Commentary #5

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Georgia's European Journey: A Battle Against Time

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Georgia's European Journey: A Battle Against Time

Always Looking West

For over three decades, Georgia has stood out in the post-Soviet space as a country with a clear European vocation. Unlike others in the region, we never hesitated about our direction once the Soviet Union started to fall apart. Even before regaining independence, the majority of Georgians agreed: our future was with Europe.

This consensus wasn't just symbolic. It has underpinned Georgia's national development, with 75–85% of the public consistently supporting EU and NATO integration throughout this period.

The first decade of independence was a hazardous and often overlooked chapter. Amid civil war, economic collapse and uncertainty, Georgia established the foundations of a modern state—a new constitution, parliamentary democracy, national currency and banking system, defence and security institutions, and strategic partnerships. This early groundwork enabled the political developments and achievements that followed. Recognising this historical continuity is essential rather than fragmenting it for political convenience.

In 2002 Georgia formally declared its intention to join NATO. Momentum accelerated in 2004, and by 2008, the push for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) reached its peak. It is often claimed that Georgia was "on the verge" of receiving a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), with Chancellor Merkel's resistance frequently cited as the decisive obstacle. While it is true that Merkel played a leading role among the sceptics, this narrative oversimplifies a much more complex and multifaceted reality. The core issue was not the stance of any single leader but a broader geopolitical reality. Despite encouraging rhetoric, there was no genuine political will in the West to support Georgia's NATO accession at the time. Although a formal consensus on NATO enlargement emerged in 1994, its boundaries were never clearly defined—yet, in practice, they excluded Georgia. From 2002 onward, everything we pursued was framed as a partnership rather than a genuine path to membership. Understanding this reality is essential for making sound judgments about past decisions and the strategic choices we face today.

Following the August 2008 war, momentum toward Georgia's NATO accession stalled while the focus shifted toward deeper engagement with the EU. Georgia signed the Association Agreement, including DCFTA, and secured visa-free travel with the Schengen Area. Though these developments occurred under the *Georgian Dream* government, they were not spontaneous. They were the fruits of a long and cumulative process, with contributions from every administration and generation.

While Georgia often characterised its relationship with the EU as "integration," Brussels again viewed it as an advanced partnership—short of a genuine accession trajectory. This only changed after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In response to that brutal aggression, the EU reimagined its enlargement policy, granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. For the first time, EU accession became a formal path.

Yet, at this historical juncture, the Georgian government chose not to advance the process but to obstruct it. Still, the ruling party retained significant electoral support in the 2024

parliamentary elections—even as the majority of the population continues to favour EU integration. To understand this seeming paradox, two key factors must be considered:

First, while pro-European feelings are deep in Georgian society, they often rest on emotion rather than a comprehensive understanding of the EU and its benefits. This emotional foundation makes the public highly vulnerable to disinformation and manipulation. Russia effectively exploited this weakness through an aggressive information war in recent years.

Second, the 2024 election campaign was dominated by fear and negativity. The ruling party fueled anxieties by warning of war and cultural collapse should it lose power. Meanwhile, the opposition failed to present a compelling, forward-looking alternative. Their campaign focused primarily on ousting the incumbent party without offering a credible vision for the future or addressing the everyday concerns of citizens. In such an environment, many voters, particularly from middle-aged and senior generations, gravitated toward the incumbent—not out of enthusiasm, but because it felt more familiar and "predictable" than the uncertain alternative.

Yet despite these conditions, independent exit polls showed that opposition parties, collectively, earned more votes than *Georgian Dream*—highlighting both widespread dissatisfaction and systemic irregularities.

Why Should Europe Care?

Georgia is under active attack from Russia—this time through hybrid means and the systematic dismantling of its European future. Yet, this is not merely a domestic crisis—it is part of a broader geopolitical confrontation, clearly outlined by Vladimir Putin in his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference. At the time, many dismissed his words as bluster. But he was not bluffing. He always tells us what he intends to do—our failure has been in not believing him.

Every time Russia plans a major aggression, it tests the limits first. In 2008, it tested the world's reaction in Georgia. When the response was weak, it pushed further—Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, and eventually the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Russia's conventional war in Ukraine is accompanied by an equally treacherous hybrid war against the democratic world. Disinformation, cyberattacks, political subversion, and economic coercion are no less fatal than conventional weapons — they target the very foundations of our democracies.

In this kind of war, Moldova was nearly captured, Armenia remains under relentless pressure, and even EU member states are not immune. Hybrid warfare knows no borders and often bypasses traditional defence mechanisms—including NATO's Article V. That's why every country counts in this struggle, whether a NATO ally or an EU candidate. If one falls, others will follow.

The Power of a New Generation

And yet, hope remains. Amid these challenges, a powerful source of resilience is emerging—led by a new generation unwilling to give up on Georgia's European future. While the older generation saw European integration mainly as a path to security and prosperity, today's youth are reshaping its meaning. They see Europeanization as far more profound—rooted in justice, freedom, and dignity. Their vision is clear: a European Georgia anchored in the rule of law and democratic governance. Unsurprisingly, the slogan of nonstop Georgian protests has become: "No Justice, No Peace!"

Movements like these—such as the recent youth-led protests in Tbilisi—often give rise to new political forces driven by energetic, motivated, and uncorrupted young leaders unburdened by past political failures. Their leadership can restore trust in state institutions, break the vicious cycle of polarisation, and lead the country more decisively toward European integration. The first signs of success are visible. Despite bureaucratic roadblocks and official intimidation, civic networks, independent professional unions, and new political formations are emerging. These are the seeds of future transformation. But they need support—domestically and internationally.

The moment is historic, but the window is narrow, and missing it would be a tragedy. Seizing it requires courage from our people. Some may grow disheartened by the slow pace of progress—but now is not the time to yield to frustration. Let's focus on the bigger picture. Progress is happening, and results will come—but only if we do not give up. And if we do not give up, perhaps, despite its immense challenges, Europe will not give up on us either. But if we fail, no one will come to rescue us.

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