



**Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe,
Eurasia and MENA**

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Key points:

- 1) Russia's war in Ukraine: is it becoming a proxy of the US-China global standoff?
 - 2) How the China-Russia evolving strategic partnership is reshaping geopolitics in Eurasia.
 - 3) Is Georgia on the way out of European integration?
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1) Russia's war in Ukraine: is it becoming a proxy of the US-China global standoff?

One year ago, we discussed the potential role of China as diplomatic mediator or military spoiler in the war in Ukraine ([Issue 22, March-June 2023](#)). At the time, we had reached the conclusion that *"dismissing China's mediation ability would be bad policy for the Ukrainian state's survival and post-conflict reconstruction, as it might leave Beijing with no better option than fully embracing the terms of a Russian peace."* Recent developments, including Beijing's refusal to participate in the "Peace Summit" organized by Switzerland and Ukraine on June 15-16, 2024, in Burgenstock (Switzerland), and the mounting perception in Kyiv (and in the West) that Beijing has got closer to Moscow than ever, might have upended Ukrainian initial cautious acceptance of Chinese mediation efforts to strike a diplomatic deal with Russia. For example, at a recent high-level conference in Singapore (June 3, 2024), the Ukrainian president V. Zelensky lashed out at China over attempting to undermine the summit: *"Russia, using Chinese influence on the region, using Chinese diplomats also, does everything to disrupt the peace summit."* He added that Ukraine would have evidence that China has assisted Moscow's war efforts, thereby questioning Beijing's impartiality. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>)

Beijing has given three reasons for its decision to skip the Swiss-Ukrainian peace summit: that the format was not recognized by both parties to the conflict; Russia was not invited; and the summit only discussed points from Zelensky's peace plan, ignoring other peace initiatives (i.e. China's peace proposals). (<https://carnegieendowment.org>) And China was not the only major actor sceptical about the peace summit in Switzerland. No BRICS countries signed the final communique, and many Global South countries did not attend at all. Instead, both Western and Global South participating leaders emphasized their hope for Russia to eventually join that negotiation format. However, they didn't elaborate a clear strategy for how they could increase support for Ukraine and thereby pressure Russia to accept some of the summit's key terms and principles for eventual talks, rendering the summit of

little to zero practical relevance. (<https://ranenetwork.com>)

Russian absence from the summit was actually decried by most participants, including Saudi and Turkish foreign ministers and the Brazilian advisor to the president. Eventually, even the Swiss president, Ms. Viola Amherd, acknowledged that *"a peace process without Russia was inconceivable"*, adding that the conference should also address *"how and under what conditions Russia can be included in this process."* President Zelensky responded that Ukraine's intention was to *"negotiate with Russia collectively — after building consensus among Kyiv's allies and as many neutral nations as possible"*. He admitted that once an *"action plan" to end the war was agreed, it will be communicated to the representatives of Russia* at a second conference where it would be invited to attend. (<https://nytimes.com>) However, besides this was anything but effective "collective diplomacy" it contrasted with Western mantra that it should be exclusively for Kyiv to decide when and on what terms to conduct eventual peace negotiations.

The Russian president, V. Putin, didn't miss the opportunity to undermine the Swiss-Ukrainian summit by making a ceasefire offer just on the eve before it started (i.e. on June 14, 2024). He urged Ukraine to withdraw troops from its entire Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions, which he had officially claimed as part of Russia since September 2022; abandon plans to join NATO; and the West to lift all sanctions imposed on Russia. Under those conditions, president Putin said, Russia would *"immediately issue an order to cease fire and start negotiations."* He further clarified that he *"was not talking about freezing the conflict, but its final resolution"*. (<https://nytimes.com>)

Nevertheless, for reasons explained in our past issue, China has maintained a high interest in mediating the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Its trump card would be its perceived ability to bring Russia at the negotiation table. However, the ever-closer relationship

developed by presidents Putin and Xi over the last year might have worked in Ukrainian eyes as a hindrance, as Kyiv would fear that China-mediated peace might be largely on “*Russian terms*”, which was unacceptable to Kyiv. Furthermore, Beijing has strived to draw into its peace efforts some other interested partners from the Global South. On May 23, 2024, a week after the most recent meeting between Xi and Putin, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi met with C. Amorim, chief adviser on national security to the president of Brazil. In a joint statement on settling the “*Ukraine crisis*”, they called for an international peace conference in which both Russia and Ukraine would be represented, and all peace plans should be reviewed. (A. Gabuev on <https://foreignaffairs.com>) Beyond the debateable diplomatic need for reviewing all existing peace plans, the meaning of the Chinese refusal to attend the Western-backed Swiss-Ukrainian summit, along with Beijing’s efforts to build up a Global South alternative negotiation platform, is that Russia’s war in Ukraine is becoming a proxy in the China - U.S. global stand-off.

