



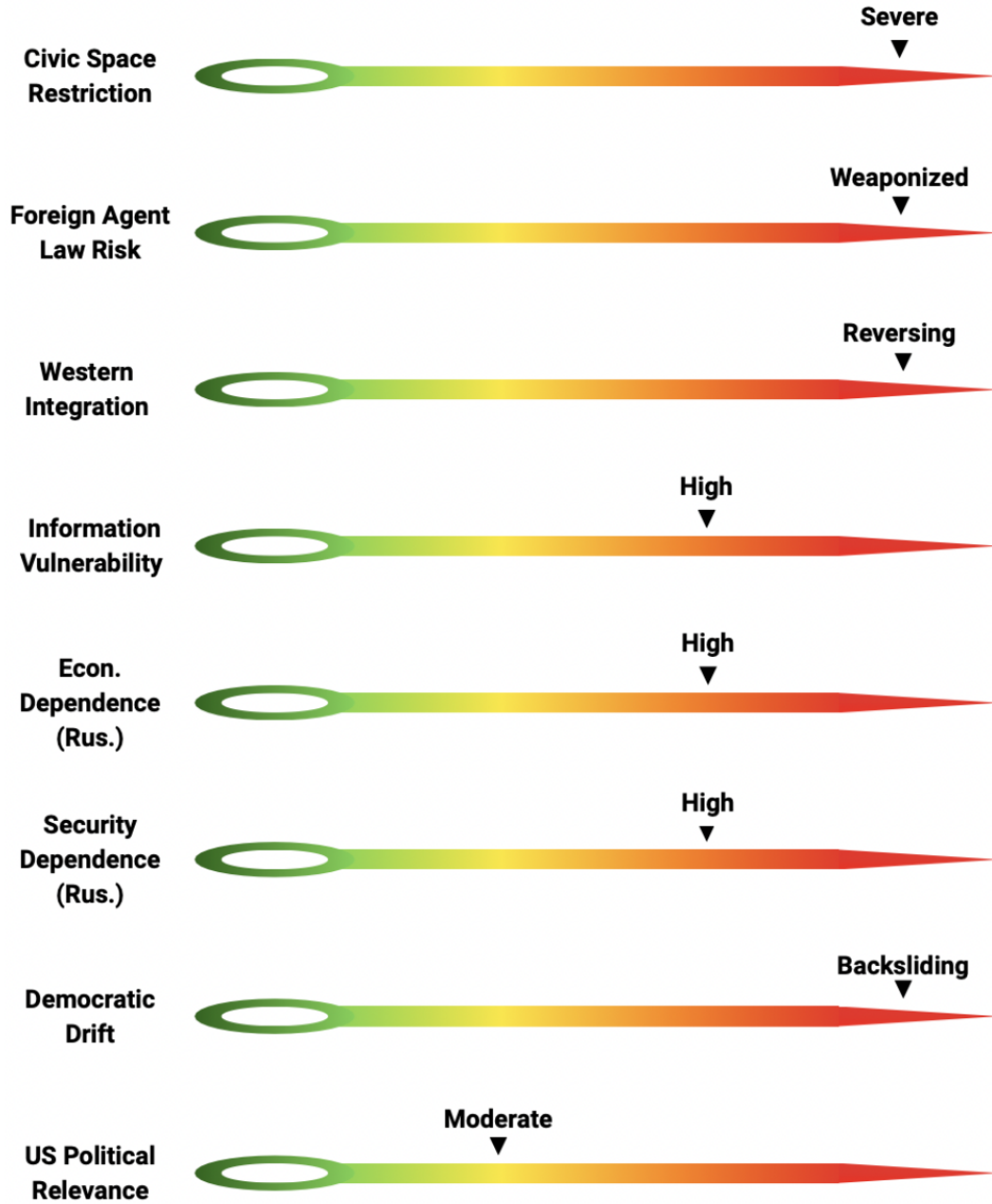
SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Regional Affairs Dispatch I:

GEORGIA

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Senate Square Society Assessment

I. Regional & Institutional Influences

A. Geographic & Political Challenges

a. Historical Tensions With Russia Inform Contemporary Strife

Georgia and Russia have faced numerous geographic and religious challenges throughout their 600-year history. **Georgia existed as a state long before Russia's founding**; its early roots underwriting the Georgian sense of national identity of the intelligentsia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Russian conquest in 1801 enveloped eastern Georgia, and the west was absorbed in the following decades. At this time, the nation mainly consisted of peasants with a group of elites that integrated themselves into the Russian imperial civil and military ranks.¹

However, **Russification policies quickly yielded Georgian nationalism and rebellions**; the last decade of the 19th century saw Georgian intellectuals subscribing to Marxism with the belief that the bourgeoisie and autocracy were in the way of a future of political and social freedom. **Georgia briefly regained independence after the Russian Empire collapsed with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, but this was short-lived and Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1921.** Tensions were often palpable in the early Soviet republic, as anti-Bolshevik sentiments and violent protests were commonplace. Peace demonstrations were violently suppressed in 1956, student-led protests persisted several decades later when the Kremlin proposed to strip the Georgian language of its sole official state status in 1978, and a major massacre occurred in 1989 when pro-independence movements were crushed by the Soviet army.

