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Georgia: Another Russian Front

Régis GENTÉ

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

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Author

Régis Genté has been a journalist and specialist in the former Soviet bloc since 2002, and is based in Tbilisi (Georgia). As a journalist, he has spent more than twenty years covering news from the ex-USSR for *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, *France 24*, *Le Figaro*, *Bulletin de l'Industrie Pétrolière (BIP)*, and more. He is the author of four books, including *Volodymyr Zelensky: dans la tête d'un héros* (2022) and *Poutine et le Caucase* (2014). As an expert and consultant, he provides political and geopolitical analyses for think tanks and business intelligence consulting firms on issues such as ruling elites, the hydrocarbon sector, conflicts affecting the region, and internal political questions in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus.

Abstract

The end of 2023 is due to mark a turning point in Georgian history. In December, the European Council will decide whether to award the country European Union (EU) candidate status. For the majority of Georgia's 3.7 million citizens, this decision is extremely important, as 81 percent of them say that they want their country to join the EU. However, the government and the ruling party Georgian Dream, under the informal control of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, have consistently acted contrary to this deeply rooted popular desire since coming to power, taking a foreign policy approach, at least since 2021, that has undermined relationships with Western partners and brought the ex-Soviet republic back into Russia's sphere of influence. After twenty years of pro-European policy, this divergence between Georgia's rulers and its population has provoked a succession of political crises in the country over the last few years. Moscow is supporting this dramatic shift in Tbilisi's strategic orientation, and may even have initiated it. Numerous indicators show that in practice Russia, which waged war against Georgia in 2008, continues to regard its neighbor as another battlefield in its confrontation with the West. These developments in Georgian politics presage the emergence of major political and geopolitical tensions.

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Introduction

The end of 2023 holds major stakes for Georgia's future. In December, the European Council is due to decide whether or not to give it European Union (EU) candidate country status. This decision is eagerly awaited by Georgia's 3.7 million citizens, more than three-quarters of whom have consistently been in favor of their country joining the EU¹ and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for the last twenty years or more. This orientation stems from a long-standing feeling of belonging to the European "family" and the Western world, on which the Georgian nation has been built over the past few centuries. It is also rooted in resentment toward Russia, due to the latter's support and facilitation in the early 1990s of the secessionism of two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, representing 20 percent of the nation's territory.

In the 1990s, Georgians' deeply held hopes led Tbilisi to establish a foreign policy that aimed to move closer to the EU and NATO, resulting in a number of internal governance reforms that were encouraged by Western powers (including regarding elections, the media, and the independence of the judiciary). This also led to making the Georgian army conform to NATO standards, and contributing troops to the US-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as being part of the European Union Training Mission in Central African Republic. These aspirations toward being part of the "European family" also led to the inclusion in the constitution of the duty for the country's institutions to "take all measures (...) to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (article 78).

However, especially over the last two years, the current government's policies have involved moving further away from the West and closer to Moscow, which has created a succession of internal political crises. The Georgian government's current foreign policy marks a radical new direction compared to the country's recent history. So much so, in fact, that the situation within the country became increasingly tense as the government took decisions and acted in such a way that the Europeans refused to grant Georgia the status of "candidate country" to the EU. The tension eased a notch with the European Commission's opinion of November 8,

1. Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) Georgia, *Taking Georgians' Pulse: Findings from December 2022 Face to Face Survey*, February 2023, available at: <https://cdnq.us1.myspdn.com>, p. 69. The question reads, "Do You Approve or Disapprove of Georgian Government's Stated Goal to Join the EU?"

recommending the granting of this status “subject to the adoption of a certain number of measures”.

How can we explain this geopolitical shift, which runs counter to the will of most of the population? Why is the party in power making decisions and committing acts that go conspicuously against democratic and liberal values and reduce the country’s chances of becoming an EU candidate? Under the sway of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, a businessman who made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s and entered Georgian politics at the end of 2011 to oppose the then president Mikheil Saakashvili, the current government takes positions more than ambiguous with regard to Russia: sometimes invoking the necessity of caution faced with its large northern neighbor, and at other times implying, by repeated critiques of the West, that Georgia and Russia share common values.

Since 2012, those critical of Ivanishvili, who has not held public office since 2021, have seen him primarily as a man “in the power of” the Kremlin, like nearly all oligarchs of Russian origin or whose fortune is connected to Russia. The policy it seems he has instructed the ruling party, Georgian Dream, and the government to follow has regularly earned him praise in the Russian media and from Russian officials. Fifteen years after the Russian invasion of Georgia, on similar pretexts to those applied to Ukraine since 2014, are we seeing Moscow gradually reasserting control over this one-time “beacon” of democracy in the former Soviet bloc? Is this another front in the war Moscow is waging against its former colonies and the West?

A “second front” in addition to Ukraine?

