

Tamar Gamkrelidze* - 30 June 2026

Georgia Is Not Lost For the EU: Why Georgian Dream's Pro-Kremlin Shift Remains Fragile

Introduction

The decision by the Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, on November 28, “not to put the issue of opening negotiations with the European Union on the agenda until the end of 2028”¹ was met with shock by many Georgians, prompting nationwide demonstrations. However, the decision to postpone negotiations did not come as a surprise to many observers, as the Georgian Dream (GD) government had been gradually and systematically moving in this direction. This was evident in the recent adoption of controversial laws on foreign influence and family values, the introduction of administrative and legal measures aimed at restricting freedom of assembly and expression, relentless verbal attacks on EU officials (eg., describing the EU Ambassador as a “tragic figure” and a “representative of the deep state”²), and the promotion of conspiracy theories about a “Global War Party”³ allegedly dominated by EU and US officials seeking the “Ukrainisation” of Georgia⁴.

The motivations behind this shift are arguably multi-layered, ranging from the broader geopolitical context and the perceived necessity - or strategic utility - of taking sides, possibly reflecting Kremlin expectations and incentives, to the failure of GD's opportunistic attempt to “ride two horses” simultaneously (i.e., Russia and the EU). Other factors are likely to include business interests, insecurities regarding the Kremlin, and grievances of GD's Honorary Chairman and informal ruler, Bidzina Ivanishvili towards the West, particularly regarding restrictions on his access to financial assets.⁵

While the GD party claims that the decision was carefully considered, it may have failed to take into account whether its political project can remain viable and sustainable, even with increasingly authoritarian instruments at its disposal. The project is largely transactional and contingent in nature, driven by narrow party and private interests, grounded in prag-

matic economic engagements with Russia, China, and Iran, and characterised by a limited developmental vision beyond the instrumental use of fear-mongering and rhetorical attacks on European values.

The Georgian Dream—Led Political Project: Pro-Russianness, Securitisation of the EU, and Multi-Vectorism with China

GD's vision of Georgia's “bright future” is framed primarily in terms of “sovereignty,” (a framing that aligns with Kremlin preferences⁶) yet remains under-specified in its concrete political and institutional implications. In simple terms, this could be characterised as a form of “sham sovereignty,” which hinges not on strengthening resilience and state capacity, but rather on avoiding actions that might antagonise a highly securitised Russia, which occupies 20% of Georgia's territory, under the assumption that an escalated confrontation could lead to rapid military defeat within five to six days.⁷ A key contradiction in this framing lies in the coexistence of sovereignty rhetoric with an emphasis on acute vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia and the acknowledgement of structural military asymmetry.

GD's rapprochement with Russia has been closely associated with Bidzina Ivanishvili.⁸ This has included the resumption of economic and social ties after the 2008 war, as well as the desecuritisation of Russia through the avoidance of critical references (e.g. commemoration of the April 9 tragedy) and the revision of certain historical narratives (e.g. the 2008 August War), even when Russia has been central to hostile actions against Georgia. Ultimately, GD's desecuritisation strategy appears less as an exercise in strategic autonomy and more as an accommodation of Russian expectations, while simultaneously reinforcing perceptions of external threat and domestic vulnerability.

* Tamar Gamkrelidze is operations coordinator and postdoctoral fellow at the European Neighbourhood Chair, College of Europe in Natolin. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Ilia State University and a Master's in European Studies from Maastricht University. A recipient of several fellowships, she is an alumna of Academic Swiss Net, EUCACIS, and DAAD. Her research covers identity politics, EU external affairs, and discourse theory. Her work has appeared in *Democracy and Security*, *Contemporary Politics*, *East European Politics*, etc..

Paradoxically, GD's desecuritisation of Russia is accompanied by the securitisation of the EU and the US (a pattern that was reversed with regard to the US following Trump's re-election⁹), with particular emphasis on the EU. Since 2022, the party has promoted narratives of a "second front" and "Ukrainisation," alleging that Western actors seek to draw Georgia into war.¹⁰ Within this framing, the EU is portrayed as being "at a crossroads—not only the political West, but also the civilisational West, based on Christian and democratic values".¹¹ More broadly, GD has advanced a sustained discourse that constructs the EU as an external threat, allegedly endangering Georgia's traditional values and sovereignty. Therefore, GD's refusal to align with EU demands is consequently being portrayed as resistance to externally driven destabilisation.

