



Policy Brief

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How To Help Georgia Out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis

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Summary

Georgia is fighting for its political future. The ruling Georgian Dream party now governs through an expansive repertoire of repressive tools to stifle dissenting political voices. Pro-democracy actors are mounting a resilient resistance to autocratization, seeking to defend a vision of politics in which the country is governed democratically and strong independent institutions guarantee that politicians serve the public and are held to account when they do not.

Georgian Dream's incremental anti-democratic turn became more pronounced as the war in Ukraine and the EU accession process forced it make a choice. It chose an anti-West stance in response to the war and anti-democratic measures to derail EU accession. The result was unprecedented Western sanctions on political figures and the deterioration of ties with the West, especially since the fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2024. At the same time, the government has sought closer ties with China and Russia. Georgian Dream's hope for business as usual with the West is proving futile, whether regarding the EU or the new administration in the United States. This leaves Georgia increasingly isolated and weakened on the international stage.

Georgia's foreseeable future seems likely to be one of protracted political uncertainty rather than clear-cut autocratic consolidation or democratic comeback. Neither the government nor its opponents have the capabilities to fully achieve their goals. Georgian Dream is constrained by growing societal dissatisfaction with its governance while pro-democracy actors are hampered by the disunity among opposition parties and the increasingly hostile environment for democracy at home and globally.

In this context, its Western partners can and must take steps to help Georgia back toward a more democratic path, which would also aid their geopolitical objectives. These include using targeted economic and personal sanctions against figures in Georgian Dream to curtail its repressive apparatus, providing flexible support for Georgian civil society to help it maintain democratic resilience, engaging with public-opinion leaders and the private sector across the country to stress the opportunities that the EU membership offers and to counter anti-West disinformation, and undertaking close-door and public diplomacy efforts, backed up by the credible threat of consequences in case of no action on the part of the government.

Introduction

This brief unpacks the nature of Georgia's political crisis with a view to how the country's partners, in particular the EU and its member states, can do more to help solve it. It first sets out the deteriorating domestic situation with the competition between autocratic and democratic actors. It then looks at how the international context shapes Georgia's domestic one. The brief concludes by setting out scenarios for the country's future and offering policy recommendations to Western actors for how to best support Georgia in getting out of its crisis.

The Domestic Situation

The speed of democratic decline in Georgia has been remarkable: after a steady, gradual deterioration for several years, there was a radical downturn in 2024. The respected V-Dem Institute now classifies it as an electoral autocracy, for the first time in 22 years.¹ Democracy in Georgia has had some ups but more downs over the years. Between 2012 and 2016, the country saw democratic reforms and the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, but it then returned to the ills of dominant-party rule. With the country in a long-term political crisis marked by protests, election boycotts, and EU mediation, the Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, became increasingly wary of democracy.

The war in Ukraine and the prospect of EU accession threatened Georgian Dream's hold on power. The party has turned increasingly anti-West in its rhetoric, passed repressive laws to shrink civic space, and instrumentalized the fear of being dragged into the war in Ukraine. And, as those measures did not guarantee success, even in combination with the advantages of incumbency, it organized widespread irregularities in the 2024 parliamentary elections.² The country's Western partners (except Hungary) did not judge the elections to be free and fair, leaving Georgian Dream increasingly isolated on the world stage.

As a result, Georgia has returned to its default normality with large nationwide protests sparked by the fraudulent elections and Georgian Dream's decision to halt the EU accession process until the end of 2028. After six months of uninterrupted but now scaled-down protests, there is a political stalemate: autocratic repression and democratic resistance face off with neither having a clear upper hand. The ruling party, the opposition, civil society, and grassroot protest movements all have strengths and weaknesses, and much will depend on the mistakes each one makes.

Repression is Georgian Dream's strength but also its weakness. The party has responded to protests with measures such as imprisonments, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, deploying informal *titushky* enforcers where the state's repressive power fails to bear fruit, firing dissenting civil servants, closing down financial avenues for foundations that paid for the fines imposed on the protesters, and hardening "foreign agents" laws with criminal liability to suffocate civic space. Georgian Dream has also instituted a parliamentary investigation into the activities of the United National Movement and other opposition parties with the intention to declare them unconstitutional and ban them. Two opposition leaders, Zurab Japaridze and Nika Melia, were jailed in May for their refusal to pay bail following their decision not to testify at the parliamentary investigation. Other opposition leaders also face this threat. This repression could backfire. As the state focus entirely on suppressing protests, rising

violent crime, environmental disasters, a drug-addiction crisis, a miner's strike, and economic insecurities despite formal growth have revealed the cracks in Georgian Dream's ability to govern. The country has had political crises before, but without much economic and governance repercussions. Things now are different: the political uncertainty is having effects on the economy and on many aspects of governance.

