits the Government of Georgia.”⁵⁶ Congress is considering legislation proposing further measures.⁵⁷ Most importantly, according to recent reports citing U.S. officials, Washington is preparing sanctions against Ivanishvili as “concerns mount over his role in deepening ties with Russia and steering the country away from its democratic path.”⁵⁸

For its part, the E.U. has suspended all high-level meetings with Georgian officials, frozen Georgia’s accession process to the bloc — as well as the distribution of some financial assistance — and is also considering further steps dependent on postelection developments.⁵⁹ While Brussels and Washington are keen to tailor their policy responses solely against the government and its allies in an effort to avoid alienating a largely pro-Western Georgian public, some E.U. countries have pushed for a suspension of the bloc’s visa-free policy with Georgia.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “Treasury Sanctions Georgian Officials and Extremists for Serious Human Rights Abuse,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 16, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2580>; “U.S. to Review Relations With Georgia, Slaps Visa Bans on Officials over ‘Foreign Agent’ Law,” RFE/RL, May 24, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tbilisi-foreign-agent-blinken-visa-protest-/32961744.html>; “Postponement of Exercise Noble Partner Announcement,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 5, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3827839/postponement-of-exercise-noble-partner-announcement/>; “U.S. Suspends \$95 Million in Aid to Georgia After Passage of Foreign Agent Law That Sparked Protests,” AP, July 31, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/us-georgia-blinken-aid-2bc63a85d39d126b023658e6787a7f15>.

⁵⁷ “Cardin, Shaheen, Risch, Colleagues Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Hold Georgian Officials Accountable for Corruption, Human Rights Abuses, and Anti-Democratic Efforts,” U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, May 24, 2024, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/cardin-shaheen-risch-colleagues-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-hold-georgian-officials-accountable-for-corruption-human-rights-abuses-and-anti-democratic-efforts>.

⁵⁸ Ani Chkhikvadze, “Exclusive: U.S. Officials Say Sanctions Against Pro-Russian Former Georgian PM are Ready to Go,” VOA, September 22, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/exclusive-us-officials-say-sanctions-against-pro-russian-former-georgian-pm-are-ready-to-go-/7794010.html>.

⁵⁹ Sophiko Megrelidze and Lorne Cook, “E.U. Halts Georgia’s Accession To the Bloc, Freezes Financial Aid over Much-Criticized Law,” AP, July 9, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-eu-membership-foreign-agents-law-b812e27d5ddba6e03d8859652b8fc986>; “EU Amb. Herczyński Ties Georgia’s Future to Elections, Slams GD’s Propaganda,” Civil Georgia, October 4, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/627226>.

⁶⁰ Laura Dubois, Daria Mosolova, and Anastasia Stognei, “E.U. Countries Push for Sanctions on Georgia Over ‘Russian Law,’” *Financial Times*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/d4475d59-df96-4005-9786-04042704d07e>.

The back and forth between partisan, Western-funded NGOs and attempts by the ruling party to delegitimize them through legal requirements for registration and monitoring has contributed to a spiral of radicalism in Georgian politics and disrupted relations with the West. President Zourabishvili, who was endorsed by the Georgian Dream in the 2018 election but has since become a leading voice against the ruling party, said that the E.U.'s decision to halt Georgia's accession was in response to the "anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric and actions" by the Georgian Dream government.⁶¹ For its part, Ivanishvili and the GD government have become much more explicitly critical of the West in their rhetoric and have threatened authoritarian measures. They talk of a "global war party" that they claim is seeking to undermine their government and push the country into another war with Russia.⁶² Ivanishvili has explicitly threatened to ban opposition parties if GD wins the elections, which would further polarize Georgian politics and, of course, threaten core democratic values.⁶³

In sum, a spiral of mutual radicalization appears to have set in. This process was set in motion by UNM's rallying of its allies in Congress and the European Parliament since losing power in 2012. The West has moved behind the line of the NGO-linked opposition, which has hindered opportunities to encourage balanced solutions to conflict between the parties.⁶⁴ This process was then given a tremendous extra boost by the Russian

⁶¹ "E.U. Halts Georgia's Accession, Freezes Financial Assistance," RFE/RL, July 9, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-halts-georgia-accession/33027858.html>; Felix Light, "E.U. May Suspend Visa-Free Travel for Georgians if Election Not Free and Fair," Reuters, September 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-may-suspend-visa-free-travel-georgians-if-election-not-free-fair-2024-09-20/>.

