

# Georgian Dream vs. Georgians' Dream

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Another post-Soviet country has begun to attract attention at a time when the continental war in Ukraine has remained high on the international agenda. Developments observed in Georgia earlier this month were phenomena that went beyond the permanent political tensions inherent in that country and were of a geopolitical nature. Until recently, it was assumed that this small country in the South Caucasus, which received prospects for NATO-membership in 2008 and signed an association agreement with the European Union in 2014, had made its strategic choice and was moving towards integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Claims by Georgian opposition figures that the Georgian Dream government was moving closer to Russia and away from the line of European integration seemed more like exaggerated views aimed at discrediting a rival in domestic and international public opinion. However, after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the politics pursued by the Georgian Dream government increased these suspicions, while the introduction of the bills on *agents of foreign influence* in parliament (mirrors of recent Russian laws) and the adoption of one of the bills in the first reading led to a clarification of the picture. This article explores the causes and nature of those developments in Georgia.

**Note:** In order to understand the recent political tension in Georgia and the problems that have arisen in relations between the Georgian Dream government and the West, it is necessary to return to the 31 October 2020 parliamentary elections. At the parliamentary elections in which 120 out of 150 seats were elected by the proportional system and the remaining 30 by first-past-the-post, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party won 48,77% of votes under the proportional system, and its

candidates were elected in all 30 single-mandate constituencies (a second round was held in 17 constituencies). The opposition decided to boycott elections, accusing the ruling Georgian Dream party of election fraud and [announcing](#) that it would not participate in the 2nd round and in the new parliament at all. The [arrest](#) of the country's main opposition leader, Nika Melia, in February 2021 further excited political passions. Thus, a political [crisis](#) erupted in the country. As a result of the dialogue between the government and opposition, with the mediation of the European Union, a [plan](#) for solving the political crisis was presented by European Council President Charles Michel and [signed](#) on 19 April 2021 at a ceremony at the residence of the president. The text of the agreement, entitled *The Way Forward*, called for reforms in the electoral system, electoral administration and judiciary. However, on 12 July, Georgian lawmakers [pushed](#) through six judicial appointments for the Supreme Court in violation of this document, and on 28 July, the Georgian Dream party [abandoned](#) the agreement. This decision not only made it impossible to resolve the political crisis in the country through compromise, but it is also remembered as the first serious problem in relations between the West and the Georgian Dream party, which came to power in 2012. And after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it soon became a bigger problem.

### **The government's difficult choice: European integration or the interests of the oligarchs?**

The Georgian government has kept its distance in its relations with Ukraine since the early days of the war, [saying](#) that it would not join sanctions on Russia, rejecting an opposition initiative, backed by the president, to convene an extraordinary parliamentary session over Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The government [tried](#) to block hundreds of Georgian volunteers with military backgrounds from joining the defense of Ukraine. On 1 March, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy recalled the Ukrainian ambassador to Georgia for

consultations, [accusing](#) Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's cabinet of barring Georgian volunteers from flying to Ukraine and demonstrating the "immoral position" on Russia sanctions.

The Georgian Dream government [has assumed](#) since the beginning of the war that Ukraine also wants to involve Georgia in the war and open a second front against Russia. This [rhetoric](#) is still being used. Another fact causing tension in relations is that last October, Ukraine imposed [sanctions](#) against relatives of the founder of the Georgian Dream party, billionaire tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has continued to run the party and the country from behind the scenes.

The Georgian issue has also drawn worldwide attention in the intervening period because of the [deterioration](#) of imprisoned ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili's health. American expert toxicologist, David Smith, in his testimony given to the Tbilisi City Court, [claimed](#) that Saakashvili was poisoned with various heavy metals, which cause serious toxic effects. However, the court in a decision denied the motion to defer Saakashvili's sentence, and the political authorities rejected petitions to release him amid his deteriorating health for treatment inside the country or abroad.

All these events that took place in the period after the parliamentary elections of 2020 showed that Georgia lags behind its international commitments to human rights and democratization. It is for this reason that despite the fact that the European Union decided to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova at a summit in Brussels on 23 June 2022, the EU [said](#) it would only be ready to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia once the priorities specified in the European Union's opinion on Georgia's membership application have been addressed. To get candidate status, Georgia will have to fulfill [the European Union's 12-point outline](#). Most of these priorities consist of the points mentioned in the Michel Agreement (the 19 April EU-brokered deal achieved through the

personal facilitation of Charles Michel) and the first article refers to this agreement: "address the issue of political polarization, ensuring cooperation across political parties in the spirit of the April 19 agreement." However, Article 5 is the one receiving attention now: the government "must implement the commitment to 'de-oligarchization' by eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political, and public life." *There is only one oligarch who has extreme influence on Georgia's political, social, and economic life: Bidzina Ivanishvili.* That is, we can assume that the EU demands the abolition of Ivanishvili's informal rule. This demand, combined with other EU priorities, puts the government and the leadership of the ruling party before a very difficult choice: they must either fulfill these conditions to maintain relations with the West and continue the policy of Euro-Atlantic integration, or risk this envisioned future for the country for the sake of Ivanishvili and their personal interests.

