



Research Article

Strategic Competition and Illiberal State Capture in Georgia – A Win for Moscow

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Abstract: Today's strategic competition between the West, Russia, and China—and particularly between the West and Russia in Europe—has increased feelings of insecurity and despair among Georgians, sentiments that the ruling Georgian Dream party has exploited for political gain. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Georgian Dream party has further strengthened its ties with Moscow and intensified its use of anti-Western, nativist rhetoric. Despite Georgia's strong pro-Western stance following the Rose Revolution of 2003 and Russia's 2008 invasion, the Georgian Dream's gradual capture of vital state institutions has created a permissive environment for authoritarianism to proliferate. The leadership of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the party's honorary chairman and most influential political figure, has hindered the country's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. In today's strategic competition between liberal democracies and autocratic regimes, Russia appears to have gained an edge in Georgia. The domestic and regional consequences of growing Russian influence include rising corruption, coercion, illiberalism, underdevelopment, and a retreat from Euro-Atlantic integration. Using a case study methodology, this article examines the consequences of illiberal state capture in Georgia for the country's future and the broader implications of increasing Russian influence in the region.

Keywords: strategic competition, state capture, illiberalism, oligarchy, Russia, the West, Ukraine, democracy, authoritarianism, Georgia.

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia has navigated a complex and often turbulent path, balancing its aspirations for Western integration with the enduring influence of its larger neighbor, Russia. Over the years, as Georgia's

ambitions for EU and NATO membership grew, so too did Russia's opposition, viewing Georgia's alignment with the West as a direct challenge to its regional dominance.¹ Tensions culminated after Georgia's pro-democratic 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2008 war over the so-called "South Ossetia," leading to a Russian military victory and the eventual recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states by Russia.²

Domestically, the rise of the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition in 2012 marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. Initially positioning itself as a pro-European political party, GD gradually began consolidating power, sidelining its pro-Western allies, and introducing policies that increasingly aligned Georgia with Russia.³ Since the GD party began exerting control over vital state institutions, the country's democratic foundations have been steadily undermined, opening the door for illiberalism and authoritarianism to take root. In the last several years, the country has dropped six points in Freedom House's democracy indicators. Problems such as oligarchic influence in politics, physical attacks on opposition figures, corruption in government, the undermining of media freedom, executive and legislative interference in the courts, and a lack of transparency and professionalism in judicial proceedings have been cited as the country's major obstacles to progress.⁴

At the center of this shift is Bidzina Ivanishvili, the party's honorary chairman, who has effectively become the most influential actor in Georgian politics. Under his behind-the-scenes leadership, Georgia has witnessed the emergence of illiberal state capture, in which key institutions have fallen under the control of powerful individuals serving personal interests rather than democratic ideals. Transparency International defines state capture as "powerful individuals, groups and organizations undemocratically shaping a nation's policies, legal institutions and economies to illicitly enrich themselves with impunity."⁵

As a means to garner popular support despite the ongoing shift away from Euro-Atlantic integration, Ivanishvili and his clan employ securitization techniques to portray relations with the West as a threat to national security. Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, explains how political actors frame issues as existential security threats to justify extraordinary

¹ Natia Seskuria, "Russia's 'Hybrid Aggression' against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools," Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 21, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools>.

² Seskuria, "Russia's 'Hybrid Aggression' against Georgia."

³ Dato Parulava, "8 Things to Know about Georgia's 'Existential' Election," *Politico*, October 24, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/georgia-parliamentary-election-georgian-dream-bidzina-ivanishvili-opposition-unm-russia-west-us-eu-enlargement/.

⁴ "Georgia," in *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict* (Freedom House, February 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2024>.

⁵ Transparency International, "Glossary: Corruption Offences," *Transparency.org*, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.transparency.org/en/glossary>.

measures.⁶ The GD's growing antagonism toward the West signals a potential departure from Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

This shift has been particularly prominent since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The use of securitization has been explicitly linked to Western efforts to aid Georgia's reform, a move the GD has portrayed as a likely cause of future war with Russia. While not explicitly incorrect, framing the issue in this way deceitfully places the blame on the West for merely helping a nation propel itself forward. Also, it tacitly accepts Russia as a state that would act on its "rightful security interests" by instigating war should its neighbor seek integration with the West. This war of narratives has greatly benefited Russia in many parts of the world and appears to have gained prominence in Georgia. Because of the illiberal state capture in Georgia, the elite can exploit these narratives to their advantage while pursuing personal enrichment through relations with Moscow, at the expense of the majority's wish to join the West.

Through a case study approach, this article argues that the rising influence of Russia in Georgia—facilitated by the consolidation of power by the Georgian Dream party—undermines democratic principles and fosters an environment ripe for corruption, coercion, and illiberalism. By shedding light on this dynamic, this article highlights the broader risks to both Georgia's development and regional stability, illustrating how state capture in Georgia has led to a victory for Moscow's growing ambitions in the region.

Post-Cold War Political Development in Georgia

After the fall of the Soviet Union, newly independent Georgia faced major challenges, including separatist conflicts and civil war on its territory in the Tskhinvali region, also known as South Ossetia, and in Abkhazia. Under Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the country's foreign policy was more isolationist and pan-Caucasian. Gamsakhurdia strongly opposed Russian imperialism but did not seek integration with the West. Under his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia pursued closer ties with the West while attempting to maintain a balanced approach toward Russia.

