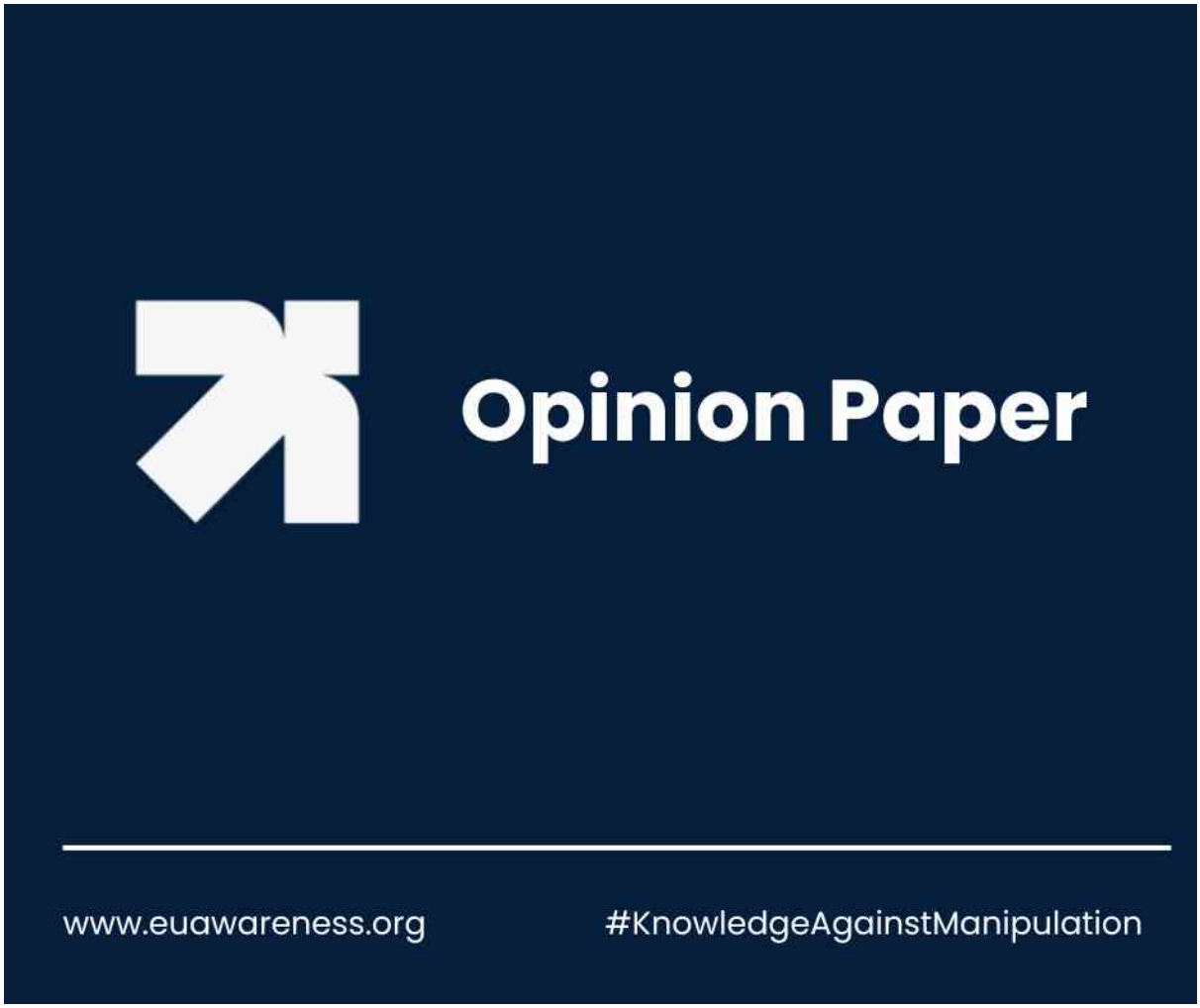

Opinion paper # 13

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A Corridor Without a Country: Georgian Dream and Georgia's Vanishing Place in Europe's Connectivity Agenda

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On 23 June 2026, the European Commission brought together transport ministers and senior officials from Central Asia, South Caucasus and Eastern Europe in Brussels to launch the Connectivity Agenda Platform, a framework for coordinating investment along the trade corridor that links the European Union to Central Asia. Hosted by three Commissioners — **Marta Kos** (Enlargement), **Jozef Síkela** (International Partnerships) and **Apostolos Tzitzikostas** (Sustainable Transport) — the meeting concluded statements of intent with international financial institutions expected to mobilise up to **€2 billion** for transport infrastructure, border crossings and trade facilitation along the route. The delegations seated at the table came from EU member states, Armenia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, alongside the G7 and the financial institutions themselves.

