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Forum: Georgia at 35: Lessons of a Generation

Synthesis paper

After the Anchor:

What Georgia at 35 Teaches About Small-State Strategy

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28 September 2026

After the Anchor: What Georgia at 35 Teaches About Small-State Strategy

Synthesis paper of the EU Awareness Centre Forum "Georgia at 35: Lessons of a Generation"

The Forum opened with Ambassador Tedo Japaridze's essay "The Anchor Before the Vectors" (25 June 2026) and a deceptively simple proposition. Before a country decides how to navigate among competing powers, it must first know who it is, where it belongs, and what kind of state it seeks to become.

For Georgia, Japaridze argued, this means separating strategic orientation from foreign-policy instruments. The first sets the destination; the second determines the route. A country can and has to maintain relations with many partners, but multi-vector diplomacy cannot substitute for a strategic anchor. Without one, diversification risks becoming drift.

Three response essays followed: Ambassador David Dondua, "The Anchor on Deck" (28 June); Ambassador Tadaharu Uehara, "A Japanese Perspective" (14 July); and Professor S. Neil MacFarlane, "View from the United States" (10 August). They broadly accepted the burden of strategic purpose but complicated the proposition. They asked what makes an anchor durable, whether an orientation is secure if society has not internalised it, how much consensus a democracy can realistically sustain, and whether a small state in an unfriendly environment can afford to subordinate diplomatic flexibility to key clarity.

Taken together, the discussion suggests that Georgia's main challenge is not choosing between one foreign-policy vector and another. It is building the domestic political, institutional and civic foundations that make any strategic orientation sustainable.

From choosing an anchor to securing it.

Japaridze's starting point places foreign policy inside a wider conception of statehood. In his formulation, Georgia's Western orientation was never merely a geopolitical preference. It was a choice about the kind of state Georgia wanted to build: one governed by law rather than arbitrary power, by institutions rather than personalities, by accountability rather than dependency, and by citizens rather than subjects.

The implication is that strategic orientation cannot be reduced to membership aspirations or diplomatic declarations. It has an internal dimension, and ultimately depends on the political and social order a country is trying to construct.

Dondua sharpened this into a second distinction: not only between destination and route, but between declaring a destination and building the road towards it. Georgia repeatedly declared its European and Euro-Atlantic orientation, and successive governments shared pro-Western rhetoric for most of the post-independence period. Public support for EU and NATO integration stayed consistently high. Yet no government fully built the institutional and civic foundations the choice required, and high support did not amount to a deeply understood purposeful choice. A society can be pointed in a direction without being anchored.

In Dondua's phrase, an orientation that rests mainly on political declarations or elite consensus is vulnerable. If citizens do not understand what the choice means for their own lives, and institutions

do not embody its values, the orientation stays fragile even when formal support looks strong. The Forum therefore shifted the question from which direction Georgia should take to the conditions that would let that direction survive changes of government, external pressure and a shifting international environment.

The anchor is domestic before it is geopolitical.

The contributions also moved the focus from foreign capitals to Georgian society itself.

Uehara's perspective is particularly useful here. He approaches Georgia's European aspiration through governance, social cohesion and the practical meaning of shared values. Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, he argues, acquire meaning only when they become part of everyday life. Integration is not a "rosy narrative": it asks citizens to accept the compromises of majority rule, tolerance of differing beliefs, and rights across gender and ethnicity.

This qualifies a purely geopolitical understanding of the European choice. The European choice also involves institutional practice, economic governance, political accountability and the capacity of a diverse society to build a shared civic framework. Uehara points to Georgia's multiethnic and multireligious character and asks whether that diversity can be understood not as a reason for division but as a pluralistic community linked by common civic values. He treats this as a test of Georgia's maturity as an aspiring member state.

The same logic applies to the rule of law and democratic institutions. Constitutional language alone cannot secure an anchor. It must be reflected in institutions that function regardless of who governs, in accountable government and in public faith.

The European project cannot be communicated only in geopolitical language. Citizens need to understand what political and economic choices mean for jobs, education, healthcare, security, opportunity and the quality of public institutions. This is not a secondary matter; it is part of strategic strength. A society that understands why an orientation matters, what it requires and what it should deliver is better placed to defend it when circumstances turn difficult.

But how much strategic consensus is possible?

MacFarlane offered an important counterpoint. Japaridze's argument can be read as assuming that a state can reach a clear and durable understanding of who it is, where it belongs and what it wants to be. MacFarlane asks how realistic that is. A workable identity, he argues, must be consensual, shared by people and elites alike, and remain as circumstances change. That is a very tall order.

His comparison with the United States is deliberately provocative. Japaridze cites the US as a state whose diplomacy serves a clear strategy. MacFarlane counters that even a power with enormous resources has unresolved disputes over national identity, domestic governance, economic policy, immigration and its role in the world, and that most permanent members of the UN Security Council would fail the same test. Strategic consensus is not something great powers naturally have, and small states simply lack.