⁶² Lela Kunchulia, "Georgian Dream Takes On the 'Global War Party,'" RFE/RL, May 18, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/global-war-party-georgian-dream-bidzina-ivanishvili/32951749.html>.

⁶³ Giorgi Lomsadze, "Incumbents Touting Desire to Turn Georgia Into a One-Party State," EurasiaNet, August 27, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/incumbents-touting-desire-to-turn-georgia-into-a-one-party-state>.

⁶⁴ Western support for the opposition line was also encouraged by corporations that painted the Georgian government as pro-Russian and authoritarian in order to avoid paying Georgia costly compensation for botched infrastructure development and environmental damage. See Thomas Rowley and Shota Kincha, "This Oil and Gas Firm Spent \$1M on U.S. Lobbying While Its Georgian Workers Went Unpaid," openDemocracy, May 21, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/frontera-resources-lobbying-georgia/>.

invasion of Ukraine and a new Western determination to roll back Russian influence wherever this could be achieved.

Section 4: Georgia, Russia, and the West

The increasing tension between the Georgian government and the West also needs to be understood in the context of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion led to Western pressure on Georgia to take a stronger stand against Russia, including by imposing sanctions on Russia that fully matched E.U. and U.S. sanctions. The E.U. and U.S. also requested that Georgia deliver much of its Soviet-era weaponry and equipment to Ukraine, as this could be done much faster than supplying Western arms.⁶⁵

The GD government did denounce the Russian invasion and voted in the United Nations to condemn it. However, Georgia did not participate in some of the stronger measures urged by the E.U. and the United States. Georgia also did not fully join in E.U. economic sanctions, and rejected calls for arms deliveries to Ukraine. In June 2022, the European Parliament called for imposing personal sanctions on Ivanishvili for encouraging "ambiguous relations with Russia."⁶⁶

The great majority of the Western media and commentariat have since sided with the Georgian opposition in portraying the GD government as agents of Moscow.⁶⁷ The U.S.,

⁶⁵ Author interview with Petre Mamradze, political adviser and former senior official in Saakashvili- and Shevardnadze-led governments, September 2024; See also, "Ambassador Degnan's Media Comments at the Opening of the American Studies Center at IBSU," U.S. Embassy in Georgia, January 20, 2023, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/ambassador-degnans-media-comments-at-the-opening-of-the-american-studies-center-at-the-international-black-sea-university-ibsu/>.

⁶⁶ "Motion for a Resolution on Violations of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Georgia," European Parliament, June 7, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0303_EN.html.

⁶⁷ Andrew Harding, "Georgia's Future Path at Stake as Protests Divide Nation," BBC, May 19, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0jjezq41pgo>; Piotr Sauer and Shaun Walker, "Georgia's Billionaire 'Puppet Master' Betting the House on Moscow," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/16/bidzina-ivanishvili-georgias-billionaire-puppet-master-betting-the-house-on-moscow>; Christian Edwards and Niamh Kennedy, "Georgia Presses On with Putin-Style 'Foreign Agent' Bill Despite Huge Protests," CNN, April 18, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/europe/georgia-foreign-agent-law-russia-first-reading-intl/index.html>;

