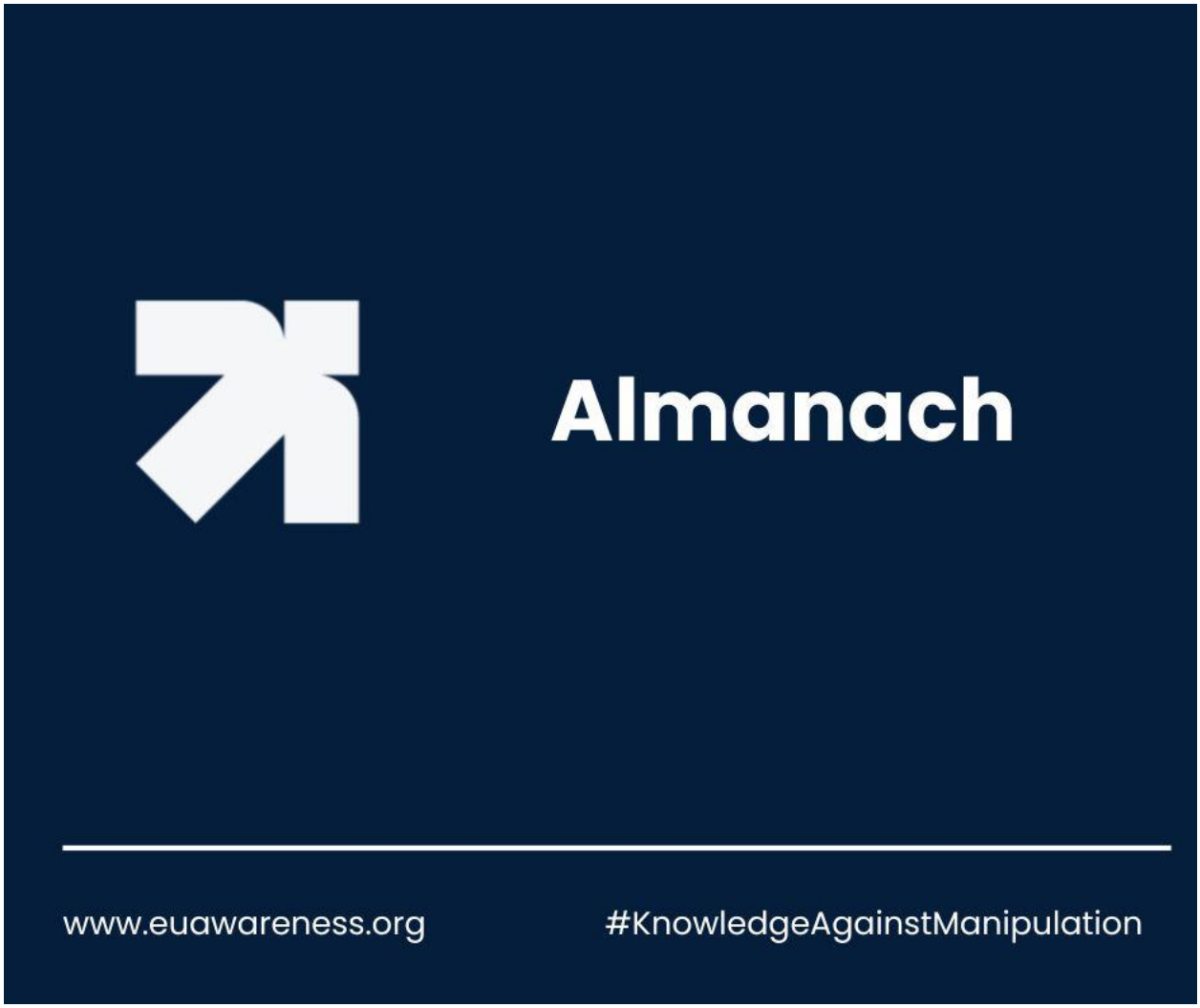

Almanach # 11

Tedo Japaridze

Again, Anchor First, Hedge Second: Georgia Between Two Orders

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On September 1, 2026, *The New York Times* published an essay by the distinguished Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan under a title that was difficult to ignore: **"A New World Order Is Coming. We Aren't Ready."** I read it with the utmost attention, armed with a pen and a pad, and although Professor MacMillan's subject was the international system rather than Georgia, I found myself thinking almost immediately about my own country. Not because the questions she raises were entirely new to me. Far from it. In different contexts and different calibrations, many of them have surfaced repeatedly in different publications and, more importantly, in the debates that have accompanied Georgia throughout its independence: the reliability of great-power commitments, the vulnerability of small states, the limits of alliances, the necessity of realism, the dangers of confusing pragmatism with accommodation, and the perennial Georgian problem of reconciling geography with strategic choice.

What Professor MacMillan's essay did was something different. It brought many of those scattered anxieties together within a larger and rather disturbing proposition, at least for a small and vulnerable country such as Georgia: **what if what we have been treating as separate crises are symptoms of a transformation of the international system itself?** Her argument is disturbing precisely because it does not depend on some spectacular prediction of an approaching catastrophe. It is more unsettling than that. The signs, Professor MacMillan argues, are already around us. The international order within which several generations learned to think about security, alliances, diplomacy and international institutions is eroding. Great powers are less constrained. Wars are multiplying. Alliances are being tested. Institutions remain, but their authority is weakening. And countries are already beginning to adjust to a world in which what was true yesterday may no longer necessarily be true tomorrow.

Professor MacMillan calls it a **new age of disorder**. For a large country, disorder creates problems. For a small country, disorder can become an existential condition. And that immediately raises — **again** — the Georgian question: **How does a country of Georgia's size survive between two international orders — when the old one is weakening, and nobody yet knows what will replace it?**

I use the word *survive* deliberately.

