



Feature Article
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Georgia's Spiral towards Authoritarianism: Can it be Brought Back from the Brink?

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In over six months after disputed parliamentary elections, Georgia's democracy is on life support. The ruling Georgian Dream party is moving towards full authoritarianism at breakneck speed, passing a battery of laws that threaten the very existence of independent civil society. Party leaders regularly threaten to go even further and institute an outright ban on much of the opposition.

Daily protests continue, but at nowhere near the scale seen in late November when Prime Minister

Irakli

Kobakhidze announced that Georgia's EU membership bid would be effectively suspended until 2028. Since then, numbers have shrunk from

hundreds of thousands to just a few hundred stalwart demonstrators. The movement is still capable of mobilising larger numbers on



The Village of Ushguli, Georgia (Courtesy of Flickr)

key days, such as on the April 9 and May 26 national holidays, but overall, the movement is no longer strong enough to seriously challenge

Georgian Dream's grip on power.

The main opposition parties are in arguably an even worse position than the broader protest movement. The four major alliances that won seats in the October 2024 election are all boycotting Parliament and are increasingly turning against each other. The brief and brittle consensus that allowed Georgia's fifth president, Salome Zourabichvili, to act as a sort of unifying figure and mediator is now openly breaking.

Overall, Georgia appears to be spiralling towards authoritarianism, undoing over three decades of effort to escape Moscow's political orbit. But amid the grim prospects, there is an urgent need to focus on what it would take for Georgia to return to the democratic path. Full authoritarian consolidation in previously stalwartly pro-EU Georgia would not bode well for the prospects of democracy in the broader region.

Georgian Dream: Choosing Power over Progress

Georgian Dream came to power in 2012 as a rainbow coalition of mostly pro-Western forces and acolytes of the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. In 2025, only the latter remain, as Georgian Dream edge closer to completely jettisoning Georgia's geopolitical orientation towards Europe, in favour of a policy that

prioritises staying in power indefinitely, even at the cost of allowing Russian influence to grow.

It is generally not disputed that Ivanishvili, who has no official state role, is by far the most powerful person in the country, with the formal political leadership under Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, serving at his pleasure. But characterising Kobakhidze, who clearly has his master's ear, as nothing more than a puppet also likely oversimplifies the situation.

The prime minister has been largely successful in purging Georgian Dream of cadres loyal to his predecessor, Irakli Gharibashvili, from key positions. Gharibashvili has remained loyal to Ivanishvili, but he recently resigned from the post of party chair after seeing remaining allies, such as ex-intelligence chief Grigol Liluashvili, removed from office. Conspiracy theories abound that Gharibashvili is merely being kept "in reserve" by Ivanishvili in case Kobakhidze becomes too unpopular to keep in office. But it is likely that some level of rivalry exists between the two men, albeit not to the level that would prompt Gharibashvili, who owes his entire career to Ivanishvili, to break from his mentor.

Despite these internal rivalries, there is little sign that a fundamental split in Georgian

Dream is imminent. The party is united by its aim of maintaining its grip on power at all costs. It has sacrificed Georgia's EU membership prospects to the service of this, recognising that this aim is inconsistent with the sort of authoritarian system that would allow it to keep power indefinitely.

As such, Georgian Dream is not truly an ideologically "pro-Russian" party. Ivanishvili, a classic post-Soviet oligarch with a highly conspiratorial and paranoid mindset, almost certainly finds Russia more culturally comprehensible than the West. But he is primarily concerned with maintaining power, and his cryptic alliance with Kremlin interests is one of convenience, not principle. If the EU were to accept forever Georgian Dream rule, Ivanishvili (a French citizen) would likely remain open to membership.

As things stand, however, Georgian Dream appears determined to follow an authoritarian path. It has passed a battery of legislation that risks destroying civil society and free media in Georgia.

The Russia-style "foreign influence" legislation that was the focus on mass protests in spring 2023 and 2024, has now been replaced with a supposed "copy and paste" of the 1938 U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA). Unlike the U.S. Act, however, this law is aimed not at agents of

adversarial states, but at NGOs and media receiving grant funding from the West. Without the independent judiciary that allows the U.S. Act to work, in practice it will likely be weaponised against civil society.

New rules have also been passed requiring all grants from abroad to be approved by the government, effectively giving Georgian Dream the power to cut all funding from civil society organisations it dislikes.