E.U., and most Western governments are now openly hostile to the GD government. This hostility will obviously intensify greatly if new opposition protests lead to intensified repression and real dictatorship. And given what they increasingly see as implacable Western hostility, GD may, in the end, feel that they would benefit by drawing closer to Russia, despite the inherent risks — thus turning Western fears of Georgia moving toward Moscow into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, we have not yet reached this point. A balanced assessment of GD policies toward Russia should factor in Georgia's challenging geopolitical situation, as well as efforts by Georgia to oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Before relations with the West began to deteriorate radically as a result of the Ukraine conflict, the U.S. and E.U. actually supported Georgian government efforts to establish reasonable working relations with a wide range of partners, by combining partnership with the U.S. and E.U. with improved relations with Russia. For some years this "multivector" policy worked well. Under GD governments, Georgia was able to stabilize relations with Russia (despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties as a result of the 2008 conflict), while still maintaining strong relations with the U.S. When GD took power in 2012, they sought to improve economic relations with Russia, and the share of Georgian exports to Russia rose from 2 percent to 15 percent of total exports by 2017. At the same time, a 2018 Congressional Research Service report still identified Georgia as "one of the United States' closest partners among post-Soviet states," stating that "With a history of strong economic aid and security cooperation, the United States and Georgia have deepened their strategic partnership."⁶⁸

Serge Schmemmann, "Do Not Allow Putin to Capture Another Pawn in Europe," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/opinion/georgia-foreign-agent-russia.html>; Editorial Board, "The Final Call for Georgia's Democracy," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/09/05/georgia-democracy-hangs-balance/>; "Sen. Shaheen: GD Wants Georgia to Be a Dictatorship, Not a Democracy," *Civil Georgia*, September 6, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/622795>.

⁶⁸ "Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, September 5, 2018, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45307/2>.

Thus, Georgia has sought to become part of what CIA Director William Burns has called the “hedging middle” and what others refer to as a “multivector” foreign policy, which maintains relationships with a wide range of countries according to the official view of what constitutes national interests.⁶⁹ This is the approach being followed by Mongolia and several former Soviet states in Central Asia: They do not wish to break with the West, but they are equally determined not to be pushed into hostility with Russia or China.⁷⁰

The pressure against nations seeking to chart any version of a middle course between the U.S. and its rivals has multiplied greatly since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Georgia has joined U.S. efforts against the invasion in a number of ways, even though it has not fully joined in sanctions against Russia or agreed to deliver arms to Ukraine. In an interview with one of the authors of this brief, a senior official in previous Georgian governments, Petre Mamradze, said:

GD voted in the Council of Europe to stop Russia’s membership, then voted to expel Russia from the Council of Europe in 2022, then voted in the U.N. General Assembly to condemn Russia for the invasion. ... They did even a crazy thing – GD and 34 UNM deputies asked the ICC to start a case against Putin as a war criminal. Neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia ever voted against Russia. They either abstained or walked out.⁷¹

⁶⁹ William J. Burns, “Spycraft and Statecraft,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/cia-spycraft-and-statecraft-william-burns>.

⁷⁰ Alessandro Arduino, “Central Asia Caught in a Geopolitical Tug of War,” East Asia Forum, February 26, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/26/central-asia-caught-in-a-geopolitical-tug-of-war/>; “Mongolia Ignores an International Warrant for Putin’s Arrest,” AP, September 4, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mongolia-russia-putin-international-criminal-court-warrant-4c79850ecf409287924e3d96218abc78>; Saif Islam, “Between the West and Russia: The Ukraine War and Kazakhstan’s Tough Balancing Act,” S-RM, May 13, 2022, <https://gsi.s-rminform.com/articles/between-the-west-and-russia-the-ukraine-war-and-kazakhstans-tough-balancing-act>; Reid Standish, “Our Government Doesn’t Want to Spoil Relations With China,” *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/china-xinjiang-uighur-kazakhstan/597106/>.

⁷¹ Author interview with Petre Mamradze.