Georgian Dream, created at the end of 2011 by Ivanishvili, has repeatedly stated since spring 2022 that Western countries want to open a military “second front” in Georgia, to add to that being fought in Ukraine.² However, there are no grounds to support the assertion that the Americans and Europeans, already at the limit of their capacities supporting Kyiv, are seeking to open another front in Georgia, a country whose military is too weak to resist Russia. Moscow began to echo this line in fall 2022, through the director of the SVR (Russian Foreign Intelligence Service), Sergei Naryshkin, among others.³ Russia embracing this narrative has been perceived by some Georgians as a threat: “When the Russians accuse you of plotting something, it’s often because they want to do that very thing themselves. It’s their way of muddying the waters in advance”, noted a veteran of Georgian diplomacy.⁴

On the Georgian side, this narrative is the culmination of two years of the systematic sabotage of relationships with Western partners. As an example, between February 24 and July 30, 2022, of the critical statements made by the president of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, fifty-seven targeted Western partners, twenty-six were against the Ukrainian authorities, fifteen were directed at anti-Russian sanctions, and only nine criticized Russia.⁵

The narrative of a “second front” was brought into the public conversation a little after Tbilisi officially requested EU membership on March 3, 2022, following the applications from Kyiv and Chişinău. The large-scale invasion of Ukraine led European leaders to encourage the Ukrainian authorities, along with those of Georgia and Moldova, to speed up their membership applications. The “Ivanishvili government” applied to

2. See, for example: “PM Garibashvili Links Tbilisi Protests to ‘Destructive, Anarchist’ Forces”, *Civil.ge*, March 13, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

3. “West Tries to Persuade Tbilisi to Open ‘Second Front’ against Russia—Intelligence Chief”, *Tass*, April 4, 2023, available at: <https://tass.com>. This narrative has also been taken up from the Georgians by leaders of regimes in pro-Russian separatist areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. See, for example: “Sekretar’ Sovbeza Abhazii sčitaet, čto Zapad podtalkivaet Gruzii otkryt’ ‘vtoroj front’”, [Abkhazia’s Security Council Secretary Believes the West Is Pushing Georgia to Open a “Second Front”] *Tass*, November 9, 2022, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

4. Interview with a Georgian diplomat, September 2022, Tbilisi. Translator’s note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material are our own.

5. S. Kincha, “Irakli Kobakhidze: The Face of Georgia’s Turn from the West”, *OC Media*, August 1, 2022, available at: <https://oc-media.org>.

Brussels properly, against a backdrop of 81 percent of Georgians stating that they wanted their country to join the EU (almost as many wanted to move toward NATO).⁶ Not to apply or to submit a poor application would have resulted in a great deal of popular anger in Georgia. This goes some way to explaining the Georgian government's "schizophrenia", forced to demonstrate its pro-European credentials to avoid running afoul of public opinion, while simultaneously striving not to obtain EU candidate status, or at least to reassure Moscow of its real anti-Western intentions.

Meanwhile, Georgian Dream has further increased the number of hostile declarations and gestures made toward the West, while sending various signals in favor of a return to the Russian fold. For example, the director of the main opposition television channel, Nika Gvaramia, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison on May 16, 2022, in a verdict considered by human rights organizations to be "probably politically motivated".⁷ This sentence was handed down the very day before the prime minister, Irakli Garibashvili, visited Brussels, where he was due to discuss obtaining EU candidate country status for Georgia. The date of the verdict, in a context where the Georgian judiciary has been strongly criticized for its lack of independence,⁸ is considered by a number of observers as deliberate symbolism on the part of the Georgian government, with the aim of sabotaging its own application for EU candidate status.⁹

On June 23, 2022, it was no real surprise when the European Council did not then grant Georgia EU candidate status, unlike Ukraine and Moldova.¹⁰ Brussels made the conferral of this status conditional on the implementation of twelve "recommendations" before the end of 2023 (independence of the judiciary, depolarization of domestic politics, "de-oligarchisation", freedom of the press, etc.). However, according to the European Commission "oral report" of June 21, 2023, Georgian Dream had implemented only three of these recommendations (gender equality,

6. The figure was 73 percent, according to the NDI survey (CRRC Georgia, *Taking Georgians' Pulse*, p. 67). Over the last seven years, between 61 percent (November 2016) and 81 percent (November 2023) of Georgians have answered "approve" to the question "Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the NATO?"

7. "Georgia: RSF Seeks Review of Opposition TV Chief's Conviction, Jail Sentence", RSF, April 23, 2022, available at: <https://rsf.org>.

8. In particular by a number of NGOs and international organizations, including Amnesty International and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. See: Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 27, 2023, available at: www.amnesty.org; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Third Report on the Nomination and Appointment of Supreme Court Judges in Georgia*, July 9, 2021, available at: www.osce.org.

9. On June 22, 2023, President Salome Zurbishvili used her powers to pardon Gvaramia, resulting in his immediate release.

10. The irony of the situation is that large swathes of Georgian society are most concerned by the "status" of candidate country not being awarded, whereas from Brussels's point of view, it is the "prospect" of becoming an EU member that is important.

European Court of Justice rulings being taken into account by Georgian courts, and the appointment of a new public defender).¹¹

The decision that the European authorities must take at the end of 2023 carries with it significant risks. Both the choice to take formal steps toward the EU or NATO and the choice not to take those steps involve the likelihood of triggering destabilizing events, as with the situation in Ukraine in 2013-2014 when the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich refused to continue negotiations on an association agreement with the EU. The Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 showed that Georgia was of real strategic importance to Russia. We might consider this conflict and the 2014 stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war as parts of the same whole, so similar were the motivations displayed by Moscow and the way in which hostilities began.

