



Georgia's Dangerous Gamble: Understanding Georgia's Alignment with Non-Democratic Powers

Tamta Bezhanishvili

Luka Danelia

Bachelor Program of International Relations,

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

E-mail: luka.danelia006@sps.tsu.edu.ge,

E-mail: tamta.bezhanishvili970@sps.tsu.edu.ge

Abstract

This paper aims to determine the main reasons why Georgia has chosen to align with actors fundamentally at odds with the liberal international order. By using content analysis and speech act analysis, the article tends to examine the tendency of foreign policy shift by the Georgian Dream officials and find what stands behind this decision.

Since the escalation of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, Georgia has demonstrated a significant foreign policy shift towards non-democratic powers of the international system, namely, Russia, China, and Iran, resulting in various directions of affairs. Georgia's recent geopolitical moves during the period, when the 'window of opportunity' for membership of the European Union is open alongside Ukraine and Moldova, are associated with risks. It contradicts Georgia's constitutionally claimed pro-Western foreign policy. It might trigger complete political isolation from the Western liberal powers and end up under the influence of the "Greater Eurasian" orbit. This article argues that the need for the Georgian Dream Party to prolong its hold on power is the main trigger to Georgia's foreign policy transformation, since it is considered not only a way out of political isolation, but also a way to gain its pseudo-international legitimacy from the non-democratic entities.

Key words: Regime Survival, Foreign Policy Shift, Non-Democratic Powers, Georgian Dream.

აბსტრაქტი

ნაშრომი მიზნად ისახავს იმ ძირითადი მიზეზების გამოკვლევას, რომლებმაც განაპირობა საქართველოს არჩევანი, დაახლოებოდა საერთაშორისო სისტემის არადემოკრატიულ აქტორებს. კონტენტ ანალიზისა და ქართული ოცნების მაღალჩინოსნების განცხადებების შესწავლის საფუძველზე ნაშრომი იკვლევს საგარეო პოლიტიკური კურსის ცვლილების ტენდენციასა და იმ ძირითად განზრახვას, რომელიც გადაწყვეტილების უკან დგას.

მას შემდეგ, რაც 2022 წელს რუსეთმა სრულმასშტაბიანი ომი წამოიწყო უკრაინაში საქართველომ მნიშვნელოვნად შეცვალა თავისი საგარეო პოლიტიკური კურსი და სხვადასხვა მიმართულებით დაუახლოვდა საერთაშორისო სისტემის არადემოკრატიულ ძალებს, კერძოდ, ჩინეთს, რუსეთსა და ირანს. საქართველოს მიმდინარე გეოპოლიტიკური სვლები მაშინ, როდესაც ევროკავშირისთვის კარი ღიაა ასოცირებული ტრიოს სამი ქვეყნისთვის: საქართველოსთვის, უკრაინასა და მოლდოვისთვის, დიდ რისკებთანაა დაკავშირებული. იგი ეწინააღმდეგება საქართველოს კონსტიტუციურად გაცხადებულ პროდასავლურ საგარეო პოლიტიკას და შესაძლოა გამოიწვიოს, ერთი მხრივ, „თავისუფალი სამყაროსაგან“ სრული იზოლაცია, მეორე მხრივ, კი მისი „დიდი ევრაზიული“ გავლენის სფეროში მოქცევა. წინამდებარე ნაშრომი ამტკიცებს, რომ „ქართული ოცნების“ ძალაუფლების შენარჩუნებისკენ სწრაფვა ქვეყნის საგარეო პოლიტიკური კურსის ტრანსფორმაციის მთავარი გამომწვევი მიზეზია, ვინაიდან იგი არა მარტო პოლიტიკური იზოლაციისგან თავდაცვის საშუალებად, არამედ ფსევდო საერთაშორისო ლეგიტიმაციის აღიარების გზადაც მოიაზრება.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: რეჟიმის გადარჩენა, საგარეო პოლიტიკური კურსის ცვლილება, ავტორიტარული ძალები, ქართული ოცნება.