Another key concept re-emerging in the GD narrative is a multi-vector foreign policy, an approach that has been hailed in the Kremlin.¹² This policy envisions not only closer alignment with Russia, but also Georgia's strategic partnership with China, established in 2023 and preceded by the China–Georgia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), in force since January 2018. However, this partnership does not entail deeper political ties, military/ security cooperation/commitments, or arrangements comparable to Georgia's partnerships with NATO members. The relationship remains largely transactional, contributes to economic diversification, and does not imply political alignment. China's recent abstention on a UN resolution concerning Georgia further illustrates the limits of this strategic partnership.¹³

While GD presents its foreign policy as multi-vector, its increasing tensions with the EU raise questions about whether this policy remains genuinely multi-vector.¹⁴ A multi-vector strategy requires maintaining workable relations across multiple external partners. When one vector is systematically weakened or antagonised, the policy begins to resemble reorientation, hedged alignment, or asymmetric balancing. The deterioration of relations with Georgia's principal Western partners, which support its territorial integrity and advocate the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgian territory, therefore appears to signal increasing alignment with Kremlin narratives and requests to suspend EU integration, rather than a genuinely balanced multi-vector approach.¹⁵

The Kremlin's Influence Operation in Georgia

Russia's ideological approach in the post-Soviet space has changed over time, and Georgia has served as a testing ground for new approaches. The Kremlin is aware that Russia is heavily securitised in public and political discourse in Georgia, meaning that it is increasingly perceived as a major threat to state sovereignty and security. This perception is reflected in public opinion surveys, where 77% of respondents identify Russia as the primary threat to Georgian statehood.¹⁶

Consequently, Russian influence operates less through direct ideological promotion and more through indirect networks, proxies, and narratives that avoid explicit association with the Kremlin. These narratives often promote a binary framing of choice: either alignment with the EU and the risk of a "second front" and war, or neutrality associated with peace. These actors tend to capitalise on pre-existing social anxieties, particularly fears, not only of war, but also of rapid social change, and perceived external imposition of norms that may contradict local traditions and cultural values.

In this context, anti-EU narratives become especially important. Pro-Russian proxies, which do not openly acknowledge allegiance to the Kremlin due to significant political costs, frequently portray the EU as an external actor attempting to impose liberal social norms (e.g. alleged imposition of same-sex marriage¹⁷) that undermine national traditions and sovereignty. In this way, they reinforce broader Kremlin narratives without necessarily presenting themselves as openly pro-Russian. Ideologically, this reflects a broader shift in Russia's positioning toward a conservative civilisational discourse centred on traditional values and sovereignty, and structured around opposition to Western liberalism.¹⁸

Dichotomization of the Domestic Front: Growing Tensions with the Pro-European Public

The Georgian public is largely pro-European, a constituency that GD has targeted through a combination of administrative, legal, and extrajudicial measures. However, these efforts have largely failed to undermine support for European integration. A particular challenge for GD is the urban population. Urban voters pose a significant obstacle because, even according to GD-endorsed election results that were contested by the OSCE, the party either lost or

came close to losing in major cities (Tbilisi – 42.18%; Rustavi – 41.41%¹⁹). This electorate is arguably more resistant to manipulation, as it has access to alternative sources of information and remains steadfast in its support for Georgia’s European future.