For more than three decades, Georgian foreign policy rested upon a strategic assumption that, whatever difficulties arose along the way, the general direction of history was reasonably clear. Georgia would consolidate its independence, build democratic institutions, move closer to Europe and the United States, integrate gradually into Euro-Atlantic structures, and eventually find itself securely anchored within them.

That road was never as straight as we sometimes pretended. Russia opposed it. The West was often hesitant. We ourselves made more than enough mistakes. The 2008 war brutally demonstrated the distance between political partnership and an actual security guarantee.

Nevertheless, there was an anchor.

And the importance of that anchor is hardly a new theme in my thinking. I have returned to it more than once because changing international circumstances repeatedly bring us back to the same elementary Georgian problem: **vectors can multiply; the anchor cannot simply disappear.** A small state may diversify its relationships, adjust its tactics and hedge against uncertainty, but unless it knows the strategic point from which those adjustments are being made, flexibility can gradually become disorientation. To put it simply: **you need to know on which side of the fence you — and your strategic anchor — stand.** Today that danger is greater because the certainty surrounding the anchor itself is weaker.

I said that many times: the United States remains the most powerful Western state, but we can no longer simply assume that every American administration will understand its interests, alliances and international responsibilities in the same way. Europe is geographically permanent but strategically unfinished. NATO remains formidable, but Georgia remains outside its security umbrella. Russia continues to occupy Georgian territory. China is increasingly economically present but offers no security guarantees. Turkey is a powerful neighbour, a NATO member and an indispensable regional partner, but it cannot by itself become Georgia's substitute for the Euro-Atlantic world.

So, what should Georgia do?

One answer, increasingly visible in the policies and rhetoric of Georgian Dream, is **strategic ambiguity**. There is a certain logic to it, and it would be intellectually dishonest to simply dismiss it. A small state living beside Russia cannot behave as though geography were an ideological misunderstanding. It must avoid unnecessary confrontation. It must talk to Moscow when necessary. It should trade wherever trade serves its interests. It should develop relations with China. It should strengthen connections with Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Central Asia, the Gulf states and India. It should exploit every opportunity offered by the Middle Corridor and by Georgia's position between Europe and Asia.