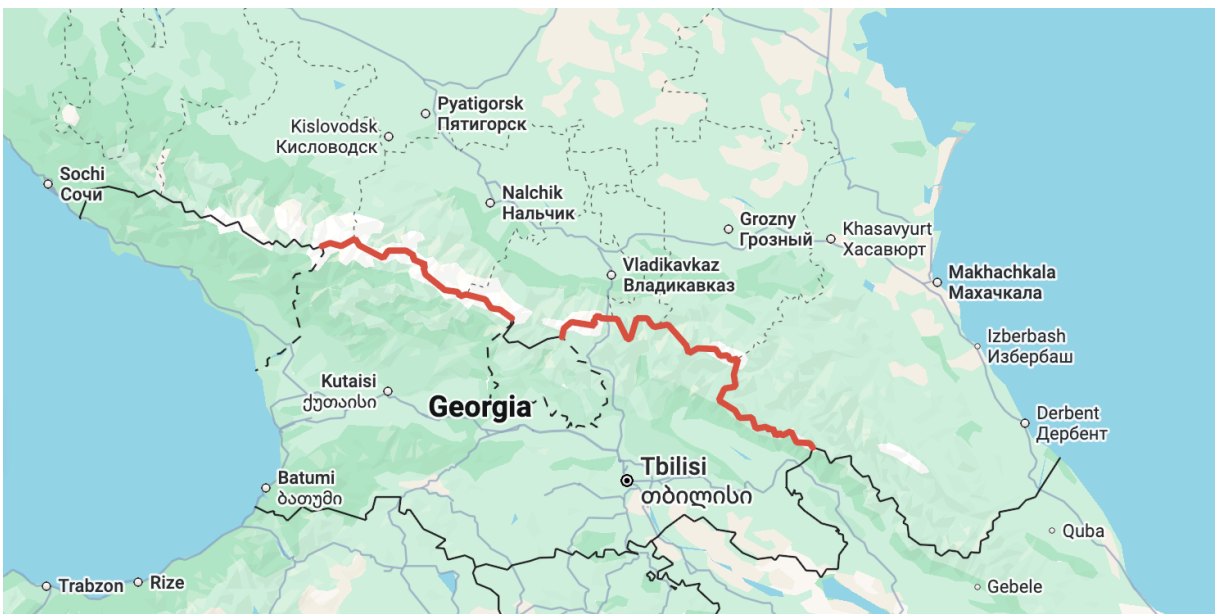
Throughout the Soviet years, Georgian nationalism remained strong and demands for independence grew as time passed. **In 1991, Georgia regained its independence but separatist conflicts in Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia made relations complicated with Russia (which supported the separatists).** In 1993, Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. Georgia hoped this would lead to economic support and a solution to the separatist conflicts by Russia.² **The 2003 Rose Revolution also marked a turning point in Georgia-Russia relations as the country pursued closer ties with the west.** These frustrations between both nations led to the **Russo-Georgian War in 2008, where Russia invaded Georgia. Russia recognized the breakaway nations as sovereign while they are internationally understood as Russian-occupied Georgian territories.** Georgia and Russia's dynamic and extensive past

¹ Suny, Ronald. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford University Press, 1993.

² Vladimir Socor, *Georgia Near Exit From CIS*, Volume 3 Issue 92, Eurasia Daily Monitor (2006), <https://jamestown.org/georgia-near-exit-from-cis/>.

alongside one another has created a complicated and intertwined relationship today as **each nation attempts to balance its own interests while being mindful of its neighbor.**³

Outlined below in red is Georgia's border with Russia, interrupted in two places by its breakaway territories, Abkhazia on the coast and South Ossetia in the center.



b. Georgian Dream Lobbies U.S. Lawmakers While Cozying Up to Russia, China, Iran

Georgian Dream (*Qartuli Ocneba* in Georgian), colloquially known as “Kotsebi,” is a conservative Georgian political party founded by billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2012. Originally a pro-European party, Georgian Dream began at center-left, but has since migrated to the far right, now pushing culturally conservative, Eurosceptic ideals all the while maintaining its liberal fiscal policy positions. It has promoted problematic conspiracy theories and policies labeled by the US as contradictory to EU and NATO membership policies. The U.S. and other nations have sanctioned Georgian Dream officials for committing human rights violations and working for the benefit of the Russian Federation. Since the party took over in 2012, it has faced criticism from U.S. lawmakers for wavering on its original democratic principles and enacting repressive laws despite support from Georgians for Euro-Atlantic integration.⁴

³ Emil Souleimanov, “A Wonderful Country in the Caucasus...”: A Brief History of Russo-Georgian Relations in the Pre-Soviet Era, IJORS (2013), https://www.ijors.net/issue2_1_2013/articles/souleimanov.html.

⁴ Alex Raufoglu, *US House Passes Georgia Bill Targeting Russian, Chinese Influence Amid Deepening Rift With Tbilisi*, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty (Jun. 9, 2026), <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-house-passes-georgia-bill-targeting-russian-chinese-influence-amid-deepening-rift-with-tbilisi/33776729.html>.

The **Global War Party**, for example, is a Georgian-Dream-backed conspiracy theory; an alleged international organization leveraging influence against the EU and US. Perpetrators of the theory spread misinformation and fearmonger the Georgian public with veiled threats of a prolonged Russo-Ukrainian war, or the “Ukrainization of Georgia.”⁵

In May 2026, Georgian Dream lobbyists came to Washington, lobbying Congress to restore the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership (suspended in November 2024), presumably in an effort to quell U.S. and European fears about Georgia strengthening its ties with China, Russia, and Iran.⁶

As recently as early June 2026, the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs passed the Countering China’s Control of the Caucasus Act, requiring the State Department to “submit a classified report to Congress that examines Russian and Chinese influence and intelligence activity in the country of Georgia,” along with a strategy to enhance bilateral ties with Georgia.⁷ The bill, brought by Representatives Wilson (R-SC) and Cohen (D-TN) will soon be considered by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.⁸

Roughly a fifth of Georgia’s territory is occupied by Russian forces (discussed in detail below), **and it is facing trade isolation and an increased economic and security dependence on Moscow.**

Georgia is thus extremely vulnerable to Russian pressure:

*[I]n 2023 when the European Union granted Georgia candidate status[, i]nstead of embracing this historic opportunity, **the ruling party reintroduced the Russian-style “Foreign Agents’ law,” a measure designed to silence civil society and independent media.** This move sparked massive protests that were met with brutality from the government. Yet the government doubled down on Kremlin-style rhetoric, accusing the West of orchestrating unrest and attempting to drag Georgia into the war with Russia.*⁹

Georgia’s drift away from Euro-Atlantic relations is also evidenced through the rise of the United Neutral Georgia political movement, a Georgian Dream-backed political party that advocates for anti-NATO and anti-EU positions.¹⁰ In 2025, Georgia participated in Turkmenistan’s 30th anniversary of its UN-neutral status. “Since neutrality implies limited engagement with the

⁵ Global War Party, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_War_Party.