In that vein, experts from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) having studied the discourses prevalent in China at both the official level and within the academic and expert community (in spring 2023) identified four main narratives regarding the Russia-Ukraine war: 1) “*America is using the war in Ukraine to encircle China, but it has failed to unify the world around itself.*” This narrative depicted the war in Ukraine as an indirect conflict between China and the US, in which both sides gained advantages from their positions. The assumption underlying this narrative was Washington was using that “*crisis*” to strengthen unity with its allies in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. 2) “*By supporting Russia, China stands to gain more than it would lose, effectively binding Russia to China as a junior partner.*” Presidents Xi Jinping and V. Putin would apparently

share a common goal: to reshape the international order to make it safer and more comfortable for their countries (and regimes). Therefore, China should continue to provide Russia with economic and diplomatic lifelines. 3) “*War in Ukraine has had no influence on the likelihood of conflict over Taiwan.*” Although officials stressed the point that “*Taiwan is not Ukraine*” and that those analogies were inappropriate, the war in Ukraine might still serve as an example of how a possible conflict in Taiwan might evolve. 4) “*Economic interdependence between the West and China would not protect Beijing in an escalating confrontation or potential conflict, prompting the need to prepare for potential Western sanctions.*” One of the main lessons Chinese observers have learnt from the war in Ukraine was that for the West international politics and security are more important than economics. This contradicted the older belief that economic interdependence could serve as a deterrent, preventing open conflicts. The experts concluded that, from a Chinese perspective, Russia might play the role of an instrument in China's rivalry with the U.S., just as Russia has viewed Ukraine as a proxy agent of the West in its confrontation with the U.S. ([China and Ukraine: The Chinese debate about Russia’s war \(ecfr.eu\)](http://ecfr.eu))

Recent publications have also brought in the spotlight the increased relevance of the “*global perspective*” on the war in Ukraine. For example, A. Kendall-Taylor and R. Fontaine argued in a recent article that China, Russia, Iran and North Korea “*increasingly identify common interests, match up their rhetoric, and coordinate their military and diplomatic activities. Their convergence is creating a new axis of upheaval a development that is fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape.*” Those are the key supporters of Russian military and economic ability to fight the war in Ukraine. They further noted that “*Moscow has been the main instigator of this axis. [...] Putin has grown more*

committed to destroying not only Ukraine but also the global order. And he has doubled down on relationships with like-minded countries to accomplish his aims.” [The Axis of Upheaval: How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order \(foreignaffairs.com\)](#)

In the same vein, H. Brands argued for the essential role played by the “*New Autocratic Alliances*” in supporting Russia’s war in Ukraine: “*Russia has sustained its war in Ukraine thanks to the drones, shells, and missiles Tehran and Pyongyang have provided. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s economy has stayed afloat because China has absorbed Russian exports and provided Moscow with microchips and other dual-use goods.*” [The New Autocratic Alliances | Foreign Affairs](#)

Furthermore, T. Galen Carpenter has concluded in a recent op-ed that China’s interest to intervene as a mediator in the war in Ukraine would be “*yet another manifestation of an increasingly multipolar international system.*” He further suggested that “*To minimize instability and the risk of war, the United States will need to recognize that both Russia and China, as well as a rising number of mid-sized powers, will work to establish their own spheres of influence and play more active roles in international affairs.*” [US Must Accept Spheres of Influence To Preserve Peace - Antiwar.com](#)

In conclusion, as the war in Ukraine has escalated since February 2022 it has also become entangled with the global confrontation between the West and the China- Russia- Iran- North Korea revisionist quartet. As such, the strides for bringing the war in Ukraine to a halt by a temporary ceasefire or a peace deal should consider not only national and regional factors, but also the wider global context of the international system shifting towards a multipolar structure.

