

## THE DIFFICULT EUROPEAN PATH TO SETTling RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS IN POST-ELECTION GEORGIA IN 2024: A ROLLBACK ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OR THE UNACCEPTABILITY OF CONFRONTATION

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the trends in the settlement of Russian-Georgian relations after the parliamentary elections in Georgia on October 26, 2024. Attention is paid to how the ruling Georgian Dream party won, as well as to why Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili and the opposition parties refused to recognize the results of the parliamentary elections, calling for civil unrest and protests. The article examines the trends in the settlement of Russian-Georgian relations after 2024 as the beginning of the formation of a new track, which is significantly influenced by historical memory and the Russian war against Ukraine since 2022. In this sense, the Georgian ruling elite actively uses and periodically weaves all this into the modern political agenda, trying to get its domestic and foreign policy dividends. The article notes that the Georgian elite, since the transition of the ruling Georgian Dream party, has begun to create a reality in which a new fundamental historical narrative was formed by returning to the supposedly forgotten past. In this context, the basic actions in implementing this policy are Georgia's transition to a pro-Georgian development course and a demonstrative rejection of its previous orientation toward the EU and European integration.

**Keywords:** *Georgian Dream party, pro-Georgian development, Russia, geopolitical balance, confrontation, NATO, EU.*

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## Introduction

The article covers the dynamics of Russian-Georgian relations after the victory of the Georgian Dream party in the elections, held in Georgia in October 2024. In the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation, the restoration of political relations became important for Tbilisi and Moscow. The positive signals coming from Georgia were perceived with understanding in Moscow, as they believed that even if attempts to normalize relations with Georgia do not achieve significant success, bilateral relations discussed at the level of the two governments will certainly improve.

In Russian-Georgian relations, both sides have their own 'red lines'. For Moscow, this is the exclusion of Georgia, which shares a common border with its country, from joining NATO, and for Tbilisi, the restoration of its territorial integrity. The Kremlin understands that no Georgian government can establish full relations with Moscow and open the Abkhazian road. In the complex international conditions that have developed at the same time and the realities that have developed in the region after the loss of Artsakh, if Georgia guarantees that it will not be included in NATO, how important are Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Moscow?

The article also touches on the disruption of the balance of power in the South Caucasus that had developed in previous decades and the new challenges that became part of the agenda after the fall of the Republic of Artsakh.

## Russian-Georgian regional balance

Two interrelated principles are important for Russia. First, Georgia's European or Western choice should not become an anti-Russian one. That is, the principle of geopolitical pluralism should also apply to Russia. Meanwhile, from the late 1980s until 2024, Georgian foreign policy was conceptually built on the West-Russia opposition. Second, the European or Western choice should not entail a choice in favor of expanding NATO military infrastructure right up to Russia's borders. Identifying the Western choice with an anti-Russian one pushed Georgia's previous ruling elite to base its foreign policy strategy on a scenario in which Russia's foreign policy influence would at a minimum not grow and at a maximum weaken. This scenario is clearly not coming to fruition. Relying on Russia's weakening makes the success of Georgia's strategy critically dependent on factors beyond Georgia's control. Finally, this rate prevents Georgia from taking advantage of the benefits that Russia's growing economy provides to its neighbors and that business groups from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan enjoy.

The question of the scope and quality of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, discussed in principle in the context of the long-term normalization of the situation in the region, can hardly be raised under the current circumstances. The resumption of social and economic ties between the parties could involve the creation of a common space for the movement of people, goods, capital, and services between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, with the direct participation of Russia, which should become a structural part of this space. The initiative to restore railway service between Georgia and Abkhazia met with objections or doubts in both Tbilisi and Sukhumi and was removed from the agenda. Nevertheless, despite the obstacles facing

the practical implementation of this plan, the restoration of railway service could give new impetus to positive processes throughout the Transcaucasus, which is of interest to several states in the region. We believe that this topic requires discussion, if not at the political, then at the expert level.