⁶ Beka Chedia, *Georgian Dream Seeking U.S. Reset While Resisting Requisite Reforms*, Jamestown (Jun. 10, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/georgian-dream-seeking-u-s-reset-while-resisting-requisite-reforms/>.

⁷ Countering China’s Control of the Caucasus Act, H.R.7668, 119 (2026), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/7668>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Vasil Sikharulidze, *Russian Influence Operations in Georgia: A Threat to Democracy and Regional Stability*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (Mar. 13, 2025) <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russian-influence-operations-in-georgia-a-threat-to-democracy-and-regional-stability/>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it also reinforces and formalizes Russia's influence in Georgia."¹¹ **While not explicitly pro-Russia, this movement is one of many Georgian Dream initiatives that functionally appeases demands from Moscow, regardless of any goals the administration claims to have set for the country's independence and agency.**

Another common practice in suppressing challengers of Georgian Dream leaders and policies is political imprisonment and extended prison sentences. Last year, a Georgia court extended the prison sentence of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, a prominent critic of Georgian Dream, by four-and-a-half years for "illegally entering the country following his exile in 2021."¹² His sentence, which Georgian Dream officials claim is for embezzlement and abuse of power while in office, will last over a decade.¹³ "Saakashvili has always denied wrongdoing and called his latest sentence "illegal" and "unjust". Rights groups say his imprisonment is politically motivated. Saakashvili opposes the governing Georgian Dream party, which favours closer ties with Russia. As president, he sought to forge closer relations with Western governments."¹⁴

c. South Ossetia Opens its Doors to the North

While it technically sits within Georgian territory, **South Ossetia has existed as a separate administration since Mikheil Saakashvili, the former President of Georgia, signed the presidential decree in 2007.**¹⁵

In a November 2025 briefing, Georgia's Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, argued elections in Tshinkvali, South Ossetia's capital city, functionally resulted in the Georgian government "[granting] legitimacy to separatist processes, which was a clear and grave betrayal of Georgia's state interests."¹⁶ He alleged that the 2007 Georgian government acted as part of a "geopolitical game" controlled by external forces that designated Georgia a "sacrificial pawn."¹⁷ The Georgian Dream politician pointed to the same "betrayal of Georgia's national interests" in the ongoing lawsuit wherein the ruling party aims to ban three opposition forces (the United National Movement, Ahali/Coalition for Change, and Strong Georgia/Lelo).¹⁸

¹¹ Beka Chedia, *Georgia Drifting Back Into Russia's Orbit*, Jamestown (Jan. 12, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/georgia-drifting-back-into-russias-orbit/>.

¹² James Gregory, *Saakashvili Handed Further Four Years In Jail*, BBC (Mar. 17, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn0jwnyk110o>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Civil GE, *GD to Abolish South Ossetian Provisional Administration*, Civil GE (Nov. 17, 2025), <https://civil.ge/archives/711026>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Civil GE, *Ruling Party Appeals to Constitutional Court to Ban Three Major Opposition Forces*, Civil GE (Oct. 28, 2025), <https://civil.ge/archives/708651>.

In May 2026, **Alan Gagloev, the de facto president of South Ossetia signed an agreement with Putin on “Deepening Allied Interaction,”** loosening restrictions on who could take part in South Ossetia’s separatist administration and **allowing, for the first time, Russian citizens to serve.**¹⁹ One month after the agreement was signed, South Ossetian Prime Minister Dzambolat Tadtoev resigned.²⁰ In his place, **Gagloev announced he would appoint North Ossetian native and career Kremlin bureaucrat Marat Kambolov, cementing Tskhinvali-Moscow relations and expanding Russian reach into Georgian territory.**²¹ While Georgian Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili has commented that “Russia continues to disregard its international obligations and is taking further steps toward the annexation of Georgia’s regions,” **Tbilisi has done little to successfully frustrate what appears to be the impending annexation.**²² For more information on South Ossetia, please see APPENDIX A.

d. Abkhazia: an Intersection of Security, Leverage, and Sovereignty

Abkhazia is a region in northwestern Georgia that fought for sovereignty after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Separatists attempted to break away from Tbilisi, and war broke out in 1992 and 1993. **The conflict displaced many ethnic Georgians, and with Russia’s support the separatists were able to gain control.**²³ **Abkhazia declared independence in 1999; this status was formally accepted by Russia only after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, which ended in a ceasefire and disagreement over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.** The rest of the international community recognizes Abkhazia as Russian-occupied Georgian territory. This unresolved status continues to be a source of tension.

Since the 2008 conflict, **Russia has retained military presence in the area, facilitating Abkhazia’s further integration into “security cooperation, financial systems integration, infrastructure investments, and legal harmonization,”** and embedding the region into **Russian systems. In the long term, this allows Russia to strengthen its leverage in the South Caucasus.**²⁴ Though Abkhazians are heavily dependent on Russia today, as **70% of residents hold Russian passports**

¹⁹ Nicholas Castillo, *Some Georgians Think Russia Just Annexed Part of Their Country*, The Moscow Times (Jun. 12, 2026), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/06/12/some-georgians-think-russia-just-annexed-part-of-their-country-a93004>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ Reuters, *Putin Promises Continued Electricity Supplies in Meeting with Breakaway Abkhazia’s Leader*, Reuters (Mar. 5, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-promises-continued-electricity-supplies-meeting-with-breakaway-abkhazia-as-2025-03-05/>.