A major turning point in Georgia's foreign policy orientation occurred during the 2003 Rose Revolution, when President Shevardnadze was forced out of power following massive popular unrest over electoral fraud, corruption, and economic difficulties. As a result of this societal upheaval, Mikheil Saakashvili, a prominent leader of the opposition party United National Movement, became Georgia's new president. Early in his presidency, Georgia implemented significant reforms to combat corruption, liberalize the economy, and establish democratic institutions, even emerging as an exemplary model of democratic progress

⁶ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 25.

in the region.⁷ However, the more Georgia expressed interest in joining the European Union and NATO, the more Russia, viewing Georgia as part of its privileged sphere of influence, responded with growing antagonism.⁸

After several years in power, Saakashvili began facing criticism for a number of issues, including his alleged ordering of an attack on businessman and politician Valeri Gelashvili in 2005. Gelashvili had publicly commented on a conflict between himself and Saakashvili, as well as on Saakashvili's personal life.⁹ Saakashvili was also criticized for his response to the 2007 Georgian protests, which were forcefully dispersed by police using harsh methods.¹⁰ Additionally, his political opponents accused him of corruption and of amassing personal wealth after taking office. Alleged corruption within Saakashvili's inner circle was one of the main causes of the 2007 demonstrations.¹¹

In 2008, Saakashvili unsuccessfully attempted to regain control over the separatist region of South Ossetia through military force. While the mission failed and the move was unpopular, it is important to understand the context in which Tbilisi's initial attack in the Tskhinvali region on the night of August 7–8, 2008, took place. The EU-commissioned *Tagliavini Report* (2009) acknowledges this first attack but stresses that there had been escalating tensions, provocations, and Russian military movements for years beforehand. Additionally, the report confirms that Russia's military actions went beyond self-defense, violating international law by advancing deep into Georgian territory. Moreover, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev later admitted that he had already decided to intervene militarily before Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali.¹²

The five-day war that followed resulted in a Russian victory, after which Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and reinforced

⁷ Jkabaker, "Georgian Elections a Victory for Democracy," *The Stanford Review*, January 17, 2008, <https://stanfordreview.org/georgian-elections-victory-democracy/>.

⁸ Jeronim Perović, "Georgia at a Crossroads," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* No. 349 (Geneva: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, October 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000697506>.

⁹ "RFE/RL's Georgian Service, "Saakashvili Convicted of Abuse of Power, Sentenced in Absentia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/saakashvili-convicted-of-abuse-of-power-sentenced-in-absentia/29327555.html>.

¹⁰ Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Georgia: Opposition Lawmakers Protest Violence Against Demonstrators," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 1, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1059631.html>.

¹¹ Erekle Urushadze, "Overview of Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Georgia," Transparency International, November 20, 2013, https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/Overview_of_corruption_in_Georgia.pdf.

¹² "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," Report (Brussels: The Council of the European Union, September 2009), <https://web.archive.org/web/20091003093859/http://www.ceiig.ch/Report.html>.

its already substantial contingents of peacekeepers in these regions.¹³ This defeat, coupled with growing concerns over Saakashvili's increasingly authoritarian rule, paved the way for the rise and eventual victory of the Georgian Dream coalition, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

In subsequent years, GD won the general elections as a single party rather than in coalition with other opposition parties – in 2016, 2020, and 2024. The GD initially positioned itself as a center-left party committed to the country's EU and NATO aspirations.¹⁴ Originally composed of a diverse range of opposition groups united under Ivanishvili's leadership, the GD gradually sidelined all its pro-Western coalition partners. Over time, Ivanishvili and his associates came to control key public institutions to serve his personal business interests.

Several factors can explain Ivanishvili's shift away from the West. For one, he may fear that implementing the necessary reforms for EU and NATO integration would jeopardize his control over Georgian institutions. Ivanishvili also had a trust dispute with Credit Suisse, which could have led him to distance himself from the West.¹⁵ Publicly, however, in 2024, he accused a Western "global party of war" of meddling in Georgia.¹⁶ Today, he opposes deeper relations with Europe and favors a growing partnership with Moscow. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only solidified these trends, as Georgia refused to join the sanctions regime and has since increased its economic ties with Moscow.¹⁷ Commenting on these developments, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington was sanctioning Ivanishvili for "undermining the democratic and Euro-Atlantic future of Georgia for the benefit of the Russian Federation."¹⁸

¹³ Brian Whitmore, "One Year After 'Independence,' Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Legal Gray Zone," *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, August 26, 2009, www.rferl.org/a/Year_After_Independence_Abkhazia_South_Ossetia_In_Legal_Gray_Zone/1808101.html.

¹⁴ Jamie Shea, "Georgia: The Dream Turns Bad, But This Is No Time to Disengage," *Friends of Europe*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-georgia-the-dream-turns-bad-but-this-is-no-time-to-disengage/>.

¹⁵ Shea, "Georgia: The Dream Turns Bad, But This Is No Time to Disengage."

¹⁶ Felix Light, "Georgia's Ivanishvili Lashes Out at West amid 'Foreign Agent' Bill Crisis," *Reuters*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lawmakers-scuffle-again-georgia-over-foreign-agent-bill-2024-04-29/>.

¹⁷ Alexander Atasuntsev, "Why Bidzina Ivanishvili Is Returning to Georgian Politics—Again," *Carnegie Politika*, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, February 23, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/why-bidzina-ivanishvili-is-returning-to-georgian-politicsagain>.

¹⁸ Daphne Psaedakis and Felix Light, "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Georgian ex-Prime Minister Ivanishvili, Citing Concerns about Russia," *Reuters*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-us-imposes-sanctions-on-georgian-ex-prime-minister-ivanishvili-citing/>.

Georgian Dream's "Securitization" of the West

Securitization theory refers to the process by which state actors transform subjects from regular political issues into matters of security, thereby enabling them to use extraordinary means in the name of protecting that security.¹⁹ The Georgian Dream party now actively "securitizes" the West, portraying it as a threat to Georgia's social conservatism, security, and stability, as demonstrated by the party's increased use of anti-Western rhetoric. The political elite in Georgia uses this tool to consolidate power by leveraging fears within society.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, GD party leaders blamed NATO for starting the war.²⁰ The party's platform during its campaign for the October parliamentary elections included a strong emphasis on preserving stability in Georgia amidst what it described as opposition attempts to drag the country into war. The party also intensified its use of "nativist" rhetoric, stressing Georgia's uniqueness and social conservatism, while positioning Europe's liberalism as a threat to the country's national identity.²¹

Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly defended the controversial "Transparency Law" in a speech last year, asserting that it was designed to protect Georgia from external forces, such as the so-called "global party of war," which he alleged was manipulating Georgia through foreign-funded agents. He also accused Western powers of orchestrating past conflicts, including the 2008 war with Russia and the crises in Ukraine.²²

However, the Georgian population has demonstrated that it has limits regarding the reach of this securitization process. In the spring of 2024, large protests erupted across the country against the passage of the "foreign agents" bill, which required organizations and media outlets receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as foreign agents. The controversy surrounding this bill lay in its striking resemblance to Russia's "Foreign Agents Law" passed in 2012, which was aimed at cracking down on the opposition and minimizing Western influence in the country.²³

Despite widespread protests, Georgia's parliament passed what it called the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" on May 14, 2024, with overwhelming support from the ruling party, while opposition parties abstained from the vote. Although Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the bill in a show

¹⁹ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 25.