The Russian-Ukrainian war created a completely new situation not only in global terms but also in terms of the regional balance formed in the South Caucasus. The unprecedented military operations in Europe after World War II posed new challenges to the South Caucasian republics. The Kremlin, foreseeing the sanctions, restrictions on various communications and logistical problems it would face before the Russian-Ukrainian war, tried to mitigate them by deepening relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, as a result of which the Armenian Artsakh was depopulated. On the other hand, the role of Georgia became important again for Russia, since the only land route bypassing Russia and stretching to Europe remained the South Caucasus.

Since 1991, the Georgian authorities had adopted the Western vector of development, since in Tbilisi they believed that reducing the Russian threat in that region and ensuring Georgia's sovereignty could be realistic only by joining the EU and NATO structures.

After the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Georgia's pro-Western sentiments among the population became even stronger (Hopmann 2025; Selivanova 2025; Jones 2025). Diplomatic and political relations with Russia were severed. According to opinion polls conducted in Georgia, 85% of the population was in favor of the EU, and 78% of it was in favor of joining NATO. Opinion polls conducted in March of 2023 also indicate that public sentiments in Georgia have not changed significantly. This time, 89% of the population was in favor of EU membership, and 80% of it was in favor of joining NATO. According to the Georgian population, the main threat to them remains Russia (IRI 2023; Civil Georgia 2023a). However, since 2020, the Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia (GD), taking into consideration these public sentiments in the country and the complex political processes taking place globally in the world, has tried to conduct a cautious and balanced foreign policy.

Despite the fact that one of the first resolutions of the 10<sup>th</sup> session of the Georgian Parliament in 2020 was the "Decision on Georgia's Foreign Policy until 2024," according to which Tbilisi should have officially applied for membership in the EU and NATO by 2024, and the main strategic partner was declared to be the United States, with which the "United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership" (U.S. Department of State 2009) had been signed back in 2009, opposition parties nevertheless believed that this resolution was declarative in nature and intended more to serve as a 'balm for the soul of the West,' since what was being discussed in this resolution was already enshrined in Article 78 of the country's Constitution.

As for relations with the Russian Federation, it was included in two points. The first concerns the de-occupation policy and the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, and the second concerns the establishment of a fundamentally new and constructive relationship with Moscow in order to reduce new existential and hybrid threats to Tbilisi and to establish pragmatic relations (Civil Georgia 2020a).

After the Second Karabakh War, Georgia lost its leadership in the region, and as a result of the Ukrainian war, new economic prospects opened up for Georgia. In

January-June of 2023, as a result of economic cooperation with the Russian Federation, Georgia received \$2 billion in income, which was 1.6 times higher than the level of the same period in 2022 (Transparency International Georgia 2023a).

A political scandal erupted in Georgia when it became known that Russian businessman D. Khidasheli was an advisor to the Minister of Defense of Georgia in February of 2020-2024 (Hosaka 2025). Thus, in the current situation, the restoration of political and economic relations has become important for both Russia and Georgia.

The views of those advocating a pragmatic policy towards Russia have been reflected in Georgia's political life, considering that the U.S. offered Georgian society an alternative path, thus placing Georgia at the center of geopolitical games. However, the U.S. offered the Georgian political elite conditions that it had already received from Russia (visa-free travel, free trade privileges, and military assistance). However, the possibility of visa-free travel is no longer attractive to most of the Georgian population, since the country's skilled workforce has long been in the United States. As for the free trade status with the U.S., Russia is a traditional market for Georgian products, and for a number of reasons, Georgia cannot be competitive in the American market. In this context, one can question what kind of war with Russia is being discussed when trade volumes and the number of tourists arriving from Russia are growing, and Georgia not only lacks the resources to confront Russia, but any such step could have serious consequences.