The opposition parties are struggling with their usual problems of internal democracy and interparty coordination, yet they still pose a threat to Georgian Dream. The unequal playing field makes it extremely difficult for them to compete electorally, but part of the blame is on them. For decades, the opposition parties failed to develop genuine internal democracy, and their resulting acute leadership crises and groupthink works against them. Moreover, they found their comfort zone in campaigning on geopolitical issues, rather than regularly engage with voters on bread-and-butter ones. Despite efforts by former president Salome Zourabichvili to bring them together, they remain disunited and unable to offer credible and realistic vision for the future amid the ongoing protests and changing international politics. That said, however, the fact that Georgian Dream intends to ban them shows that, rightly or wrongly, it sees even the weak and disunited opposition parties as a significant threat.

Civil society and independent media operate in an even more hostile environment.

Civil society and independent media operate in an even more hostile environment. Civil society organizations (CSOs), media organizations, and individuals face criminal charges and/or fines if they fail to comply with the Foreign Agents Registration Act adopted in April. This latest law comes in addition to the 2024 Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which key CSOs did not comply with. Repressive legislation also includes an anti-LGBTQ+ law adopted in 2024. In April, Georgian Dream amended the Law on Grants to mandate that any foreign grants disbursed in Georgia must be permitted by the government, further shrinking civic space. Media freedom is also increasingly compromised. Dozens of reporters have been attacked during the protests, but no perpetrator has been brought to justice.³ Mzia Amaglobeli, the founder of the independent online media outlet Netgazeti/Batumelebi, has been illegally held in prison since January. The opposition-leaning television station Mtavari Channel has recently stopped broadcasting, citing financial difficulties stemming from the political differences among its co-founders.⁴ Broadcasters have been banned from receiving foreign funds and the government can now impose "coverage standards" on them. Online media outlets are affected by cuts in foreign aid.

The grassroots protest movement have kept alive the idea of Georgia's democratic potential, but political apathy looms large amid the lack of tangible results. The protests have significantly reduced from their peak as the government shows no signs of backing down. International democracy support, which in the past was a necessary factor for the success of protests, is also diminished. The country is only marginally on the EU or US agenda today, leaving Georgian Dream emboldened and the public even more apathetic.

However, new pro-democracy actors, such as Freedom Square and the Movement for Social Democracy, are emerging. They try to forge solidarity networks and to advocate a new kind of politics. Hope could lie in a new political agenda that connects with workers across sectors and throughout the country, in contrast with the traditional, excessively geopoliticized politics. What the protests need is political parties

that are seen by the public as representing their interests. As one analysis puts it, elections in Georgia “do not promote competition and the outcomes do not reflect the concerns or needs of Georgia’s citizenry.”⁵ A truly bottom-up politics that addresses the concerns of citizens could pose a real counterforce to the trend of growing autocracy.

The International Context

Georgia’s domestic political crisis is a foreign policy one as well. Following the controversial 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream has failed to repair ties with the EU and the United States that have been deteriorating for some time. The country also remains on the receiving end of the global political and economic changes.

Despite Georgian Dream’s hope, there has been no substantive change in ties with the United States despite the recent change in administration. The Biden administration suspended the strategic partnership with Georgia signed in 2009, froze financial assistance to the government, and sanctioned Georgian Dream’s billionaire and Russia-friendly leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, as well as some judges and law-enforcement officials. The Trump administration has not reversed any of this. Georgian Dream has sought to align itself with the administration, pledging to establish its version of the Department of Government Efficiency in the United States, and backed the US-drafted UN General Assembly resolution on Ukraine in February. However, the Trump administration’s wholesale ending of US foreign aid and introduction of 10% tariffs on Georgian products have brought the relationship to its lowest point. Over the past three decades, the United States has provided up to \$6 billion in aid to Georgia⁶—covering sectors such as governance, security, economy, and healthcare—which has benefited ordinary Georgians. This comes in addition to the freeze of EU assistance.

