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SHIFTING POLITICS AND CIVIC AGENCY IN GEORGIA

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ANALYSIS

Strategic Drift and Authoritarian Resilience: The Drivers behind Georgia's Foreign Policy Realignment

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Abstract

Georgia's foreign policy has long been defined by defence and survival. However, recent realignment cannot be explained simply as a change in strategic instruments. This article argues that it reflects a deeper reordering of survival priorities: away from the long-term consolidation of a democratic European state and towards the more immediate preservation of governing power and political autonomy. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 should have reinforced Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course, given the country's security-driven rationale for integration, its constitutional commitment to Europe, and the granting of EU candidate status in 2023. Instead, Georgian Dream increasingly treated candidacy as symbolic, intensified anti-EU rhetoric, and pursued what may be described as authoritarian multivectorism. This article explains this shift through three mutually reinforcing strategies: narrating survival through discursive securitisation, institutionalising survival through legal-institutional tightening of domestic control, and repositing survival through diversified ties with foreign illiberal actors. Together, these dynamics produced strategic drift abroad and authoritarian resilience at home.

Introduction

Georgia stands at a critical crossroads, facing a political crisis that is existential in scope. At stake is the country's future as a democratic, sovereign European state, and any consolidation of the current Uturn would tilt the balance further against democratic and pro-European forces in the region. Georgia's foreign policy realignment amounts to the deliberate entrenchment of an authoritarian equilibrium on the European Union's (EU's) southeastern frontier rather than a temporary deviation or a merely reactive response to external shocks. Georgia's EU candidate status is now retained largely symbolically, as the accession process has settled into a 'mutually agreeable deadlock' (Baev & Bechná, 2025) between Tbilisi and Brussels, in which neither side is prepared to bear the costs of a decisive rupture or to abandon meaningful reforms entirely. V-Dem (2025) data

record the steepest single-year democratic decline since independence, confirming that Georgia has shifted from a regional democratic frontrunner to a model of electoral autocracy at the edge of the EU.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted a critical juncture that intensified Georgia's long-standing security dilemma and laid bare the limits of the EU's predominantly soft-power presence in the region. Although Europe retained its normative and political appeal, the war sharpened elite perceptions that the EU could not offer a credible security counterweight to Russian coercion. This gap between normative attraction and security protection deepened Georgia's sense of vulnerability and enabled the 'Georgian Dream' (GD) party to reinterpret EU–Russia rivalry not as a rationale for deeper Europeanisation, but as an opportunity to expand regime autonomy through caution and distanc-

ing from Brussels. In this framework, the war in Ukraine functions as the principal driver of change in Georgian strategic drift, whereas the key mechanism is the narration of survival, through which external pressure is recast into a new understanding of what must be protected.

This paper analyses the structural underpinnings of this trajectory, arguing that GD has reframed sovereignty as regime resilience: entrenching domestic control while navigating an increasingly fragmented international landscape by straddling the geopolitical divide between liberal democracies and authoritarian power centres. Significantly, this shift unfolds despite enduringly high levels of public support for EU membership. The widening disjuncture between societal aspiration and elite behaviour is accompanied by obstructionism, confrontational posturing towards Brussels, and efforts to reshape European norms to fit Georgia's increasingly illiberal governance, underscoring the leadership's lack of genuine alignment with liberal European values.

This analysis traces Georgia's dual-track approach through three mutually reinforcing strategies: (1) *narrating survival*, in which GD discursively securitises Europeanisation and external criticism as threats to sovereignty and national identity; (2) *institutionalising survival*, in which that threatened self-narrative is embedded through legal-institutional tightening of internal rules that regularises regime-centred understandings of security; and (3) *repositing survival*, in which authoritarian multivectorism refers to the diversification of external alignments in ways that reduce dependence on liberal-democratic partners and deeper engagement with illiberal actors.