²⁰ Gabriel Gavin, "NATO Aspirant Country Blames NATO for Russia's War on Ukraine," *Politico*, May 30, 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-blame-nato-russia-war-ukraine/>.

²¹ Emil Avdaliani, "The Rise of Socially Conservative Georgia," Center for European Policy Analysis, July 10, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/the-rise-of-socially-conservative-georgia/>.

²² Light, "Georgia's Ivanishvili Lashes Out at West amid 'Foreign Agent' Bill Crisis."

²³ Lucian Kim, "Russia's Foreign Agent Law Targets Journalists, Activists, Even Ordinary Citizens," *NPR*, July 31, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/31/1021804569/russias-foreign-agent-law-targets-journalists-activists-even-ordinary-citizens>.

of solidarity with the protesters, the law was still enacted after parliament overruled her veto.²⁴ The GD argued that the law was necessary to block opposition influence and secure the party's victory in the elections.²⁵

GD pledged to outlaw opposition groups, including the largest opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM), if it won the October parliamentary elections. GD accused UNM of being responsible for the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and claimed that the party seeks to open "a second front" in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.²⁶

The use of populist and nativist messaging campaigns, along with the securitization of the West, is a way for the ruling party to maintain popular support by leveraging social conservatism and fear of war. However, it also suggests a longer-term plan to shift toward Moscow, prioritizing short-term economic gains over Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. GD has focused on emphasizing themes of national sovereignty and conservative values, giving Russia new forms of leverage over Georgia.

Over the past 18 months, key figures from Georgian Dream have made antagonistic remarks about their Western allies. According to *OC Media*, between February and July 2022, Irakli Kobakhidze—then chair of Georgian Dream and now Prime Minister of Georgia—made only nine critical statements about Russia but delivered 57 disparaging comments about the West and 26 about Ukraine.²⁷ Leaders of GD have frequently framed their criticism of the United States and the European Union as a defense against foreign meddling in Georgia's internal affairs, suggesting a desire to push Western representatives out of the country.²⁸ Ivanishvili has consistently given the impression that he is gradually marginalizing pro-Western forces within Georgian society, including NGOs, political parties, and media outlets. In this regard, his party aligns with a distinctly Georgian identity rather than a European or Western one – something the Kremlin surely favors.

On October 26, 2024, Georgian Dream emerged victorious, securing 54 percent of the vote in an election that the opposition, civil society, and Western

²⁴ Cory Welt, "Georgia's Parliament Passes 'Transparency of Foreign Influence' Law," Congressional Research Service, Insight IN12368, May 28, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12368>.

²⁵ Tina Dolbaia and Maria Snegovaya, "In Georgia, Civil Society Wins against Russia-Style 'Foreign Agents' Bill," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 15, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/georgia-civil-society-wins-against-russia-style-foreign-agents-bill>.

²⁶ Ketrin Jochecová, "Georgia's Ruling Party Wants to Outlaw the Opposition," *Politico*, August 21, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-dream-party-ban-opposition-unm-mikheil-saakashvili/>.

²⁷ Shota Kincha, "Irakli Kobakhidze: The Face of Georgia's Turn from the West," *OC Media*, August 1, 2022, <https://oc-media.org/features/irakli-kobakhidze-the-face-of-georgias-turn-from-the-west/>.

²⁸ EuvsDisinfo, "Twists and Turns: Georgian Dream Rhetoric on the EU," *Kyiv Post*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/41048>.

countries viewed as a pivotal moment for the country's European future.²⁹ Despite overwhelming support for European integration among Georgians and a desire to distance themselves from Moscow, 20 percent of Georgia still remains under de facto Russian control after the 2008 war.

The rhetoric of the election campaign—involving messages about the preservation of family values (as opposed to the infiltration of LGBTQ+ ideas), protecting Christianity (Georgian Orthodox), choosing peace over war, and preserving economic development and prosperity over the destabilization that might arise from war—resonated with many, particularly those living near the separation line between sovereign Georgia and the separatist territories under Russia's control.³⁰ In the capital city of Tbilisi, however, many residents feel that Georgia's opportunity to become a full democracy and join the European Union is slipping away. The opposition claims the ruling party's real goal is to maintain power and create a one-party system rather than simply keep the country out of conflict, and it has also alleged that the elections were stolen.³¹

As the war in Ukraine continues and nations are forced to take sides on whether or not to impose sanctions on Russia, Georgia's leadership has assessed that it would be more financially beneficial to strengthen ties with Moscow. As the elite has slowly but steadily captured the state, the insecurity brought about by the war in Ukraine has allowed them to consolidate power and steer the country in a more authoritarian direction. Moscow benefits from seeing Georgia increasingly return to its sphere of influence, at the expense of the majority of Georgians who aspire to democracy and closer integration with the West.

Ivanishvili and Growing Russian Influence in Georgia

Bidzina Ivanishvili is Georgia's wealthiest individual, with an estimated net worth of around USD 7.6 billion, or about a quarter of the country's GDP.³² He accumulated his fortune primarily through business dealings in Russia during the 1990s. After returning to Georgia, Ivanishvili supported the Rose Revolution and donated USD 1 billion to assist the government afterward.³³ His contributions

²⁹ Reuters, "Georgian Ruling Party Wins Disputed Election, Near-Complete Results Show," *CNBC*, October 26, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/10/26/georgia-faces-an-uncertain-future-as-all-sides-claim-election-victory.html>.

³⁰ Mary Ilyushina, "Fearing War, Georgia Chooses a Return to Russia's Embrace," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/21/georgia-russia-elections-influence/>.

³¹ Ilyushina, "Fearing War, Georgia Chooses a Return to Russia's Embrace."

³² Dato Parulava, Eva Hartog, and Gabriel Gavin, "The Man Who Bought a Country," *Politico*, October 24, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/bidzina-ivanishvili-georgia-election-2024/.

