Forum: Georgia at 35: Lessons of a Generation

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The Anchor on Deck

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The Anchor on Deck

Thirty-five years is a long enough record to learn from. Ambassador Tedo Japaridze, once my boss, mentor and now dear friend, has given us an essay of rare honesty — the honesty of someone who did not merely witness these decisions but shaped them, and is now prepared to examine them with us.

It deserves a response of equal honesty.

His essay arrives at exactly the right moment and asks the right question. Before debating how Georgia should navigate a turbulent and unforgiving international environment, we must first know: "*Who are we, where do we belong, and what kind of state do we aspire to be?"* The anchor before the vectors. The destination before the route.

It seems a deceptively simple argument, but it leaves a question open, one that anyone who has lived through these thirty-five years cannot avoid asking. If the principle is this clear, why was the anchor never properly secured? Georgia has had time, partners, resources, and overwhelming public support for its European future. And yet here we are.

We Georgians have a habit of explaining our difficulties by pointing at everything but ourselves — at Russia, at geography, at history. All were real, but the primary responsibility for this unfinished task cannot be delegated. We declared the anchor, but we never fully installed it.

Understanding why that happened, and what it cost us, is where this conversation must pick up.

The Declared Anchor

Tedo writes that Georgia's Western orientation *"reflected a broader choice about the kind of state Georgia sought to build: a state governed by law rather than arbitrary power, institutions rather than personalities, accountability rather than dependency, and citizens rather than subjects."*

He is right. But there is a distinction his essay does not fully explore — the distinction between choosing a destination and building the road toward it.

Georgia chose the destination early and chose it genuinely, rooted in centuries of cultural and spiritual orientation toward the Western world. When independence came again after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Euro-Atlantic choice felt less like a decision to be made than a truth to be declared. Pro-Western rhetoric became the default language of Georgian politics, embraced by every government for more than three decades. For much of that time, Georgia's Western partners largely accepted this rhetorical commitment as evidence of the country's strategic orientation, even though no government fully translated it into the institutional and societal foundations that such an orientation required, albeit to very different degrees. And only recently has that rhetoric itself been openly abandoned.

But a declaration is not a construction. Georgia's European choice was never genuinely debated or consciously owned by its society. Citizens were offered reassurance rather than understanding. Public support for EU and NATO integration consistently exceeded seventy per cent — an impressive number that masked a dangerous fragility. A society that merely feels its strategic direction rather than consciously understanding it is not anchored. It is merely pointed.

That hollow foundation left Georgian society structurally exposed. A society that has not genuinely internalised its own strategic choice, that holds it as sentiment rather than conviction, cannot defend it. Russia's cognitive operation understood this perfectly and exploited it with precision.

The Anchor as Freedom

There is a dimension of Tedo's argument that Georgia's own recent experience illustrates with painful clarity. Tedo writes that a secure anchor does not constrain pragmatism — it enables it.

For as long as Georgia's Western orientation was credible, or at least accepted as such by its international partners, the country enjoyed the freedom to pursue a degree of pragmatism in its relations with more difficult partners. This was evident, for example, in Georgia's slightly lower alignment with certain EU statements on democracy and human rights than other EU-aspiring countries, driven by the legitimate concern that stronger positions might jeopardise support for Georgia's policy of non-recognition of the occupied territories. It was also reflected in carefully managed relations with Iran despite international sanctions, and in engagement with China on connectivity and transit. These relationships were largely understood by Georgia's partners as tactical expressions of sovereign pragmatism rather than evidence of strategic drift.

The same relationships today are cited as evidence of strategic betrayal. Georgia has not gained freedom by distancing itself from the West. It has lost it. The anchor was never a constraint on Georgia's foreign policy. It was the source of its room to manoeuvre.

The Regional Dimension

Georgia's anchor problem also has a strong regional dimension.

The Baltic states are the model most frequently cited. Geography, historical experience, and the living memory of interwar independence were real advantages. But there is something more. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania shared an identical strategic orientation from the moment they regained independence. Three small voices speaking in unison became a political force disproportionate to their individual size.

The South Caucasus tells a different story. Strategic orientations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan diverged immediately and never converged. Each country carried its burden alone, without regional amplification or a shared voice. Georgia's arguments arrived in Brussels and Washington as the claims of a single small, conflict-affected state — compelling, but carrying none of the regional weight that made the Baltic case difficult to ignore. Armenia, now cautiously reorienting toward Europe, faces the same structural challenge — no shared voice, no regional anchor to lean on.

There is one observation worth making carefully. Azerbaijan never declared an anchor it did not intend to install. Its strategic orientation is not EU/Europe, and it has never pretended otherwise. Yet measured against Tedo's framework, it has been consistent: it identified its anchor and pursued it coherently. The lesson is not that Azerbaijan's choices were right. The lesson is that Tedo's principle holds even when the anchor points in a different direction. What destroys small states is not the choice of anchor — it is the absence of one.

The Anchor Still to Be Secured

Returning to Tedo's framework, the question that remains is no longer analytical but practical: What does securing the anchor actually require in 2026?

A strategic anchor is not a declaration. It is a construction—built patiently, maintained consistently, and sustained by the informed conviction of an entire society.

For Georgia's future leaders — and Tedo's closing challenge is directed at them — this means doing something Georgian politicians have too often avoided: speaking honestly to their own citizens, in plain language, about the issues that shape everyday lives. Not slogans about European integration, but answers to the questions people actually ask: *How will this improve my job prospects? My healthcare? My family's security? My children's education?*

It means explaining not only what European integration demands but also what it delivers, not in the abstract vocabulary of geopolitics but in tangible improvements in prosperity, justice, security, and opportunity. It means building institutions that function regardless of who governs them, and recognising that sovereignty is not merely proclaimed in a constitution but exercised every day through accountable government, the rule of law, and public trust.

Yet the responsibility does not rest with political leaders alone. A strategic anchor cannot be imposed from above; it must be consciously embraced by society itself. Georgia's European future will not be secured by another declaration from its leaders or another document signed in Brussels. It will be secured when European integration becomes not merely the policy of successive governments, but the informed and enduring choice of its citizens.

An anchor serves its purpose only when it reaches the seabed. For thirty-five years, Georgia has carried its European anchor on deck — chosen, declared, admired, yet never fully secured. The challenge before the next generation is not to proclaim it once again, but to lower it at last. Only then will Georgia have the stability and confidence to navigate whatever vectors the future may bring.

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