An additional source of the U.S. establishment's unhappiness with the GD government is a dispute over a contract with Beijing to build a new port on the Black Sea, which was opposed by the U.S.⁷² However, this contract was originally given to a European–U.S.–Georgian construction consortium that failed to meet critical construction deadlines. The International Chamber of Commerce/ICC Arbitration Tribunal recently upheld Georgia's cancellation of the contract based on failure to complete agreed tasks.⁷³

It should also be understood that even though Georgia has not fully joined in E.U. economic sanctions, it has made efforts at partial compliance and at preventing the use of Georgian territory for sanctions evasion. In his 2023 visit to Georgia, the E.U.'s special envoy for sanctions, David O'Sullivan, said:

We also understand the very specific situation in which Georgia finds itself both economically, in terms of geography, and in terms of close contacts with Russia in many ways. So, we understand that they're not going to implement our [E.U.] sanctions. But, I have to say that what we have seen over the last two days has confirmed to us that the Georgian authorities are taking very seriously the issue of not allowing this country to be used as a platform for circumvention. And they have put in place significant measures of controlling the exports, of possible export from Georgia of the most sensitive 38 [dual use] products, and the same is true across financial sanctions, where they have put in place very close

⁷² "Chinese-Led Consortium to Build Massive Port Project on Georgia's Black Sea Coast," RFE/RL, May 29, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/anaklia-georgia-china-port-winner/32970697.html>.

⁷³ Brawley Benson, "International Arbitration Court Rules in Favor of Georgian Government on Port Development Case," EurasiaNet, July 30, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/international-arbitration-court-rules-in-favor-of-georgian-government-on-port-development-case>; "The Government of Georgia Defeats an ICC Arbitration Claim of U.S. \$1.5 Billion at Its Highest Over Its Termination of an Investment Agreement for the Development of the Anaklia Port," White & Case, August 5, 2024, <https://www.whitecase.com/insight-alert/government-georgia-defeats-icc-arbitration-claim-us-15-billion-its-highest-over-its>.

vigilance. And we are frankly impressed with the measures which they have taken.⁷⁴

Georgia is hardly alone in not joining all U.S. and E.U. sanctions. Turkey, Georgia's biggest neighbor after Russia, has pursued a policy of determined neutrality toward the war in Ukraine.

The economic relationship with Russia is important to Georgia. Although Georgia has no formal diplomatic relations with Russia, trucks going to Russia from the Persian Gulf and elsewhere are backed up for miles at the Georgia–Russia border. Russia remains a significant market for Georgian agricultural produce and wines. Georgia receives numerous tourists from Russia (as well as refugees fleeing the Putin government). Remittances from Georgians working in Russia may also play an important role in supporting many Georgian families, though one that is difficult to quantify.⁷⁵

Most Georgians continue to stress poverty and economic concerns as the most important factors in their lives. Nevertheless, the opposition Strong Georgia coalition has clearly stated that they would seek to enforce all E.U. sanctions against Russia, as well as restrictions on other Russo–Georgian economic interactions.⁷⁶ Such a development could harm the many Georgians who have benefited from newly expanded trade with Russia. While Georgians, for understandable historical reasons, have a deep fear of Russia, many still favor maintaining the current level of economic relations with their massive northern neighbor.⁷⁷ As one Georgian remarked to one of the authors,

⁷⁴ "Transcript of Press Point of the E.U. Sanctions Envoy, Mr. David O'Sullivan," European External Action Service, June 28, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/transcript-press-point-eu-sanctions-envoy-mr-david-o%E2%80%99sullivan_en?s=221.

⁷⁵ "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023," Transparency International Georgia, February 16, 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-summary-2023>.

⁷⁶ "'Strong Georgia' Presented the Election Program – 'Ilia's Way,'" InterPressNews, September 6, 2024, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/133213-strong-georgia-presented-the-election-program-ilias-way/>.