³³ Arielle Thédrel and Régis Genté, "Ivanichvili, l'homme qui va vraiment diriger la Géorgie [Ivanishvili, the Man Who Will Truly Lead Georgia]," *Le Figaro*, October 28, 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/10/28/01003-20131028ARTFIG00567-ivanichvili-l-homme-qui-va-vraiment-diriger-la-georgie.php>. — in French

played a key role in reforming the police and developing new infrastructure in the country.

In early 2008, Ivanishvili is believed to have had a falling-out with Saakashvili. Ivanishvili himself stated that he faced increasing pressure from Saakashvili's administration and lost interest in continuing to fund government initiatives.³⁴ On October 7, 2011, he publicly declared his intention to lead the opposition in the 2012 Georgian parliamentary election, citing the perceived authoritarianism of Saakashvili.³⁵ On February 21, 2012, he announced the formation of Georgian Dream, which included his own political party of the same name, the Republican Party of Georgia, Our Georgia – Free Democrats, and the National Forum.³⁶

Ivanishvili's control within Georgia is significant, extending beyond the ruling party to key state institutions such as the judiciary, security services, and the economic sector. When Western sanctions were imposed on Russia and Russian oligarchs following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Ivanishvili came under scrutiny for his alleged business ties with Russia. More recently, reports suggest he has cultivated ties with Russian oligarchs and helped expand Russian market access to Georgia. A high-ranking U.S. official has stated that there is evidence pointing to Ivanishvili acting under the guidance of Russian intelligence agencies, raising significant concerns.³⁷ Ivanishvili's leadership has increasingly mirrored that of other autocratic leaders who consolidate power to safeguard their economic interests. Seeking to reduce his dependence on the West, he has shifted Georgia's focus away from its traditional Euro-Atlantic path in favor of strengthening trade and economic ties with alternative partners.

While Georgia has still not officially re-established diplomatic ties with Russia after the latter's 2008 invasion of the country, Ivanishvili has pursued unofficial rapprochement policies with Moscow, emphasizing economic cooperation. Tbilisi condemned Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine through a UN resolution on March 2, 2022, but refused to implement Western sanctions against Russia. Moreover, alongside other countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Georgia has been perceived as acting as a transit hub for goods bypassing sanctions.³⁸

³⁴ Regis Gente, "Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Man Who Plays According to Russian Rules?" *Caucasus Survey* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1-9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23761202-00101009>.

³⁵ "Written Statement of Bidzina Ivanishvili," *Civil Georgia*, October 7, 2011, <https://civil.ge/archives/121452>.

³⁶ "Founding Declaration of the Political Coalition Georgian Dream," *Civil Georgia*, February 21, 2012, <https://civil.ge/archives/121750>.

³⁷ Ani Chkhikvadze, "Exclusive: US Officials Say Sanctions Against Pro-Russian Former Georgian PM Are Ready to Go," *VoA*, September 22, 2024, www.voanews.com/a/exclusive-us-officials-say-sanctions-against-pro-russian-former-georgian-pm-are-ready-to-go-7794010.html.

³⁸ "Georgia's Role in Sanctions Evasion: A Transit Hub for Russia?" October 24, 2024, <https://forbes.ge/en/georgia-s-role-in-sanctions-evasion-a-transit-hub-for-russia/>.

According to Transparency International Georgia, the number of Russian companies registered in Georgia increased 3.6 times compared to the period from 1995 to 2021. In 2023, remittances from Russia to Georgia totaled USD 1.5 billion, 3.7 times higher than in 2021. The influx of Russian citizens fleeing their country after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly contributed to the rise in investments in Georgia. Additionally, exports from Georgia to Russia grew by 2.3 percent in 2023. Georgian wine exports continue to depend heavily on the Russian market, accounting for 65 percent of all Georgian wine exports – the highest proportion since 2005. Compared to 2021, oil product imports have increased fourfold. In 2023, natural gas imports from Russia increased by 15 percent, with Russian natural gas accounting for 20 percent of Georgia’s total consumption, up from 16 percent in 2021. Between January and September 2023, foreign direct investment from Russia increased by 17 percent compared to the same period in 2022.³⁹ Georgia has thus significantly increased its economic relations with Russia, as Ivanishvili and his oligarchic clan have identified new opportunities to enrich themselves while playing on domestic war fears and utilizing anti-Western rhetoric.

Over the past decade, Russia has regained several forms of influence in Georgia through business and politics. In 2014, Russian state oil giant Rosneft acquired a 49 percent stake in Petrocas Energy, the owner of the strategically vital oil terminal in Poti on the Black Sea. The stake was sold by a company linked to Russian-Georgian businessman David Iakobashvili, who remains the majority shareholder.⁴⁰ The Kremlin has also proactively fostered and funded pro-Russian parties while promoting xenophobic, ultranationalist, and predominantly anti-Western narratives within society.⁴¹

The Alliance of Patriots, an ultranationalist and traditionalist political party that opposes ties with the West, has been receiving Russian funds since 2016, according to a 2019 report by the Dossier Center.⁴² This party, however, has not been particularly successful in Georgian politics. Instead, Russia has effectively deepened societal divisions in Georgia by promoting “patriotic” nationalism and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. The Kremlin appears to have resonated with a segment of the population by depicting the West as evil and framing European values as

³⁹ “Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War,” Transparency International Georgia, February 22, 2023, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-impact-russia-ukraine-war-1>; “TI: Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia Increases,” *Georgia Today*, August 3, 2022, <https://georgiatoday.ge/ti-georgias-economic-dependence-on-russia-increases/>.

⁴⁰ Régis Genté, “Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia’s Drift from Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 21, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/>.

⁴¹ Seskuria, “Russia’s ‘Hybrid Aggression’ against Georgia.”