The ruling Georgian Dream party was well aware that reintroducing the bills on foreign agents and on banning LGBT propaganda to parliament would lead to a deterioration of relations with the West (House of Commons 2024; Human Rights Watch 2025). This indicates that, ahead of the parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024, the Georgian authorities prioritized weakening the opposition's position by establishing good neighborly relations with Moscow and ensuring the country's dynamic development. In this way, the ruling Georgian Dream party also secured the support of conservative segments of society and the church.

### **Georgia's integration with the EU and the Western vector of development**

Following these steps, Georgia's integration into the EU was effectively frozen for a time, and the Georgian authorities were criticized by the U.S., while European institutions also considered these laws anti-democratic and demanded their revision (European Parliament 2024; Venice Commission 2024).

Thus, despite the fact that the European and Western development vector has received the approval of a significant part of the population, moreover, it has been enshrined in the constitution, nevertheless, in the current geopolitical situation, Tbilisi, using its Eurosceptic and conservative line, decided to preserve the country's sovereignty through the diversification of foreign policy. Freezing relations with the EU and NATO is beneficial to Russia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Iran. However, in our opinion, such a strategy of Georgia is more in the interests of Moscow than anything else. For the Kremlin, Georgia has always been considered a zone of geopolitical influence. In Russian-Georgian relations, both sides have their own 'red lines'. For Moscow, this is the exclusion of Georgia, which has a common land border with it, from joining NATO, and for Tbilisi, the restoration of its territorial integrity.

Thus, Georgia is no longer considered by the West as a center of democracy in the South Caucasus. In addition, such a change in the Georgian vector will reduce the West's position in Armenia, which will no longer have the opportunity to move west through Georgia. The relations that have developed between the two countries since 2008 have not satisfied anyone. Georgia has become convinced that neither NATO nor the EU is going to accept them. And in the current difficult geopolitical conditions, Moscow has begun to attach more importance to Georgia's loyalty than to the issue of the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For Moscow, the "Georgian Dream" is preferable to M. Sahakashvili, who will not be able to engage in political activity in the near future, and the party he leads is about to be outlawed. As a result of the policy of the current Georgian authorities, closer relations with the EU or NATO are also not a matter of the foreseeable future. The Kremlin understands that no Georgian authority can deepen its relations with Russia and open the Abkhazian road without restoring its territorial integrity. If this issue is of secondary importance for Moscow, then it is a matter of principle for Tbilisi. After all, Russia can survive without that road. However, here another question arises for the Kremlin. In the current complex international and regional conditions, how important is the role of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for Moscow? Moscow solved a similar problem in the South Caucasus together with Ankara. True, initially not considering that it would completely lose Nagorno-Karabakh, the complex situation forced the Kremlin to make concessions. In recent years, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were options for Moscow to put pressure on Georgia. More than a dozen Russian military bases and the construction of the Ochamchire naval base were considered important in the event of Georgia's accession to NATO. However, if it is possible to reach an agreement with Georgia and obtain guarantees that Georgia will not claim to be included in the North Atlantic Alliance, then in that case for Moscow, as happened with Azerbaijan in the case of Artsakh, Moscow believed that in the current situation, it was more economically beneficial to fully return Georgia to its geopolitical orbit and fully control it, instead of two unrecognized republics that had become a "burden" for it.

In fact, with smart and balanced steps, Tbilisi managed to put Moscow in front of a difficult dilemma "ahead of time". Moscow now understands that strategically, having previously recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they are currently in a difficult situation. Back in 2015, Vladimir Putin stated that the territorial integrity of Georgia is primarily a matter for the Georgian, South Ossetian, and Abkhazian peoples, and that Russia would accept any decision they make (German 2016). This is a rather vague formulation, and if the Kremlin withdraws its decision, an uncomfortable situation will be created for its allies, who, at the instigation of Moscow, had recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru).

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, speaking at the UN on September 28, 2024, on the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, noted that they are neighbors of Georgia and that the current Georgian leadership honestly assesses the events that have taken place and is inclined towards historical reconciliation (MFA of the RF 2024a). He then added that if all sides show willingness, Russia will be ready to assist in this process (MFA of the RF 2024a).