Pro-opposition media has also been targeted, with new "impartiality" rules supposedly modelled after those of the UK being selectively used to target outlets that describe the government as illegitimate. The crackdown on free speech has also spread to social media, with anti-government activists fined, and even imprisoned, for insulting senior Georgian Dream MPs online. Mzia Amaghlobeli, the founder of a major online news website, Netgazeti, has also been detained for an alleged physical attack on a police officer during a protest.

A parliamentary commission supposedly investigating the crimes of the previous government has also been weaponised to detain opposition leaders that refuse to testify. Georgian Dream quickly made non-attendance a criminal offense in full knowledge that much of the opposition will boycott the sessions as illegitimate.

The ruling party also intermittently threatens to use the “crimes” uncovered by the commission as a pretext to ban the opposition outright. But so far it has remained content to formally allow the opposition parties to continue, safe in the knowledge that many will be boycotting upcoming October local elections anyway.

Ruling Party Retains Appeal Amongst Older and More Rural Populations

What is less clear is at what point, if ever, do Georgian Dream’s supporters realise that they have become tools in consolidating an authoritarian regime. They do not, by and large, recognize what is currently unfolding as creeping authoritarianism. And, whatever exact proportion of the population they are, they are numerous enough to enable Georgian Dream to cling onto power. Authoritarianism does not require majority support, but it does require a sizable bedrock of support. And Georgian Dream indubitably has that.

The coalition of Georgian Dream support is quite diverse (if somewhat shallow).

Like most other post-Soviet “parties of power,” Georgian Dream can count upon the backing of those attached to the state itself and associated patronage networks – the so-called administrative resource. The government has consciously inflated the

ranks of the public sector to achieve this, and Georgian Dream has become the only force capable of maintaining a patronage network at a national scale. It is this that explains the party’s overwhelming dominance in the regions where public sector jobs make up a large share of stable employment opportunities. Until now the opposition United National Movement (UNM) also retained a ghost of the patronage network it had in power, but the 2024 election result showed that this has now collapsed, with the party falling behind the Coalition for Change made up of ex-UNM splinter parties.

Inconveniently for the opposition, Georgian Dream maintains other bastions of genuine support. Many of these can be termed “Never Misha” voters. Often from families and communities victimised by the authoritarian tendencies of the 2003-12 UNM government, these are voters who will not countenance any return to power of either UNM itself or politicians who were prominent in government in that era.

Then there are other voters for whom peace and stability is most important. These tend to be older voters who were convinced by the Georgian Dream line that any change to a more pro-Western government will prompt renewed Russian aggression. This stance has become typified by the cliché response to criticism of Georgian Dream “*aba omi ginda?*”

(So, you want war?). Tbilisi intelligentsia circles and Western analysts alike tend to characterise this bloc as victims of propaganda. But this is not wholly fair. Indeed, one would not have lost money over the past two decades betting on Russian aggression. It is not outlandish to imagine that Russia might react to the replacement of a relatively friendly regime in Georgia with a flexing of hard power muscle.

None of these groups' support for Georgian Dream is very deep. Those reliant on (often piecemeal) ruling party patronage could be swayed by the promise of something better. As the prospect of a UNM restoration becomes ever more remote, and Georgian Dream's own authoritarianism becomes clearer, Never Misha voters could be persuaded to part ways with the government. Indeed, they could be made to see that some of the same cadres who worked as enforcers under UNM play the same role under Georgian Dream. And the risk-averse, elderly vote could be convinced by a campaign that is more socio-economic rather than geopolitical in focus.

The problem is, whatever the shortcomings of the October 2024 election, the opposition (with the partial exception of former Georgian Dream premier Giorgi Gakharia) did not truly reach out to these voters.

The Opposition: Hapless, Divided, and Discredited...but Also Needed

Over the past year, the Georgian opposition has gone from looking like it could be on the brink of power to looking utterly defeated.

Much is made in analytical circles of the lack of unity within the opposition. And the opposition is indeed divided. The brittle understanding that allowed the four main blocs to cooperate under the coordination of former president Salome Zourabichvili is now falling apart completely. Accusations of collusion with Georgian Dream and treachery are now exchanged openly between the parties. Tactical and strategic disagreements, most notably over whether to stand in local elections scheduled for October, have escalated into open intra-opposition conflict.

But it is not disunity per se that is the key weakness of Georgia's opposition. It would be more accurate to say that the opposition has failed to overcome a dilemma it has faced since Georgian Dream came to power in 2012.