The older fears that this war might become entangled with the global competition for power seem to have materialized. Consequently, the search for a solution to the underlying geopolitical conflict

could hardly work just upon bilateral, regional or even European arrangements. Hence, it should be deemed as a global affair which has affected global stability and directly impacted the shifting world order. From this perspective, leaving the huge geopolitical burden of bringing peace back to Ukraine on the shoulders of presidents V. Zelensky and V. Putin looks increasingly illusive. And “peace summits” aimed exclusively at PR goals, with little to zero practical relevance -as the one held in June 2024 in Switzerland-, should be avoided in the future.

From a Ukrainian perspective, now is hardly the best time for setting up a consistent bilateral peace dialogue with Russia. Given the difficult situation on the front line, Kyiv’s current focus on boosting its military power, and efforts to reach out to the Global South are understandable. However, as discussed in past issues (see [Issue 19/May-July 2022](#) and [Issue 21/November 2022- February 2023](#)), they could hardly end this war as long as Ukraine was falling short of developing and pursuing a sound war strategy setting achievable goals, devising workable ways out of the current conflict quagmire, and matching all that with the necessary means. It is, therefore, the responsibility of Ukraine’s regional and global allies and friends to help Kyiv devise a new war strategy that should stabilize the front line, mitigate the Russian attrition war, and start peace negotiations on realistic terms. If China, Brazil, or others from the Global South could also help in pursuing such a strategy would be even better. Lessons learned from the 19th, and 20th century history have proved that territorial wars entangled with Great Powers’ confrontation to reshaping the regional and global orders are usually hardly conducive to achieving stable peace. Whether or not, and if so, how could Ukraine escape the current global geopolitical conundrum remains to be seen.



Source: <https://worldatlas.com>

2) How the China - Russia evolving strategic partnership is reshaping geopolitics in Eurasia.

On May 16-17, 2024, president V. Putin visited China in his first official visit abroad after his re-election. He held talks with president Xi Jinping and signed eleven cooperation documents, including a joint statement pledging deeper military cooperation, such as joint drills and military-technical cooperation. The most significant practical result of the meeting was an agreement to improve the financial infrastructure for the uninterrupted functioning of payments between banks and businesses facing the threat of U.S. secondary sanctions on Russian entities. (<https://ranenetwork.com>) Notably, the presidents vowed to deepen the evolving strategic partnership between China and Russia while taking aim at the United States, deemed as “destabilizing aggressor”. The joint statement boasted: “*Russian-Chinese relations stand the test of rapid changes in the world, demonstrating strength and stability, and are experiencing the best period in their history.[...] We intend to increase interaction and tighten coordination in order to counter Washington’s destructive and hostile course towards the so-called ‘dual containment’ of our countries*” (<https://edition.cnn.com>)

Over the last couple of years, trade between China and Russia has surged to over \$200bn a year as Russia's trade with Europe has plummeted in the wake of EU economic sanctions. China has become Russia's most important export market for both energy and raw materials. Russia and China have also abandoned the dollar and started to settle their mutual trade in Rubles and Yuan. “*In 2022, China’s share of Russian imports rose sharply as Russia pivoted to the East to offset the damage of Western economic sanctions. The timing worked out for them both; Russia needed to continue to export goods and gain access to high-tech products, while China, whose economy was faltering, needed cheap resources and uncompetitive markets.*” (E. Zolotova, “The Reality of Russo-Chinese Relations”, from <https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

However, soaring trade, investments, and military cooperation have only provided meat on the bone of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership: an evolving shared vision over the outlook of the multipolar world. Experts feared that presidents Putin and Xi might seek to form a global alliance of non-aligned countries in the Global South through the BRICS+ format. Other similar organisations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Community of Independent States (CIS), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would

complement and mutually reinforce that endeavour. In addition, connecting the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) featured high on the Chinese-Russian economic agenda. (<https://www.intellinews.com>)

Indeed, upon his return from China, foreign minister S. Lavrov confirmed those plans while highlighting that the latest negotiations with president Xi and other Chinese high-level officials have revealed the existence of a comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation "*surpassing the classical interstate alliances in quality*". Lavrov further added that Russia had an open mind on "*building a real alliance with China*", and explained the audience (i.e. foreign and security policy elite in Moscow at the annual plenary of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy) that "*the time may have come to combine the Eurasian 'sprouts' of a new architecture/configuration (EAEU, BRI, CIS, CSTO, SCO) with some kind of 'common umbrella' since 'we see a great reason for ensuring global security should begin with the formation of the foundations of Eurasian security.'*" (<https://www.indianpunchline.com>)