Narrating Survival: Securitised Sovereignty and Moral Order

The first pillar of this survival narrative is fear. This refers to the process of *narrating survival*: the meaning of national survival shifts from democratic-European state consolidation towards the preservation of governing authority, domestic order, and autonomy from external constraint. Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling GD party, and GD leaders have repeatedly claimed that unnamed 'forces' sought to drag Georgia into a 'second front' in Russia's war in Ukraine, asserting that only GD's restraint has 'saved' the country from involvement in this war (Publika.ge, 2022). This rhetoric later crystallised in the 'Global War Party' conspiracy, which links external war, domestic opposition, and foreign influence into a single populist fear narrative in which GD casts itself as the only force capable of preventing Georgia's 'Ukrainisation' and defending sovereignty, peace, and traditional values (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025). The societal trauma of war with Russia constitutes a real and politically exploitable background condition in Georgia. In the 2024 survey

of the CRRC-Georgia, 34% of the respondents believed in the existence of the 'Global War Party', whereas 20% believed that the West intended to open a second front in Georgia (Chkhetiani & Turmanidze, 2025). The GD's conspiratorial rhetoric therefore did not create insecurity *ex nihilo*; rather, it activated and structured pre-existing fears of renewed war, thereby enhancing the credibility of its anti-Western securitisation discourse. According to the official EU Neighbours East Annual Survey, the share of Georgians with a positive image of the EU fell sharply from 60% in 2024 to 43% in 2025, while neutral views rose to 48%, suggesting a marked erosion of the EU's affective appeal even as support for membership remained high (EU Neighbours East, 2025).

The second pillar is based on the fusion of national identity and sovereignty, which are mobilised as political imperatives against perceived external interference, providing an ideological frame for authoritarian consolidation. Sovereignty is no longer framed primarily as democratic government secured through European integration but as the defence of historical continuity, national dignity, religious tradition, and the state's right to resist external impositions. In this context, an 'us versus them' divide becomes central. 'Us' refers to the Georgian people, their faith, traditions, and legitimate government; 'them' includes radical domestic opposition, foreign-funded nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), external bureaucrats, and liberal actors portrayed as alien to Georgian values (Inauri, 2025; Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025).

GD's alignment with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)—the country's most trusted institution, with deep historical resonance—has been crucial here. This church-state alliance functions in two key ways. First, it neutralises Western liberalism and pluralism by labelling it 'corrosive imports', while 'traditional values' are stressed as markers of nativist identity politics. Church-endorsed 'traditional values' are presented as authentically Georgian, in deliberate contrast to the supposedly alien secularism, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights associated with Europe (Khakhutaishvili, 2024). Second, the church-state alliance shields the regime domestically by blending opposition to GD policies with a rupture from national and religious heritage, allowing the government to depict critics as enemies not only of the state but also of the orthodox faith. In this sense, the GOC becomes an active agent of illiberal consolidation under the banner of nativism and the defence of 'authentic' Georgian identity (Metreveli, 2025). The core pillars of the EU–Georgia relationship—visa liberalisation, humanrights protection, and rule-of-law benchmarks—are reframed as instruments of 'LGBT propaganda', identity erasure, and foreign tutelage (Chedia, 2025; European Commission, 2025).

Institutionalising Survival and State Control

If narrating survival provides the justificatory frame, institutionalising survival embeds that frame in laws, regulations, and enforcement. Georgia's de-democratisation became visible in 2023, when amendments to the 'Law on the National Bank of Georgia' and the 'Electoral Code' weakened independent oversight and increased ruling-party influence over key institutions. This trajectory deepened in 2024 with the adoption of the 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence' passed despite large-scale public protest and widely criticised as anti-democratic and damaging to Georgia's EU path.

This strategy is crystallised in the coupling of the 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence' with the 'Family Values and Protection of Minors' package; both are presented as necessary shields for national sovereignty and 'traditional families' from Western interference, even though EU recommendations focus on democratic safeguards and nondiscrimination rather than on family law or same-sex marriage. The 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence' requires NGOs and independent media to receive more than 20% foreign funding to register as organisations acting in the interest of a foreign power, thereby exposing them to stigma, administrative burdens, and political control. The 'Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors' (September 2024) constitutionally redefined marriage, banned same-sex adoption, criminalised gender-affirming health care, and introduced media censorship provisions prohibiting coverage of LGBTQ+ issues (Parliament of Georgia, 2024; Venice Commission, 2024). Nine months after Georgia received EU candidate status and was condemned by the EU, UN human rights experts, and the Venice Commission as incompatible with European standards, the law marked a decisive moment in which formal candidate status was instrumentalised as symbolic cover for substantive civilisational divergence from European norms (Borrell, 2024).