²⁴ Irakli Laitadze, *Kremlin Suspends Internal Russian Passport Issuance in Abkhazia*, Jamestown (Mar. 5, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/kremlin-suspends-internal-russian-passport-issuance-in-abkhazia/>.

and Russia provides necessities such as security backing and electricity,²⁵ they hold **reservations about Russia's encroachment and worry about economic takeover**. Such concerns fueled the resignation of previous de facto leader, Aslan Bzhania, as **mass protests ensued after the proposal of a pro-Russia bill in 2024**.²⁶ Video footage revealed raiding the parliament and the presidential complex.²⁷ His successor, Badra Gunda, proceeded with more caution when dealing with implementation of the bill. The issues surrounding Abkhazia also extend to humanitarian crises; Georgians living in Abkhazia, especially the Gali district, have experienced restrictions and interferences of rights as documented by Human Rights Watch.²⁸

In June 2026, the Chinese embassy in Georgia published letters between Presidents Xi Jinping and Mikheil Kavelashvili announcing an upgrade to the two countries' strategic partnership.²⁹ This partnership is just one of China's eighty, and promises very little in terms of comprehensive or structural aid in Georgia.³⁰ "Beyond economics, the political returns on this partnership have been equally thin. China has not offered Georgia meaningful diplomatic backing where it counts. At the United Nations, Beijing once again abstained just days ago on the resolution concerning displaced persons from Abkhazia and South Ossetia."³¹ However, "Despite China's non-recognition of Abkhazia's self-proclaimed independence, top officials of Abkhazia's de facto government, along with some outside experts, have frequently expressed optimism about China's ability to foster the renegade region's economic development."³² As such, U.S. policymakers should remain informed on developments in this area.

Abkhazia holds a strategically significant foothold on the Black Sea. **Access to this coastline is another attractive incentive for Russia, which seeks to reestablish its maritime power, including**

²⁵ Reuters, *Putin Promises Continued Electricity Supplies in Meeting with Breakaway Abkhazia's Leader*, Reuters (Mar. 5, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-promises-continued-electricity-supplies-meeting-with-breakaway-abkhazia-2025-03-05>.

²⁶ Jaroslav Lukiv, *Abkhazia: Leader of Georgia Breakaway Region Resigns*, BBC News (Nov. 18, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crr91px4nlqo>.

²⁷ Hafsa Khalil, *Pro-Russia bill triggers protests in Georgia breakaway region*, BBC News (Nov 15, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c206dyxkg01o>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Living in Limbo*, Human Rights Watch (Jul. 15, 2011), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/07/15/living-limbo/rights-ethnic-georgians-returnees-gali-district-abkhazia>.

²⁹ Revaz Topuria, *Georgia's Upgraded Partnership With China: A Louder Signal, An Empty Promise*, The Diplomat (Jun. 13, 2026), <https://thediplomat.com/2026/06/georgias-upgraded-partnership-with-china-a-louder-signal-an-empty-promise/>.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² Diego Benning Wang, *Commentary: Unpacking China's Increasing Influence in Abkhazia*, Eurasianet (Oct. 24, 2025), <https://eurasianet.org/commentary-unpacking-chinas-increasing-influence-in-abkhazia>.

by establishing a Russian naval facility at the Port of Ochamchire.³³ Abkhazia is not a frozen ethnic conflict, the region is an active component of Russia's efforts to extend beyond its formal borders and their cooperation allows Russia to be an influential player in the South Caucasus.³⁴ For more information on Abkhazia, please see APPENDIX B.

B. Cultural Influences

a. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)

As with Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia, the **Georgian Orthodox Church holds significant power in the lives of Georgians.** An early adopter of the religion—second only to Armenia, who adopted Christianity in 301 AD—Georgia has embraced Christianity since the 4th century.

Despite seventeen centuries of Christian traditions, Georgia also plays host to extensive lore underpinned by pre-Christian mythology (*kartuli mitologia* in Georgian). Georgian mythology has been preserved through popular tales and fables; many of which fused with Christian legends in the early 4th century, though the lack of uniform evangelization resulted in a patchwork of beliefs that differs as you travel across the region. According to Georges Charachidze, while the plains are heavily informed by early Christian influence, “the mountain Georgians, on the other hand, preserved a rich and well-organized [pagan] religious system to the beginning of the twentieth century, with differentiated cults that continued to be productive [thanks largely to the persistence of] a priestly class with an orally-transmitted body of knowledge.” The Caucasus Research Resource Center found in 2019 that 91% of the Georgian public believed in some sort of supernatural power.³⁵ Nearly 60% of respondents reported a belief in faith healers, and nearly half of respondents said they believed ancestors had supernatural powers.³⁶ According to their survey, “the only statistically significant difference present in the data was with regard to people who are more religious, who believed in more superstitions on average while controlling for other factors.”³⁷

As of 2020, roughly 85% of Georgians self-identified as Georgian Orthodox Christian. Georgian women are increasingly encouraged to return to traditional Christian gender roles and abstain from joining the workforce, despite their achieving similar levels of education as their male

³³ John. C. K. Daly, *Russian Black Sea Fleet Intends to Establish Base in Abkhazia*, Jamestown (Jul. 1, 2025), <https://jamestown.org/russian-black-sea-fleet-intends-to-establish-base-in-abkhazia/>.

³⁴ Ekaterina Petrchenko, *Growing Russia-Abkhazia Cooperation Across Key Sectors*, Special Eurasia (Jun. 11, 2026), <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2026/06/11/russia-abkhazia-cooperation/>.

³⁵ Caucasus Research Resource Center Georgia, *Almost Everyone in Georgia Believes in the Supernatural*, Caucasus Research Resource Center Georgia, <https://crrc.ge/en/almost-everyone-in-georgia-believes-in-the-supernatural/>.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

counterparts.³⁸ **Public opinion (88% of respondents) in Georgia is that it is equally important for girls and boys to earn a university degree, but that post-graduation it is only the boys who should enter the workforce.**³⁹ With 71% of respondents agreeing that women should work less and devote more time to caring for their families, and 69% agreeing that when a mother works for pay her children will suffer,⁴⁰ it is easy to see how the church steers Georgian values.

b. Russian Involvement with the GOC

Crucial to our understanding of Georgian-Russian relations is the history of the two orthodox churches. **Once the Russian Empire annexed Georgia, the Russian Orthodox Church controlled the Georgian church in 1811**, and it took over a century for it to regain its autocephaly in 1917.⁴¹ Then, **under the Soviet regime, frequent purges of the Georgian church and the repression of Orthodox worship encouraged the incorporation of religious identity into the Georgian nationalist movement.**⁴² Beginning in the late 1970s, the Georgian Orthodox Church was revived by the election of Irakli Gudushauri-Shiolashvili (Ilia II) as Catholicos-Patriarch; he was permitted by officials in Moscow to begin consecrating and reopening closed churches soon thereafter, inspiring a large-scale restoration of the faith.