Russia -the largest heir of the former Soviet Union- has always considered Central Asia (besides the South Caucasus, and much of Eastern Europe) within its *sphere of influence*, and it had competed with China and with the West for economic and political influence there. However, Moscow is slowly starting to see Central Asia not just as an exclusive "*near abroad*", but also as an area prone for a geopolitical/power-sharing deal with China, which has blunted some of Russia's inherent hostility to Chinese economic expansion. Apparently, Moscow is mulling to replicate in Central Asia the same pattern of shared regional dominance established with Turkiye in the South Caucasus in the wake of the second Karabakh war (September -November 2020). On the other hand, China has had a shorter record of regional involvement in this neighbouring key Eurasian region. Until spring 2023, China addressed Central Asia exclusively through bilateral meetings,

as well as under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The latter advanced regional cooperation against terrorism and perceived threats to domestic security and helped China to expand its economic and energy ties to the countries from the region, while acknowledging Russia's key role as the lead security partner of Central Asian states.

The May 2023 China-Central Asia summit, held in Xian (PRC), apparently marked a new stage in Beijing's regional engagement. On that occasion, President Xi called for "*brotherhood*" and a "*harmonious Central Asia*" in the face of threats from terrorism and "*colour revolutions*". He pledged Chinese support to enhance the region's law enforcement and defence capabilities via the "*Global Security Initiative*". Experts assessed that the Xian summit had positioned China to play a larger direct role in security and economic affairs in Central Asia. A formal mechanism for future similar summits has been established, with the next meeting to be held in 2025, probably in Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, Central Asian states (unlike Ukraine since 2014) wanted to avoid choosing sides in the ongoing great power competition, not least for they have been land-locked countries reliant on Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan for their main trade routes to the rest of the world. They would therefore prefer "*multi-vector*" foreign policies that would keep good relations with, and an active regional involvement of Russia, China and the West (and neighbouring Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan). ("*China Looks to Fill a Void in Central Asia*", <https://www.usip.org>)

Regional powers Iran, Turkiye, India, and Pakistan are struggling to join in (and balance) the Russia-China power-sharing deal in Central Asia, mostly via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-SCO, but also increasingly through BRICS+ and other bilateral or multilateral arrangements. For example, Iran has already joined both organizations, India is a founding member of BRICS and joined the SCO since 2017

(along Pakistan), while Turkiye is aspiring to membership of both organizations.

The evolving Sino-Russian strategic partnership in Eurasia might be a highly consequential geopolitical trend, despite some had tried to soothe ensuing concerns in the West: *“China is keen to criticize US dominance in the world order and its policy of strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, but some in Beijing feel that Russia’s hope to break this order—rather than replace it— is a dangerous overreach.”* (P. Baev on <https://jamestown.org>) However, as appealing as this reassuring approach might look, dismissing this geopolitical trend was merely wishful thinking, as A. Gabuev argued: *“Never since the fall of the Soviet Union has Russia been so distant from Europe, and never in its entire history has it been so entwined with China. The truth is that after two years of war in Ukraine and painful Western sanctions, it’s not just Mr. Putin who needs China - Russia does, too.”* And this was not just a transient shift in Russian attitudes as long as many educated Russians would see China as *“a technologically advanced and economically superior power to which Russia is ever more connected. With no easy way back to normal ties with the West, that’s unlikely to change anytime soon.”* (A. Gabuev, *“The West Doesn’t Understand How Much Russia Has Changed”*, on <https://nytimes.com>)

Others admitted that *“The war in Ukraine has brought out a core strategic realignment in the global power distribution that is fast redefining the world order: the Sino-Russian partnership that many thought only a few years back would not be possible is a new geopolitical reality.”* The key variable in the future Eurasian equation might be how strong and enduring the Sino-Soviet partnership would be, and how it could shape the distribution of power in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific, as well as the ensuing global and regional alignments across the West and the Global South. (C. Michta, *“China-Russia*

Axis Heralds an Ominous Future” on <https://cepa.org>)

In the wake of the U.S. and NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, in June 2021, we had reflected on geopolitical trends in Eurasia. At the time, we had warned over an emerging *“geopolitical vacuum”* at the *“Heart of Eurasia”* (including Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), as a direct result of a dramatic change of Western strategic priorities in Eurasia: a potential move away from Mackinder’s *Heartland* (enshrined in Z. Brzezinski’s focus on the *“Eurasian Balkans”*) to focus on the *Rimland*, that might be motivated by the strategic imperative to contain Russia and China by controlling their access to the *“World Ocean”*. (*“Is a ‘geopolitical vacuum’ emerging from the imminent US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan?”*, [Issue 14/April-May 2021](https://www.gpf-europe.com/issue-14/april-may-2021)).