Introduction

Instead of undertaking the necessary reforms to prepare Georgia for EU accession by strengthening democracy, safeguarding human rights and equality, providing fair and free elections, and reforming the judiciary, the ruling Georgian Dream party, in fact, pivoted away from a Western-oriented foreign policy by neglecting most of the recommendations provided by the European Commission for the EU candidacy (European Commission, 2022). It deepened its economic dependence on Russia (Transparency International, 2024). According to the open-source information and independent media investigations, Georgian authorities enabled Russia to circumvent economic sanctions imposed by the West (Civil Georgia, 2025). GD also halted the strategic partnership with the United States and instead established a strategic partnership with China. Notably, the Prime Minister of Georgia visited the funeral of the President of Iran, amid crowds openly voicing “Death to America” and “Death to Israel,” underscoring the widening rupture with Georgia’s Western allies. This strategic reorientation, accompanied by strengthening autocracy on the domestic level, has unsurprisingly seriously hindered the EU integration process.

The following piece demonstrates that the urgency of power maintenance is one of the key reasons for shifting Georgia’s foreign policy, since the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party regards this strategy as the only means of avoiding complete political isolation and securing at least partial international recognition of its legitimacy. The manipulation of the concepts of sovereignty, neutrality, peace, and national identity guides GD’s strategic realignment.

Although Georgia was long regarded as a frontrunner of democratization in the South Caucasus with a distinctly European identity both on the state and societal levels, the Georgian Dream government has adopted a foreign policy direction that starkly contradicts this legacy. The following article aims to answer the main research question: What underlying factors have driven Georgia’s external alignment toward more non-democratic powers?

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point in GD’s foreign policy. Instead of maintaining a strong pro-European position and pursuing a constitutionally claimed value-based foreign policy, the Georgian Dream party adopted critical and cynical rhetoric toward European partners, blamed them for an attempt to open the “second front” in Georgia, labeled the West as “Global War Party”, and refused to join Western sanctions against Russia.

The Georgian Dream Party is aware that the EU integration process implies the strengthening of democratic institutions, fighting against corruption, and resistance to disinformation, all of which undermine the foundational pillars of an authoritarian regime. By choosing to align itself with illiberal powers of the international order, GD aims to prolong its governance and deepen its autocracy.

Literature review

Georgia's recent foreign policy, which is moving away from its traditional pro-European stance and turning toward stronger relationships with non-democratic powers, provides an interesting example of how elites' personal interests can influence the foreign policy strategy. This review begins by looking at the main academic discussions. It also highlights the important contributions of Georgian scholars, whose work helps explain how local politics, history, and society shape the country's foreign policy. The rise of populist and anti-Western rhetoric is also a key topic among Georgian academics. They point out how the ruling party has used conservative and religious values to argue that Europe's liberal ideas do not fit Georgia (Matsaberidze, 2025). Such arguments are not just widespread in society; they are often used by leaders to justify their decisions and strengthen their own position.

Within Georgia, the rise of populist and anti-Western rhetoric further complicates the country's position. As Matsaberidze (2021) notes, conservative narratives emphasize religion and tradition to argue that European liberal values are incompatible with Georgia's identity. These narratives have been instrumentalized by ruling elites to legitimize their power and justify foreign policy choices.

Domestic democratic backsliding plays a key role in shaping Georgia's foreign policy. Kakachia and Lebanidze (2019, 2023) document how the ruling Georgian Dream party has weakened democratic institutions, eroding checks and balances, and fostering an increasingly autocratic environment. This consolidation of power has foreign policy implications: as leaders grow stronger at home, they may be more open to engagement with illiberal powers (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

Georgian scholars have also written a lot about how domestic politics, especially the recent democratic decline, have influenced foreign policy. They describe how the ruling party has weakened checks and balances, making the system more autocratic (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2025).

Instead of just pointing to Georgia's struggle to balance between East and West, it is helpful to look at how the country's own political system and institutions affect its foreign policy choices. Recent studies suggest that when a government becomes more powerful at home, it may also become more open to influence from countries with less democratic values (Sirbiladze, 2025). At the same time, changing alliances in the region make it even harder for smaller countries like Georgia to act freely (Sabanadze, 2025). In this situation, Georgia's shift may not be a clear decision to turn away from the West, but rather a reaction to outside pressures and new realities in the region (Sirbiladze, 2025; Sabanadze, 2025). This view shows how closely linked Georgia's internal politics are with outside influences and suggests that the country's future path will depend on both how strong its institutions are and how well it can adjust to a world with many competing powers. Sirbiladze (2025), in "Aligned or Multi-aligned? Georgia's Foreign Policy in Flux," posits that Georgia's attempt to pursue a multi-aligned foreign policy