The dilemma is this: the prevalence of Never Misha voters in the electorate means that too much unity cements the ruling party's characterisation of the opposition as the "collective UNM" – losing them critical swing voters. But too much division leads to

the status quo of constant bickering and disjointed strategy.

This is why the past months have seen so many iterations of loose cooperation between the opposition parties. Salome Zourabichvili, as the sole unifying figure in the opposition, keeps announcing new formats, from last year's "Georgian Charter" to the "Resistance Platform" of April 2025. But they fail to square the fundamental circle that dogs the opposition. Any opposition union excluding the UNM cannot win the swing voters needed to win power. But any union without the UNM cannot hit critical mass either.

However, even if the opposition were to overcome the question of unity, it suffers from a deeper malaise. Most of the opposition parties lack any substantive ideological or substantive basis.

Georgian parties could most accurately be described as fan clubs with pretensions of power rather than anything that would be recognisable in Western political culture as programmatic political parties. The UNM is united by fealty to imprisoned ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili. The Coalition for Change is an alliance of tiny ex-UNM breakaway parties, each with its own leader. The glue that bound the (now disintegrating) Strong Georgia alliance was the funding of banker Mamuka Khazaradze. And Giorgi

Gakharia's For Georgia party has no identity at all independent of its leader.

This reality means that opposition parties spend most of their intellectual resources on byzantine intra-opposition machinations and winning foreign support than making their case to the electorate. When elections come, parties hurriedly put together slogans and populist policies, engaging in only the bare minimum of true voter outreach outside of the urban political bubble. There is often a perception that opposition leaders spend more time lobbying in Washington, DC and Brussels than they do campaigning on the ground.

The current war of words between parties advocating standing in October's local elections and those pushing for a boycott is illustrative. Pro-boycott parties argue that participation is futile but offer no alternative strategy other than aimless street protest and empty faith in external salvation via sanctions. Those urging participation don't seem to have any solid plan for how to win sufficient support to deny Georgian Dream a blanket victory or at least force them to resort to obvious electoral fraud.

These factors mean that many attending the street protests see the opposition as discredited. But the reality for Georgia's broader pro-EU movement is that they still

need sympathetic politicians in power to achieve their aims.

There appears no alternative way to put the country back on the European integration path other than through this dysfunctional, divided, and rudderless opposition replacing Georgian Dream in government. And that cannot happen unless something like either the 2003 or 2012 scenarios recur. Either Georgian Dream is defeated in elections by such a margin that even administrative resources and state coercion cannot compensate (the 2012 model), or through outright revolution and a collapse of the Georgian Dream elite (the 2003 model). The opposition currently shows little potential to achieve either of these outcomes. And the street protesters, in their effort to keep themselves “pure”, have been reticent about closer coordination with an opposition that at present remains the only alternative to authoritarian consolidation under Georgian Dream.

A theoretical alternative would be for the protestors to develop their own organisations and structures. However, other than a few informal groups and a small new social democratic party, the movement has largely failed to establish such structures. Unlike the Ukrainian Maidan, the Georgian protests remain aimless symbolic events and not institutions. There is no strong

permanent presence, and only the weakest form of coordination. The reliance on a tactic of “standing around on Rustaveli Avenue hoping for change to come” has failed, and that failure has demoralised the movement to a level where now only a few hundred attend daily protests. Participation is further disincentivised by the introduction of huge fines of 5,000 Georgian lari (about \$1,800) for participating in the road-blocking protests.

There is also a dire need for the pro-EU movement to establish firmer foundations in the regions. The height of the protests in December saw demonstrations spread to smaller towns like Khashuri and Poti. Since then, however, the movement has largely retreated to its Tbilisi and Batumi core. This is despite the fact that the regions do have real grievances of their own.

EU membership, and the subsidies that come with it, would likely be a lifeline to the increasingly ageing and depopulated agricultural regions. This case is not really being made at scale by the urban-dominated pro-EU movement. Existing struggles, such as those related to the mining operations in the town of Chiatura, are largely ignored or only given cursory importance by the opposition.

This could be a mistake of existential proportions, and if the opposition is to ever

build the sort of overwhelming support it would need to shake an authoritarian Georgian Dream regime, it would need to coopt such movements into a broad front.