11. A. Brzozowski, “Commission Briefs on Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia’s Reform Progress Towards EU Membership”, Euractiv, June 21, 2023, available at: www.euractiv.com.

A Georgian “Yanukovych moment”?

Tensions were especially high in Georgia at the start of March 2023. The party in power, through a newly created satellite party,¹² put forward legislation on “Transparency of Foreign Influence”. The particular targets of this proposed law were NGOs and media supported by the West, which would have been required to declare themselves “foreign agents” if over 20 percent of their revenue came from another country.

Various groups in society, in particular politically active youth,¹³ were alarmed about the possibility of this law being passed, with its content and vocabulary being obviously inspired by the law passed by the Russian Duma in 2012 during a period of the hardening of the authoritarian regime. For many Georgian citizens, the text threatened their rights and was thus a tool for creating a radical rupture with Georgia’s Western partners, probably with the goal of ensuring the European Council would refuse to award EU candidate status at the end of 2023. Within forty-eight hours, between March 7 and 9, demonstrators forced the government to withdraw the proposed law, which they called the “Russian law”.

The possibility cannot be discounted that Russia was behind the proposal of this law, in a context of Russia applying pressure to its neighbors in the region, although there is no proof of this.

In this context, some experts have spoken of a “Yanukovych moment” for Georgia.¹⁴ The obvious consequence of adopting such a law on “foreign agents”—rupture with the West—is strongly reminiscent of the end of 2013, when Yanukovych decided to break off negotiations between Ukraine and the EU on the subject of an association agreement that was part of an

12. This was “People’s Power”, created in August 2022. Local experts, such as the highly cautious research organization Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), considered this movement to be a “satellite” party of the ruling party (Georgian Dream). See: K. Kakachia and N. Samkharadze, “People’s Power or Populist Pawns? Examining Georgia’s New Anti-Western Political Movement”, *GIP Policy Memo*, No. 63, December 2022, available at: <https://gip.ge>; R. Machaidze, “‘People’s Power’: Anti-Western Movement in the Service of the Ruling Party of Georgia”, *Jam News*, March 2, 2023, available at: <https://jam-news.net>.

13. These young people say they are political but not partisan, often refusing to vote for either Georgian Dream or the opposition. See: CRRC Georgia, *NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023*, May 2023, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>. In response to the question “If parliamentary elections were tomorrow, which party would you vote for?”, 11 percent of the 18-34 age group said “Georgian Dream”, 9 percent other parties, 44 percent “none”, and 30 percent “don’t know”.

14. The expression is notably used by the former diplomat Sergi Kapanadze in “The Introduction of a ‘Foreign Agent’ Law in Georgia”, The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS), March 7, 2023, available at: <https://sceeus.se>.

“Eastern Partnership”. Yanukovych’s U-turn was the consequence of a “warning” from the Kremlin accompanied by the promise of a US\$ 15 billion loan to Ukraine.¹⁵

“Introducing the foreign agents’ law, à la Russian (FSB) playbook, makes even the ardent supporters of Georgia wonder whether this is done to deliberately invoke the EU’s negative position on the candidate’s status” noted the former diplomat Kapanadze.¹⁶ During a one-to-one interview, he emphasized that this “law goes against one of the most important of the EU’s twelve priorities, namely the tenth point, which requires the Georgian government to involve civil society to a greater extent in political decision-making. How can this civil society, which is only able to exist thanks to Western funding, have greater involvement if it is given the infamous label of ‘foreign agent’? Especially when there was no internal political imperative that suddenly made such legislation necessary?”¹⁷

Russia habitually puts pressures of this kind on countries it considers to be its “near-abroad”. Before Yanukovych’, in September 2013, then Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan was summoned to the Kremlin and then several days later rejected an agreement with the EU concerning a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and a potential association agreement. During 2013, “Russian pressure on Armenia included a rise in gas prices and a shipment of heavy weapons worth nearly US\$ 1 billion to Azerbaijan. Russian officials, including former Ambassador to Armenia Vyacheslav Kovalenko, made numerous threatening or contemptuous statements. A few days before Sargsyan’s visit to Moscow, the first secretary of the Russian Embassy in Armenia Alexander Vasilyev demanded that the agreements reached during the EU-Armenia negotiations should be disclosed, and threatened a ‘hot autumn’ in Armenia”, reported the political analyst Armen Grigoryan.¹⁸ Immediately afterward, Armenia announced it was joining the Eurasian Economic Union, a project initiated and dominated by Russia.

Many Georgians are disorientated by the pronouncements from the government, which takes a pro-Russian line without admitting to doing so, justifying its approach by the necessity of demonstrating caution as regards an extremely aggressive Russia. The latter argument is in itself completely

15. The Kremlin’s threats seem to have been delivered primarily during a secret meeting between Vladimir Putin and Yanukovych on November 9, 2013. The Russian president apparently warned his Ukrainian counterpart that he would “never allow the European Union or NATO to share a border with Russia”, and threatened, if an agreement was made with the EU, to “occupy the Crimea and a good part of southeastern Ukraine” in S. Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, New York: Norton, 2023.