has ultimately failed due to the country's limited strategic value. Complementing this perspective by delving into the specific drivers of this shift, Sabanadze (2025), in "Is Russia Behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?", directly questions the role of external forces. She contends that the Georgian Dream has become "Russia's most valuable asset" in the South Caucasus, with Moscow projecting influence not through overt means, but by leveraging domestic proxies, aided by external enablers like Hungary, and capitalizing on a perceived lack of Western resolve. Together, these analyses underscore that Georgia's current trajectory represents a critical juncture, where domestic political choices and external geopolitical dynamics are driving the country towards a definitive alignment with non-democratic powers, thereby undermining its traditional democratic and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Understanding Georgia's foreign policy requires looking closely at how internal politics and leadership beliefs guide decisions. Kakachia and Lebanidze (2023) highlight that strategic calculations made by political leaders are rarely transparent, especially when public opinion diverges from government intentions. For instance, when Georgia's leadership engages in friendly gestures towards Russia, this is often done with caution due to the pro-Western preferences of much of the population. Such a balancing act means that leaders tend to avoid openly challenging the nation's stated Western aspirations, demonstrating the tension between public sentiment and elite strategies (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

In recent years, Georgia has sometimes cooperated with states that do not share its democratic aspirations. Rather than a simple alignment with the West, the country's approach often mixes practical interests with value-based ambitions, particularly in the wake of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kakabadze (2024) describe Georgia's "hedging" approach, where decision-makers assess short-term needs and risks rather than acting solely on ideological commitments. This pragmatic strategy allows Georgia to maintain flexibility in a volatile regional environment.

At the same time, competing visions among the country's elites have created uncertainty in both rhetoric and policy. As Kakachia and colleagues (2025) show, debates about migration from Russia have produced mixed messages from the authorities, revealing how internal disagreements can be reflected in the nation's external stance. Information threats, both domestic and foreign, further contribute to an environment where public perceptions and elite preferences interact in complex ways, shaping responses to external challenges (Kakachia, Lebanidze, Kohv, Kandelaki, & Kakabadze, 2025).

Davit Afrasidze (2015) argues that regional identity plays a significant role in shaping a country's identity. Given that the South Caucasus lacks strong regional identity (which is a social concept in the first place), regional states do not share multidimensional similarities, such as, for instance, same religion, language, and political values, and

all of them has different understanding of their position in the region, Georgia began to change its regional identity and align itself with Europe. For years, Georgia has strived for Euro-Atlantic integration. However, Georgia's current realignment does not consider the country's regional identity as a main driver for the foreign policy orientation.

Taken together, this literature shows that Georgia's current path is not merely a balancing act between East/North and the West. Rather, it reflects the interaction of the elite's personal interests and external pressures. The convergence of democratic backsliding, elite calculations, and geopolitical volatility suggests that Georgia is at a critical juncture. Unless domestic institutions are strengthened and the gap between public aspirations and elite strategies is reduced, the country risks drifting further into the orbit of authoritarian powers, undermining its long-standing European and democratic aspirations.

Theoretical Framework foundation

This article is based on classical realism. From a classical realist perspective, the Georgian Dream government's shift in foreign policy can be understood as a rational pursuit of power preservation and regime survival, rooted in the realist view of politics as a struggle for dominance and security. While classical realists like Hans Morgenthau (1948) emphasize the individual 'will to power', which can be connected to the most influential figure for GD, however, as there is a lack of epistemological evidence to explain the personal motives of Bidzina Ivanishvili beyond maintaining power (often linked to Russia), this analysis moves beyond individual-level explanations to provide a systemic assessment of the current Georgian political order. Rather than focusing on the personalities of specific leaders, it evaluates 'Georgian Dream' (GD) as a consolidated oligarchic system, the survival of systemic oligarchic governance. In this context, foreign policy is not a pursuit of national interest but a mechanism for domestic preservation. For a regime whose legitimacy and wealth are predicated on informal power structures, Western-led integration - with its demands for the rule of law and institutional transparency - poses an existential threat. Thus, the regime's anti-Western posture is not a strategic preference, but a structural necessity; it is the only way to safeguard the oligarchic system from the liberalizing 'contagion' of Western standards.