Ironically, three years later, China and Russia are apparently aiming to establish a new power-sharing arrangement in Central Asia as a pillar of a post-Western Eurasian order. This would position both of them *“to dominate Eurasia, while forcing the United States to revisit its historical strategic dilemma, i.e., whether America can remain secure in its hemispheric homeland and free to pursue its economic and security interests worldwide if Russia and China control the Eurasian landmass.”* (C. Michta, *op. cit.*)

As of January 2025, the next American president will have to make strategic decisions on how to deal with this recurring dilemma. In any case, NATO’s role in empowering U.S. strategy (except for the improbable full retrenchment to the Western Hemisphere) would be critical, so that current talk of former president D. Trump’s potential withdrawal from NATO might be superfluous. However, he would likely shift the current priorities of NATO’s and U.S. military global engagement, while keeping strong political pressure on his European counterparts to increase defence budgets and

military capabilities, and gradually take over the responsibility of defending Europe with ever less American support.

Against a shifting global and regional backdrop, the prospective role of Turkiye in the Sino-Russian equation in Eurasia is worth looking into, as she is the only member of NATO maintaining good working relations with both Russia and China and displaying a large interest and greater influence in the “*Heart of Eurasia*”. Turkiye is a well-established regional power, which can be described as a “*swing state*”. As such, it is axiomatic that without Western alignment (NATO membership, and close strategic links with the EU), Turkiye had hardly enough power to compete in Eurasia with the Russia-China-Iran “*Axis of Upheaval*” ([The Axis of Upheaval: How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order \(foreignaffairs.com\)](#)). Ankara’s best bet would therefore require hedging between the West and the Axis by pursuing economic, diplomatic, military, and technological ties with members of both. How could the West benefit from Turkiye’s leverage and strides in Eurasia and encourage its emergence as a partial counterweight to the China-Russia-Iran axis? Should the West support the Turkish pivot to Eurasia without imposing ideological, geopolitical, or other constraints on Ankara? How would Turkiye’s prospective membership to the BRICS+ (and the SCO) effect on its Western alignment? Those are issues that need further monitoring, and they will be more thoroughly addressed in the next issues.

3) Is Georgia on the way out of European integration?

The Wider Black Sea (WBS) is in the middle of a “*geopolitical storm*” maintaining the regional balance of power in flux. Since February 2022, the EU’s and U.S. levels of engagement with the South Caucasus (Eastern WBS) region have significantly increased, while Western confrontation with Russia expanded and intensified ever since. Tensions with

Iran over deliveries of drones and missiles to Russia, the war in Gaza, and more broadly over Tehran’s aspirations for growing regional influence in the Middle East have also reached new highs. The problem is that the rules-based order in Europe (i.e. post-Cold War “*status quo*”) has been killed. In the South Caucasus, Western regional influence is waning. The new South Caucasian geopolitical “*status quo*” is based upon the Russo-Turkish condominium, currently supported by Iran, and more discretely by China, while the West is struggling to get back into the regional geopolitical game.



Source : <https://www.cer.eu>

Within, and partly due to this regional turmoil, Georgia is in crisis. This is a chronic, deep rooted, political crisis, which has been rekindled by the adoption of a controversial law on “*Transparency of foreign influence*”, largely known in the international media as the law on “*foreign agents*”. This most controversial piece of legislation has been signed into law on June 3, 2024, by the Parliament Speaker S. Papuashvili, after the Parliament quickly overrode the initial veto of President S. Zurabishvili. It requires nongovernmental groups and media organizations that receive at least 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as organizations “*pursuing the interests of a foreign power*.” The country’s justice ministry has been given broad powers to monitor compliance, and to fine violations.

