

Russian Influence and Democratic Governance in Georgia

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Executive Summary

Georgia faces a compounding crisis of democratic backsliding and strategic drift. Since the Georgian Dream party came to power in 2012, judicial independence and electoral integrity have eroded, civil society has come under increasing pressure, and Georgia's foreign policy has grown progressively more accommodating toward Russia. This trajectory has stalled EU accession and widened the gap between government policy and public opinion. Rooted in a longstanding pattern of seeking security through external alliances at the expense of institutional development, Georgia's current situation demands a coordinated response. This paper recommends three courses of action: reforming the judiciary and electoral system to restore democratic credibility, accelerating economic integration with the European Union, and expanding Georgia's role as a regional energy and transit hub. Together these measures would reduce Georgia's strategic vulnerability, restore its European integration trajectory, and strengthen the domestic institutions on which long-term stability depends.

Introduction

The relationship between Russia and the West continues to shape the future of democratic governance in Eastern Europe. The Russo-Georgian war in 2008 marked a turning point in Georgia's foreign policy, specifically the shift under the Georgian Dream Party, which came to power in 2012 and pursued a pragmatic approach to managing relations with both the West and Russia simultaneously.

This balancing strategy took a more dramatic turn following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rather than aligning with Western sanctions policy, Georgia resumed direct flights with Russia, expanded bilateral trade in petroleum and other goods, and declined to join multilateral sanctions (Al Jazeera, 2023). Government officials framed this as pragmatic caution given Georgia's geographic exposure and its unresolved territorial conflicts (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2024). In an increasingly polarised European landscape, however, the strategy has carried a significant cost: Georgia's EU accession process has slowed markedly, even as Georgian public opinion has remained strongly in favour of European integration.

A second dimension compounds this foreign policy drift. The Georgian Dream Party has consolidated control over the judiciary and press, passed a foreign agent law widely seen as modelled on Russian legislation targeting civil society (European Parliament, 2024), and presided over elections whose integrity international observers have questioned (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). The result is a state increasingly distant from European norms while remaining formally committed to European integration, a contradiction that this paper takes as its central problem. Georgia, burdened by its geographic position, must restore both strategic autonomy and democratic governance whilst navigating competing pressures from Russia and the European Union.

Historical Outlook

Pre 2008 Invasion

Georgia's present geopolitical position developed from a long pattern of seeking protection from stronger neighbouring powers. Unified in 1008 under the Bagrationi dynasty, the country's location in the Caucasus placed it between competing empires and conditioned its

rulers to seek external alliances rather than resist pressure alone. This pattern became most consequential in 1783, when King Erekle II concluded the Treaty of Georgievsk with Russia, placing Kartli-Kakheti under Russian protection in exchange for formal autonomy (Wikipedia, 2025). Within two decades, Russia had annexed the territory entirely (Russian Presidential Library, n.d.). The lesson, repeated across subsequent centuries, was that security partnerships with stronger powers tended to erode rather than preserve Georgian sovereignty.

Russian imperial and Soviet rule severely limited the development of independent Georgian political institutions. When Georgia regained independence in 1991, the inherited weaknesses were immediately apparent: civil conflict, economic collapse, and separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which received Russian support and became enduring tools of Moscow's leverage over Tbilisi. The Rose Revolution of 2003 brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power on a platform of institutional reform and Western alignment (Helsinki Commission, 2004), substantially strengthening the Georgian state and deepening ties with NATO and the EU. These same policies, however, increased tensions with Russia, whose strategic interests in the region were directly challenged by Georgia's western trajectory. The confrontation escalated into the five-day war of August 2008.

Post 2008 Invasion

The war fundamentally altered Georgia's strategic environment. Russia recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, establishing a permanent military presence near Georgia's borders and converting the unresolved territorial conflicts into a durable source of political leverage. In response, Georgia intensified its European integration effort: a 2014 Association Agreement with the EU created the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (European Commission, 2024a), and visa-free access to the Schengen Area followed in 2017 (European Commission, 2024b), further strengthening public support for a European future.

The Georgian Dream party's electoral victory in 2012 promised to correct the executive overreach of the Saakashvili years while maintaining the European agenda. In its early period the government broadly delivered on this, implementing reforms aligned with the Association Agreement and pursuing EU candidate status. Over time, however, democratic backsliding accelerated. A network of senior judges consolidated disproportionate influence over the High Council of Justice, compromising judicial independence. International observers documented the use of administrative resources and pressure on public employees during the parliamentary elections of 2020 and 2024 (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). A foreign agent law passed in 2024, requiring organisations receiving more than twenty percent of their funding from abroad to register as foreign agents, mirrored Russian legislation used to suppress civil society and was cited by European institutions as a primary obstacle to accession progress (House of Commons Library, 2024).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the government's refusal to join Western sanctions and its expansion of trade with Russia created sharp tensions both internationally and domestically, where public support for EU membership remained consistently high (CEPA, 2023). Georgia entered a period of strategic uncertainty: formally integrated with European institutions, but increasingly distant from the democratic norms on which deeper integration depends.