Over the past decade, this segment of the population has maintained positive perceptions of the EU and the US, which has translated into sustained support for Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2015, 85% of Georgians supported EU membership, while 78% supported NATO membership.²⁰ These figures declined slightly by 2017, with support for the EU at 80% and for NATO at 68%.²¹ In 2019, support stood at 77% for the EU and 74% for NATO.²² A 2022 poll showed renewed support, with 83% in favor of EU membership and 77% supporting NATO.²³ A 2024 survey further indicated that 81% of Georgians trust the EU, while 60% hold a positive image of it.²⁴

Moreover, the EU and the US have consistently been identified as Georgia’s most important international partners.²⁵ In 2011, 61% of respondents named the US as the country’s primary partner, while 33% selected the EU.²⁶ By 2021, these figures remained high, with 60% identifying the US and 56% the EU as Georgia’s most important partners.²⁷ This trend likely reflects increased engagement through initiatives such as the Association Agreement and visa liberalisation, as well as the substantial financial and political support provided by both actors (EU²⁸, US²⁹) since Georgia’s independence.

Enablers of GD’s Electoral Capital: Fragile and Transactional

Most exit polls place GD’s support between 40.9% and 42%³⁰—a strikingly high figure given high-level corruption and economic hardship. This enduring backing is sustained by a coalition of GD supporters motivated by distinct but mutually reinforcing logics. Support for GD can be broadly divided into two categories: those who benefit financially and politically, and those who subscribe to the GD-led narrative. The first category—arguably the key pillar—consists of “enablers”: members of patronage networks, including bureaucrats, local elites, and business figures who receive direct material advantages through state patronage. Their loyalty is transactional, rooted in personal or economic gain derived from proximity to power.

The second category can be further divided into three subgroups. One segment is composed of ideologically committed individuals who prioritise order and national security above all else. They tend to view dissent—whether from civil society, the media, or opposition parties—as inherently destabilising. Another subgroup, often described as fear-driven supporters, is motivated, not by material gain/abstract ideals, but by fear. Their political engagement is shaped by anxiety over the potential return of the UNM/ the Saakashvili era.

Finally, GD draws substantial support from some of the most vulnerable populations—particularly those in rural areas and villages with limited access to independent information. These individuals often rely on regional GD figures as their primary source of news and political cues. In many cases, such support is cultivated through the distribution of small benefits—mainly monetary—particularly in the lead-up to elections. Together, these groups form a support base that insulates the GD from accountability and enables it to maintain power despite its increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

GD’s Strengths, Limits and Vulnerabilities

Trust in GD is as low as 24%.³¹ Public distrust toward GD is primarily driven by high-level corruption, weak responses to economic hardship, and the absence of a coherent long-term development strategy beyond narrow party and private interests. It is further reinforced by perceptions of selective justice and broader political disillusionment. For GD, one of the main sources of power is a structurally fragmented party system, as 41% of respondents do not identify with any political party. This party dealignment, compounded by opposition fragmentation, a problematic political legacy, and internal divisions, weakens the capacity of opposition forces to translate societal dissatisfaction into coordinated political alternatives.

GD’s foreign policy strategy is predominantly flawed and creates a gap between the GD and the public. In particular, GD’s attempt to recalibrate relations with the EU and Russia is constrained by entrenched public preferences. Despite efforts to reframe threat perceptions, the pro-European majority remains broadly sceptical and continues to question the legitimacy of government narratives. Sustained Euro-Atlantic orientations in public opinion indicate that these preferences are deeply embedded and resilient, con-

straining the government's ability to meaningfully reshape foreign policy attitudes through (dis)informational strategies.

Similarly, GD's rapprochement with Russia remains constrained by entrenched societal perceptions. This includes perceptions among its own supporters/enablers, who view Russia as a hostile actor. The factor that resonates most strongly is fear of war, from

which GD appears to benefit most. Relatedly, while pro-European protest participation has declined compared to its initial peak, public opposition to GD has not dissipated but instead persists in a more diffuse yet robust form, shaped by expectations of external geopolitical developments, particularly regarding Ukraine and broader regional dynamics.