⁴² “Investigation Alleges Russian Money Behind Political Party in Neighboring Georgia,” GMF Alliance for Securing Democracy, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/investigation-alleges-russian-money-behind-political-party-in-neighboring-georgia/>.

incompatible with traditional Georgian values. A prevalent narrative, especially among more conservative groups, suggests that the West seeks to undermine the Georgian people's traditional Orthodox Christian beliefs.⁴³

Recent developments illustrate Kremlin-inspired tactics and narratives being actively deployed in Georgia. In July 2021, a small group of LGBTQ+ rights activists attempted to organize a Pride march in Tbilisi, while several ultra-Orthodox and traditionalist groups held a counter-rally. Although the Pride organizers ultimately canceled their event, 53 journalists covering the protests were physically attacked. The opposing groups also stormed the offices of local LGBTQ+ and civil society organizations, replacing the EU flag outside the parliament with an Orthodox cross, specifically, a St. Nino Cross, a uniquely Georgian symbol. Among the attackers were members of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and businessman Levan Vasadze, who has ties to Russian ultranationalist Alexander Dugin.

Russian and pro-Russian propaganda seeks to depict the Western alternative in Georgia as a corrupt distortion of national interests, contrasted with traditional and family values.⁴⁴ Rossiya-1 TV channel was quick to justify the violence, linking it directly to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and asserting that "ordinary" Georgians oppose holding Pride events in Tbilisi. According to Rossiya-1, "not everything is lost" for Tbilisi – if Georgia abandons its NATO aspirations, life will improve.⁴⁵

To that effect, in September 2024, a law was passed titled "On the Protection of Family Values and Minors." This law prohibits same-sex marriage and transgender rights, restricts same-sex adoption, bans the discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in schools and the media, and prohibits public demonstrations on these topics.⁴⁶

Issues of social conservatism are being exploited as a means of fostering anti-Western sentiment and embedding authoritarian laws and norms in society under the pretext of "protecting" Georgia from becoming overly liberalized. These narratives are typically Russian in origin and serve to consolidate authoritarian leadership, much like what occurred in Russia when similar laws were passed. Such measures help keep the current elite in power while pushing Western influence, perceived as a threat to the elites' authority, out of society.

State Capture in Georgia

State capture refers to the process by which political elites, often supported by private actors or oligarchs, undermine democratic institutions, legal systems, and political norms to concentrate power and resources in ways that harm the

⁴³ Seskuria, "Russia's 'Hybrid Aggression' against Georgia."

⁴⁴ Genté, "Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe."

⁴⁵ Seskuria, "Russia's 'Hybrid Aggression' against Georgia."

⁴⁶ "Georgian Parliament Passes Homophobic Law Banning LGBT 'Propaganda,'" *JAM-news*, September 17, 2024, <https://jam-news.net/georgia-passes-anti-lgbt-law/>.

broad public interest. It describes the manipulation of formal procedures—such as laws, social norms, and government bureaucracy—by government officials, state-owned enterprises, private corporations, or individuals to influence state policies and laws for their own benefit.⁴⁷

State capture can lead to several significant consequences, including democratic backsliding, in which countries that were once democratic gradually erode political freedoms, civil liberties, and the rule of law. It also privileges ruling elites and sidelines opposition groups. Additionally, illiberal state capture can have wider regional and global repercussions, such as lending tacit support to corrupt and aggressive authoritarian regimes that encourage similar processes of state capture, as in the case of the regime in Russia.

Ivanishvili has filled key government positions—particularly in high-spending ministries and law enforcement—with individuals loyal to him or with prior ties to him. For example, former prime ministers Irakli Gharibashvili and Giorgi Kvirikashvili held senior roles at Ivanishvili's companies before joining the government. Several ministers, including those for Internal Affairs, Healthcare, Infrastructure, and Finance, also had links to Ivanishvili's businesses.⁴⁸ Moreover, the dismissal and appointment of officials, especially prime ministers, often appear to be directed by Ivanishvili himself, bypassing formal legal procedures and reducing Parliament's role in the process. Ivanishvili's control over law enforcement agencies such as the prosecutor's office and the state security service is particularly concerning, as these institutions have been accused of serving his personal and political interests. The failure of these institutions to address high-level corruption has been noted by international bodies, including the European Parliament.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the Georgian Dream has attempted to pressure the executive branch by trying to impeach the current president of Georgia for traveling to European capitals to reaffirm the Georgian people's dedication to European values. However, according to her office, she was traveling in a private capacity, as she did not expect the government to approve her trip.⁵⁰

Despite efforts to decentralize power in Georgia, the GD exerts substantial control over local governance through its command of resources and appoint-

⁴⁷ Joel S. Hellman, Geraint Jones, and Daniel Kaufmann, "'Seize the State, Seize the Day': State Capture, Corruption, and Influence in Transition," *Policy Research Working Paper* 2444 (The World Bank, September 2000), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/537461468766474836/pdf/multi-page.pdf>.

⁴⁸ "Is Georgia a Captured State?" Transparency International Georgia, December 11, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state>.

⁴⁹ European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution of 14 November 2018 on the Implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Georgia," November 14, 2018, Strasbourg, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0457_EN.html.

⁵⁰ Dato Parulava, "Georgia's Pivot to Russia 'Might Be a Plan,' President Says," *Politico*, October 16, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/georgia-pivot-russia-plan-president-salome-zourabichvili-bidzina-ivanishvili-eu-election-tbilisi/.

ment powers. Rural voters rely heavily on local GD-affiliated mayors, school directors, judges, and business figures. This dependence intensifies during elections, as rural voters are promised promotions or bonuses in exchange for their support. Since the government is the primary employer in the regions, GD can maintain popular support by using its influence over local information and opinion leaders to uphold the system.⁵¹

Despite promises of reform, the judiciary in Georgia remains dominated by a group of loyal judges with close ties to GD, undermining the independence of the courts. This arrangement allows the ruling party to secure favorable judicial rulings, further consolidating its power. While there has been some improvement in non-political cases, the judiciary is often unable to provide impartial justice in politically sensitive cases.⁵²

Georgia's parliament has struggled to function as an independent institution due to the influence of the ruling party. It rarely exercises its power to investigate the executive branch or address corruption, as opposition-led efforts to establish investigative commissions are routinely blocked.⁵³ This has contributed to a weak system of checks and balances.