This avoids the anchor from becoming an unrealistic demand for unanimity. Democracies contain disagreement, strategic choices are contested, governments change, and societies progress. The

relevant question may be less about permanent consensus than about a sufficiently durable strategic framework within which disagreement can take place.

For Georgia, the distinction matters more than for most. MacFarlane stresses that large states have the depth and slack to absorb internal disarray and leadership failures. Georgia, with limited resources, a difficult neighbourhood and no reliable allies, as 2008 showed, cannot absorb strategic mistakes in the same way, nor remove uncertainty from its environment. The challenge is to combine strategic clarity with the flexibility that geopolitical reality demands.

When those in power no longer hold the anchor.

The Forum's hardest question concerns the premise itself. MacFarlane questioned whether "Georgia" can be said to have embraced a Western orientation at all when the current government does not appear to share it. He noted that the governing party first came to power in a free and fair election, and most recently in a manipulated one. In his view, the manipulation affected the margins but not the result.

That result has an uncomfortable implication. Part of it reflects the opposition's weakness and division. But it may also indicate that a significant share of the population is sceptical of the domestic changes that "joining the West" would require. MacFarlane describes a government that appears to believe it can be *in* the West without being *of* it, or that may not want to be in the West at all.

This reframes the Forum's central diagnosis. The gap between declared orientation and internalised commitment is not only a failure of past governments to explain and build. It is now a live political fact, with the elite that once declared the anchor openly abandoning its rhetoric, as Dondua also notes. The anchor framework was written as if the question were how to secure a shared choice. The harder question is how an orientation survives when those in power no longer hold it and part of society is unconvinced.

The contributions point to one answer but don't fully develop it. If an orientation lives only in government policy, it falls with the government. If it lives in institutions and in citizens' informed conviction, it can outlast a government that turns away from it. That makes societal ownership not a finishing touch to strategy but its main line of defence.

The unresolved question of multi-vector diplomacy.

This is where the Forum produced its most productive intellectual tension.

Japaridze does not reject pragmatic relations with multiple actors. His essay states explicitly that Georgia should engage Washington, Brussels, Moscow, Beijing, Ankara, Baku and Yerevan. The issue is not the number of relationships but the strategic framework through which it pursues them. A nation without an anchor, he argues, does not practise multi-vector diplomacy; it merely oscillates between vectors.

MacFarlane approaches the question from the other direction. Georgia can balance by finding allies, which involves sacrifice, as its casualties in Afghanistan showed. It can bandwagon, appeasing the main threat at the cost of sovereignty. Or it can avoid the choice through manoeuvre. With no credible balancing option and bandwagoning with Russia a threat to sovereignty and cultural

heritage, he has long regarded a multi-vector approach as desirable in its own right. For him, manoeuvre may be necessary precisely because the environment offers no straightforward choice.

Uehara occupies the middle ground. He treats the constitutional attachment to Euro-Atlantic integration as the anchor of national policy, and multi-vector diplomacy as indispensable alongside it for safeguarding sovereignty and security. In his reading, the two are complementary rather than competing.

This difference should not be smoothed over; it is one of the Forum's most valuable findings. The disagreement is not between pragmatism and strategy, but about their relationship. One view holds that pragmatism works best from a secure strategic foundation. The other holds that, for a vulnerable small state, manoeuvre may be needed to preserve room for strategic choice in the first place. Neither requires Georgia to isolate itself from actors outside its preferred strategic community.

The real test is whether tactical diversification gradually changes the country's orientation, or remains an instrument serving an established national purpose. That is a question of coherence over time, not of any individual relationship.

The anchor as a source of freedom.

The discussion also challenged the assumption that strategic harmonisation necessarily reduces sovereignty. Georgia's recent experience suggests the opposite.

While Georgia's Western orientation was credible to its partners, it retained considerable room for pragmatic engagement with states whose interests did not coincide with those of the EU or the United States. Dondua cites carefully managed relations with Iran despite sanctions, engagement with China on connectivity and transit, and somewhat lower alignment with certain EU statements on democracy and human rights, motivated by concern for support of Georgia's non-recognition policy on the occupied territories. Within a broader structure of alignment, partners read all of this as a sovereign manoeuvre.

As strategic credibility weakened, Georgia's freedom of action did not grow. It shrank. Once partners began questioning the underlying orientation, they reinterpreted the same relationships as evidence of drift. This supports Japaridze's claim that a secure anchor turns pragmatism into strength, and leads to a proposition relevant to small states generally: strategic clarity can create diplomatic room for manoeuvre rather than eliminate it.

Georgia and the regional problem.

The Forum also placed Georgia's dilemma in its South Caucasus context. The Baltic states offer the most frequently cited comparison. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania shared a consistent strategic orientation from the moment they restored independence, and reinforced one another's voice. The combined weight of three states advancing compatible positions partly offset their individual size.