GD's recalibration of Georgia's foreign policy is a strategic maneuver designed to maintain political control in a threatening environment. Facing increasing Western criticism over democratic backsliding, the ruling elite perceives alignment with non-democratic powers (such as Russia, China, and Iran) as a means of minimizing external pressure and ensuring regime continuity, predominantly with the huge assistance of the authoritarian states. From a realist perspective, this presents a shift from normative alignment with liberal democracies toward self-help and power protection within a system perceived as hostile or uncertain.

Classical realism also highlights the role of prudence and political necessity. As Morgenthau stressed, moral principles cannot be applied to state behavior in the same way they are to individual conduct; survival is the ultimate political value. Thus, for GD, maintaining power domestically through consolidating autocracy and limiting Western leverage appears as an act of prudence in the face of potential sanctions or isolation. By repositioning Georgia's foreign policy, the ruling party seeks to preserve national autonomy and regime legitimacy, even at the cost of weakening democratic commitments.

Furthermore, realism distinguishes between state interests and regime interests, but in hybrid or semi-authoritarian contexts, such as Georgia, these interests are often portrayed as converging. The government's survival becomes synonymous with the state's stability. Consequently, GD's actions reflect what classical realists would identify as the politics of necessity—where leaders justify controversial external alignments as essential to preventing instability or external interference. GD leaders proved this claim by shaping a discourse on the 'War fear' through anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the motivations behind Georgia's recent foreign policy realignment and the strategies used by the ruling Georgian Dream party to justify this shift. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables a nuanced understanding of how political elites construct and communicate legitimacy through discourse and symbolism, rather than through formal institutional or quantitative indicators.

The research is based on a diverse range of primary and secondary sources from 2022–2025, including official speeches, parliamentary statements, interviews, and media materials. Particular attention was paid to the rhetoric of senior GD officials, such as the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as analyses by local and international think tanks, including the Georgian Institute of Politics, Gnomon Wise, Chatham House, and Carnegie Europe. These sources offer insights into how narratives of sovereignty, neutrality, and national identity have been strategically employed to portray Georgia's foreign policy redirection as pragmatic rather than ideological.

Two complementary methods were applied: content analysis and speech act analysis. Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, key terms, and rhetorical patterns across the GD's public communications, revealing how the government reframes its relations with the European Union and Western partners within a “balanced” or “multi-vector” policy framework. Speech act analysis, informed by the classic theoretical approaches of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), was applied to examine how political speech does not merely describe reality but actively shapes it. This approach helped uncover how GD leaders employ performative language—such as appeals to

“sovereign decision-making”, “preventing war”, and “national dignity”—to legitimize distancing from the West while maintaining domestic authority.

All collected data were coded thematically to detect underlying narratives and recurrent linguistic patterns. Contextual analysis of EU–Georgia relations, regional developments, and democratic backsliding complemented the interpretation of discourse, ensuring that findings were situated within broader geopolitical and institutional dynamics. Although this study focuses primarily on elite-level discourse rather than public opinion, this limitation aligns with its objective: to understand how language functions as an instrument of power preservation and foreign policy legitimization in contemporary Georgia.

Why Now? Triggers to Georgian Dream’s Escalating Authoritarianism and Strategic Realignment

The main trigger to GD’s foreign policy transformation is the urgency of maintaining power. After facing a decline in electoral support, emerging the real potential of Georgia becoming one of the members of the EU, and external pressure to explicitly distance itself from pro-authoritarian policy, all of which present an overt threat to GD’s hold on power, the ruling party realized the need to quickly change its pro-Western foreign policy and adopt a new strategy consisting of the consolidation of power domestically and establishing new partnerships with actors globally that would turn a blind eye to the country’s democratic backsliding.

Georgia’s foreign policy shift was guided by external and internal aspects. On the domestic level, Georgian Dream Party began consolidating its autocratic rule by introducing a series of authoritarian-leaning laws—such as the “Foreign Agents Registration Act,” which seeks to suppress the non-governmental sector, amendments aimed at banning political parties, and restrictions on media outlets—all of which enable the government to silence dissent and exert extensive control over civil society (Transparency International Georgia, 2025).

"There is no alternative to transparency. It is unacceptable for someone to try to organize a revolution in our country in a non-transparent manner, to finance a revolution. This is not the right practice," said Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze (TV Pirveli, 2024). Once again, Georgian Dream discredits foreign partners and Georgia’s non-governmental sector in the name of transparency, thereby manipulating nonexistent threats to justify its authoritarian-leaning legislative actions.