Although Georgian law protects media freedom, the government continues to exert significant influence over media outlets. Independent TV stations face financial and legal pressures to support the government. The Georgian National Communications Commission is intended to be an independent media regulator. Yet, its leadership has ties to Ivanishvili's media enterprises, and the Commission often targets outlets critical of the government.⁵⁴

State Capture Effects on Governance Reforms and Euro-Atlantic Integration

Georgia's relationship with NATO has been steadily strengthening since the late 1990s through various frameworks and initiatives, such as the Partnership for Peace program, and through the recognition at the 2008 Bucharest summit that Georgia would become a NATO member once it implements the necessary re-

⁵¹ Stephen Jones, "Perspectives: Mapping Georgian Dream's Path to 'Victory,'" Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, November 4, 2024, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/perspectives-mapping-georgian-dreams-path-victory>.

⁵² "The State of the Judicial System 2016-2020," October 30, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/state-judicial-system-2016-2020>.

⁵³ Alexander Scrivener "Constitutional Reform in Georgia: Challenges of Implementing the Idea of a Strong Parliament and Analysis of Obstacles," Georgian Institute of Politics, February 23, 2016, https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/policy_brief_GEO-3.pdf. – in Georgian

⁵⁴ "Georgian Media Environment in 2016-2020," Transparency International Georgia, October 29, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgian-media-environment-2016-2020>.

forms. At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) of measures was launched to strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself and advance its preparations for membership.⁵⁵

Since the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the country has made a concerted effort to reform its military and prioritized the professionalization of its armed forces. However, Ivanishvili's leadership and the Georgian Dream's dominant position in parliament have hampered reform processes, posing a significant challenge to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. Samuel Huntington, among other scholars, has emphasized that a crucial balance between civilian and military authorities is needed for a stable democracy: effective civilian oversight and military professionalism ensure that the military remains separate from political affairs.⁵⁶ Evidence of an imbalance in this relationship would be another indication that Georgia is undergoing processes of illiberal state capture by the elite, as the country continues to exhibit persistent issues such as nepotism, clientelism, corruption, and the dominance of political figures – all of which have a considerable impact on the independence of the Georgian military and the overall civil-military relations.⁵⁷

At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, Ukraine was assured it would eventually join NATO once the conditions were met, whereas Georgia was simply told to continue focusing on reforms. In the context of the war in Ukraine, growing concerns that Georgia could become Russia's next target have led the Georgian government to modify its rhetoric on NATO membership. Joining NATO requires a long-term political commitment, which appears to be lacking among Georgian leaders. Although the government continues to affirm its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, statements by former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili suggest a more ambivalent stance. Speaking at the Global Security Forum in Bratislava in 2023, Garibashvili suggested that NATO's expansion was a key cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – remarks that sparked both domestic and international criticism.⁵⁸ This controversy led to his absence from the Vilnius summit, with Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili representing Georgia instead.

Initially, under the party's leadership, Georgia made significant strides toward integration with the European Union, signing an Association Agreement in 2014 and a Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement in 2016. Georgian citizens were granted visa-free access to the Schengen Area, and in 2018, Georgia

⁵⁵ "Relations with Georgia," NATO, last updated March 7, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm.

⁵⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985); Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Civil-Military Relations and Democracy* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁵⁷ David Darchiashvili and Stephen Jones, "Georgia: Warlords, Generals, and Politicians," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, published online September 28, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1891>.

⁵⁸ Gavin, "NATO Aspirant Country Blames NATO for Russia's War on Ukraine."

enshrined its goal of EU and NATO membership in its constitution. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia—alongside Ukraine and Moldova—applied for EU membership in March 2022. While Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2023, the European Union granted Georgia this status only in December 2023, along with a list of conditions that the country would need to meet before formal accession talks could begin. These included measures to combat disinformation, align more closely with EU foreign policy, reduce political polarization, improve electoral fairness, enhance parliamentary oversight, reform the judiciary, fight corruption, reduce the influence of oligarchs, and protect human rights.⁵⁹

After the controversial passing of the foreign agents law, sharp criticism from the West ensued, with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issuing strong recommendations to repeal the law.⁶⁰ The United States froze its financial assistance to the country.⁶¹ The European Union warned of potential sanctions, reduced economic aid, and the possible reintroduction of visa requirements for Georgian citizens.⁶² NATO, for the first time since 2008, omitted any mention of Georgia's potential future membership from its official statements at the 2024 summit in Washington, D.C.⁶³

Georgia's increasing distancing from the European Union in recent years has had significant repercussions. The country has already lost €121 million in EU aid, and the EU ambassador to Georgia has warned that further delays in the accession process could result in a complete loss of financial support.⁶⁴ The European Union has also frozen \$32 million in defense aid to Georgia and warned

⁵⁹ "Opinion on the EU Membership Application by Georgia," European Commission – Questions and Answers, June 17, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_22_3800.

⁶⁰ "Georgia Should Repeal the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in Its Current Form, Says Venice Commission," Council of Europe Newsroom, May 22, 2024, www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/georgia-should-repeal-the-law-on-transparency-of-foreign-influence-in-its-current-form-says-venice-commission.

⁶¹ "US Suspends \$95 Million in Aid to Georgia after Passage of Foreign Agent Law That Sparked Protests," *Associated Press*, July 31, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/us-georgia-blinken-aid-2bc63a85d39d126b023658e6787a7f15>.

⁶² Laura Dubois, Daria Mosolova, and Anastasia Stognei, "EU Countries Push for Sanctions on Georgia Over 'Russian Law,'" *Financial Times*, May 22, 2024, www.ft.com/content/d4475d59-df96-4005-9786-04042704d07e.

⁶³ Mason Letteau Stallings, "NATO Summit's Declaration Omits Georgian Membership Path," *The American Conservative*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/nato-summits-declaration-omits-georgian-membership-path/>.