16. S. Kapanadze, “The Introduction of a ‘Foreign Agent’ Law in Georgia”, *op. cit.*

17. Interview with the author, March 8, 2023, Tbilisi.

18. A. Grigoryan, “Armenia Chooses Customs Union over EU Association Agreement”, CACI Analyst, September 18, 2013, available at: www.cacianalyst.org.

admissible¹⁹ and was the basis for Ivanishvili's foreign policy program when he sought to gain power in Georgia at the end of 2011.²⁰ Today, this approach helps explain, among other things, the refusal to participate in international sanctions against Russia.

This argument is given further weight by what a handful of sources in Tbilisi say is Ivanishvili's thinking on the outcome of the war in Ukraine: in essence, he believes that no-one will win; the West and Russia will have to negotiate and agree how to share the region to the east of Europe, at the end of which Georgia will find itself in the Russian zone of influence. According to the Georgian oligarch, Georgia must prepare for this moment, and therefore lay the groundwork in advance for good relations with Moscow.²¹ This "caution" line is all the more difficult to decode given that the Georgian authorities blur perceptions of the situation by sometimes officially positioning themselves against the war, for example by voting for United Nations resolutions condemning Russian aggression.²²

However, the reasons for increasing closeness with Russia seem much more often to be linked to the conservatism embraced by the authorities, who imply that the values promoted by the EU are incompatible with those of Georgia. In reality, this seems to be an instrumentalization of the question of allegedly traditional values, essentially in order to help manage the pro-Russian shift in Tbilisi's foreign policy. Rather than a negative justification (avoiding war), this provides a positive one (subscribing to the same values as those promoted by Russia). This narrative of conservative values is accompanied by another that centers on increasing trade with Russia being in Georgia's best interests.

In 2022, trade between the two countries leaped by 52 percent, thanks to an increase of 79.4 percent in Georgian imports from Russia. "As a result of the international sanctions, Russia was forced to sell oil and oil products at a significant discount which gave an opportunity to Georgian importers to make higher profits. The share of Russia in the import of petroleum products was 16% in 2021 and it increased to 47% in 2022 and to a further 66% in January-May 2023", according to the Georgian think tank GRASS.²³

19. See, for example, "‘Grave Situation’—Georgian FM Defends ‘Cautious’ Stance on Ukraine", *Civil.ge*, March 1, 2022, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives>.

20. "We will be realistic about Georgia's possibilities. We will abandon saber-rattling and recognize that Georgia is a small regional power in a very dangerous neighborhood", (opinion piece from B. Ivanishvili, "How I'd Build Peace in the Caucasus", *Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2012, available at: www.wsj.com).

21. These sources are not sufficiently proven to attribute this analysis to Ivanishvili with certainty. But this account does have the merit of providing reasoning that can be taken into account when explaining the "Ivanishvili government's" choice to turn toward Russia.

22. "Georgia Supports UN Resolution Calling on Russia to Withdraw Troops from Ukraine", *Agenda.ge*, February 24, 2023, available at: <https://agenda.ge>.

23. Projet FactCheck, "Georgia's Trade Turnover with Russia in 2022 Increased by 52 % to USD 2.5 billion", *GRASS*, June 27, 2023, available at: <https://factcheck.ge>.

Any role Georgia may play in circumventing sanctions is yet to be proven, even if the Russian authorities like to give the impression otherwise.²⁴

In summary, “caution” is used as a pretext for closer Russo-Georgian relationships principally motivated by the Kremlin’s geopolitical imperatives and Ivanishvili’s wishes. An examination of Georgian Dream’s policy approach since it came to power in 2012 generally shows a pro-Russian orientation from the start, although a very gradual one, via discreet support for pro-Russian political forces, the return of Moscow’s propaganda within the Georgian media, and strategic companies such as Rosneft entering the national economy.

After failing to impose the “foreign agents” law, the Georgian government swiftly sent Moscow signals of its political alignment through its statements and actions: condemnation of demonstrators depicted as young “Satanists”,²⁵ an attempt to pass a law against “LGBT+ propaganda”, a declaration regarding NATO’s responsibility for the outbreak of war in Ukraine, incessantly arguing with the Ukrainian authorities, etc.

24. However, Georgia only exported \$42 million more to Russia in 2022 than it did in 2021. See: “Russia Touts Georgia’s Role in Overcoming Sanctions”, Civil.ge, June 22, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

25. Taking up the vocabulary used by Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. See “PM Garibashvili Links Tbilisi Protests to ‘Destructive, Anarchist’ Forces”, Civil.ge, March 13, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

Why is Georgia so important to Russia?

Why is Russia seeking to bring Georgia back into its orbit at the very moment that its war in Ukraine seems to require its full attention? There are some fundamental reasons for the high importance the Kremlin sets by Georgia, and others that are more circumstantial. Among the fundamental reasons are the desire to retain control over its former empire, security fears faced with the EU and NATO's advances toward Russia's borders, concern about preserving its status as a major power, and the need to protect its regime by ensuring democracy does not become contagious in the region.