In April, the US Helsinki Commission condemned Georgian Dream’s plan to award Anaklia Deep Sea Port contract to a Chinese conglomerate.⁷ That same month, a spokesperson said the State Department had made “clear the steps Georgia’s government can take to demonstrate it is serious about improving its relationship with the United States” and spoke of “continuing anti-democratic actions taken by the Georgian Dream government.”⁸ In May, the House of Representatives passed the Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia’s Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence (MEGOBARI) Act, which envisages both sticks and carrots for Georgia.⁹ (The act still has to be adopted in the Senate.) Soon after, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze sent an open letter to President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance expressing disappointment on the state of the relationship between the two countries. In May, Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke of an “anti-American government in Georgia” and the US embassy stated that Ivanishvili had refused to meet with the ambassador to discuss the relationship between the two countries.¹⁰ Later last month, US Senator Steve Daines visited Georgia, where he “strongly encouraged” Georgian Dream to cooperate with the Trump administration and reiterated “the need for a pro-Western Georgia” during a meeting with opposition.¹¹ These developments suggest that the Trump administration is unlikely to deviate substantially from its predecessors’ approach. Realizing this, Georgian Dream is pushing the conspiracy theory that a “deep state” is taking hold of the administration and making a thaw in the relationship less likely.

There are no prospects of improvement in Georgia's ties with the EU either; rather, they are getting worse. The EU had suspended political interaction with the authorities already before the last elections. Georgian Dream's decision to halt the accession process for four years has taken the relationships into uncharted waters. Its further autocratization, violent crackdown on protests, and anti-EU stance offer no grounds for improving ties. The EU has been unable to impose sanctions on Georgian officials due to Hungary's veto power, but it has revoked the visa-free regime for holders of diplomatic passports. Member states including Estonia, Germany, Latvia, and Lithuania have imposed entry bans on Georgian officials. As in the case of the United States, Georgian Dream pushes conspiracy theories against the EU, calling it a tool of a "deep state" for exerting pressure on the country. At the same time, though, the EU has been less vocal about supporting pro-democracy actors in Georgia. The Resistance Platform, run by Zourabichvili together with the opposition parties, has recently called on France, Germany, and Poland to develop a coherent EU policy toward the crisis in Georgia.¹²

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In January, Georgia withdrew from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe following the latter's decision to ratify its credentials only conditionally and suspended some of its rights.¹³ In its April Session, the assembly recognized that there is now no Georgian delegation and that it could not ratify the credentials of a new one under the current conditions of democratic backsliding.¹⁴

Georgia's political standing abroad is contested as never before. While the government engages with neighboring states and a handful of others—mostly autocracies—to bolster its legitimacy, the critical Zourabichvili has enjoyed some degree of welcome in the West since leaving office last December. She has met with Trump and attended his inauguration, as well as with France's President Emmanuel Macron and the EU and US ambassadors in Georgia. She has also toured the Baltic states and testified at the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.

At the same time, the current remaking of global partnerships has important implications for Georgia. In particular, the Trump administration's approach toward Russia and the war in Ukraine, its disregard of democracy support, and its relations with China and the EU are all likely to define the future direction of Georgia's domestic and foreign policies.

For the parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream campaigned on the premise that the war is to blame for the deteriorated ties with the West and that things will get back to normal once it ends. Ivanishvili said the war could end in January if the Trump was elected in the United States.¹⁵ The party's calculus remains that ties with the West are likely to remain frozen as long as the war continues.

In the context of the strained transatlantic relationship, Georgia's growing alignment with China and Russia leaves it outside of the emerging new European security architecture. In 2024, the EU froze funding for Georgia under the European Peace Facility and the government is hardly a like-minded partner that it is willing to cooperate with as it unveils European Defense Readiness plans for 2030. In any case, Georgian Dream seems unwilling to join in the emerging European security architecture. It sees

Europe's security awakening as an obstacle to peace rather than a deterrent against Russia. And it is likely to benefit from any rapprochement between Moscow and Washington, given its increasing economic ties with Russia and its pragmatic stance on the war.

Trump's China policy also puts Georgia in a potentially tight spot. Georgia signed a strategic partnership with China in 2023, and it selected a Chinese conglomerate to build the Anaklia Deep Sea Port in 2024. China's ties with Georgia could influence the Trump administration's policy toward the country. The first Trump administration raised the issue of Chinese influence, and the second one sees trade routes as important for strategic competition with China.