Since Georgia regained its independence in 1991, the Georgian Orthodox Church has remained an integral aspect of Georgian culture and politics. In that same time, the Russian church has become the main ally of the Russian government.⁴³ **The Kremlin has exercised soft power through the church both domestically and internationally; the Russian Orthodox Church furthering state leadership's superiority and influence over neighboring peoples, consolidating the Orthodox Christian world.**⁴⁴ **The Russian Orthodox Church's primary tactic in Georgia has been to "reverse its Euro-Atlantic integration strategy,"** returning Tbilisi to the Kremlin's political orbit, and to convince Georgians that Russia is "the last bastion of Christianity and conservative values in the world."⁴⁵ **Orthodoxy, and the Church in general, has become Russia's main instrument to mitigate Western influence in Georgia.**⁴⁶

³⁸ Caucasus Research Resource Center Georgia, *Georgian Women Encouraged to get an Education but Not to Use It*, Caucasus Research Resource Center Georgia, <https://crrc.ge/en/blog-georgian-women-encouraged-to-get-an-education-but-not-to-use-it/>.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Christianity in Georgia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Georgia_\(country\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Georgia_(country)).

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Giorgi Jokhadze, *Religion as a Powerful Foreign Policy Tool*, New Eastern Europe (Jul. 7, 2020), <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/07/07/religion-as-a-powerful-foreign-policy-tool/>.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Caucasus Watch, *Risk Assessment of Russian Religious and Political Influence on Georgia's Orthodox Church and Conservative Groups*, Caucasus Watch (Feb. 24, 2022),

*In the absence of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, the patriarchate even plays the role of the main communication channel between the two countries. Although this is the bright side of this matter, there is also a dark side: even though the Georgian Orthodox Church has autocephaly... **the Georgian religious leaders comply with the decisions of the Moscow Patriarch... Under the influence of Russian Orthodoxy, the Georgian Church duplicates conservative ideas and worldviews that originate in Russia.** Well-funded Russian-backed conservative propaganda to say that Russia is the defender of morality, and the West is a perverted world.*⁴⁷

Given the overwhelming percentage of Georgians who self-identify as Orthodox Christians, the percentage who support conservative family values, and the rampant superstition across the country, it is unsurprising that they are vulnerable to Russia's propagandist machine.⁴⁸

c. New Head of GOC Welcomes Strong Russian Influences (May 2026)

In March 2026, Ilia II died in Tbilisi at age 93 after serving as the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church since 1977.⁴⁹ Less than two months after his death, the Holy Synod, the supreme governing body of the Georgian Orthodox Church, **elected Elizbar Teimuraz Mujiri (Shio III) to take over as the new Patriarch.**⁵⁰ "He is the first Catholicos-Patriarch to be elected to this position after the collapse of the Soviet Union, under an independent Georgia."⁵¹ Unlike his predecessor, who was born and educated in present-day Russia (Владикавказ),⁵² Shio III is Georgian-born, and trained as a cellist in Tbilisi before eventually completing his doctorate of divinity in Russia at Moscow Theological Academy and Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University.⁵³ **His views echo the conservative sentiment expressed by the Russian Orthodox Church,** and since his appointment as the patriarchal *locum tenens* in 2017, **Georgian NGOs have consistently sounded alarms about his Russian ties, particularly pro-Kremlin businessman Levan Vasadze.**⁵⁴ Shio III faces significant challenges both in establishing a unified spiritual culture across Georgia and in building trust

<https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/risk-assessment-of-russian-religious-and-political-influence-on-georgias-orthodox-church-and-conservative-groups.html>.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Giorgi Jokhadze, *Religion as a Powerful Foreign Policy Tool*, New Eastern Europe (Jul. 7, 2020),

<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/07/07/religion-as-a-powerful-foreign-policy-tool/>.

⁴⁹ Giovanni Zavatta, *Shio III is New Catholicos-Patriarch of Orthodox Church in Georgia*, Vatican News (May 12, 2026), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2026-05/georgia-orthodox-church-shio-iii-ilia-ii-catholicos-patriarch.html>.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ Beka Chedia, *Georgian Patriarch Election Fuels Kremlin Interference Claims*, Jamestown (May 13, 2026),

<https://jamestown.org/georgian-patriarch-election-fuels-kremlin-interference-claims/>.

⁵² Ilia II of Georgia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilia_II_of_Georgia.

⁵³ Shio III of Georgia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shio_III_of_Georgia.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

within the clergy.⁵⁵ “These challenges are closely tied to **persistent suspicions about his potential proximity to both Russian political and ecclesiastical circles and to Georgian Dream**, whose representatives were among the first to publicly congratulate him on his election.”⁵⁶

d. Quasi-Russian Cultural Interests Groups in Georgia

It is important to clarify that not every Russian-speaking, orthodox, or cultural group in Georgia is directly tied to Moscow. However, many such **groups play off of traditional Georgia-Russia sentiments, maintain negative views of Georgia looking West, or call attention to these cultural themes and values. Russia attempts to exert influence and soft power through Russian-language education, cultural programming, allegiances with compatriots, and organizations** such as *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), *Rossotrudnichestvo* (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), and the *Gorchakov Fund*.⁵⁷ A leaked report by the Kremlin on how to administer diaspora strategies reveals the importance of connection with these compatriots, **who can further Russia’s efforts beyond its official borders.**⁵⁸

Local NGOs can also fulfill the goals of administering soft power on Russia’s behalf by claiming to focus on Eurasia or on the dialogue between Russia and Georgia. “[Kremlin-backed] groups and factions frequently promote (outwardly or implicitly) Russian Eurasianist ideologist Alexander Dugin’s recommendations of military-political neutrality for Georgia. And they warn Georgians that if their country becomes a NATO member, Russia will never de-occupy Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”⁵⁹ These groups include Eurasian Institute, which is not transparent in its funding sources and which Kremlin-affiliated political philosopher Alexander Dugin⁶⁰ listed as a partner of his International Eurasian Movement organization.⁶¹ Other similar groups include Eurasian Choice and the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center/Center of Georgian-Russian Society.⁶² The latter

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ Eleonora Tafuro, *Fatal Attraction? Russia’s Soft Power in its Neighbourhood*, FRIDE Policy Brief (May 2014), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/180660/Fatal%20attraction_%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20soft%20power%20in%20its%20neighbourhood.pdf.