In his speech in Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili responded by stating that the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity is possible only through peaceful means, based on mutual reconciliation and forgiveness (Tsurtsunia 2024). He emphasized that foreign agents and the National Movement do not want this. He also stated that after winning the elections, the ruling Georgian Dream party is ready to choose a model of constitutional arrangement that will allow for the restoration of the territorial integrity of a united Georgia (Tsurtsunia 2024).

In essence, this was a message to Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. With this, the Georgian leadership hinted that, in addition to the threat of a new war, it understood the impossibility of resolving this issue without an agreement with Russia, which put the Russian leadership in a difficult situation. In the prevailing difficult international circumstances, Russia needed Georgian transport and communication infrastructure and at least its neutrality. However, the Kremlin did not quite understand how to convince the Abkhazians and South Ossetians in these republics (Miklasová 2024; Gabrichidze 2021), which are recognized by Russia and where dozens of Russian military bases are located, of the need to unite with Georgia within the framework of a federation or confederation. According to Article 4 of the Constitution of Abkhazia, the territory of the Republic of Abkhazia is indivisible, inviolable and inalienable, and its independence and territorial integrity cannot be abolished.

South Ossetia, which is in a more difficult economic and political situation, deliberately included a mechanism in its Constitution for possible incorporation into the Russian Federation. However, the Russian political leadership has so far ignored these proposals. According to paragraph 3 of Article 3 of the Constitution of South Ossetia, the territory of the republic is not subject to alienation, but paragraph 4 of the same article states that the territory, status and borders cannot be changed without the consent of the people. Nevertheless, Russia reacted positively to the proposals of the Georgian leadership, as the Kremlin believed that even if attempts to normalize relations with Georgia were unsuccessful or only partially successful, bilateral relations would nevertheless reach a new level, since the issues were being discussed at the government level (Miklasová 2024; Gabrichidze 2021).

In his annual report presented to Parliament in June 2024, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze noted that Georgia has two main problems: the final eradication of poverty and the unification of the country. He thus also confirmed Bidzina Ivanishvili's statement that by 2030, Abkhazia and South Ossetia will already be reunited with Georgia (Solovyov 2024).

The Georgian side understands very well that now a favorable internal and external situation has been created for it. Joe Biden was defeated in the US elections; the position of the German Chancellor was also shaken. These figures decided to pursue and thoroughly study the mistakes made in the elections in Georgia. Ukraine received new missiles, for which Moscow also becomes accessible. However, the West, for some reason, will also have to recognize the Georgian elections and not completely break off ties with Tbilisi.

First of all, this is the use of the Georgian section of the East-West transit route. Second, with this step, the West is also trying to counter the further expansion of Russian influence in the region. Thus, both Moscow and the West are trying to pursue

a pragmatic policy in the region. This circumstance, in turn, will also give Tbilisi the opportunity to pursue a multi-vector policy and improve relations with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and Türkiye, and, possibly, with Iran.

The abolition of Russian visas for Georgian citizens, the warming of Russian-Georgian relations caused concern in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. Although on October 4, 2024, at the meeting of the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Moscow, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated that the 2008 recognition of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia is not subject to abolition, however, these assurances did not completely dispel the doubts of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians (MFA of the RF 2024b). This is not the first time that the idea of creating a confederation with Georgia has been raised by Moscow.

Back in August 2008, Abkhazian President S. Bagapsh was offered the opportunity to create an Abkhaz-South Ossetian confederation before the recognition of independence, which would be open to other Georgian entities (Hille 2010; Potier 2001a, 2020b). The Abkhazians and Ossetians did not agree to this proposal, guessing the purpose of the Kremlin's 'trick' and offered to recognize their independence separately (Beacháin 2025). Even more suspicious was the fact that Dmitry Kozak, the deputy head of Russia's presidential administration, who is the author of the failed project for the integration of Moldova and the Transnistrian region, was sent to the Abkhazian direction. Another of his failed attempts was the Minsk agreements on Ukraine.