Trump's ending of US democracy-support programs will make it easier for Georgian Dream to further erode democracy. It has had a critical impact on the CSOs and independent media outlets that call out the government's assault on democracy and the rule of law and that highlight governance problems. The EU is unlikely to be able to completely fill the gap, leaving the sustainability of the Georgian CSOs hanging in the air. And its efforts will be hampered by the new legal requirement for government permission. At the same time, the government has created a State Grant Management Agency to issue state funding for CSOs, which aims at co-opting them.

What Lies Ahead?

Georgia faces three major scenarios. A continuation of the status quo is the most likely and would leave the country unstable, undemocratic, and isolated abroad. Autocracy consolidation is the second-most likely scenario, and it would bring stability at the expense of democracy and a resumption of basic ties with the West. Democratic turnaround is the least likely scenario. In it, Georgia would return on the path to democracy and restore ties with the West, but political instability would still loom large.

More of the same

In the status quo scenario, no clear winner emerges in the standoff between autocratic and democratic forces, and Georgia remains off the radar internationally. Georgian Dream updates its repressive methods to further target dissenting actors, including opposition leaders, and deepen political apathy, but this fails to fully crush the democratic resistance. Georgia's pro-democracy actors continue their protests, but this fails to pressure the government into major concessions. Local elections are held later this year and the opposition parties are allowed to take part on the existing unlevel playing field, and what follows does not substantially alter the status quo. International actors take little interest in Georgia and limited Western sanctions do not change Georgian Dream's behavior meaningfully. Foreign relations are thus mostly with autocracies, with only occasional transactional engagement with the West. The autocratic and democratic forces wait for a tipping point in their favor.

The record of Georgia's political crisis over the past years shows that Georgian Dream can maintain its hold on power despite a strong societal pushback and limited Western sanctions. However, despite—or maybe because of—excessive repressive measures, it cannot fully eliminate the societal tendencies

to defend democracy and a pro-West foreign policy. Political uncertainty has become Georgia's only certainty for some years now. Other things being equal, this is likely to remain true for some time ahead.

Autocracy Consolidation

In this scenario, Georgian Dream gains the upper hand over the democratic resistance, consolidating the country's turn into an autocracy. Repressive methods end the protests and some stability is restored. Directed by the ruling party, the Constitutional Court declares the major opposition parties unconstitutional, which bans them from participating in elections. Georgian Dream party jail party leaders to stifle competition and resistance. The Foreign Agent Registration Act is fully operational and implemented, and noncompliant CSO leaders, journalists, and activists are fined, arrested, or forced into exile. Pro-government broadcasters and outlets fully monopolize the media space, with independent media driven out or closed. Fringe opposition parties, aligned with Georgian Dream, are allowed to participate in the local elections later this year, creating a false sense of competition and political pluralism. While the West occasionally condemns these developments, no outside pressure is strong enough to change Georgian Dream's behavior. The EU and the United States drop democratic conditionality as a precondition for restoring political ties, and Georgia retains trade and transit relations with the West. Georgia's EU accession is no longer a priority for either side.

The international environment that is increasingly enabling autocratization supports this scenario. Georgian Dream is cultivating close ties with China and other autocratic powers in the neighborhood to offset any further Western pressure. In the absence of additional Western sanctions, Georgian Dream can consolidate its autocratic rule by building further on the three pillars of its authoritarian playbook: declaring opposition parties and CSOs foreign agents and forces of war and instability, waging a populist-nationalist discourse that makes the enemy out of the West, and suppressing protests through economic crackdown (disproportionate fines and threatening jobs) rather than the systematic use of overt physical violence. On top of general political apathy, the fear of punishment, legal troubles, and economic consequences creates a chilling effect for individuals.

Democratic Turnaround

In this scenario, democratic forces pressure Georgian Dream into major concessions, political prisoners are released, and new parliamentary elections are called alongside the local elections in October or later. They are held in an improved electoral environment in line with the recommendations of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights following the 2024 elections. Georgian Dream loses its majority and a new government is formed following coalition talks among the major opposition parties. The new government starts doing away with the antidemocratic legislation adopted under the Georgian Dream, while EU accession and Western integration again become the key foreign policy priority.