⁵⁸ Rasmus Canbäck, *Leaked Russian Report Details Influence Strategy for Diaspora in South Caucasus*, OC Media (Jan. 30, 2026), <https://oc-media.org/leaked-russian-report-details-influence-strategy-for-diaspora-in-south-caucasus>.

⁵⁹ Beka Chedia, *Russian Interference in Georgian Politics: The Activation of Ultra-Right Forces*, Jamestown (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://jamestown.org/russian-interference-in-georgian-politics-the-activation-of-ultra-right-forces/>.

⁶⁰ Aleksandr Dugin, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr_Dugin.

⁶¹ David Kanchashvili, *Russian Propaganda and Georgia*, JAM News, (Jun. 6, 2015), <https://jam-news.net/russian-propaganda-and-georgia/>.

⁶² Eka Janashia, *Russia Enhances Soft Power in Georgia Through Local NGOs*, CACI Analyst (Jun. 24, 2015), <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13243-rujssia-enhances-soft-power-georgia-local-ngos.html?print=1&tmpl=component>.

is directed by Dmitri Lortkipanidze, a former pro-Russian politician,⁶³ and was described as a “hotbed of pro-Russian influence in Georgia” throughout the 2024 election cycle.⁶⁴ Because these are soft power means of influence, their ties to the government are less explicit. There are also non-cultural organizations in Georgia that tout anti-West rhetoric and align with the Georgian Dream government, such as United Neutral Georgia. **Media outlets that have been identified as contributing to anti-West sentiment include Georgia & World, Sakinformi, TV Obieqtivi, Asaval-Dasavali, and Alia.**⁶⁵

As mentioned earlier, **Russia’s efforts in Georgia also rely on the two nations’ overlap in orthodoxy, which allows for the discussion of “traditional” values, anti-West messaging, and anti-liberal ideas.** Not all orthodox Georgian organizations adhere to Russia’s religious guidance, but this is another avenue through which soft power is deployed.⁶⁶ **Openly pro-Russia movements and figures are unpopular in Georgia, therefore influence can be channeled through Georgian actors who are anti-West.**⁶⁷ This type of rhetoric, as well as negative takes on Europe and alignment with the Georgian Dream party has had success.⁶⁸ **Russian influence in Georgia is not always explicit, and is not necessarily limited to political organizations or groups, as broader cultural networks and the manipulation of soft power successfully furthers Putin’s anti-West agenda.**

C. Corruption Within the Political Landscape

a. Crime and Corruption Linked to the Russian Government

“Thieves-in-law” (*vory-v-zakone* in Russian or *kanonieri qurdebi* in Georgian) is the unofficial, longstanding term for organized crime leaders that dates back to the Soviet 1930s. Underground criminal groups, headed by thieves-in-law who oversee particular regions, continue to operate both within Georgia and across greater Europe and Russia, and they wield a great deal of influence.

⁶³ Gorchakov Fund, *The Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center*, <https://en.gorchakovfund.ru/portal/page/centers>.

⁶⁴ Zaal Anjaparidze, *Russian Influence in Georgia Ahead of Critical Elections*, Jamestown (Mar. 13, 2024), <https://jamestown.org/russian-influence-in-georgia-ahead-of-critical-elections/>

⁶⁵ Civil GE, *MDF Releases Report on Anti-Western Propaganda in Georgia*, Civil GE (Jul. 22, 2020), <https://civil.ge/archives/360158>.

⁶⁶ Giorgi Kanashvili, *Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Exploits, Limitations and Future Threats*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung (Oct. 16, 2017), <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/russian-soft-power-georgia-exploits-limitations-and-future-threats>.

⁶⁷ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Georgia’s Information Environment Through the Lends of Russia’s Influence*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/A4_new.pdf.

⁶⁸ Beka Chedia, *Georgia’s Pro-Kremlin Parties are Growing Stronger*, Jamestown (Apr. 30, 2025), <https://jamestown.org/georgias-pro-kremlin-parties-are-growing-stronger/>.

These groups have significant ties to Georgian culture and society; some Georgians perceive the groups to be beneficial and more efficient than local police.⁶⁹

In the 1990s and 2000s these groups controlled large shares of Georgia's formal economy. In 2004, for example, it was estimated that approximately 30% of revenues in Georgia's banking system; 40% of income from hotels and restaurants; 60% of the gambling business; 15% of the energy sector; and 40% in the construction industry were in the hands of mafia groups.⁷⁰ **Today, these groups operate more abroad but still retain influence through extortion, criminal dispute resolution, prison networks, etc.** In 2025, 228 individuals had criminal proceedings initiated against them on charges related to these "thieves-in-law."⁷¹

For decades, Tbilisi has attempted to establish full control and rein in these groups, but their resilience has been strong, especially given the logic and temptation of arbitrage. Georgia's third president, **Mikheil Saakashvili, was especially well-known for attempting to crack down on this problem.** Unofficial Soviet-era support strengthened these groups and expanded state power; they were eventually able to take advantage of corruption networks and expand.⁷² Due to their Soviet origins, there are notable ties today between these groups and Russia. Recent Georgian law enforcement actions indicate that domestic criminal actors continue to coordinate with thieves-in-law abroad—including in Russia and Europe—to resolve disputes, collect debts, and enforce decisions through intimidation.⁷³ However, public evidence does not prove that the Kremlin directly commands Georgian thieves-in-law as a unified network.