As for contextual reasons, a “second front” in Georgia, although not necessarily a military one, is in Russia's current interests. This “second front”, whether initiated by the Kremlin or by Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream, seems to have been playing out in front of Georgians with increasing speed since at least summer 2022, and involves the country's return to the Russian fold and the sabotage of its relationships with the West. This may culminate in an overt change of the country's strategic orientation, i.e., abandoning the policy of moving closer to the EU and NATO, and also in a change in the model of internal political governance.

This “second front” takes the form of deliberately wrecking relationships with Western partners. The first ingredient is criticism of the fundamentals of the Georgian foreign policy and security doctrine that was established at the end of the 1990s. The next is decisions and declarations that directly contradict European values: infringement of the freedom of the press, political opponents being physically attacked with complete impunity, stigmatization of LGBT+ people through proposed laws, and outbreaks of violence perpetrated by groups closely associated with those in power, etc.²⁶ Finally, there are those gestures designed to please Moscow: non-participation in sanctions ordered against Russia, collaboration on resumption of direct flights between Russia and Georgia, accompanied by a proposal to use Georgia as a hub for Russian citizens who want to travel to

26. The law on “foreign agents” is a prime example of this strategy.

Europe,²⁷ establishment of links between FSB agents and those close to Ivanishvili,²⁸ etc.

If Tbilisi abandons its efforts to move closer to the West in 2023 or 2024, Moscow will have scored a political victory in Georgia and struck a blow in its struggle against the West that will partly compensate for the military setbacks suffered in Ukraine, at least in terms of its image. Externally, this will demonstrate to the ex-Soviet republics just how unwise it is to try to escape Russian influence. This will then help Moscow to remain the main, if not exclusive, influence in its “near-abroad”. The symbolism will be powerful in the former Soviet republics, where public opinion is marked by a degree of resentment toward Russia, considered to be dismissive of their independence. The leaders of Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan have certainly demonstrated much caution as regards the Kremlin, but are displaying some indications of disapproval with regard to the war in Ukraine. They are taking advantage of Russia’s current weakened state to defend their interests to the detriment of Moscow’s, as shown in Azerbaijan’s attitude to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh question, for example.

27. “Tbilisi to Become the Fourth Transit Hub for Russian Flights to Europe—Co-owner of Vnukovo Airport”, *Jam News*, July 14, 2023, available at: <https://jam-news.net>.

28. As demonstrated by recent revelations regarding Otar Partskhaladze, a former Georgian prosecutor general with personal links with Ivanishvili’s family. On September 14, 2023, Partskhaladze was placed under sanctions by the United States, along with a Russian intelligence officer, Aleksander Onishchenko, for having helped Russia to exercise a “malign influence” on Georgia (see “US Sanctions Ivanishvili Crony for Channeling Russia’s Influence”, *Civil.ge*, September 14, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge>). As part of this, the FSB agent allegedly obtained a Russian passport for his Georgian associate. Following these revelations, those in power in Georgia took great pains to defend Partskhaladze.

Bidzina Ivanishvili: The man who plays by the Kremlin's rules

Moscow has grounds to hope for a political victory in Georgia, because it has an extremely powerful collaborator in Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose actions are compatible with its interests, or even serve them directly. It was in Russia that the oligarch, who was born in 1956 in the village of Chorvila in northern Georgia, accumulated most of his fortune, estimated at €4.6 billion.²⁹ The heart of his empire was the Rossiyskiy Kredit bank, but his portfolio diversified over the years (into pharmacy, the agri-food sector, real estate, and also energy, with the billionaire having held 1 percent of shares in the Russian giant public gas company Gazprom for a number of years³⁰).

Ivanishvili, although not that well known even in the ex-USSR, is not just another of Russia's billionaires: he was a member of the *semirbankirtchina* (seven bankers). This term refers to the group of around a dozen businessmen led by Boris Berezovsky that greatly assisted Boris Yeltsin's reelection in 1996 in exchange for control over whole swathes of the Russian economy. This was the founding moment of the oligarchy, and would have a profound influence on Russian politics until 2003.

At the end of 2011, Ivanishvili decided to enter the political arena in his country of origin, primarily to ensure the president at the time, Saakashvili, was not reelected: "President Saakashvili's total monopoly on power (...) prompted my decision to establish a political party and to run in the 2012 parliamentary elections", he explained on October 7, 2011 in a written statement.³¹ Although he pledged not to spend more than a year leading Georgia and did indeed keep that promise (he was prime minister from October 2012 to November 2013), the oligarch has been informally running the country for the last ten years.

29. According to *Forbes* magazine, available at: www.forbes.com.

30. According to a Russian energy consultant, who asked to remain anonymous, "it's not just that holding 1 percent of a company of such strategic importance, in particular for Putin's regime, is only possible with the Kremlin's approval, but it also demonstrates a significant convergence of interests".

31. "Written Statement of Bidzina Ivanishvili"[unofficial translation], Civil.ge, October 7, 2011, available at: <https://old.civil.ge>.