Georgia also coupled growing pressure on journalists and civil society activists with new censorship measures, financial penalties, and broadcasting rules that could be used to suppress critical media (CPJ, 2025; Europe Press Freedom Report, 2025). Amnesty International concluded that Georgia's criminal justice system had been 'weaponized to stifle dissent, instill fear, and silence free speech' (Amnesty International, 2025). Overall, institutional decay proceeded in tandem with the promotion of illiberal values, whereas EU attempts to reverse the former were weakened by a limited capacity to constrain the latter.

Repositing Survival: Authoritarian Multivectorism

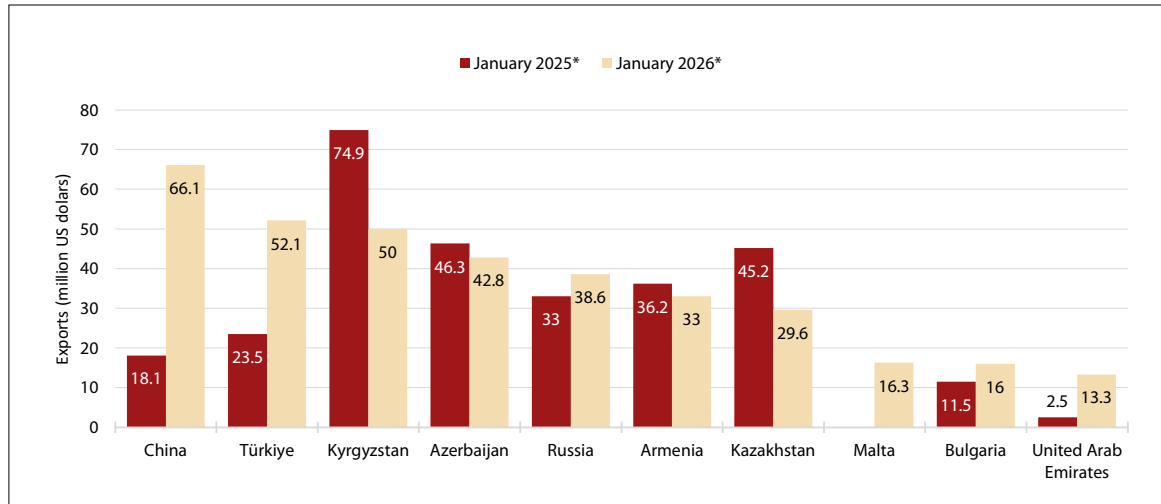
Within this context, GD adopted a geostrategic repertoire of 'multivectorism'. Geographical proximity to Rus-

sia and the absence of robust external security guarantees help explain why the Georgian government interprets its security environment acutely and remains cautious about actions that might provoke Russian retaliation (Kakachia et al., 2024). Russia continues to maintain a considerable military presence in Georgia's occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region), and these troops represent a permanent threat to Georgian stability and security while serving as leverage over Tbilisi's foreign policy.

Economic considerations further reinforce this caution. Although Georgia has declared its intention to join the EU, its approach towards Russia and alignment with Western sanctions have remained restrained (Rustavi2.ge, 2022). The most recent trade data reveal the depth of Georgia's structural economic reorientation in January 2026. EU countries absorbed only 16.1% of Georgian exports, whereas members of the Commonwealth of Independent States comprised 46.7% and non-Western partners led by China, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a further 37.2% (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2026, p. 5). China emerged as Georgia's top single export destination for the first time, with exports surging from 265.7% year-on-year to US\$66.1 million—almost entirely driven by mineral ore extraction—while the UAE entered the top-ten export table with a 434% increase, indicating that the Gulf axis of multivector policy is now statistically visible (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2026, pp. 5, 16). On the import side, the United States—formerly the top supplier—collapsed 72.6% to US\$97.4 million, the direct statistical signature of the US–Georgia Strategic Partnership suspension, while Russia consolidated its position as the third-largest supplier at US\$156.8 million, and crude petroleum appeared for the first time as a Russian import commodity (US\$15.2 million), reflecting the activation of the Kulevi refinery and the new Russian–Georgian energy dependency that triggered the EU's February 2026 proposal to sanction Kulevi port (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2026, p. 17). Accelerating structural trade realignment away from Euro-Atlantic partners and towards authoritarian and semiauthoritarian states is a shift that is no longer a trajectory but an accomplished economic fact (see Figure 1 on p. 13).