Since the 2024 parliamentary elections, the capital’s main avenue has been the scene of nonstop protests lasting over 300 days. Despite employing a wide range of coercive measures to block the streets, the Georgian Dream

government has failed to contain this persistent civic mobilization. The imposed fines, often exceeding the country's average monthly income, illustrate the extent of state pressure directed against the demonstrators.

The recently published BBC research, claiming the possibility of the GD using prohibited chemicals against peaceful demonstrators, also proves the disparity of the ruling government, an urge to silence resilience, and its diminished political legitimacy. The government that presents a threat to the national population and serves its own political interests rather than the national ones is deprived of legitimacy. (BBC, 2025)

Furthermore, GD activated a massive disinformation campaign and adopted hate speech against European leaders. By introducing conspiracy theories about “Global War Party” and “Deep State,” creating irrational fear of losing sovereignty, and emphasizing an attempt from the Western liberal powers to drag Georgia into the war, the ruling party manipulated the Georgians' emotions and, in this way, tried to justify its foreign policy shift. Therefore, the disinformation campaign was strategically designed to portray the West as an unreliable partner, one willing to sacrifice Georgia for its own geopolitical aims. By first sowing doubt and fear among the population, the government laid the groundwork for a broader reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's part of his speech in 2024: “We are making a choice between a dignified European future for our country and the unacceptable reality that the radical opposition and foreign actors want to pass off as European,” (TV Imedi, 2024) shows the party's attempt to create false dichotomies and, as a result, to manipulate the perceptions of the electorate. By emphasizing the importance of sovereignty, national values and traditions, and on the other hand discrediting the immigration policies of the European Union, the party aims to create a false threat of losing national identity in case Georgia accomplishes the requirements presented by the EU. Irakli Kobakhidze's words (2025): “As for identity, due to migration, there are serious challenges in maintaining both ethnic and religious identity. For example, in England, the most common name given to newborns is Muhammad, and in Berlin - the capital of Germany - the most common name is also Muhammad. They are gradually losing their ethnic and religious identity.” (Pirveli TV, 2025) also serves as a means of discrediting Europe.

Messages related to the Global War Party and the second front (July-September 2024)