The [failure of a declared nationwide strike to cause significant disruption](#) starkly illustrates this disconnect. Despite widespread discontent, the absence of strong, independent trade unions or a tradition of grassroots labour organisation meant that the call simply fizzled. Where the strike occurred at all, it depended on businesses granting workers permission to take a short break to stage symbolic demonstrations. This was not a tactical error but the consequence of a decades-long neglect – by opposition parties, foreign donors, and elite civil society – of the need to build grassroots movements and institutional power across a broader section of society, including the regions.

The Economy: Good on Paper, Much Weaker in Practice

In general, economic growth is a great legitimiser, and prosperity can act as an effective anaesthetic to concerns about democratic backsliding.

On this basis, Georgia's GDP growth figures should give the Georgian Dream government cause for confidence. The Georgian economy grew 9.4% in 2024, and

shows little sign of slowing down, posting year-on-year preliminary growth figures of 11.1% in January 2025, and 9% in March 2025.

These figures suggest that Georgia is experiencing an economic boom that in ordinary circumstances should guarantee Georgian Dream political dividends.

The reality, however, is more complex. This growth is disproportionately concentrated in sectors that do not generate local employment, such as the IT sector ([24.3% growth in 2024](#)). Much of this IT growth derives from the relocation of Russian tech workers fleeing the war. This does not even come with high tax revenue, as many such workers pay only 1% income tax as part of Georgia's individual entrepreneur scheme. This is money that is often earned and spent by non-Georgians, boosting growth figures, but making little difference to the livelihoods of local people. If anything, the influx of Russians led to a spike in rent and real estate rates, pricing locals out of the Tbilisi property market.

Another significant contributor to growth in recent years is the automobile repair and re-export industry. The sector [experienced 17.8% growth in 2023, though it has since fallen back to 6.7% in 2024](#). While most of this ostensibly goes to Central Asia, there is [evidence that some of this is sanctions-](#)

[evasion activity, bringing cars into Russia.](#)

While this generates revenue for the budget and for a few Georgian middlemen, it is hardly a sector that brings in significant high-wage employment to the average citizen.

Construction is also experiencing a boom (14.2% growth in 2024). While this does create some jobs, these are usually low-paid and menial, with most profits going to an elite class of developers. This sector is arguably also being significantly boosted by the influx of Russian money.

So, while this GDP growth is “Georgian” on paper, it is often Russian in practice, and is being generated by Russians, or for the benefit of them. This means that many Georgians, far from being grateful for miracle growth figures, feel increasingly economically sidelined in their own country, as they see wealthy Russians earn money, pay just 1% tax, and spend it at businesses established by other Russians.

For balance, it is also true that not all the growth is accruing to wealthy Muscovite tech workers working from Batumi beach. There is [evidence that some wage growth for locals is also taking place](#). But the sky-high headline growth figures belie a complex reality.

This means that socio-economic issues such as widespread poverty remain a subject of public dissatisfaction, especially in the very

regions where Georgian Dream is strongest. A competent opposition would see an opportunity to undermine the regime here. But the current crop of Georgian opposition politicians is largely every bit as elitist as Georgian Dream.

Foreign Policy: Increasingly Isolated but Backed by the Axis of Authoritarians

It is hard to believe that less than two years have passed since Georgia was granted EU membership candidate status. Since then, Georgia has witnessed one of the most sudden geopolitical U-turns in the country’s political history.

Ties with both the EU and the U.S. are not only damaged but almost completely moribund. Georgian Dream officials now regularly use phrases to describe their Western interlocutors that might make an Iranian ayatollah blush.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [recently equated the European Parliament with the Supreme Soviet of the USSR](#). And Georgian officials often repeat the conspiracy theory of a “Global War Party” that controls the West and seeks to push Georgia into an unwinnable war with Russia. Even erstwhile pro-Western figures such as MP Mariam Lashkhi [now speak of Masonic conspiracies](#). Western ambassadors are now routinely accused of pushing for regime change and

revolution. German Ambassador Peter Fischer was even [verbally abused by a Georgian Dream supporter](#).

In terms of allies, Georgia's government looks increasingly isolated, having burned bridges with traditional allies in the West and not integrated into any alternative bloc either.

Only two countries stand out as being true allies to the Georgian Dream government.

Perhaps the closest relationship Georgia's leadership maintains is with Hungary's Viktor Orban. The Georgian and Hungarian prime ministers [met each other seven times](#) in the nine months following the October 2024 parliamentary election. There clearly exists close coordination between Tbilisi and Budapest, culminating in a Georgia-Hungary Intergovernmental Commission. Georgian Dream clearly sees the Orban model as something to aspire to – part of Europe, but unapologetically illiberal and authoritarian. Georgian Dream's communications strategy often closely emulates those used by Hungary's ruling Fidesz party – especially the tendency to cast all opposition as nefarious “agents” of foreign powers bent on undermining traditional values.