One country with an indisputable claim to a seat was missing. **Georgia was not there.**

This absence is not a diplomatic accident or an oversight to be corrected at the next meeting. It is the predictable result of a deliberate political course pursued by the Georgian Dream government, and it crystallises, in a single empty chair, the strategic price the country is now paying for that course. Tbilisi's exclusion from the Connectivity Agenda Platform represents a self-imposed punishment of Georgia's most durable national asset — its geography — and that the government's broader disappearance from the European agenda carries economic and strategic costs that will compound for years.

Why the corridor matters

To understand the scale of what Georgia is missing, one must first grasp what the Connectivity Agenda Platform is about. **The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route**, commonly called **the Middle Corridor**, is a multimodal network of railways, ports and roads running roughly 4,000 kilometres from western China across Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, the Black Sea and Türkiye into the European Union. Before 2022 it was largely an aspiration. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine closed the Northern Corridor to Western trade, and successive crises in the Middle East have rendered southern routes through Iran unreliable. The Middle Corridor is what remains: the only major overland route between Europe and Asia that bypasses both Russia and Iran.

The numbers confirm the shift from aspiration to necessity. According to the European Commission's own meta-study, published in February 2026, trade along the route has quadrupled since 2022 and could triple again by 2030 with the right investment. Commissioner Kos told the Brussels meeting that traffic "could increase fivefold over the next 15 years." This is no longer a question of commercial opportunity alone, the corridor has become a question of European economic security and strategic autonomy — a hedge against the weaponisation of trade routes.

Within this architecture, Georgia is not a marginal participant but a structural necessity. Georgia is "arguably the Middle Corridor's most structurally vulnerable node,"(Jamestown) because all rail shipments moving from Baku to European markets must traverse Georgian territory, without Georgia, "the region's connectivity map remains incomplete" (Carnegie). Commissioner Kos herself has acknowledged that "it is impossible to talk about a real connectivity agenda without Georgia" (Civil Georgia). Geography handed Georgia a role that no neighbour can fully replicate.

The chair that Georgia decided to leave empty

If Georgia is indispensable, why was it absent? The answer lies not in Brussels but in Tbilisi. Commissioner Kos has been candid that Georgia's exclusion is a direct response to its government's conduct. Speaking to the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee on 20 April 2026, she revealed that since the last structured dialogue she had visited Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye to advance the connectivity agenda — but pointedly not Georgia, because of the government's democratic backsliding and anti-EU turn. The EU, she added, would deepen Georgia's involvement only "to the extent that they also show that they want to engage on other areas" (Civil Georgia)— that is, on the political reforms Brussels has demanded. Georgia's absence, then, is neither accidental nor a matter of EU neglect: **it is a political choice by Tbilisi**, which has refused to meet the conditions that would earn it a seat.

Those "reasons" are a matter of public record. Having been granted EU candidate status in December 2023, the Georgian Dream government proceeded to dismantle the very reforms that had earned it. In 2024 it pushed through a Russian-style "foreign agents" law; held parliamentary elections in October that the Commission

found “marked by widespread irregularities”; and then, in November 2024, announced it would not pursue accession negotiations, suspending the EU path until 2028 (Georgia 2025 Report). In 2025 it went further, adopting a Foreign Agents Registration Act carrying criminal penalties of up to five years’ imprisonment, and amendments to the Law on Grants requiring government approval for any foreign grant (Venice Commission). By the EU’s own assessment, Georgia had become “a candidate country in name only” (EEAS).

The institutional consequences have accumulated. The Commission suspended bilateral financial assistance to the Georgian authorities in June 2024. In March 2026 it suspended visa-free travel for holders of Georgian diplomatic, service and official passports — the first ever use of the reinforced visa suspension mechanism (EEAS). On 17 June 2026, less than a week before the connectivity ministerial, the European Parliament adopted a resolution by 436 votes to 145 calling for targeted personal sanctions on **Bidzina Ivanishvili** and senior Georgian Dream figures, and reaffirming its non-recognition of the legitimacy of Georgia’s parliament (Civil Georgia). The same resolution noted that Georgia’s alignment with EU foreign policy positions had fallen from 53% in 2024 to 40%. A government that aligns with Europe on four issues in ten cannot credibly expect to be seated at Europe’s strategic table.

It is worth being precise about responsibility here. Brussels did not bypass Tbilisi due to lack of concern; it has, in fact, gone out of its way to keep the door open, repeatedly distinguishing between the Georgian government and the Georgian people. An argument must be made that underscores the point: the obstacle to Georgia’s inclusion is the conduct of its government, not the EU’s appetite to engage.

Counting the cost

The empty chair in Brussels is not merely symbolic. Its consequences are measurable, and they fall into three categories.