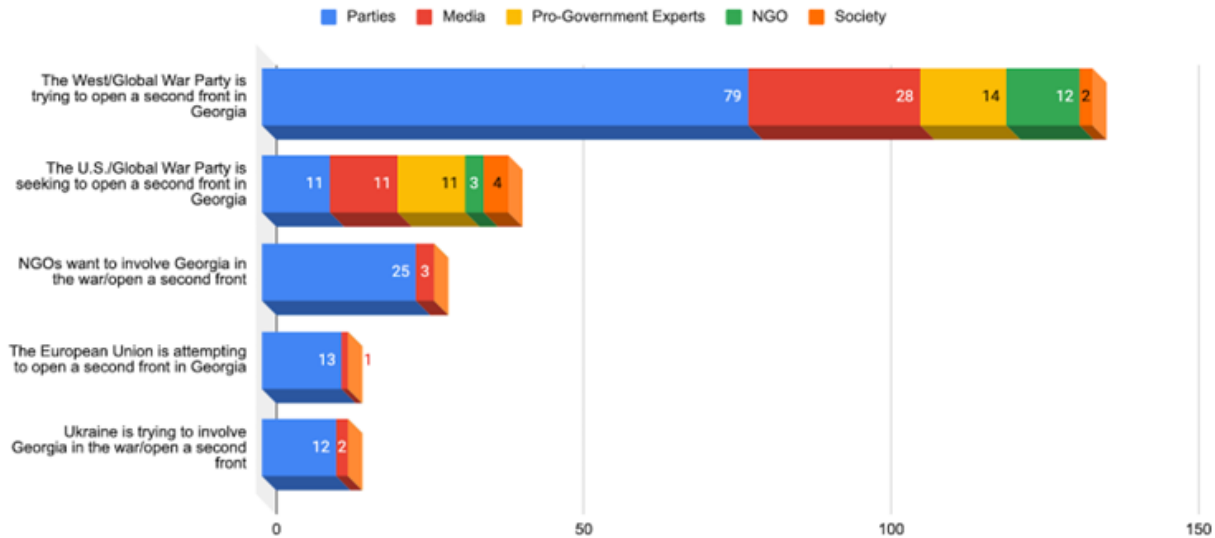


Figure Source: MDF, 2024

“The desire to open a second front in Georgia is so strong that the Global War Party has pushed the entire European bureaucracy into attack mode against Georgia, and they see abolishing visa-free travel – the last trump card in their hands – as leverage,”...“Those seeking to drag our country into war believe that abolishing visa-free travel with the EU on a fictitious basis will spark such unrest that it will eventually lead to the overthrow of the government and the coming to power of the agents,”(Civil Georgia, 2025). Irakli Kobakhidze’s words demonstrate how the GD blames the West for allegedly attempting to drag Georgia into the war, while portraying the EU’s efforts to encourage Georgia to return to its democratic and pro-Western path as an attempt to organize a revolution in the country and a threat to Georgia’s national security.

According to the Media Development Foundation (MDF) research (2024), most of the messages, which aimed to discredit the ‘Collective West’(32,7%), targeted the United States (23,3%), the European Union (11,5%), Non-governmental organization (9,7%) and included pro-Russian narratives, also the ones indirectly justifying its actions in Ukraine (13.1%).

Subjects of Anti-Western Messages (July-September, 2024)

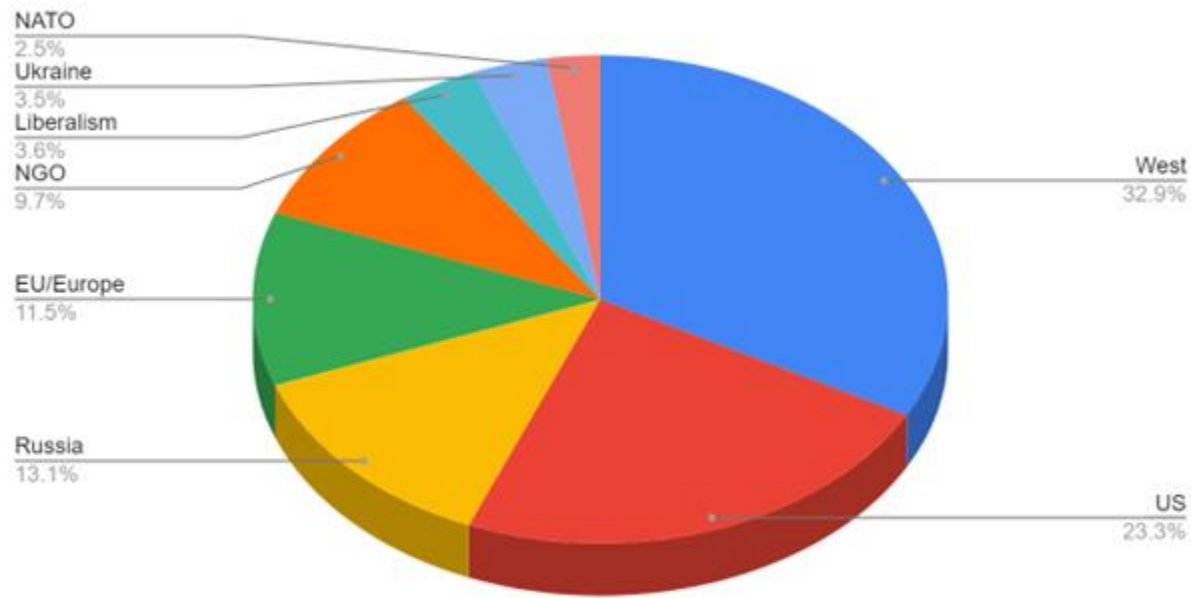


Figure Source: MDF, 2024

Georgia's foreign policy shift is not linked to a singular period or event. It has begun since 2012 when the new political leadership came to power and sought to balance relations between the West and Russia through a so-called "non-confrontational" or "pragmatic" foreign policy toward Moscow - a sharp contrast to the previous government's more pro-Western stance. Despite this reorientation, GD managed to secure significant benefits from Euro-Atlantic integration while simultaneously deepening the country's economic ties with Russia and thereby paving the way for later shifts in foreign policy.