Policy Recommendations

Georgia's historical development reveals several patterns that remain relevant to its current strategic situation. First, the country's geographic position has consistently exposed it to pressure from stronger neighbouring powers, from Persian and Ottoman influence in earlier centuries to Russian dominance in the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. The destruction of Tbilisi in 1795 following the withdrawal of Russian protection illustrates the

vulnerability of small states caught between competing powers, a reality that continues to shape Georgia's security environment. Second, Georgia's reliance on alliances with stronger states has often produced mixed outcomes. While external partnerships have offered protection, they have also limited political autonomy, as demonstrated by the transition from the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783 to full Russian annexation in 1801, and by the tensions that have accompanied Georgia's post-2003 integration with Western institutions. Finally, Georgia's ability to maintain political autonomy has been closely tied to the strength of its domestic institutions. Periods of weak governance have increased both internal instability and external influence, while the country's progress toward European integration since 2008 has shown that closer ties with Western institutions depend heavily on maintaining credible democratic governance. Taken together, these historical patterns suggest that Georgia's long-term stability will depend on strengthening domestic institutions while managing relations with external powers in a way that reduces strategic vulnerability.

With all of this in mind, this paper proposes three main courses of action for Georgia to take in order to restore strategic autonomy and reestablish democracy.

1. Reforming the Judiciary and Electoral System to Restore Democratic Credibility

Georgia should prioritise reforms that strengthen judicial independence and improve electoral competitiveness. Concerns regarding political influence over the judiciary have centred on the role of the High Council of Justice, where a small group of senior judges has exercised disproportionate influence over appointments and promotions. Georgia should reform the appointment system by introducing a requirement that at least half of judicial appointments be approved by a supermajority in parliament and by expanding the number of non-judicial

members within the High Council of Justice drawn from legal associations and academic institutions. This would reduce the ability of a small judicial network to dominate the system.

Electoral reforms should also be implemented to reduce the use of administrative resources during campaigns. Georgia should strengthen the authority of the Central Election Commission by granting it independent investigative powers and expanding the presence of international election monitors through long-term observation missions organised by the OSCE. Restrictions should be introduced to prevent public sector employees from participating in campaign mobilisation during working hours.

Critically, the foreign agent law passed in 2024 which requires organisations receiving more than twenty percent of their funding from abroad to register as foreign agents, should be repealed or substantially revised. As currently constructed, the law mirrors Russian legislation used to suppress civil society and independent media, and its existence has been cited by European institutions as a primary obstacle to Georgia's EU accession progress (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Replacing it with transparent financial disclosure requirements that apply equally to domestic and foreign-funded organisations would address legitimate transparency concerns without stigmatising civil society. These reforms collectively would restore public confidence in democratic institutions while removing the most significant structural barriers to Georgia's European integration.

2. Accelerating Economic Integration with the European Union

Georgia should deepen its economic integration with the European Union by accelerating regulatory alignment under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA.gov.ge, n.d.). While the agreement has expanded trade with the EU, many sectors of the Georgian economy remain only partially harmonised with European standards. The government should

prioritise alignment in agricultural exports, food safety, and digital services to increase market access, with implementation timelines tied to measurable benchmarks rather than open-ended commitments.

Georgia should simultaneously pursue targeted investment from the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to modernise infrastructure and reduce economic dependence on Russian markets. This matters because the paper's own analysis shows that Georgia's cautious foreign policy posture since 2022 has been partly driven by economic exposure to Russia, including resumed trade in petroleum and increased commercial flows following the outbreak of the Ukraine war. Reducing this exposure would give future Georgian governments greater freedom of manoeuvre (CEPA, 2023). Investment should focus on transport corridors linking the South Caucasus with European markets, including upgrades to the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and road logistics infrastructure along the Middle Corridor.

Georgia should also explore sectoral integration agreements with the EU beyond trade, particularly in digital markets and energy regulation, which would create deeper institutional ties without requiring full accession. This approach, similar to pathways used by Ukraine and Moldova in recent years, would sustain integration momentum during a period when full membership remains a long-term prospect rather than an imminent outcome.