The South Caucasus followed a different path. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan diverged from the start and never converged. Georgia's case reached Brussels and Washington as the claim of a single small, conflict-affected state, without regional weight behind it. Armenia, now cautiously reorienting towards Europe, faces the same structural isolation.

This does not mean the region should reproduce the Baltic model; the political, historical and security circumstances differ too much. But the comparison shows the limits of viewing small-state strategy through a purely national lens. Small states operate within regional systems, their choices affect one another, and the absence of convergence reduces their collective influence.

Dondua suggests that Azerbaijan is instructive for a different reason. Its orientation is not towards the EU, and it has never claimed otherwise, but it has pursued its chosen direction consistently. The lesson is not that its choices are preferable to Georgia's. It is that strategic coherence, meaning consistency between declared priorities and actual policy, matters whatever the destination. What weakens small states is not the direction of the anchor but the absence of a coherent one.

The question left open: what integration requires of Western partners.

The Forum set out to ask what meaningful Euro-Atlantic integration requires of both aspiring states and Western partners. The contributions answered the first half in depth. The second half remains largely unexamined.

The discussion contains one important pointer. For much of the past three decades, Western partners accepted Georgia's rhetorical commitment as evidence of its orientation, even though no government fully translated it into the institutions that orientation required. If declaration outran construction, that was not only a Georgian failure. Partners who rewarded declaration over delivery, or who offered aspiration without a credible path, shared in producing the fragility the Forum describes. MacFarlane's observation that Georgia had no reliable allies in 2008 points in the same direction.

Several questions follow. What should partners condition, and what should they guarantee? How can external support strengthen domestic ownership of the European choice rather than substitute for it? And how should partners engage a society that still largely supports integration when its government no longer shares that goal? The EU Awareness Centre regards these as priorities for further debate.

What securing the anchor requires.

If the Forum has a common conclusion, it is not a new foreign-policy formula but a set of conditions for strategic resilience.

1. **Owned by society, not only declared by elites.** An orientation imposed from above is inherently vulnerable. Governments can announce it, parliaments can legislate it, and partners can encourage it, but none of these can substitute for citizens in choosing the country's direction.
2. **Institutionalised.** The rule of law, accountable government and a professional public administration must provide continuity across changes of government.
3. **Connected to everyday life.** Citizens need to understand both what integration requires and what it is meant to deliver, in plain terms rather than the vocabulary of geopolitics.
4. **Compatible with pragmatic diplomacy.** An orientation should not prevent engagement with other states; it should provide the framework for it.

5. **Resilient to disagreement.** A democratic orientation cannot depend on the absence of contestation. It needs enough institutional and societal depth to survive political disagreement, electoral change and a government that turns away from it.
6. **Supported, not substituted, from outside.** External partners can reinforce an orientation, but external support cannot compensate indefinitely for weak domestic institutions or an unresolved national debate.

This is where democratic resilience meets foreign-policy resilience.

From Georgia at 35 to a broader small-state question.

The Forum began with Georgia, but its underlying question is wider: how does a small state preserve strategic agency in a system shaped by larger powers?

There is no universal answer. Geography, history, economic structure, security threats and domestic institutions all matter. But the discussion suggests that small-state strategy cannot be reduced to either alignment or manoeuvre. A state needs a sense of purpose, and it needs flexibility. It needs external partnerships, but it cannot outsource its strategic identity to them.

A small state keeps the most agency by being clear about its purpose and flexible about its means. That is the deeper meaning of the anchor metaphor. The anchor is not the route and does not dictate every diplomatic decision. It does not stop a state from adjusting its sails. It establishes the point from which movement remains intelligible.

The Forum's central lesson is that a strategic orientation is strongest when it is both credible abroad and understood at home. A declaration without institutions is fragile. Institutions without public ownership are vulnerable. Pragmatism without purpose becomes drift. Purpose without flexibility becomes rigidity. The challenge is to hold these elements together.

For Georgia, thirty-five years after restoring independence, the task is not to repeat past strategic choices. It is to understand why they were made, what they produced, where they failed, and whether they are embedded deeply enough in institutions and society to withstand the pressures now bearing on them, including from within. After thirty-five years on deck, the question is whether the anchor has finally reached the seabed. Governments alone cannot answer that. Georgian society must answer it.

The Forum therefore ends where Japaridze's essay began, with a question of strategic identity. But the exchange has given it a more demanding form. It is no longer simply *"Where does Georgia belong?"* It is: *"What kind of political and social order must Georgia build for its strategic choice to become durable, and what does that experience teach other small states facing the same problem?"*

That is the unfinished question the *Forum - Georgia at 35* leaves to the next generation.

Contributions to the Forum:

Tedo Japaridze, "The Anchor Before the Vectors: Georgia's Strategic Choice in a Changing World" (25 June 2026); David Dondua, "The Anchor on Deck" (28 June 2026); Tadaharu Uehara, "A Japanese Perspective" (14 July 2026); Stephen Neil MacFarlane, "View from the United States" (10 August 2026).