While the major opposition parties, which lack leadership and a forward-looking vision for the country, have been so far unable to affect the calculus of Georgian Dream, the sense of societal solidarity for political prisoners and their families is likely to render it increasingly unpopular. At the same time, new

political actors, unburdened by past mistakes, could manage to fill the political gap by presenting an appealing vision for the future. Failures in governance and economic problems are also likely to add to Georgian Dream's unpopularity. The widespread sense of a political, economic, and governance crisis, coupled with Georgia's growing isolation from the West, could add pressure on the party's fragile position, leading to major political concessions that could create space for pro-democracy actors to unite and mount resistance.

What Help Does Georgia Need?

In recent months, the EU and its members, the United Kingdom, and the United States have taken unprecedented steps in response to Georgian Dream's anti-democracy agenda and anti-West stance. These include the suspension of funding for government programs and imposition of travel bans and sanctions on the party's members and affiliates, including judges and law-enforcement officials. The Biden administration sanctioned Ivanishvili. Some EU member states sanctioned Georgian officials responsible for human rights violations. The Trump administration has so far not changed US policy. In April, the United Kingdom sanctioned Georgian officials, including country's Prosecutor General.

These measures did not change Georgian Dream's line—in fact, the opposite has followed. It has passed more repressive and restrictive legislation and taken actions to shrink civic space further and to suppress dissent. Its anti-EU rhetoric is still rampant, but it has taken a more measured approach to the Trump administration.

The EU and its members, other European countries like the United Kingdom, and the United States should craft a more nuanced approach that reflects how Georgia's autocratization and alignment with China and Russia affect their respective geopolitical objectives. For the European actors, the objective should be to maintain a democratic state in their neighborhood and to contest Russia's imperial ambitions there. For the United States, Georgian Dream's autocratization may not yet be a red line, but its alignment with Beijing could threaten the primary strategic objective of contesting China's rise.

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For the EU in particular, given the changing geopolitical context and the Trump administration's policies, it is crucial to recognize that democracy support in Georgia and other membership candidate states facing similar problems is more than ever relevant for its security agenda. And, given the domestic situation in Georgia today, it is imperative that this support focuses on the embattled civil society actors. This should include preparing for the contingency that many of them may soon find themselves forced to operate at least partly in exile. This will require EU actors to make sure that their different support mechanisms are updated for the speed and flexibility that the situation in Georgia requires.

Georgia's long-standing international partners should all take the following steps to help its return to democracy and a pro-West foreign policy, which would advance their geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives. The EU, its member states, the United Kingdom, and the United States, should:

- Call for new parliamentary elections and the freeing of political prisoners as a way out of the political crisis.
- Freeze support for the development of Georgia's transit potential and withhold potential funding for the Black Sea Submarine Cable Project, until Georgian Dream returns to the democratic path. The party seeks to bolster Georgia's position as a transit state to facilitate trade between Asia and Europe, and to then use the economic gains for consolidating autocracy. The country's transit future depends on EU support to mobilize funds; signaling that this support is conditional on democratic reforms would be the most effective instrument against Georgian Dream.
- Signal the intent to sanction Ivanishvili and other officials under respective global human rights sanctions regime. The arbitrary arrests and detentions as well as the violations of freedom of assembly in recent months justify such action. Although in the EU this is likely to be opposed by Hungary (at least), putting the issue on the agenda could affect Georgian Dream's calculus.
- Pursue multi-level diplomacy (including Track 2 and 3), engaging with public opinion leaders and the private sector to preemptively debunk government disinformation about the EU. EU diplomacy with the country has gone quiet recently, creating a sense of abandonment among the public.
- Provide flexible financial support to civic actors, including CSOs and independent media as well as informal initiatives and diaspora-based organizations, promoting cross-regional cooperation and multi-stakeholder network building.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges between civic networks that face repressive regimes or human rights abuses, in such areas as personal safety and digital hygiene.
- Provide support for human-rights monitoring and documentation of violations, as well as for full or partial relocation abroad of civic actors facing personal-safety risks and repression, including means to allow them to keep operating from outside the country.
- Seek ways to facilitate informal formats to carve out a policy space for multi-stakeholder dialogue, especially on key national priorities, between government officials, opposition figures, and civic actors.
- Counter Chinese influence, including through the threat of sanctions in case the government signs the contract with the Chinese conglomerate selected to build Anaklia Deep Sea Port.

Endnotes

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