3. Expanding Energy Security and Regional Transit Infrastructure

Georgia should strengthen its energy security and deepen its strategic importance to Europe by expanding its role as a regional transit hub. A central priority should be increasing Georgia's participation in the Southern Gas Corridor, working with Azerbaijan and European partners to increase capacity and develop additional storage infrastructure within Georgian territory. This

would increase transit revenues while reinforcing Georgia's value to European partners independently of its domestic political situation, creating a form of strategic leverage that does not depend solely on democratic performance.

The completion of the Anaklia deep-sea port should be elevated to a national strategic priority. The project has been repeatedly delayed, most recently following the withdrawal of the American consortium TBC in 2020 amid concerns about government interference, and its stagnation has itself become a symbol of Georgian Dream's ambivalence toward Western investment. Georgia should re-tender the project with transparent international procurement and actively seek involvement from European and American institutional investors to both finance construction and insulate the project from domestic political interference.

However, this recommendation should be accompanied by a clear-eyed acknowledgment of limits. Greater transit importance does not by itself resolve Georgia's security dilemma, rather it could instead rehash what has now become something of a frozen conflict. Russia retains the ability to escalate pressure through the occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and increased Western economic presence in Georgia could provoke rather than deter Russian interference. Georgia should therefore pursue transit expansion in coordination with a broader diplomatic strategy, including maintaining open channels with Russia on conflict resolution while simultaneously deepening Western ties rather than treating infrastructure investment as a substitute for political engagement. However, there must be jGeorgia's history, particularly the aftermath of the Treaty of Georgievsk, illustrates the danger of assuming that strategic value to a protecting power automatically translates into security. Furthermore, the conflict of 2008 and the recent government trajectory show both the dangers of pivoting too far, too quickly towards the EU as well as how attempting to appease both sides can go wrong.

Evaluation

Economic integration with the European Union is more achievable than institutional reform, but it is not without risk. While it does not carry the same immediate security implications as military alignment, it can still provoke Russian pressure, likely through trade restrictions, energy leverage, or increased activity around South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This creates a trade-off. Reducing dependence on Russia is necessary for greater autonomy, but doing so may increase short-term exposure.

This is where the link to the other recommendations becomes important. Expanding Georgia's role as a transit and energy hub can help offset some of this risk by embedding the country more deeply in European supply chains, giving external actors a stronger material interest in its stability. However, as with economic integration, this should not be overstated. Greater strategic value does not automatically translate into security, and poorly managed projects risk reinforcing existing governance problems rather than resolving them.

Judicial and electoral reform, by contrast, remains the most important of the three, but also the least feasible in the short term. Without it, neither economic integration nor infrastructure development is likely to translate into sustained progress towards EU accession. At the same time, it is difficult to see how meaningful reform would occur under current political conditions without changes in the broader incentive structure.

In practical terms, this suggests an order of priority shaped by feasibility. Economic integration and selective infrastructure development are the most realistic starting points, as they can be pursued within existing constraints and begin to shift Georgia's economic position. Over time, this may strengthen both domestic and external pressure for institutional reform, which remains essential but is more likely to follow than to lead.

Conclusion

Georgia's present difficulties are not an aberration but the latest expression of patterns that have shaped the country's politics for centuries. The pursuit of security through alignment with stronger powers, the weakness of domestic institutions, and the tension between sovereignty and external dependence have all recurred across Georgian history, from the Treaty of Georgievsk to the Rose Revolution to the present accommodation of Russia. What distinguishes the current moment is that Georgia, for the first time, has a credible alternative to dependence: a developed institutional relationship with the European Union, significant strategic value as a transit and energy corridor, and a population that has consistently expressed support for European integration even as its government has moved in the opposite direction.

The three recommendations advanced in this paper are designed to work together rather than in isolation. Judicial and electoral reform addresses the democratic deficit that has become the primary obstacle to EU accession. Economic integration with Europe reduces the commercial exposure to Russia that has given the Georgian Dream a convenient justification for its cautious foreign policy. Expanding Georgia's role as a regional transit hub converts geographic vulnerability into strategic leverage, giving Western partners a material interest in Georgian stability that does not depend solely on normative commitments to democratic governance.

None of these measures will succeed without political will from a Georgian government that has so far shown little inclination toward reform. The international community, and the European Union in particular, must therefore make clear that accession progress is contingent on demonstrable institutional change, while offering concrete incentives that make reform the more attractive path. Georgia's history shows the cost of getting this balance wrong. Its future will depend on whether it can break the cycle.

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