Until 2012, a part of his fortune was still “Russian”. He parted ways with these holdings, at least officially, in spring 2012, before taking up his role in the fall. Some journalistic investigations from the time seemed to show that these assets were probably transferred to people in his entourage and that it was reasonable to doubt the reality of his “exit” from the Russian economy.³²

The fact that some of his fortune is probably still in Russia may be one of the factors that makes Ivanishvili dependent on Moscow. Above all, an analysis of the way relationships work between Putin’s Russia and oligarchs who are either Russian or have made their fortunes in Russia shows that no oligarch has been able to truly free themselves of Kremlin influence over their affairs. Even those who seem the most eager to internationalize their assets in order to protect them, such as Roman Abramovich, Mikhail Fridman, and Viktor Vekselberg, remain manifestly “in the power” of the Kremlin. This is also true of non-Russian oligarchs who have built their financial empires wholly or partly thanks to Russia, such as the Ukrainians Rinat Akhmetov and Dmitry Firtash. It is therefore unlikely that Ivanishvili has escaped this “phenomenon”.

Berezovsky, the “founding father” of the Russian oligarchy, explained when visiting Tbilisi in 2012 that Ivanishvili always played “according to the rules set by the Russian government”³³ and added that “there are no businessmen in Russia who do not have problems with the government and, at the same time, are not supporters and carriers of its politics”. It is also striking to note that in eleven years at the helm of Georgian politics, Ivanishvili has never, for example, been criticized by Russian officials or in Kremlin-funded media.³⁴

Ivanishvili is not a Kremlin “puppet” insofar as, according to sources,³⁵ he entered Georgian politics in 2011 of his own volition. Nonetheless, his position as an oligarch, as is so often the case for billionaires who have made their fortunes under authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, necessarily makes him a geopolitical actor dependent on those in power in the country to which he owes his informal status. The Kremlin, in this case, still has powerful levers against the Georgian billionaire “as it does against other oligarchs from the former Soviet bloc. This may take the form of threats, such as publishing *kompromaty* (compromising information) on them and

32. Investigations published on the Facebook page of the investigative journalist Vladimir Ivanidze; these are no longer available online, but I have kept copies. Furthermore, the NGO Transparency International Georgia has shown that Ivanishvili owned around ten companies in Russia until at least 2019, either directly or via members of his family. See: “Russian Businesses of Bidzina Ivanishvili and His Relatives”, *Transparency International Georgia*, April 27, 2022, available at: <https://transparency.ge>.

33. “Boris Berezovsky: Ivanishvili Plays According to the Rules Set by the Russian Government”, *Tabula*, May 24, 2012, available at: <https://tabula.ge>.

34. Additionally, the merit of this argument has been confirmed by two Russian sources: one from oligarchic circles and another from the realm of the security services.

35. Political and security sources close to President Saakashvili consulted in 2012.

their businesses, or the potential for physical attacks on them or their friends and family. This can also take the form of measures that are in their interests, by doing them favors in their business dealings”, explains a Russian political consultant.³⁶

Moscow is also supported by other pro-Russian political actors in Georgia. Foremost among them are several Orthodox hierarchs and the Georgian Orthodox Church itself. In September 2021, almost thirty-six thousand files from the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) were made public by a whistleblower, all relating to the surveillance of the upper echelons of the Georgian church. Thousands of these concerned links between these senior figures and the Russian security services.³⁷ Of particular note was evidence that seemed to confirm that “Georgian Patriarch Ilia II appointed Metropolitan Shio Mujiri as the Patriarchal Locum Tenens³⁸ in 2017 [thus making him his presumptive successor] in violation of the canonical law, and with pressure from the Russian Church and political elite”. The second group of pro-Russian forces in the country are a number of political parties (such as the Alliance of Patriots) and factions that style themselves as ultra-conservative and traditionalist (such as Alt-Info, which is patently under the protection of the Georgian authorities).

The regime established by Ivanishvili resembles a quasi-autocracy led by an oligarch who has no official position. He has placed people who are extremely loyal to him at the head of all the country’s key institutions, in particular the post of prime minister, given to his “man-of-all-work” in Georgia, Garibashvili, and that of minister of internal affairs, given to the former head of his personal security team, Vakhtang Gomelauri. In eleven years in power, no former member of the government or senior administration who has left their post has gone on to have a further political career of their own. Admittedly, Georgian Dream remains by far the most popular party in the country based on opinion polls. However, its popularity is declining: according to the most recent poll, only 20 percent of Georgians would vote for the party if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow, with 5 percent saying they would vote for the United National Movement created by former president Saakashvili, 34 percent saying they wouldn’t vote for any of the parties, and 26 percent not knowing who they would vote for.³⁹

36. Interview via encrypted message, January 2022.

37. “Alleged Security Files: Russian Ties of Georgian Clergy, Patriarchate”, Civil.ge, September 21, 2021, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

38. According to the statutes of the Georgian church, the *locum tenens* temporarily leads the church upon the death of the patriarch and organizes the process of electing a successor.

39. CRRC Georgia, *NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023*, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>.