Subsequent events have shown that the government either chose the second path or was forced to do so because Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Georgian Dream Party leader Irakli Kobakhidze and other officials owe their careers to Ivanishvili, and it is doubtful that they have the right to make decisions against his will. Based on past experiences, we would say that Ivanishvili can easily dismiss the party leader and head of government at any time, since the party is under his control. (Georgia has changed prime ministers six times since 2012.)

The government's introduction of the controversial *transparency of foreign influence* and *foreign agents* bills, which imitated recent Russian laws, and [passing](#) the first bill in the first reading in this regard was not too surprising. It was in line with the logic of government policy after abandoning the Michel agreement, and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. But the move came as a great shock both at home and in the West. The [draft](#) law entitled "On transparency of

foreign influence,” provided for the creation of a registry, to be kept by the Ministry of Justice, of non-governmental organizations and mass media that receive foreign financing, and the registration as “agents of foreign influence” with the Ministry of Justice of all legal entities that receive more than 20% of their annual revenue from a “foreign power.” The draft law on the registration of a foreign agent seeks to include in the registry of foreign agents not only NGOs and media, but also individuals and legal entities that receive funding from abroad. Violators would be sentenced to up to five years in prison. These bills were contrary to the spirit of the EU’s 12 points and the democratic development of the country as a whole. Moreover, they are analogous or similar to the [law](#) on controlling the activities of those under foreign influence adopted in Russia because they serve to ensure strict state control over independent civil society and to ensure that individuals and entities receiving funding from Western foundations are branded as *foreign agents* and discredited within the country. The Georgian public and outside observers understand that if these bills are [adopted](#), the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration will be sabotaged.

And this is a red line for the vast majority of Georgians: poll results [show](#) that 75 percent of citizens support EU membership, while nearly 70 percent remain committed to NATO membership. It can be said that Euro-Atlantic integration has become a national idea in Georgia; from the first years of independence, political forces have identified this issue as the highest goal. The proposal in a non-binding advisory [referendum](#) on joining NATO, held on 5 January 2008, was approved with 77% in favor. Euro-Atlantic integration is also a constitutional requirement. The Transitional Provisions of the Constitution (Article 78) [state](#) that the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

For all these reasons, after the “*foreign influence*” bill

passed its first reading on 7 March, protests started in the capital city of Tbilisi, and on the 9th, the parliamentary majority was forced to [revoke](#) the draft law.

But we should also note that real steps in the direction of Euro-integration in Georgia were taken precisely during the rule of the Georgian Dream Party. The current government actually continued the foreign policy laid down under Saakashvili, albeit with caution. In June 2014, Georgia, along with Ukraine and Moldova, signed an association [agreement](#) with the European Union. In February 2017, the European Union [adopted](#) a regulation on visa liberalization for Georgians. And on 3 March 2022, Georgia officially [submitted](#) its application to join the bloc.

But how did it turn out that the government, the author of this policy, has set a different course or, to [quote](#) the US Ambassador Kelly Degn, how is it that “there has been a campaign underway in Georgia for the last six to eight months, trying to undermine a strong partnership between Georgia and the West, between Georgia and the United States, between Georgia and the European Union”? This turn-around has occurred for two main reasons: *First*, because, as we have already noted above, the conditions put forward by the EU are a threat to the authorities since they involve eliminating the oligarchic system, ensuring the independence of courts and prosecutors, media freedom, and electoral reform; and *secondly*, the rapprochement with Russia.

### **An upward trend observed in bilateral relations with Russia**

Last year, Georgian-Russian relations achieved remarkable development. This is an interesting trend because it coincides with the same period when Russia launched an armed invasion of Ukraine, straining Russian-Western relations almost to the point of a new Cold War. Recall that due to Russia's occupation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there are no current diplomatic relations between the two

countries. However, after coming to power Georgian Dream has pursued a pragmatic policy aimed at reducing tensions with Russia and establishing stability in the relationship. The West was satisfied with this policy because they were unhappy with Saakashvili's radicalism and the outbreak of military conflict with Russia in 2008. (That Saakashvili's recent situation has gone unnoticed in crucial Western circles can also be understood by the weak reaction of Western capitals to his arrest and the treatment to which he was subjected).

But it seems that the Georgian government has become too friendly for Western comfort in its relations with Russia. The [statement](#) by US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degn on this matter is clear and understandable: "The [Georgian] people want a European future. People want a strong democracy and a prosperous, diverse economy that is not dependent on Russia. And Georgia has made real progress moving away from its dependence on Russia in previous years. That momentum needs to continue, there is no reason for Georgia to be dependent on Russia, for trade, for security, for anything."

In 2022, the [trade](#) volume between Georgia and Russia hit \$2,5 billion, up 52,3% over 2021. On the other hand, remittances from Russia to Georgia [soared](#) six-fold to a record high of \$2,068 billion, accounting for nearly a third of Georgia's 2022 state [budget](#). According to a [report](#) by *Transparency International-Georgia* titled "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine war," a total of 17.000 Russian companies are registered in Georgia, and half of them have been registered since the start of the war in Ukraine and 97% of the companies registered since March are sole proprietors.