⁶⁴ "Georgia to Lose 121 Million Euros in EU Funding over 'Democratic Backsliding,' Says EU Delegation," *Reuters*, October 8, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-lose-121-million-euros-eu-funding-over-democratic-backsliding-says-eu-2024-10-08/.

of further consequences if the government continues on its current trajectory.⁶⁵ The United States has imposed sanctions and travel bans on key Georgian officials accused of undermining democracy and has suspended more than \$ 95 million in aid to the Georgian government.⁶⁶ Moreover, the Pentagon has “indefinitely” called off a U.S. Army exercise in Georgia as part of a review of future cooperation with the country.⁶⁷

Russia clearly stands to benefit from Georgia’s growing estrangement from the European Union and NATO. On July 9, 2024, the European Union suspended Georgia’s EU accession bid, halting its candidate status in response to the controversial foreign agents law. While formal membership talks had not yet begun, this decision was a significant setback for the approximately 80 percent of Georgians who support EU membership, according to a 2023 poll.⁶⁸ A March 2022 survey revealed that 41 percent of Georgians felt democracy had deteriorated over the previous year.⁶⁹ The Georgian Dream party has been accused of consolidating power over state institutions, limiting civil society and independent media, manipulating elections, and employing selective justice.⁷⁰

In addition to internal perceptions, international organizations have reported declines in the effectiveness of democratic institutions in Georgia. In recent years, the country has fallen by six points in Freedom House’s democracy indicators.⁷¹ According to Freedom House, key events have triggered this backsliding, including large protests erupting in 2019 in Tbilisi after a Russian lawmaker addressed the Georgian Parliament from the Speaker’s chair, sparking outrage over Russian influence in the country. The government’s violent crackdown on demonstrators further fueled tensions.

In the October–November 2020 parliamentary elections, accusations of vote-buying, violence, and inaccuracies in vote counting led to an opposition boycott

⁶⁵ 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>.

⁶⁶ Matthew Lee, “US Imposes Travel Bans on Georgian Officials over New Law That Critics Say Will Curb Media Freedom,” *Associated Press*, June 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/us-georgia-sanctions-media-freedom-russian-law-4108e5a11cd312460a83a640490b0f5a>.

⁶⁷ Zamone Perez, “Pentagon Postpones Army Exercise amid Diplomatic Tensions with Georgia,” *Military Times*, July 8, 2024, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2024/07/08/pentagon-postpones-army-exercise-amid-diplomatic-tensions-with-georgia/>.

⁶⁸ Dato Parulava, “Georgians Fear Their Government Is Sabotaging EU Hopes,” *Politico*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgian-fear-government-sabotaging-eu-hope/>.

⁶⁹ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia,” Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, April 27, 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia/>.

⁷⁰ Goedemans, “What Georgia’s Foreign Agent Law Means for Its Democracy.”

⁷¹ Freedom House, “Georgia.”

of the November runoff, which recorded the lowest voter turnout in Georgia's post-independence history (26 percent). In April 2021, the European Council brokered a deal between the Georgian Dream party and opposition groups to end the parliamentary boycott, but the main opposition party, the United National Movement, did not sign it. In July, the ruling party withdrew from the agreement. That same month, anti-LGBTQ+ riots targeted the Tbilisi Pride offices, injuring 53 journalists, one of whom later died from the attack.

In August 2021, it was revealed that the state security service had been spying on hundreds of individuals, including journalists and politicians. Local elections in October 2021 saw the Georgian Dream party win 19 out of 20 mayoral races, although allegations of vote-buying, intimidation, and misuse of state resources tainted the elections.⁷²

In 2022, as the European Union deliberated on whether to grant Georgia candidate status, the country's authorities imprisoned Nika Gvaramia, the CEO of an independent Georgian media outlet. It is worth noting that Gvaramia had also held two ministerial positions under the UNM. He was accused of embezzlement and abuse of his position at a well-known television channel. Groups such as Amnesty International described the charges as politically motivated.

In 2023, several opposition figures were attacked. In addition, the government's decision to introduce the foreign agents law was regarded as a major setback for democratic progress. Critics believe the law was an attempt by the GD party to suppress opposition voices ahead of the national elections in October 2024. The law severely undermines Georgia's vibrant civil society, which has played a crucial role in the country's post-Soviet democratization and its orientation toward the West.

Then, in December 2023, as a means to retain control of the country behind the scenes without directly intervening in the election process, Bidzina Ivanishvili made his official political comeback by becoming the honorary chair of the Georgian Dream party, despite having previously announced his retirement in 2021.⁷³

These indications of democratic backsliding demonstrate that Georgia is increasingly falling under the oligarchic control of Ivanishvili and his clan, which has negatively affected the country's governance, security, and Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. These trends have been exacerbated by intensifying strategic competition between the West and Russia, which has created opportunities for the elite to enrich themselves by cooperating more closely with Moscow and Beijing, while exploiting public fears and insecurity. The future of governance in Georgia and the country's Euro-Atlantic prospects remain bleak as long as GD remains in power.

Following the October 2024 parliamentary elections, widespread protests erupted and have continued, remaining ongoing as of this writing. In response, the government has carried out mass arrests and has shown little sign of altering

⁷² Freedom House, "Georgia."

⁷³ Freedom House, "Georgia."

its approach. Numerous individuals have endured beatings, torture, and other forms of mistreatment by law enforcement.⁷⁴

According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the elections in Georgia "took place amidst serious concerns about the impact of recently adopted legislation on fundamental freedoms and civil society, steps to diminish the independence of institutions involved in the election process, and pressure on voters, which, combined with election day practices, compromised the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution."⁷⁵

Russian Interests and the Implications of Georgia's Turn Toward Moscow

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia underwent a difficult period of economic turmoil, increased societal violence and crime, heightened corruption, and instability as it attempted to transform itself from a Soviet to a liberal market economy. When Putin came to power, he vowed to turn Russia around and restore it to "great power status."⁷⁶ With the advent of the commodities boom, Russia was able to regain economic strength through the sale of natural resources. Putin capitalized on this wave to create and consolidate a system composed of networks of *siloviki*—security sector forces made up of his close acquaintances—who managed major firms in Russia that were placed back under state control.⁷⁷

As Russia experienced democratic backsliding at home with Putin's increasing domestic control, its foreign policy goals included a return to great power status and the retention of influence in the former Soviet space.⁷⁸ Russian interests focused on maintaining regional hegemony and limiting the influence of external actors such as NATO and the European Union in its near abroad.⁷⁹ Russian leaders balked at the accession of formerly Soviet-occupied Eastern European states

⁷⁴ Elizabeth McBride, "As Georgia Slides into Authoritarianism, Protesters Vow to Keep Fighting Russian Pivot," *CNN*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/15/europe/georgia-protests-authoritarianism-fears-intl-cmd/>.