⁷⁷ "IRI Georgia Poll Shows Political Threat from Russia, Concerns With the Presence of Russian Citizens, High Political Polarization," International Republic Institute, November 15, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-georgia-poll-shows-political-threat-from-russia/>; "Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia," Caucasus Research Resource Center,

“Very few Georgians have any affection for Russia or Russians, but a great many Georgians want to make money off them.” According to a National Democratic Institute survey, 37 percent of respondents said that Georgia should pursue a purely pro-Western policy, 36 percent supported a pro-Western policy while maintaining good relations with Russia, and 8 percent wanted a pro-Russian policy while maintaining good relations with the West.⁷⁸

Then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said in 2023 that to impose sanctions against Russia would “destroy Georgia’s economy,” and pointed out that many other nations have continued to trade with Russia:

The European Union trades with Russia in just four days, as much as we trade in a year. Where is the logic when we are called to introduce sanctions against Russia? Did anyone impose sanctions on Russia because of our war? No one in the world made a formal reaction. Where is the logic of, ‘Our war is not a war’ but in Ukraine it is.⁷⁹

Georgian government propaganda against the opposition is also largely concentrated on the allegation that it will drag Georgia into a new war with Russia, as part of a “global party of war.”⁸⁰ This warning may seem exaggerated, but it resonates deeply with many Georgians, including even opposition supporters. As an opposition supporter and

<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/MAINENEM/>; Zachary Fabos, Milord Shengelia, and the Caucasus Research Resource Center, “Datablog | Georgians Are Split on Economic Relations With Russia,” OC Media, April 10, 2024,

<https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-georgians-are-split-on-economic-relations-with-russia/>.

⁷⁸ “Taking Georgians’ Pulse: Findings from October–November 2023 Face to Face Survey,” National Democratic Institute, December 2023,

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_GGF%20poll_October_2023_Eng_VF.pdf.

⁷⁹ “Where Is the logic? Georgia Will Not Sanction Russia, PM Says,” Al Jazeera, May 24, 2023,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/24/where-is-the-logic-georgia-will-not-sanction-russia-says-pm>.

⁸⁰ Ani Chikvadze, “How Georgia Sided with Its Enemy,” *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2024,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/georgian-dream-tbilisi-protests-foreign-agent-bill-russia-war-ukraine/>; Daniel Boffey, “U.S. Warns Georgia Not to Side with Moscow Against the West,” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2024,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/14/us-warns-georgia-not-to-side-with-moscow-against-the-west>.

former MP told one of the authors, “Ukraine did not fight for us in 2008, so we are under no obligation to fight for Ukraine today.”

However, the combination of requests to send Georgian arms to Ukraine, and the promotion by some opposition politicians of a “Georgian Legion” of volunteers to fight in Ukraine, have led to fears that the opposition may support policies that could risk escalation with Russia, even if inadvertently.⁸¹

If present Georgian policy toward Russia is solidly grounded in pragmatism, therefore, it is also true that a certain distrust of the U.S. has grown over the years — even among pro-Western Georgians. Although both the Georgian government and most ordinary Georgians remain committed in principle to seeking NATO membership, no individual interviewed by the authors for this paper expressed confidence that NATO would, in fact, fight for Georgia in the event of a war. This skepticism dates to the Georgian–Russian War of 2008. The Bush administration had offered future NATO membership to Georgia, and U.S. officials and politicians had spoken of Georgia as a U.S. ally. Yet the U.S. did not come to Georgia’s aid.

Attitudes toward the E.U. are much more positive, both because of the hoped-for economic and migration benefits of membership and because the idea of belonging to “Europe” is deeply embedded in Georgian culture. But doubts about Western commitment have been increased by domestic political developments in both Europe and the U.S., indicating greater public opposition to further NATO and E.U. enlargement.