The first is investment that flows around Georgia rather than through it. While Georgia sits outside the EU’s coordinating frameworks, capital is already being committed elsewhere along the corridor. In late 2025 Commissioner Kos proposed a quadrilateral connectivity format involving the EU, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye — a grouping that, as multiple analysts note, “pointedly excludes” Georgia (Carnegie; Shatterbelt). The risk is structural: if Western corridor funding is channelled through formats that route cargo via Armenia, Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Georgia’s geographic advantage erodes from a near-monopoly into one option among several. A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study warns that Georgia is “the weakest among the regional beneficiaries” of the Middle Corridor and “depends on transit development more than any other country along the route” (FES). Tellingly, where investment does reach Georgia’s corridor segment, it now comes chiefly from non-EU institutions: in June 2026 the World Bank, with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB), approved a $372 million project to upgrade the Georgian rail and road segment (World Bank). Useful as that is, it underlines how Georgia is being kept commercially relevant by others while forfeiting the political coordination, and the European capital, that the Connectivity Agenda Platform now channels to its neighbours.

The second cost is the slow collapse of Georgia’s flagship infrastructure ambition. The Anaklia deep-sea port — with a planned capacity that would make it the largest on the eastern Black Sea coast — was meant to be Georgia’s instrument for capturing Middle Corridor trade. Instead, it has become a symbol of failure. Having walked away from a US- and European-backed consortium in 2020, the government selected a Chinese consortium led by China Communications Construction Company — a firm listed by the US Department of Defense among Chinese military companies — yet nearly two years on, no binding contract has been signed (Civic Idea). The government then cut the port’s 2026 budget allocation by roughly two-thirds, from 150 million to 50 million lari (DFWatch). A corridor needs an exit to the sea; Georgia is letting its own exit drift. The competitiveness gap is already visible in tariffs: crossing the port of Poti costs around $275 per 40-foot container, against $148 in Baku or Aktau (Emerging Europe).

The third cost is macroeconomic and harder to reverse. Georgia’s economy is structurally dependent on the West: financial resources from the EU, US and UK have historically amounted to around 30% of the economy, and 75% of public debt is denominated in foreign currency (Transparency International Georgia). As political ties have frayed, the money has followed. Foreign direct investment fell by roughly 30% in headline terms in 2024 — to its third-lowest level as a share of GDP this century (GlobalSource Partners) — with the first quarter of that year alone down 64% year on year (Eurasianet). Western investors, the most sensitive to political risk,

are precisely the ones retreating. The government's response — turning toward China, Iran and the Gulf states — substitutes dependence on authoritarian partners for partnership with the bloc that remains Georgia's largest trading partner (Jamestown; GIP).

The strategic stakes

Behind these figures lies a deeper strategic miscalculation. Georgian Dream appears to believe that geography is destiny — that because the corridor must pass through Georgia, Europe will eventually have no choice but to deal with Tbilisi on its own terms. Georgian officials have openly expressed hope that Brussels will be forced into a "reset" because it needs alternative trade routes (Civil Georgia).

This is a dangerous bet, for two reasons. First, geographic advantages are not permanent. As Emerging Europe observes, one might "ask Panama about alternative canal routes, or Suez about the Cape of Good Hope" (Emerging Europe). The TRIPP corridor through Armenia, the proposed land routes via Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and the EU's own willingness to fund border crossings with Türkiye and Azerbaijan all point to a future in which Georgia's segment can be partially engineered around. A monopoly wasted is rarely recovered. Second, by allowing its most important infrastructure decision — Anaklia — to be captured by a sanctioned Chinese state firm while alienating Western financiers, Georgia is converting itself from a trusted Western partner into a contested space where Russian and Chinese influence advance by default.

The tragedy is that the alternative was, and remains, available. **The EU has not slammed the door; it has set a price, and the price is reform.** Commissioner Kos's formulation — Georgia will be involved "to the extent that they show that they want to engage on other areas" — is an invitation as much as a condition. The European Parliament's June 2026 resolution explicitly expressed "full solidarity with the Georgian people." **The seat at the Brussels table was not taken away from Georgia; it was left empty by a government that decided its own grip on domestic power mattered more than its country's place in the strategic architecture of the continent.**

Conclusion

The launch of the Connectivity Agenda Platform should have been a moment of national vindication for Georgia — confirmation that the country's decades-long investment in becoming the indispensable bridge between Europe and Asia had paid off. Instead, it became a portrait of self-marginalisation. The €2 billion now being mobilised, the investment frameworks now being built, and the strategic partnerships now being forged are being assembled around Georgia rather than with it.

Governments come and go, but strategic position, once lost, is hard to regain. Every month that Georgian Dream prolongs its confrontation with Europe is a month in which corridor traffic finds alternative routes, investors recalibrate, and neighbours consolidate the role Georgia was meant to play. **The empty chair in Brussels on 23 June 2026 was not Europe's verdict on Georgia. It was Georgian Dream's verdict on Georgia's future — and the bill for it will be paid not by the party, but by the country.**

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