The war in Ukraine increased Georgia's geopolitical importance by increasing the value of alternative transport, energy, and connectivity routes linking Europe and Asia through the South Caucasus. Georgia has accordingly sought to position itself within several overlapping frameworks, including the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA), the Lapis–Lazuli route (connecting Afghanistan with Türkiye), the Black Sea–Caspian corridor, and especially the Middle Corridor

Figure 1: Georgia's Trading Partner Countries for 2025–2026



* Preliminary data.

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2026, p. 5.

(connecting China to Europe). However, these opportunities are embedded in a wider and highly unstable regional environment. As a recent analysis of the Middle East conflict suggests, prolonged instability in Iran could disrupt both the 'vertical' routes linking Europe and Russia to the Persian Gulf and onwards to Asia through the South Caucasus and Iran and the 'horizontal' routes connecting Europe to Central Asia through the Caucasus. Particularly vulnerable is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which Russia and Iran have promoted as a counterweight to East–West alternatives that bypass them; a protracted war in Iran could undermine or delay that project while increasing pressure to develop east–west connectivity despite persistent infrastructural and political obstacles (Tokmajan, 2026). In this context, the South Caucasus is shaped by overlapping corridor projects and competing external actors: the United States and the EU promote transparent, sanction-compliant connectivity; Russia seeks veto power over routes and regimes; China advances a commercially framed but strategically consequential infrastructure; Turkey acts as a pragmatic broker; and Iran supports formats that dilute Western influence. In such an environment, Georgia's ruling elite appears to treat connectivity less as a vehicle for rule-based Euro-Atlantic integration than as a geopolitical asset that can be traded for greater room to manoeuvre (Khidasheli, 2025).

Conclusion

Georgia's trajectory could be understood as the gradual construction of an authoritarian equilibrium at Europe's frontier. At its core lies a reordering in the hierarchy of survival priorities: away from the long-term consolida-

tion of a democratic European state and towards the more immediate preservation of governing authority, domestic order, and political autonomy. This shift has unfolded through three interlocking pillars of survival. *First*, the GD narrated survival through a securitised discourse that linked Europeanisation, dissent, and civil society to war, foreign interference, and moral decline. *Second*, it institutionalised survival by translating that discourse into restrictive laws, media controls, and coercive enforcement that narrowed civic space and weakened democratic safeguards. *Third*, it repositioned survival externally through authoritarian multivectorism by deepening transactional ties with illiberal actors and using Georgia's geostrategic location to widen regime room for manoeuvre. In sum, Georgian multivectorism monetises the value of transit corridors, which might be used to soften Western pressure and to preserve multiple foreign policy options for Georgia. The problem is not diversification itself but its detachment from democratic safeguards: once connectivity is embedded in authoritarian drift and weakened transparency, it turns foreign-policy realignment into a self-reinforcing pattern of strategic drift and authoritarian resilience.

Given Brussels' inconsistent response, GD escalates institutional change and deepens non-Western linkages, indicating that the material and political costs of democratic backsliding are manageable. Each round of this interaction tightens domestic control, further weakens EU influence, and increases the value of authoritarian partnerships, locking in an equilibrium where the EU remains the formal strategic destination but loses normative authority and effective leverage. In this sense, Georgia's strategic drift and

authoritarian resilience are not parallel phenomena but outcomes of a sequenced interaction between regime strategies, societal fears, and external power politics, which together transform European integration from a programme of democratisation into a distant, largely symbolic horizon. In summary, the drivers behind Georgia's foreign-policy realignment have made strategic drift and authoritarian resilience mutually reinforcing, producing a dynamic in which survival is

narrated through discursive securitisation, institutionalised through legal tightening of domestic control, and repositised through diversified ties with foreign illiberal actors, thereby driving strategic drift abroad and authoritarian resilience at home. As the regime narrates insecurity, institutionalises control, and uses geopolitical connectivity to widen its room for manoeuvre, foreign-policy change ceases to be episodic and becomes the enduring logic of authoritarian rule.

About the Author

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