b. Election Fraud

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia were highly polarized and tense, and concerns of democratic backsliding led to intense international scrutiny. While observers found the conditions adequate for the administration of democratic elections, recent legislative changes did reverse some of the positive changes. Some of the amendments were made after inclusive discussions, while others lacked support and gave rise to concerns about election stability and possible misuse

⁶⁹ Fati Mamiashvili, *Georgia's Resilient Mafia*, Institute for War & Peace Reporting (Jan. 27, 2006), <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-resilient-mafia>.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ Svetlana Alimova, *Interior Ministry: Registered crime clearance rate at unprecedented high of 70 per cent*, 1TV Georgia (Jan. 30, 2026), <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/interior-ministry-registered-crime-clearance-rate-at-unprecedented-high-of-70-per-cent/>.

⁷² Giorgi Menabde, *Tbilisi's Long Fight Against Organized Crime Continues*, Jamestown (Feb. 18, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/tbilis-long-fight-against-organized-crime-continues/>.

⁷³ Alexander Kupatadze, *Den of Thieves: Mapping Organized Crime in the South Caucasus*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (Aug. 2025), <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Alexander-Kupatadze-Den-of-thieves-Mapping-organized-crime-in-the-South-Caucasus-GI-TOC-August-2025-1.pdf>.

for political gain.⁷⁴ The divisiveness of these elections, imbalances in financial resources, opposition boycott, and protests also fueled unease and skepticism. Ultimately, **the elections saw the Georgian Dream party secure a fourth term.**

This event caused a **major legitimacy crisis** as Georgians attempted to understand the extent to which election outcomes were influenced. Documented methods of manipulation include administrative pressure, voter fraud, ID abuse, and institutional capture, among others. **Georgian society widely believes the elections—which effectively offered a choice between deepening the country’s connections with Russia or pursuing a Euro-Atlantic future—were rigged.** Moreover, Georgia’s voting rights controversy did not stop in 2024. “In November 2025, **Georgian Dream filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court of Georgia seeking to ban several political parties**, later adding more parties to the suit. **If this initiative is carried out, it could signal the consolidation of authoritarianism in Georgia.**”⁷⁵ Georgia is at a crossroads and if the nation “slides into a more consolidated authoritarian state, it risks becoming further isolated from the West and increasingly dependent on Russia, a scenario that would be extremely **difficult to reverse.**”⁷⁶

II. Dissidents & Contemporary Social Movements

A. Hear From Georgians

a. Nino Lezhava

An expert in international security and defense in the South Caucasus, Nino Lezhava worked in the Georgian Parliament between 2020 and 2025. She witnessed firsthand the parliamentary elections of 2024, along with all the controversy that followed; she was one of the first to protest from within Parliament, actively pushing back against developments as they took shape. Despite leaving her role in Parliament, Lezhava continues to work on Euro-Atlantic relations, geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus, hybrid warfare, and democracy building. In our exclusive interview, Lezhava provided deep insight and novel analysis into what is currently taking place in Georgia and what it means for the region’s future. Lezhava emphasized, first and foremost, the importance of understanding supply chains through an economic and business lens—because of **Georgia’s geopolitical position, it acts as a gatekeeper along the Black Sea, connecting Central Asia with regions including India and China.**

⁷⁴ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Georgia’s Elections Marred By An Uneven Playing Field, Pressure And Tension, But Voters Were Offered A Wide Choice: International Observers*, ODIHR (Oct. 27, 2024), <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/579376>.

⁷⁵ Beka Chedia, *Georgian Dream Seeking U.S. Reset While Resisting Requisite Reforms*, Jamestown (Jun. 10, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/georgian-dream-seeking-u-s-reset-while-resisting-requisite-reforms/>.

⁷⁶ Mariam Chikhladze, *Legitimacy Crisis: How Georgia’s Elections Were Rigged?*, European Platform for Democratic Elections (Dec. 10, 2024), <https://epde.org/reports/legitimacy-crisis-how-georgias-elections-were-rigged/>.



It must also be understood that while the US has taken a turn towards transactional international policies and relations, the same cannot be said of **Georgia—its history, size, and culture all rely on a longer-term, relationship-based foreign policy strategy.**

The US's relationship with Georgia lacks symmetry and transparency. If Georgia is to have any hope of becoming a solid partner for the US, it must disprove any rumors of foreign influence or interference by rival countries like Russia or China. **Russian hybrid influence actively infiltrates Georgian media narratives, political financing, religious networks, security threats, and economic debates.** Lezhava explained that grassroots groups are still active, and they are adapting to the shifting political climate. **Civil society is in survival mode**, exhausted by the perpetual, prolonged war of attrition and overwhelmed by the many Russians moving to Georgia and starting private companies.

Before the latest rounds of funding cuts, **US aid and soft power in the region was deeply appreciated**—though Lezhava recommended that, moving forward, we focus on infrastructure projects with higher visibility and impact in their daily lives (eg. energy, telecommunications, agriculture, etc.), rather than focusing on our imposition of Western views. **The US will win the hearts and minds of Georgians by re-investing in policies that support their sovereignty and territorial integrity.**

b. Temur Yakobashvili

Temur Yakobashvili gained a clear understanding of Georgia and its people, both domestically and on the world stage, over the course of his career as a political scientist, diplomat, and politician. He has experience in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, as the State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration, and as the Georgian Ambassador to the United States in 2010. He now is president of a boutique consulting firm, TY Strategies, where he advises governments, non-governmental institutions, and businesses.