Over the past decades, friendly relations were established between Stepanakert, Sukhumi, Tskhinvali and Tiraspol. These unrecognized republics linked their future primarily with the influence of Russia in the region. And here they are witnessing that Moscow is losing its influence in the South Caucasus, that Armenia is left alone in the face of Azerbaijani-Turkish aggression, that NATO member Türkiye is extracting concessions from the Kremlin in the region and, in the end, the Republic of Artsakh is ceasing its activities. Consequently, political elites in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are concerned about whether the fall of Artsakh marks the beginning of the end for unrecognized states in the post-Soviet space.

Unfortunately, the Kremlin's wavering policy has not once created the basis for this. For example, in 1991 and 1992, Moscow found itself in the status of an observer in two tense situations, without the South Ossetian side, and the Kremlin has repeatedly discussed blocking the road from Georgia to the Russian Federation through South Ossetia. After the fall of Artsakh, the Abkhazians and Ossetians no longer have the confidence that the presence of Russian military bases guarantees their security (Blakkisrud, Kemoklidze, Gelashvili and Kolstø 2020). Over the past two decades, Russia has had the opportunity to ensure economic prosperity for these two small republics and, conversely, demonstrate to everyone what it means to be friends with Russia. However, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are plagued by numerous economic difficulties and ineffective governance.

Initially, Abkhaz society and a number of political groups were dissatisfied with the extraordinary session of Parliament held on December 27, 2023, according to whose decision the territories of the Pitsunda settlement and the Myussera nature reserve were leased to Russia (Civil Georgia 2023b; OC Media 2022). About 30 points of this

agreement did not correspond to the Abkhazian Constitution. Moscow should have foreseen that by proposing a “Russian-Abkhazian investment agreement” to Sukhumi in November 2024, it could not but cause discontent among the Abkhazians (OC Media 2024). It contains quite high corruption risks and expresses the interests of several oligarchs, who would be exempt from all taxes for 25 years, would have priority access to all communications in Abkhazia, could import construction equipment and labor without restrictions, and non-Abkhazian banks would also regulate financial flows. After the sale of only thirty thousand apartments built by them, more than one hundred thousand Russians could move to Abkhazia. After discussing this law in the Abkhazian Parliament, about twenty amendments were proposed, none of which were accepted by the Russian side (Euronews 2024). In the end, it was rejected by the Abkhazians.

The main thing for the Kremlin, in order not to be completely discredited, is to preserve the ‘independence’ of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in the form of a ‘confederation’, as well as to guarantee the presence of part of its troops there for some time. At the same time, before ‘returning’ Abkhazia to Georgia, Moscow wants to take possession of the ‘most fertile’ areas, and the Russian army is the guarantor of this. From this point of view, the discontent of the Abkhazians and the resignation of the president were very favorable. It is clear that these demonstrations could have been dispersed in a very short time with the help of the Russian army. Moscow reduced funding and threatened to sell gas at international prices. In addition to the steps taken to gradually push them into the arms of Georgia, they are trying to convince Russian society that the ‘ungrateful’ Abkhazians should be abandoned. In Russian pro-government patriotic circles, the role of several separatist leaders and illegal armed groups during the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993 is sometimes recalled, and some of them were awarded Abkhazia’s highest awards and titles at the time (Kikalishvili 2023). As was the case with the Artsakh issue, now Moscow is interested in Georgia, opening the way for Russia and becoming one of the important logistical routes, not giving the West the opportunity to control or create obstacles for Moscow. The Kremlin is also concerned about the fact that Tbilisi has not yet expressed its opinion on the revision of Article 78 of its constitution, which enshrines its strategy for joining NATO.