The other key relationship is with neighbouring Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev, who has become increasingly vocal in his

defence of Georgia. [Azerbaijani state media took a strongly pro-Georgian Dream line](#) during the October 2024 election. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Aliyev government used its influence over Georgia's ethnic-Azerbaijani minority to swing the result in the ruling party's favour. Official results in the majority ethnic-Azerbaijani districts of Marneuli and Gardabani show that while Georgian Dream won under 50% of the vote in these places in 2020, this time Georgian Dream won almost 80% in Marneuli and 68% in Gardabani.

Like with Orban's Hungary, it is possible that Georgian Dream sees a model for its own future amidst the shiny oil-funded skyscrapers of Baku. Azerbaijan manages to maintain cordial relations with both the West and Russia, even winning the latter's acquiescence to its recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh from under the noses of Russian troops on the ground. It is a consolidated authoritarian regime that feels it can dictate terms to the great powers. Bidzina Ivanishvili may believe that he can copy Baku and leverage Georgia's geopolitical position to force Europe and Russia alike to allow him to keep the country as his personal fiefdom in perpetuity.

The miscalculation here is that Georgia's geopolitical position is sufficient to force the West to grant this wish. Western backing for

Georgia has historically been much more about its declared values and orientation than about objective strategic value. Indeed, Georgia's core transit function could become suddenly less important if, as is looking increasingly possible, the borders between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey open up. This would create an east-west transport corridor that bypasses Georgia completely.

And then there is Georgia's relationship with Russia.

The state of relations between Tbilisi and Moscow is opaque. The lack of formal diplomatic relations means that, officially, ties are mediated through the Swiss and a special dialogue mechanism involving the head of the Russian Federation Council Committee on International Affairs, Grigory Karasin. Unofficially, however, there are almost certainly backchannels and a level of closer cooperation going on under the surface.

The Kremlin has lavishly praised Georgian Dream on numerous occasions and offered to restore diplomatic ties, but Georgia's leadership knows better than to embrace Moscow too openly. Georgia is a country that fought a war with Russia in 2008. Georgian Dream knows that its supporters, while open to cryptic pro-Russian narratives, may balk at

the overt embrace of its former imperial masters.

Instead, Georgia reserves this treatment for China. Prime Minister Kobakhidze recently praised the People's Republic as ["the model superstate the world should emulate."](#) In 2023, a strategic partnership agreement was signed. A Chinese-led consortium now leads the construction of the new port at Anaklia. Another Chinese firm is close to completing the new motorway through the mountains of central Georgia at Rikoti. And, it is Chinese smart camera equipment that is enabling the government to identify and prosecute demonstrators who block roads during protests.

However, the mountains are high, and China is very far away. If Georgian Dream seeks to replace its traditional Western backers with China, it may quickly find that it will struggle to convince Beijing that Georgia is central to its interests. China could act as a counterweight – either economic or political – to Russia. But there is a logic to giving China a stake in major Georgian infrastructure that Western governments would do well to consider. Russia is far more likely to be nervous about disrupting Chinese interests in the Caucasus than it is about those of the West. In other words, if Russia were ever again to intervene in Georgia militarily, it would likely be careful

to avoid causing damage to a Chinese-owned Anaklia port.

Conclusion: Can Georgian Democracy be Salvaged?

From both a Western and a general democratic perspective, Georgia appears lost for the time being.

Georgian Dream may not be popular, but it retains enough backing and control over key patronage networks to not only remain in power but also entrench an increasingly authoritarian system.

The opposition is weak and too obsessed with itself to capitalise on Georgian Dream's real weaknesses.

Georgian society is divided, depressed, and exhausted. A likely majority is unhappy with Georgian Dream rule and its break with the West, but is also too disempowered, disorganised, and disillusioned with the alternatives to do much about it.

The economy is roaring, but for the benefit of a small elite. And Georgian Dream has now burned its bridges with the West.

In [a previous article for CACI](#), I suggested a spectrum of possible outcomes from opposition breakthrough to what I called "Khachapuri Putinism" – a softer version of authoritarian rule tailored to Georgia's

specific context and more historically pluralistic political culture.