In our interview with Yakobashvili, he highlighted that Georgia has been quick to assume that it is one of Russia's end goals. In reality, Georgia's prized asset is its geography. Valued for its connections, Georgia sits on the fringes of empires, not under their spotlights. Notwithstanding this valuation, Yakobashvili emphasized that **Georgia has all the promise and talent of a great nation—it just lacks the steering to function as a big player in economics and business right now.** He was quick to point to **Ivanishvili's willingness to put Georgia "on the menu" rather than "at the table"** while working as Prime Minister, **offering the country up as an *object* of foreign policy rather than its subject.** In Yakobashvili's eyes, **this is the kind of behavior that has cut off the Georgian Dream party from forming substantial alliances and why it will ultimately fail without direct involvement and support from Ivanishvili.**

Historic distrust between Russians and Georgians remains paramount in Yakobashvili's explanations of the two countries' current tensions, including the struggle over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia's breakaway territories used to act as crucial leverage between the two nations, but now it is only Russia's remaining phantom pains that spur investment in the campaign; Russia's domestic problems will eventually inspire (or rather, require) retreat.

Yakobashvili advises the US not to look at Georgia from solely a Russocentral political perspective. **Russia's most effective and widely-used means of influencing Georgians is fearmongering, particularly regarding the threat of Georgia being trapped into war.** It is crucial that US lawmakers understand how Russia is successfully chipping away at the Georgian psyche today, as well as the historical tensions that inform the Georgian response.

B. Additional Georgian Activists and Groups Leveraging External Influences

a. Salomé Zourabichvili

Salomé Zourabichvili is a French-born Georgian politician who served as Georgia's fifth president beginning in 2018.⁷⁷ Zourabichvili was the first woman to be elected as president, and was the last popularly-elected president, due to the latest constitutional amendments.⁷⁸ She left the official presidential residence (Orbeliani Palace) when Kavelashvili was inaugurated in late 2024, stating that the country was "practically on the verge of collapse" due to the overwhelming control by Georgian Dream officials.⁷⁹ Less than two months later, she was attacked with eggs at Tbilisi International Airport while returning from the Munich Security Conference.⁸⁰ She is still politically

⁷⁷ Salomé Zourabichvili, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salom%C3%A9_Zourabichvili.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ *Id.*

active, speaking to US and other leaders on the state of democracy in Georgia; she contends that she remains the “legitimate president in the eyes of the people.”⁸¹

b. Promote Georgia

Founded in response to the protests in Georgia in 2003, Promote Georgia is based in Brussels, Belgium and is “dedicated to advancing the interests of Georgia and its people within the European context.”⁸² They work with the Georgian diaspora in Belgium by putting together advocacy and cultural events.⁸³

c. Civil Society Foundation

Formerly known as the Open Society Foundation-Georgia, the Civil Society Foundation, works out of Tbilisi and to promote democratic change and public good. They provide programs such as human rights or media support programs and grants, as well as publish stories, research, and reports.⁸⁴ Alongside several peer organizations, the Civil Society Foundation has had their NGO bank account frozen by the Georgian Dream party.⁸⁵

d. Democracy Defenders

Based in Tbilisi,⁸⁶ Democracy Defenders “[safeguards] and [propagates] civil liberties and democratic principles while concurrently advancing Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic affiliations.”⁸⁷ It supports active citizenship, scholarly pursuits, and educational and advocacy campaigns.

⁸¹ Leila Fadel, Ashley Westerman, *Georgia’s Incumbent President Won’t Stand Down Nearly a Year After Disputed Election*, NPR (Sept. 10, 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/10/nx-s1-5534081/salome-zourabichvili-incumbent-president-of-georgia-refuses-to-stand-down>.

⁸² Promote Georgia, LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/promote-georgia/about/>.

⁸³ Promote Georgia, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/PromoteGeorgiaOfficial/>.

⁸⁴ Civil Society Foundation, <https://csf.ge/en/>.

⁸⁵ *Georgian Dream strikes at civil society, freezing NGO bank accounts*, Eurasia Net (Aug. 29, 2025), <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-dream-strikes-at-civil-society-freezing-ngo-bank-accounts>.

⁸⁶ Democracy Defenders, LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/democracy-defenders/about/>.

⁸⁷ Democracy Defenders, <https://www.demdef.org/en>.

Conclusion

Georgia's main economic leverage is its geopolitical position; it straddles an essential trade route, connecting Central Asia and China to Europe through the South Caucasus and acting as a critical point in the Middle Corridor. Thus **Russia's occupation of Georgia's breakaway territories presents not a "local Georgian problem," but rather "a European arms-control problem that has implications for Black Sea security.** It is also prone to becoming a sanctions-enforcement problem. But overall, it is a test of whether Europe's next security architecture will address all Russian occupations, or only the one that became too large to ignore."⁸⁸

*Georgian Dream hoped it could mend ties with the [second] Trump administration, particularly given its de-emphasis on democracy support and its prioritization of transactional engagement with the outside world. However, despite numerous public and private pledges and repeated claims of a shared worldview between Georgian Dream and the Trump administration, Georgian Dream failed to garner the administration's attention to the extent that it would undo Biden-era decisions, particularly the sanctions on Georgian Dream's patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili.*⁸⁹

Sovereignty and territorial integrity remain paramount in the eyes of most Georgians today, despite their leaders inching closer and closer to Moscow. "Georgia's turn toward neutrality and engagement with Russia marks a shift from its Euro-Atlantic path,"⁹⁰ and **any opportunity to invest in Georgian infrastructure and decrease the country's reliance on Russian energy and security will earn us a helpful foothold and, crucially, deny Russia access to essential geography and trade routes—all while encouraging Georgian leadership to look West.**

⁸⁸ Sergi Kapanadze, *Georgia After Russia-Ukraine War: The Security File Europe Must Not Ignore*, Geopolitics (Jun. 22, 2026), <https://politicsgeo.com/georgia-after-russia-ukraine-war-the-security-file-europe-must-not-ignore/>.

⁸⁹ *Contesting West, Aligning with Rest: Georgian Dream's Foreign Policy in 2025 and Beyond*, Civil Georgia (Dec. 30, 2025), <https://civil.ge/archives/716245>.

⁹⁰ Beka Chedia, *Georgia Drifting Back Into Russia's Orbit*, Jamestown (Jan. 12, 2026), <https://jamestown.org/georgia-drifting-back-into-russias-orbit/>.