In other words, **Georgia should hedge.**

The mistake begins when hedging ceases to be an instrument and becomes a strategy in itself. Because there is a fundamental difference between **hedging around an anchor** and **hedging instead of having one**. This distinction matters enormously for a country of Georgia's size. A great power can afford prolonged ambiguity because it possesses strategic mass of its own: military power, economic weight, demographic resources, technological capacity and political influence. Georgia possesses none of these in sufficient quantity to guarantee its security independently. A small state therefore survives not by pretending that all larger powers are equidistant from it, but by combining an external anchor with sufficient diplomatic flexibility to avoid unnecessary dependence upon that anchor.

This is where I have increasingly become uneasy about the direction of Georgian foreign policy.

The problem is not that Georgian Dream seeks relations with China. It should. The problem is not that it avoids confrontation with Russia. It should. The problem is not that it speaks increasingly about sovereignty and national interest. Every serious Georgian government should. The question is something more fundamental: **What is the anchor around which all these policies are being organised?**

If the answer remains Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community, then much of what is described as Georgian "balancing" can be understood as the normal behaviour of a vulnerable small state. But if the anchor itself becomes deliberately ambiguous, we are entering very different territory. Then hedging gradually becomes drifting. And drifting is particularly dangerous when your largest neighbour occupies part of your territory.

There is a paradox here which deserves more attention than it receives in our increasingly primitive domestic political argument. If Georgia hedges because it fears that the West may eventually abandon it, that is understandable. But if Georgia hedges in ways that progressively damage its relations with Europe and the United States, it may help create precisely the abandonment it fears. A self-fulfilling strategic prophecy is still a strategic failure.

None of this means that Georgia should simply return to the vocabulary of the 1990s or early 2000s and behave as though nothing around us has changed. That would be another form of irresponsibility. Margaret MacMillan's warning is precisely against such thinking. The dangerous temptation is to assume that familiar institutions will somehow recover automatically, familiar alliances will function exactly as before and yesterday's international system will eventually reassemble itself.

So, Georgia cannot base its survival upon nostalgia for an international order that may be disappearing. But neither should it respond by abandoning strategic orientation altogether. What Georgia needs, as I have argued before, is not equidistance but **anchored flexibility**. The new disorder does not make the anchor obsolete. Paradoxically, it makes the anchor more important. **The anchor should remain European and Euro-Atlantic.** Not because Europe is perfect. Not because America is always reliable. Not because NATO membership is around the corner. And certainly not because somebody in Brussels or Washington possesses a magical solution to Georgia's problems.

The reason is much more elementary. The European political and institutional space corresponds most closely to the kind of Georgian state we have spent more than three decades trying to construct: sovereign, democratic, economically open and protected from domination by any neighbouring great power. **That is the anchor.** Around it, however, Georgia should be far more flexible than some of its Western friends may occasionally find comfortable.

The United States should remain an indispensable strategic partner, but Georgia should not place its entire security architecture on the assumption of permanent American attention. Europe should become increasingly important not merely as a destination for integration but as a network of individual states with which Georgia needs deeper political, economic and security relationships. Turkey deserves a particularly important

place in this architecture. It is a NATO country, a Black Sea power, Georgia's neighbour and a state that — unlike the United States — cannot geographically withdraw from our region. Azerbaijan is not merely an energy partner. Armenia is not merely another neighbour. Together with Georgia, they constitute a South Caucasus whose capacity eventually to manage more of its own affairs would itself reduce the opportunities for outside powers to dominate the region. China should be engaged economically, seriously and pragmatically — but without confusing investment with protection.

And Russia must be dealt with. I use those words intentionally: **dealt with**, not embraced and not ignored. Russia exists. It will remain Georgia's neighbour whatever government sits in the Kremlin. It possesses overwhelming military superiority. It occupies Georgian territory. It can harm Georgia in ways that Georgia cannot reciprocate. Any Georgian government that refuses to take those realities into account is irresponsible. But accepting geography is not the same as accepting somebody else's sphere of influence.

Talking to Moscow is not capitulation. Avoiding war is not surrender. Pragmatism is not appeasement. But neither is submission realism. A mature Georgian strategy must learn to distinguish among these things.

There is another dimension, however, without which all discussion of anchors and hedging becomes almost meaningless. **Georgia cannot navigate external disorder while conducting an internal civil war.** I do not mean a war with weapons. I mean the increasingly destructive political condition in which government and opposition cease to regard one another as legitimate participants in the same national project.