Like the Hungarian, Slovak, and previous Polish governments, GD has also adopted an increasingly “sovereignist” rhetoric, emphasizing Georgia’s right as an independent

⁸¹ Nini Gabritchidze, “Calls for Georgia to Open a ‘Second Front’ Against Russia Fall Flat,” EurasiaNet, May 10, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/calls-for-georgia-to-open-a-second-front-against-russia-fall-flat>; Tim Hume, “Georgia Blocked Hundreds of Foreign Fighters From Joining the Defence of Ukraine,” VICE News, March 1, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/georgia-blocked-hundreds-of-foreign-fighters-from-joining-the-defence-of-ukraine/>; “Ukraine Recalls Ambassador to Georgia Over ‘Immoral Position’ of Georgian Government,” OC Media, March 1, 2022, <https://oc-media.org/ukraine-recalls-ambassador-to-georgia-over-immoral-position-of-georgian-government/>.

nation to set its own policies, defend its national interests, and maintain its own national culture. This includes policies toward sexual minorities and women's rights that are seen as alien to core Georgian traditions and are bitterly opposed by the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁸² This is now being portrayed in the West as an aspect of the GD government's supposed alignment with Moscow — though, ideologically speaking, it could equally well be called alignment with much of the U.S. Republican Party.⁸³ On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of Georgians continue strongly to support E.U. membership, which they associate, somewhat unrealistically, with immediate higher incomes, greater social protection, and emigration into high-paying jobs.

Conclusion

For years, Georgia was an imperfect but real success story for democracy in the post-Soviet space. Now, however, political conflict threatens to plunge Georgia into deep instability.

The U.S. and E.U. should recognize the complexity and fragility of the situation and resist pressure to further increase the polarization of Georgian society and politics. The U.S. and E.U. should insist on and support close, scrupulous, and objective monitoring of the upcoming elections by international observers from the OSCE and other independent organizations, and should commit themselves to accept their conclusions. Only if these impartial observers conclude that the vote is clearly rigged should its results be rejected.

⁸² "Georgia's Parliament Approves Law Curbing LGBTQ Rights," Al Jazeera, September 17, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/17/georgias-parliament-approves-law-curbing-lgbtq-rights>; "Georgian Orthodox Church Calls for 'Queer Propaganda Law,'" OC Media, July 3, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-orthodox-church-calls-for-queer-propaganda-law/>; Ketevan Rogava, "The Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Resisting LGBTQ Equality," UiT Munin, May 22, 2023, <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/29551/thesis.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>; Maria Katamadze, "E.U. Candidate Georgia Wants to Outlaw LGBTQ 'Propaganda,'" Deutsche Welle, March 31, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-candidate-georgia-wants-to-outlaw-lgbtq-propaganda/a-68700801>.

⁸³ Sophiko Megrelidze and Dasha Litvinova, "Georgian Parliament Approves Anti-LGBTQ Legislation, Echoing Measures in Russia," AP, September 17, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-lgbtq-rights-samesex-marriage-57ede62918ec995f21473f23f5676f80>.

The West should avoid a black-and-white contrast between feuding parties in Georgian politics and understand that the messages received from the various sides, including by interested actors in the NGO sector, may be slanted by self-interest. In the recent past, Georgia has been able to conduct fair elections, maintain a close relationship with the United States, and make substantial progress toward meeting the requirements for E.U. membership. These possibilities still exist but may be impossible to attain if the U.S. and E.U. reject any possibility of rapprochement with Georgia — so long as it is ruled by GD.

This assessment may seem overly optimistic at a time when the E.U. has frozen the accession process for Georgia and the U.S. has recently levied sanctions on members of the ruling party. If the GD moves toward outright authoritarianism by, for example, banning opposition parties, then E.U. membership should be out of the question. But based on the evidence presented in this paper, the claim that Georgia is already in the hands of a pro-Putin authoritarian government is, at best, highly exaggerated. A more nuanced perspective is justified based on the complexity of internal Georgian politics and the reality of Georgia's geopolitical situation.

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