Dividing overwhelmingly pro-European feeling

The “Ivanishvili government” probably also decided to attempt to pass the “foreign agents” law at the start of 2023 because it thought that the tools of control that the oligarch had established in the country over the preceding ten years had sufficiently weakened Georgians’ pro-Western aspirations. This control is exercised through several levers, starting with a myriad of media channels and social network accounts that depict the opposition and voices within civil society that are critical of government action as the “party of war” and repeat the unfounded idea that the West wants to open a “second front” in Georgia. In addition, there is the “clan of judges” that ensures the judicial system complies with government wishes, either in weakening opponents (imprisoning former president Saakashvili and the director of the main opposition television channel Gvaramia, initiating proceedings against critical media channels, the “Cartographers’ Case”,⁴⁰ etc.), or protecting the policies of the party in power (lack of prosecutions against those who have committed violence tolerated or even encouraged by Georgian Dream, negligent treatment of allegations relating to the electoral process, refusal to investigate suspicions of corruption, etc.). Furthermore, disreputable maneuvers aiming to weaken political opposition are also evident. These involve political repression of varying degrees of insidiousness that aims to stymie the opposition, including selective justice and harassment to demoralize partisans, with the treatment of the party led by former president Saakashvili, the United National Movement, being emblematic of this approach. The authorities have powerful economic levers at their disposal, such that “with rare exceptions, no Georgian businessman can afford, for example, to advertise on opposition media channels”, according to the owner of a large Georgian company. Finally, barely veiled support is offered to factions with ultra-conservative and orthodox postures (such as the Alt-Info movement) that criticize Western values and can be violent toward the government’s opponents with impunity.

Echoing Russian propaganda in both content and form, the LGBT+ question has been constantly instrumentalized in Georgia since 2021, having become a geopolitical lever. In order to compromise the European aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Georgians, the subject of

40. In 2020, two cartographers working for the state were accused of having produced incorrect maps of the border region with Azerbaijan at the time when Saakashvili and his party were in power. The leaders of Georgian Dream castigated them for betraying the country’s interests, but the way the legal system dealt with this case was questioned by numerous figures within civil society.

homosexuality has been instrumentalized and set in opposition to a traditionalism presented as intrinsic to Georgian society. Georgian Dream seems to be taking inspiration from Russia in this matter, which enables them (and likewise their Russian counterparts) to turn Georgians away from their European aspirations, by insidiously associating the EU with the promotion of homosexuality, without having to present their policies as pro-Russian: in practice, the LGBT+ question is probably perceived by the majority of the population as purely societal and not geopolitical.

After the demonstrations at the start of March 2023 against the proposed law on “foreign agents” and as the European decision on EU candidate status has approached, the government has increasingly made statements and acts that framed the LGBT+ question as a challenge to civilization in order to vilify the pro-Western parts of society. This is accompanied by closer relations with Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, for example. The Hungarian and Georgian governments are having more and more high-level meetings, making much of their agreement on the subject of their allegedly “traditional” values.⁴¹

If Moscow did not instigate this process, it has certainly supported the Georgian government throughout. Moves away from Western partners and toward Russia are welcomed by Russian leaders and prominent figures, and met with promises of economic benefits. On May 10, 2023, Putin signed two decrees: one authorizing the resumption of direct flights between Russia and Georgia⁴² and the other abolishing the ninety-day visa system for Georgians wanting to travel to Russia. Many pro-European Georgians feared that the influx of Russian money during the last tourist season would have the effect (bearing in mind that the restoration of flights from Russia was perhaps intended to do just that) of making Georgian opinion more inclined to accept a negative decision by the European Council on granting Georgia EU “candidate” status, since the summer would have been economically profitable for many households.

This geopolitical change of direction led by Georgian Dream has given rise to a great deal of criticism within Georgian society and from the political opposition, although a decade of “Ivanishvili government” has left them significantly weakened.

41. See, for example, the words of Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili, on May 4, 2023 at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, condemning forces that are destroying “the traditional family values and coercing false freedoms (...) cut people off from their own roots, family, traditions, culture, and history”, (full text of his speech available on the prime ministerial website, available at: <https://garibashvili.ge>).

42. Suspended since June 2019, following the crisis between Tbilisi and Moscow after the scandal that arose in Georgia when a Russian politician, Sergei Gavrillov, sat in the Georgian parliamentary speaker’s seat during a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy.

President Zurabishvili has spoken out against this policy. Since February 2022 and the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the former French diplomat has declared her support for Kyiv and condemned the Georgian government's policy positions, in particular as regards closer ties to Moscow. The Georgian authorities have been highly displeased with the president's pronouncements and began impeachment proceedings against her for violating the constitution, after which she organized her own tour of European capitals in May 2023, pressing the case for awarding her country EU candidate status.⁴³ These proceedings failed on October 18, when only eighty-six of the required one hundred members of parliament voted to impeach the president, but the fact such an attempt was made contributed to sully Georgia's image among Europeans.