More than 45.000 Russian citizens opened new accounts in Georgian commercial banks between February and August of 2022 and the number of Russian citizens with active accounts in commercial banks exceeded 60,000 as of 31 August, [a](#) according to *the Georgian Institute for Development of Freedom of*



*Information (IDFI)*. This raises doubts about Georgia's involvement in Russia's evasion of Western sanctions. This topic was discussed at a [meeting](#) between Georgian president Salome Zurbishvili and President Joe Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan on 10 March. Sullivan said "Georgia should not become a means of evading or circumventing (international) sanctions [against Russia]."

The attitude of Russian officials to recent events in Georgia gives reason to believe that they are disappointed that the government has stepped back. Speaker of the Russian Duma Vyacheslav Volodin [viewed](#) the withdrawal of the draft law from the parliament as depriving Georgia of its sovereignty. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the events surrounding the "foreign agents" bill in Georgia are [reminiscent](#) of the 2014 Maidan "coup" in Ukraine.

### **The president as internal opposition**

Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili has come into the spotlight during recent developments, acting as the leader of the opposition. She was in the US for an official visit when thousands of Georgians first launched mass rallies in protest over the draft "*foreign agents*" bill. In a [video address](#) she shot with New York's Statue of Liberty visible in the background, Zurbishvili supported the protesters, considering the adoption of the proposed law a violation of the constitution and stating that Georgia takes the same position as the protesting youth on the issue of protecting the European future. For those who follow Georgia's domestic politics, Ms. Zurbishvili's stance is no surprise. In 2018, she ran in the presidential election as a candidate of the Georgian Dream party; when she won, the opposition thought she would become Ivanishvili's puppet; even Saakashvili accused the ex-diplomat Zurbishvili, who once served as a foreign minister in his government, of treason. However, after her election Zurbishvili gradually began to show her independent will and, despite the fact that her powers in the



parliamentary system were very limited, she preferred to express her own conclusions on important issues. A misunderstanding, even tension, arose between the parties, for the actions of Zurabashvili, who did not consent to her symbolic role as president, did not satisfy the government.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the differences between the positions of the president and the government have become more obvious. For example, in her 1 March 2022 speech, Zurabishvili [stated](#) that Ukraine was also fighting for Georgia's freedom, that all of Europe had a unified position on the Ukrainian issue, and that Georgia should also become part of this union. In her [speech, she lobbied](#) against restoring direct air traffic with Russia and for the introduction of additional restrictions for Russians coming to Georgia; she [called](#) the prime minister's statement that "the U.S. is seeking to push Georgia into 'opening a second front' with Russia" disinformation; she put forward an initiative to [ban](#) the activities of parties that oppose Euro-Atlantic integration as enshrined in the constitution; and [accused](#) the ruling party of capitulating to Russia by making statements that coincide with Russian propaganda.

It is important for Georgia to have such different voices within the system in a country where the executive, legislative, and local governments have been brought under the control of a single political party. This creates the possibility of *checks and balances*, albeit to a lesser extent than that envisioned by a liberal constitution. At a time when the opposition is losing its influence on decision-making, the president acts as a spokesperson and transmitter of oppositional public opinion within the state, working in close cooperation with the West, by making herself an important player in the current political stage of the country. Sergei Lavrov's [words](#) "thank God, the president [Zurabishvili] had rather ceremonial functions and did not call the shots" are significant in terms of understanding Russia's views on the current situation in Georgia.

## Conclusion

Although Georgia is one of the few countries in the post-Soviet space that has gone the furthest in the field of democratic development, there has obviously been continuing [regression](#) in this direction in the past few years. The incumbent government has been the longest-ruling one in the history of independent Georgia. Although it has its positive sides in terms of achieving political stability, we may call the governance which has been formed in Georgia over the past decade *electoral semi-authoritarianism*. Today a personalist regime reigns in the country, in which all branches of power are controlled by the Georgian Dream party and its founding leader, Ivanishvili, who holds no official position. The opposition, on the other hand, is an unorganized force divided into many smaller political parties. The fact that the imprisoned Saakashvili's United National Movement party remains the largest opposition force leads to a polarization of politics on the basis of rivalry (and even enmity) between Ivanishvili and Saakashvili, thus serving the best interests of a government that does not desire the revival of the opposition. If Georgian lawmakers has not voted to drop a controversial "*foreign agents*" bill, freedoms would have been restricted, civil society would have weakened and the country would have moved to full authoritarianism. It was not the opposition, but civil society, especially the youth, who took it upon themselves to prevent this threat. At a time when there were no mass protest actions with a demand to release Saakashvili, people organized themselves and showed up to welcome a European future. It was reaffirmed that European integration is the national consensus in the country. The government that had created conditions for Russia to strengthen its political and economic influence in Georgia also saw that the influence of Moscow inside the country was minimal.

In short, veering from Georgia's constitutionally mandated path to European integration and returning to Russia's sphere

of influence are impossible, at least under current conditions, and those can only happen as a result of a forcible territorial occupation.