References

1. F. Light, *Protesters clash with Georgian police over government's EU application delay*, Reuters (29 Nov. 2024)
2. Georgian Public Broadcaster, *PM Kobakhidze describes EU Ambassador as tragic figure not allowed for his ambassadorship*, (23 Jun. 2025)
3. L. Kunchulia, *Georgian Dream Takes On The 'Global War Party'*, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (18 May 2024)
4. Georgia Today, *PM: Despite two foreign-funded revolutionary attempts, we have saved our country from Ukrainization and maintained peace*, (1 Dec. 2024)
5. J. Dowsett, *Slapped With Sanctions, Georgian Oligarch Ivanishvili Brings Assets Home*, OCCRP (14 Feb. 2025)
6. Interpressnews, *Maria Zakharova: Tbilisi has made a firm choice in favor of restoring the country's sovereignty - we are ready to deepen Russia-Georgia ties, and we do so sincerely*, (10 Jun. 2026)
7. YouTube, *Mariam Lashkhi: NGO Nation - Who Speaks for Georgia?*, (15 Jun. 2025)
8. Civil Georgia, *PM Appoints Special Envoy for Relations with Russia*, (1 Nov. 2012)
9. Eurasianet, *Georgian government's 'deep state' bromance with Trump remains unrequited*, (19 May 2025)
10. Civil Georgia, *Kobakhidze Says 'Global War Party' Uses EU Visa Threat to Open Second Front in Georgia*, (17 Jul. 2025)
11. Interpressnews, *Irakli Kobakhidze: Our history, our culture, our identity are all European, but the European bureaucracy must recognize our right to sovereignty and democracy - being pro-European does not mean being anti-Georgian*, (29 May 2025)
12. Sova, *Maria Zakharova: Georgia Has Chosen a Multi-Vector Policy*, (29 May 2026)
13. Civil Georgia, *UN General Assembly Passes Georgia IDP Resolution*, (4 Jun. 2025)
14. Interpressnews, *Prime Minister's report: Georgia continues multi-vector cooperation and harmonization with the European Union in foreign policy*, (2 Jun. 2026)
15. Civil Georgia, *EU's Kallas Says European Security Interest Is for Russian Troops Not to Be in Georgia, Moldova*, (28 May 2026)
16. International Republican Institute, *IRI Georgia Poll Shows Political Threat from Russia, Concerns with the Presence of Russian Citizens, High Political Polarization*, (15 Nov. 2023)
17. Formula News, *Macharashvili: It won't make much difference whether a married man travels abroad with a visa or visa-free*, (4 Dec. 2025)
18. MID Russia, *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova* (7 Feb. 2024)
19. Civil Georgia, *Official Results of 2024 Vote: What They Show*, (27 Oct. 2024)
20. International Republican Institute, *IRI Georgia Poll: Georgians are Less Optimistic, Continue to Desire Deeper Ties with the West, Wary of Perceived Russian Threat, Concerned Regarding Economy* (31 Mar. 2015)
21. National Democratic Institute, *NDI poll: Georgians increasingly support EU and Euro-Atlantic aspirations; view Russia as a threat*, (12 May 2027)
22. National Democratic Institute, *NDI Poll: EU and NATO Support Remains Strong but Threatened by Russia and Perception of Harm to Culture and Values; Armenian and Azeri Communities Respond Differently to NATO Membership*, (20 May, 2019)
23. National Democratic Institute, *Taking Georgians' pulse* (Mar. 2022)
24. Interpressnews, *According to EU NEIGHBOURS EAST survey, 71% of respondents support Georgia's accession to the EU, 79% believe that EU membership will bring more advantages, and 51% believe that the EU has hidden interests* (19 Jun. 2026)
25. Georgian Public Broadcaster, *IRI poll: 68% of Georgians support joining EU, 77% – NATO membership* (2 Aug. 2021)
26. International Republican Institute, *IRI Releases Expanded Nationwide Survey of Georgian Public Opinion* (5 Jan 2012)
27. *Supra* n.25
28. *EU in Georgia, Facts and Figures*, (2026)
29. U.S. Department of State. *U.S. security assistance to Georgia*. (2022).
30. Civil Georgia, *Exit Polls Show Conflicting Results as Polls Close* (26 Oct. 2024)
31. Interpressnews, *NDI poll: 24% of respondents say that Georgian Dream is closest to their views, 9% name National Movement, 8% say that none of the parties is closest to their views* (27 Jan. 2022)