In terms of external aspects, after the escalation of Russia's war in Ukraine, GD began overtly shifting its foreign policy orientation towards illiberal powers of the international system, since GD perceived this action as a perfect means of maintaining hold on power. The reasons for this are as follows:

Firstly, isolating itself from the West would allow the ruling party to consolidate autocracy on the domestic level without the EU's interference and pressure. Given that the EU integration process requires ensuring the rule of law, strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and promoting transparency, GD finds it to be a serious threat to its monopolistic governance.

Secondly, EU membership directly contradicts Russia's strategic interests in the region. Since Georgian Dream (GD) views Russia as one of the key guarantors of its continued hold on power, pursuing deeper engagement with the EU would risk provoking Putin's dissatisfaction and, consequently, jeopardizing GD's governance.

And finally, closer alignment with Eurasian powers serves a strategic function: it offers a means of cushioning the impact of diplomatic isolation. Given that Georgia cannot survive under conditions of complete political isolation, deepening economic or political relations (or in some cases both) with Russia, China, and Iran appears to be the Georgian Dream's chosen path toward a fundamental transformation of the country's foreign policy identity. By aligning itself with China, Russia, and Iran, GD aims to circumvent Western pressure, consolidate its authoritarian rule, and gain international recognition.

With this in mind, Georgian Dream has deepened its ties with China - currently the European Union's primary global competitor in trade and economics. In 2023, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili visited Chinese President Xi Jinping and signed a strategic partnership agreement. According to Gharibashvili's public statement following the visit, the initiative for this agreement came solely from the Chinese side, without prior public debate or transparent deliberation within Georgia (Civic Idea, 2024).

While diversification of trade and economic partnerships is indeed crucial, particularly for a country like Georgia, which remains heavily economically dependent on Russia, the geopolitical timing of this decision raises important concerns. Moreover, Georgia's existing Association Agreement (2016) with the EU obligates it to align its foreign policy with that of the Union. This strategic move came at a pivotal moment: a narrow "window of opportunity" for Georgia to join the European Union alongside Ukraine and Moldova is open. The urgency is clear - missing this opportunity could mean waiting an indefinite period for a second chance.

Moreover, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Georgia's economic dependence on Russia has deepened considerably, driven by a substantial inflow of Russian capital and an expanding presence of Russian businesses (Vardashvili, 2025). Analysts warn that this dependence poses significant political and economic risks, as the Kremlin has historically weaponised trade and energy ties to exert pressure—a pattern evident in 2006, when Russia suspended gas and electricity supplies and imposed a wine embargo on Georgia (Vardashvili, 2025). The wine export sector remains particularly vulnerable: since the lifting of the embargo in 2013, exports to Russia have grown steadily, reaching a record US\$183 million in 2023, and accounting for 66% of total exports (Vardashvili, 2025). Tourism is also heavily Russia-dependent, generating roughly US \$850 million in 2024, despite a slight decline from the previous year (Vardashvili, 2025). Energy dependency is growing too: imports of Russian gas rose by 32% in 2024, reaching US \$145.7 million (Vardashvili, 2025). Despite the mounting risks associated with sanctions and potential secondary measures, the Georgian government has shown no intention to revise its economic engagement with Russia (Vardashvili, 2025). Overall, Georgia's sustained reliance on Russian trade,

tourism, and energy exposes its economy to recurring geopolitical vulnerabilities and undermines long-term resilience.

Furthermore, recently, in October 2025, the Russian company Russneft delivered its first batch of crude oil to a newly built refinery in Kulevi, on Georgia's Black Sea coast (Reuters, 2025). According to data from LSEG and industry sources, the tanker Kaisery transported 105,340 tons of Siberian Light crude from Russia's Novorossiysk port to Kulevi on 6 October 2025. The Georgian Revenue Service later clarified that neither the ship, its owner, nor the involved companies are subject to international sanctions, and the cargo was temporarily stored under customs supervision. Russneft is a private company distinct from the state-owned Rosneft, though its operations similarly illustrate Russia's effort to diversify oil exports amid Western sanctions (Reuters, 2025). The refinery project, officially presented in October 2024 and backed by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and Economy Minister Levan Davitashvili, is operated by Black Sea Petroleum, founded by Georgian businesswoman Maka Asatiani. The project's total investment is valued at \$600 million, with the first phase enabling the processing of 1.2 million tons of crude oil annually and a planned capacity of 4 million tons at full scale. Financial support was jointly provided by the Georgian Development Fund and several commercial banks, including Kartu Bank, BasisBank, and Halyk Bank, through a syndicated loan structure. Despite the absence of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia since the 2008 war, the Georgian government has deepened economic cooperation with Moscow under the Georgian Dream administration, while ties with the West have deteriorated sharply (Reuters, 2025). This development reflects the broader geopolitical reality in which Georgia's engagement with Russian energy ventures persists even as the EU seeks to phase out Russian energy imports by 2027 and NATO states face mounting pressure to reduce dependence on Russian oil.