Since then, prospects have worsened. Trump's victory and the defunding of many of Georgian Dream's civil society critics have left pro-democracy forces more isolated than ever. This is a problem in a country where the knee-jerk political culture has always been to look outside the country for support. Georgian Dream's crackdown has become both less overtly violent and more targeted and institutional. New legislation, if fully enforced, would more or less close the door on democratic civil society working normally and turn Georgia into a regime far closer to that of neighbouring Azerbaijan, or even Belarus, than anyone ever thought possible.

This opposition seems incapable of winning unless a major new development occurs, such as a major and fundamental fissure in the ruling party or the collapse of the Putin regime. Terrifying for the protesters, it seems like this discredited opposition may first have to die to allow space for anything truly transformative to take its place.

There is potential within Georgian society for something new that could threaten Georgian Dream. Stubbornly high poverty rates and truly grassroots movements, such as the striking Chiatura miners and anti-hydroelectric dam protesters, demonstrate

that the Georgian regions still have the capacity to resist. A new social-democratic movement has been formed from the ranks of the protesters.

It says a lot that Georgian Dream seems as afraid of overtly pro-Russian Alt Info, or “apolitical” movements such as the Chiatura miners, as it is of its more numerous pro-Western opposition critics. As long as its detractors are the “usual suspects”, it feels comfortable. But when (as did seem to happen during the height of the December protests) dissent spreads to the regions and in previously depoliticised or quiescent groups, that’s when panic begins within the walls of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s hilltop palace.

But Georgian politics is very unpredictable. The protesters are down but not out ([I have incorrectly written them off prematurely before](#)). It is not impossible for a sudden shift in dynamics to tilt things back in their direction. But the most likely outcome now is a continued fall into some form of authoritarianism, with the question being just how far that goes.

If this movement, as seems likely, fails to win the short-term battle, the question then becomes how hope for a future democratic revanche can be kept alive. And the answer is in pro-democracy forces building broader coalitions outside their comfort zone. In

response to the severe curtailment of grant-funded activism, they need to rediscover organic, low-cost forms of organisation and network building across societal cleavages. This means a greater focus on socio-economic and not just political issues. It might mean developing new forms of organisation or strengthening non-NGO forms of activism such as the creation of independent trade unions. It also means winning the narrative battle outside the liberal classes of central Tbilisi. The Russian project in Georgia seeks to redefine Georgian nationalism as being against alien Western ideas. The task for democrats is to return it to its traditional definition as a bulwark against the existential threat of Russian imperialism.

Foreign friends of Georgian democracy would also do well to absorb some of these lessons. Civil society is reeling and on the brink of collapse. Donors must find new ways to support forces capable of keeping the democratic flame alive over the long term. This requires a more patient – and often more discreet – approach than the short-term, project-focused, and bureaucratic model currently favoured. Crucially, it means not just allowing but actively encouraging Georgian civil society actors to be led by realities on the ground, rather than by donor-imposed priorities. And it means expanding support beyond the “usual suspects” in the major Tbilisi NGOs, towards grassroots

movements and organisations that may be less polished, but also more connected to the communities they serve.

At the level of high policy, the EU's most discussed leverage – suspension of visa-free travel – would almost certainly spark another large wave of protest. But protest alone is unlikely to be effective in the current environment. Such a move would also disproportionately punish younger, pro-European Georgians, while leaving the regime's economic enablers relatively untouched. If pressure is to be effective, it must find ways to target the business and political intermediaries whose fortunes are tied to Georgian Dream's patronage networks, especially those doing business with Russia.

More generally, Western governments face a difficult balancing act over how far to engage with Georgian Dream. Too much engagement risks legitimising the government's authoritarian trajectory, while fully heeding opposition calls to cut all contact risks curtailing future opportunities to incentivise a course reversal. Whatever balance is struck, one principle must remain firm: Western countries cannot allow Georgian Dream to shift towards a transactional, interests-based model of relations. Values and democracy must be core to any Georgia policy. Any attempt by

Georgian Dream to emulate the sort of “pragmatic” relationship neighbouring oil-rich Azerbaijan enjoys with the West must be firmly rejected. The point must be made consistently that Georgia's geostrategic irreplaceability is overblown and that the EU's interest in Georgia is dependent on maintaining democratic governance.

In other words, if Bidzina Ivanishvili wants an authoritarian Georgia to be treated like Azerbaijan without oil, he must be made to see that what he will get is relations equivalent to Tajikistan with better wine.

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