Over the last year and a half, Zurabishvili has helped to alert the world to the risks involved in the historic change of direction her country is currently making. But she has struggled to make her voice heard. First, because the Georgian head of state has few powers outside the realm of protocol. Second, her previous stances weaken her considerably within Georgia: to begin with, she owes her 2018 election success to direct support from Ivanishvili (which she accepted despite long-standing signs that he was dependent on the Kremlin and that Georgian Dream was governing in a less and less democratic fashion); next, the second round of the presidential election saw clear-cut "buying" of votes (undermining her legitimacy);⁴⁴ finally, until February 2022, she had a tendency to blame the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 on former president Saakashvili rather than Putin.⁴⁵

Many Georgians doubt her word and her independence from Ivanishvili, who she almost never directly criticizes and whose name she never mentions. The president of Georgian Dream, Kobakhidze, also recently declared: "We have detailed information about why she changed her colors, but we will not go into details, because Salome Zurabishvili has not crossed the red lines yet".⁴⁶

43. She was criticized for deciding to go on this tour herself, in violation of article 52, paragraph A of the Georgian constitution.

44. In short, between the two rounds of the election, Ivanishvili saw that Zurabishvili was going to lose, and so promised to write off the loans of 600,000 Georgians (with the measure to be implemented a few weeks after the second round). This was enough to reverse the trend and propel Zurabishvili to the presidency.

45. She particularly criticized Georgia's leaders for having fallen into the trap set by Russia and for having provoked Moscow. See: "Salome Zurabishvili's August War Remarks Draw Criticism from Political Parties", Civil.ge, August 9, 2018, available at: <https://civil.ge>; S. Zourabichvili, *La tragédie géorgienne 2002-2008*, Paris: Grasset, 2009.

46. "Politicians React to President's Annual Parliamentary Address", Civil.ge, March 31, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives>.

Conclusion: Scenarios for a Russian “second front”

By making an increasing number of provocative statements and gestures toward the country’s Western partners, the “Ivanishvili government” has taken the risk of having the European Council refuse to grant Georgia the status of “candidate” country to the EU at the end of 2023. This risk has probably been defused for the time being by the European Commission’s November 8 recommendation to grant the Caucasian republic this status. But the context remains tense, with no indication that the “Ivanichvili government” will abandon its policy of returning to the Russian sphere of influence.

As the overwhelming majority of Georgians wish to join the EU, this could once again lead to anger from certain quarters. The party in power is counting on the fact that some of those who are currently pro-European will accept a return to the Russian fold. Although there are few sociological studies on what being pro-Western means to Georgians, the author’s personal experience and journalistic interviews in Georgia suggest the following conclusions:

- A minority see Europe as a political space that respects human rights and liberal values (this is Georgia’s most anti-Russian group, found mainly among the intelligentsia and elites within civil society and the press).
- Another large group consider the Old Continent as a passport to wealth, well-being, and order (due to the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and so forth).⁴⁷
- Another group, probably a sizable one, sees it as a land of Christianity to which Georgia belongs. A possibly significant percentage of this group see Europe as founded on traditional, conservative values, which may run more or less contrary to those of the liberal EU. These people are potentially more inclined to also accept a level of increased closeness with Russia, as it is perceived as a land of Orthodox Christianity.

47. A very recent poll shows that strengthening the economy is the primary motivation for Georgians who want their country to join the EU. To the question “if you support joining the EU, what is the main benefit of joining the EU?”, 45% answered “Strengthening the economy”, 14% “Security”, 14% “Development of the country”, 8% “Better future”, etc. Cf. “Georgian Survey of Public Opinion”, International Republican Institute, September – October 2023, p. 56, available at: <https://cdniq.usi.myspdn.com>.

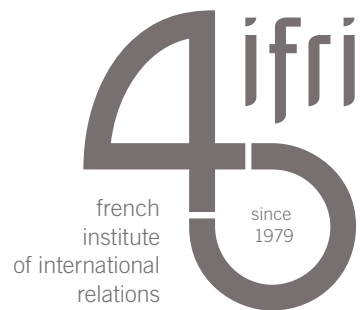
Georgian Dream and the government will continue to try to weaken the pro-European sections of Georgian society and “work on” those who are most susceptible to accepting some sort of return toward Russia, through a communications strategy that revolves around the dangers of liberal “culture” and above all the risk of a return to war, with the opening of a “second front” in the Caucasus. Economic arguments in favor of a marked move toward Russia are already being advanced, with a notable increase since March.

The continuation of the pro-Russian policy of the “Ivanichvili government” is likely to provoke further moments of tension in Georgia. If the European Council follows the Commission's advice at the end of December, as it probably will, this will help to calm the situation... at the cost of a misunderstanding (the European authorities did not grant the said “status” by virtue of the Georgian government’s efforts, but for internal EU political reasons and to reward the 3.7 million Georgians’ desire for Europe). But this is unlikely to prevent the emergence of other moments of crisis, which will erupt when major steps are taken towards breaking with the West and drawing closer to Moscow. They will also erupt when Brussels is forced to remind Tbilisi that its status as an EU “candidate” country has only been granted “subject to the adoption of a certain number of measures”, many of which are the “priorities” (nine out of twelve) of the European Council that have not been implemented by the Georgian government after June 2022. All this against a backdrop of Russian pressure that is unlikely to diminish in the current context.

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