It should be noted that no country can join the North Atlantic Alliance if there are territorial issues. Therefore, by returning South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow will demand guarantees from Georgia not to take anti-Russian steps. It should be borne in mind that Georgia’s neutral status is also beneficial to Türkiye, Iran and Azerbaijan. And from this perspective, they will clarify the example of Azerbaijan before Georgia, which restored its territorial integrity and became Russia’s key strategic partner in the region.

In fact, today we are witnessing that the previous balance of power created in the South Caucasus has been violated, and not only has a new regional security system not been formed, but new challenges have also emerged, which appeared on the agenda after the fall of the Republic of Artsakh.



## Conclusion and discussion

Over the past decades, various schemes of the South Caucasus security system have been tried to be formed. Among them, we would like to single out 3+3+1 (three South Caucasian republics, Russia, Türkiye, Iran and the EU) and 3+3+2+2+1 (RA, AR, Georgia, NKR, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, RF, Iran, Türkiye, EU, USA, PRC). However, none of these initiatives was crowned with success.

At one time, the borders of the South Caucasian states were mainly determined by Russian-Turkish agreements and treaties. After the collapse of the USSR, it was advantageous for the RF, Türkiye and IRI to have 3 South Caucasian republics, which were actually a buffer for the regional countries that had been at war with each other for centuries. At the same time, the regional countries were united in the issue of inhibiting the influence of the West in the region. Moreover, for three decades, Russian (Eurasian) influence dominated in the South Caucasus. After the Second Karabakh War, the pan-Turkic factor became active in the region. The West, which had local influence in Georgia, to some extent, ceded its positions to RF. The interests of RF and Iran in the region coincide, limiting the influence of Türkiye, which enjoys the support of the Anglo-Saxon powers. From this perspective, they also expect the support of the PRC, whose influence in the region may also become obvious.

Artsakh ceased to exist by force at a time when the international community was talking about exclusively peaceful methods of resolving ethnic conflicts. Such a solution to the ethnic problem in the post-Soviet space creates a dangerous precedent for all unrecognized entities when the latter approach wins out between the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity. Unfortunately, we are currently witnessing the fact that each of the South Caucasian countries is trying to develop its own security concept at the expense of the security of its neighbors. If we take into consideration that the South Caucasus is a rather complex region from a geopolitical, religious and ethno-political point of view, then it will be understandable what consequences the intervention of regional and global power poles in this part of the world can lead to. However, in our opinion, such a forceful solution to any problem cannot be final, and we will still see its reactions. Another important conclusion is that such a solution to the Artsakh problem, as well as the aggravation of the situation in Abkhazia, first of all, indicates the weakening of Russia's positions in the South Caucasus. By using the Karabakh scenario to "solve" the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow is trying to neutralize the West and maintain its hegemonic position among regional countries.

Such a solution to the issue will definitely cause discontent among the Ossetians, Adyghe and Abkhazians living in the North Caucasus. It will seriously affect the image of the Russian Federation, and it is not yet clear what consequences this tactical maneuver will have in terms of strategy.

Georgia, for its part, is trying not to appear on the dividing lines in the conditions of the formation of a new world order. However, the Georgian authorities understand very well that, taking into consideration the pro-Western sentiments in Georgian society, it must act very carefully and cannot appear in any structure controlled by Moscow in the near future.

In the current Russian-Georgian relations, Moscow is more interested in guarantees from Tbilisi that after reunification with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia will not move towards NATO. And for this reason, the Russian Federation is trying to maintain its military and economic presence in these territories.

The complex geopolitical processes taking place in the South Caucasus pose new challenges for Yerevan. The Republic of Armenia must conduct a sufficiently balanced policy; otherwise, it will again come under attack and pay the next price for Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Although stable contacts between the Armenians of Armenia and Abkhazia have not been established, the change in the status of the Republic of Abkhazia for the Armenians living in that country could lead to quite serious consequences, and Yerevan should develop its position and tactics in the event of different development scenarios.

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### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### Ethical standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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