⁷⁵ "Following Georgia's Elections, ODIHR Reiterates Concerns over Pressure on Voters and Independence of State Institutions and Calls for Concrete Action," *Press Release*, OSCE, December 20, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/584050>.

⁷⁶ Igor Zevelev, "Kennan Cable No. 61: Russia in the Changing Post-Soviet Space," Wilson Center, November 20, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-61-russia-changing-post-soviet-space>.

⁷⁷ For more on Russia's experience in the 1990s and Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power, see: Suzanne Loftus, *Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia: Keeper of Traditional Values* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁷⁸ For more details on Russian foreign policy goals, see: Andrei Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁷⁹ Margarete Klein, "Russia's Military Policy in the Post-Soviet Space," *SWP Research Paper* 2019/RP 01, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 25, 2019, www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP01/.

into NATO and the European Union,⁸⁰ and when it came to Georgia and Ukraine, they took military action even at the suggestion of such moves.⁸¹ The Kremlin exploited civil turmoil in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 to involve itself in these nations' conflicts, leading to its recognition of separatist territories in Georgia and the outright annexation of Crimea.

By creating and maintaining frozen conflicts in these countries, Russia has prevented them from joining NATO, as membership is precluded for states with active territorial disputes.⁸² These actions demonstrate that the Kremlin does not respect the sovereignty and political independence of these countries. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further confirmed its imperial foreign policy ambitions in the former Soviet space.

Such a foreign policy is incompatible with European norms and international law. These major differences in foreign policy and national conduct have contributed to the deterioration of Russian-Western relations over time.⁸³ Russian leaders are more inclined to advocate the idea that great powers have the ability to dictate smaller powers' political trajectories – in other words, that “might makes right.”⁸⁴ However, the people of Georgia and Ukraine wish to distance themselves from Russian coercion and join the West.⁸⁵

In many countries in the post-Soviet space, institutional legacies persist that tie political and business elites to Russia, influencing political processes in these states.⁸⁶ Integrating into the European Union requires steps to reduce corruption and implement democratic reforms, which would ultimately diminish Russian political influence. In contrast, the Georgian Dream party's redirection of Georgian policy toward Russia advances Russia's foreign policy objectives, which are generally associated with increased corruption and the stifling of liberal reforms

⁸⁰ O.N. Mehrotra, “NATO Eastward Expansion and Russian Security,” *Strategic Analysis* 22, no. 8 (1998): 1225-1235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700169808458876>.

⁸¹ James J. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁸² Seth Mandel, “NATO, Ukraine's Frozen Conflict, and the Georgia Precedent,” *Foreign Affairs Commentary*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.commentary.org/seth-mandel/nato-ukraines-frozen-conflict-and-the-georgia-precedent/>.

⁸³ For more on the deterioration of Russian-Western relations, see chapter 3 in Suzanne Loftus, *Russia, China and the West in the Post-Cold War Era: The Limits of Liberal Universalism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

⁸⁴ Volodymyr Ohryzko, Roman Sohn, and Ariana Gic, “The West Must Stop Protecting Russia from the Consequences of Its Actions,” Royal United Services Institute, November 4, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/west-must-stop-protecting-russia-consequences-its-actions>.

⁸⁵ Dolbaia and Snegovaya, “In Georgia, Civil Society Wins against Russia-Style ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill.”

⁸⁶ Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 13, 2016, www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook.

at the expense of the people's will. Increased Russian influence is also linked to the notion that smaller countries possess fewer sovereign rights, as greater powers claim the authority to dictate their foreign policy.

Russian influence in these states undermines the population's aspirations to join Euro-Atlantic institutions and erodes the rules-based international order that upholds state sovereignty instead of "might makes right." The lack of a strong European response in integrating these states into its institutions has left them in an insecure position vis-à-vis Russia. Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's actions have stoked fear in these states, as can be seen in the case of Georgia. Moscow may be winning the strategic competition in the post-Soviet space as countries such as Georgia fall back under its influence. This undermines the Cold War victory of liberal democracy in Europe and the Western values that underpin it. Violence, corruption, coercion, and illiberal state capture will only increase in the post-Soviet space if Russia is rewarded for its aggression in Ukraine and if illiberal state capture goes unchecked in Georgia.

Conclusion

The Georgian Dream's increasing authoritarianism and state capture, coupled with its recent anti-Western, populist rhetoric, are veering the country away from conducting necessary governance reforms and muddling its national security alignment. The geopolitical environment has created insecurity among the Georgian population, which the elite seeks to exploit in order to consolidate power and further avoid implementing the reforms needed to integrate into Western security and economic institutions. Oligarchic state capture can have severe, debilitating impacts on institutions by promoting corruption and patronage networks, thereby obstructing reform efforts. Anti-Western rhetoric can harm Georgia's relations with NATO and other Western partners by creating confusion about Georgia's commitment to the alliance and undermining cooperation on joint military efforts, as well as the country's long-term strategic vision.

Georgia continues to struggle with improvements to its electoral system, judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, transparency in defense and security, and civil-military cooperation, while oligarchic influence remains pervasive. Unfortunately, under Ivanishvili's influence, the country is failing to implement these necessary reforms and is inching closer to Russia. He has adopted the authoritarian rhetoric of other leaders in the region, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Vladimir Putin in Russia. These developments are occurring at the expense of the majority's aspirations to integrate into Western institutions.

Illiberal state capture in former Soviet states such as Georgia enables Russian influence to proliferate and weakens these countries' reform processes and prospects for integrating into Western institutions. This strengthens Russia's position overall, particularly when its aggression goes unchecked or is rewarded. The less the West responds to Russian aggression and the use of hybrid warfare, the more disillusioned former Soviet states become with Euro-Atlantic integration,

and the more likely they are to revert to Moscow for stability, thus erasing the last 30 years of progress toward reform.

In Georgia's case, it appears that the war in Ukraine exacerbated the already ongoing processes of illiberal state capture due to the restrictions and opportunities that emerged after its outbreak. Given Georgia's illiberal, oligarchic leadership, strategic competition between the West and Russia has hindered rather than helped its Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. This could serve as a lesson for "in-between" states in Eastern Europe that are not yet but aspire to become EU or NATO members. A more consistent and supportive integration process might have helped Georgia avoid its authoritarian trajectory. Instead, Moscow is now claiming a win.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

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