In a stable international environment, extreme polarisation is damaging. In the world Professor MacMillan describes, it can become a national-security vulnerability. A divided small country invites external penetration. Every foreign power eventually discovers its preferred Georgian interlocutors. Moscow finds those willing to listen to Moscow. Brussels finds those who speak primarily to Brussels. Washington acquires its Georgian constituency. Beijing may eventually acquire one of its own. And somewhere among all these external relationships, **Georgia itself can disappear.**

That is why I keep returning to the need for a minimum national consensus. This, too, is hardly a new conclusion. I have repeatedly returned to the need for a minimum national consensus precisely because Georgia's room for external manoeuvre depends on a degree of internal agreement about where the country ultimately belongs. What has changed is the environment in which that old Georgian necessity must now be pursued. Not agreement between Georgian Dream and the opposition about who should govern. That is what elections are supposed to decide. Not agreement about the past.

Georgians could probably argue about the past until the Second Coming.

I mean agreement about several propositions without which no small state can conduct serious foreign policy: Georgia must avoid another war with Russia. Georgia must never recognise the loss of its occupied territories as permanent. Georgia's long-term political and institutional future remains European. Relations with the United States remain

strategically important even when Washington itself changes. Georgia should expand pragmatic relations with China, Turkey, Central Asia, the Middle East and other emerging centres of economic and political power. And no external partner — Western, Russian, Chinese or otherwise — should acquire a veto over Georgia's domestic political system or strategic choices.

Everything else can be argued about. Indeed, it should be argued about. That is democracy. But a country with fewer than four million people, in Georgia's geographical position, cannot renegotiate its geopolitical identity after every election.

This brings me back to hedging.

I believe Georgia should hedge more intelligently than it has ever done before. It should diversify trade routes, energy connections and political relationships. It should make itself indispensable to the Middle Corridor. It should strengthen Black Sea connectivity. It should cultivate Central Asia. It should build redundancy into every strategically important infrastructure system.

Above all, Georgia should make itself **useful**. Small states cannot manufacture size, but they can manufacture relevance. The more countries that benefit from Georgia's stability, transit routes, ports, energy infrastructure and political independence, the greater the number of states with an interest in preventing its destabilisation. That is not a security guarantee. But in an age of disorder, security will increasingly consist of layers rather than guarantees alone. And Georgia needs as many layers as it can construct.

Professor MacMillan ends her essay without surrendering to fatalism. The old order may be faltering, but cooperation has not disappeared. Institutions remain. Coalitions can be created. New arrangements can emerge. History does not end simply because one historical arrangement does.

That may be the most useful lesson for Georgia. We do not know what international order will emerge from the present disorder. Perhaps American leadership will recover. Perhaps Europe will finally develop greater strategic capacity of its own. Perhaps new coalitions of middle powers will assume responsibilities once carried overwhelmingly by Washington. Perhaps the international system will become more fragmented, regional and transactional.

Georgia cannot know. Therefore, Georgia should not attempt to predict the winner and place a geopolitical bet on the outcome. Its task is simultaneously simpler and more difficult: **to survive the interval between two orders without losing the country, the state, or its strategic direction.** That requires flexibility. It requires pragmatism. It requires talking to people we may dislike. It requires abandoning certain comforting assumptions about the permanence of Western power. **But it also requires knowing where the rope is tied.**

We may have asked these questions before. **The difference is that the world is now making the answers more urgent. A small country should hedge its risks. It should not**

hedge its identity. For Georgia, therefore, the sequence matters. **Again: anchor first. Hedge second.** Because in the storm Margaret MacMillan describes, ambiguity may sometimes be a useful sail. **But it is a very poor anchor.**

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Tedo Japaridze

Ambassador Tedo Japaridze is a former Georgian Foreign Minister, Ambassador to the United States, Canada, and Mexico, and former Chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee. He previously served as foreign policy adviser to President Eduard Shevardnadze, later as Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister of Georgia, and currently chairs the Center for Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Studies in Tbilisi.