In addition, because Iran is regarded as the main sponsor of international terrorism and poses a serious threat not only to the U.S. interests, but also to international peace, Irakli Kobakhidze's visit to Iran for the funeral of the president, standing alongside terrorists, raises serious concerns when it comes to Georgia-US relations. Notably, GD leaders have discredited the previous U.S. administration, blaming it for Russia's war in Ukraine and for attempting to open a second front in Georgia (Imedi, 2024). This was changed in the first months of Trump's presidency, hoping that Trump would beat the 'Deep State', but controversy saw anti-GD actions and statements from the new administration, particularly, the "Megobari Act", condemning statements from the Secretary of State, and sanctions. Simultaneously, GD leaders attempt to lobby Ivanishvili's interests in Washington. Self-proclaimed Georgian Prime Minister Kobakhidze sent two letters (both public and private) to the Trump administration, asking for "resetting" the relationship, but in vain (Civil Georgia, 2025). This attempt illustrates Ivanishvili's multi-aligned policy, aimed at ensuring his own survival by balancing among global powers. Yet, what is Ivanishvili's real goal then? As Neil MacFarlane has argued, the GD and its founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, are driven more by personal interests than Moscow's. "Ivanishvili is neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western; he is pro-Ivanishvili,"

MacFarlane pointed out. (Chatham House, 2025). This explains very much why GD tries so hard to portray itself as a friend of the US.

Recently, Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze attended the 'International Year of Peace and Trust' forum in Turkmenistan. Marking the 30th anniversary of Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality, the summit brought together the leaders of Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and several Central Asian states. This event was particularly significant as it marked the first time a Georgian head of government participated in a high-level diplomatic gathering alongside the Russian President since Tbilisi severed diplomatic ties with Moscow in 2008. In fact, historically, the Georgian government has consistently boycotted diplomatic formats that include Russia, such as the '3+3' regional platform, maintaining that the Geneva International Discussions remained the only acceptable venue for engagement. Participation in the Ashgabat forum, therefore, signals a departure from this long-standing policy. It is worth noting that appearing alongside Vladimir Putin was undoubtedly politically fraught for Kobakhidze. This serves as a stark illustration of the Georgian Dream's desperate attempt to maintain a facade of international legitimacy. The regime appears willing to endure the toxic optics of proximity to the Kremlin if it provides a platform to project a sense of 'diplomatic normalcy,' even as its actions fundamentally undermine the state's strategic interests.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point in the "Georgian Dream's" foreign policy. Since coming to power in 2012, GD had pursued a dual-track approach—seeking normalization with Russia to avoid conflict, while also advancing Euro-Atlantic integration. However, after the escalation of the war against Ukraine, this balance shifted dramatically.

The main cause of GD's foreign policy shift lies in its urgency for maintaining power. More specifically, the realistic threat to GD's hold on power, the oligarch's private interests, and the need to find a way out of political isolation stimulated a considerable pivot in Georgia's foreign policy. The foreign policy shift was driven by the adoption of authoritarian-leaning laws aimed at consolidating autocratic power domestically, while manipulating people's fears and values to justify the party's emerging strategy.

EU requirements, more specifically, strengthening democratic institutions, fighting corruption, and countering disinformation, threatened the sustainability of GD's autocratic rule. Faced with waning public support, the party abandoned its previous strategy of "bandwagoning by stealth" (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2024) and took more overt steps.

Today, historical momentum for Georgia has come. Georgia must do its utmost to advance along the path of EU integration and become one of the members of the European Union. Yet democratic backsliding, autocratic consolidation, oligarchic influence, violence against peaceful protesters, and the foreign policy shift away from liberal allies all undermine Georgia's EU aspirations.

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