Western critical reactions didn’t delay (re-)emerging. For example, in a statement after the Parliament’s

vote overriding the President's veto, the European Commission said that it "*deeply regrets Parliament's decision to pass the measure, saying the law goes against EU principles and values*". As such, "*Georgia would be backsliding in several key areas where progress was required to join the EU, including taking steps against disinformation and polarization and adhering to the fundamental rights of civil society*". (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

Or, in the last decade of May, U.S. Secretary of State A. Blinken, citing the law, announced "*a comprehensive review*" of bilateral cooperation between Georgia and the United States and U.S. visa restrictions against Georgian individuals "*responsible for or complicit in undermining democracy in Georgia*." (<https://nytimes.com>)

In practice, Western leaders have had limited leverage to persuade Tbilisi to stay the course in the geopolitical confrontation with Russia and having the Georgian government press ahead with democratic reforms. That was the case since leaving Georgia in a geopolitical "*grey zone*" would be manipulated by the Kremlin, leading to pro-Russian narratives and further destabilisation of Georgia. Apparently, the best chance to change that might be in the upcoming legislative elections, in October 2024, in case they resulted in ousting the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party from power to the benefit of pro-Western opposition parties. However, this has been precisely the goal of the new law: to mitigate the chances of the opposition parties to overthrow the GD from power by cutting deep into their financial resources or, at least, by having them designated as "*foreign agents*" and, as such, as allegedly mere instruments of foreign powers.

The tense debate over this law mainly derived from the highly polarized nature of the Georgian society. While many Georgians believed that their government was making a choice in favour of closer ties with Moscow (by calling it a "*Russian-style foreign agents' law*"), others have argued that Western-funded NGOs occupy an outsized place in

domestic politics. Consequently, after that draft law was brought back in the Parliament, in early April 2024, the country's capital, Tbilisi, had become engulfed in protests against it. Although there is no evidence that Russia was behind the initiation of this law, critics said the government was seeking to emulate Moscow's methods to squash the opposition and breakdown the Western support for the Georgian vibrant civil society. Meanwhile, the government said it wanted Georgia to be in the European Union and NATO but that it must take a more neutral stance on Russia to avoid being entangled should the war in Ukraine spread. (<https://nytimes.com>)

As discussed in past issues ([Issue 19/May-July 2022](#) and [Issue 22/March-June 2023](#)), this political crisis has not come out of the blue. It has been the latest in a series of events that damaged Georgian government's image in the West. Most recently, it threatened to upend Georgia's relations with the U.S. and the EU and move the country geopolitically closer to Turkiye, China, and yes, also to Russia.

Furthermore, since 2023, the GD party has slid towards the ultra-conservative global political strain epitomized by former president D. Trump, and by Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orban. For example, on April 25, 2024, Georgian Prime Minister I. Kobakhidze lashed out at "*so-called liberals*" and accused them of threatening Christianity, national identity, and state sovereignty during his address at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest. His speech came amid an increasingly right-wing turn by his party, its growing isolation from the Western democratic political circles, and strengthening ties with V. Orban, very well known for his positions contrasting with those of most of his European counterparts. Nevertheless, in the very same speech, Prime Minister Kobakhidze reiterated that EU accession remained the top foreign policy priority for Georgia and its people (<https://civil.ge>). "*There's clearly a battle going on within Europe itself, about what it means to be European. [...] Georgian*

Dream is backing the more civilizational, traditional Christian view of Europe rather than a postmodern, progressive liberal view of Europe. [...] GD's pivot to ultra-conservatism could have been motivated by its desire to cling to power at whatever costs", commented T. de Waal, senior fellow at Carnegie Europe. (<https://www.eurasianet.org>)

Beyond the highly polarized Georgian society, this political crisis, as well as Georgian government's deteriorating relations with the West should be assessed within a highly volatile strategic context in the WBS.

Georgia has taken a particularly prudent attitude towards the war in Ukraine while continuing to claim its Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations. The Russo-Turkish tacit agreement over the geopolitical arrangements in the South Caucasus, the long-term conflict with Russia over its separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the lack of any Western security guarantees have pointed at strategic prudence as Tbilisi's safest choice in the middle of a "geopolitical storm" ravaging the WBS region.

In past issues, we have also discussed a stereotype pushed by the Georgian opposition, some experts on the region, and parts of the global media about the GD party being "pro-Russian". Recently, the rationale for this stereotype has been reinforced by the adoption of the new law on "foreign agents" which has been directed towards weakening Western influence in Georgian polity. Georgia's abstention from overt anti-Russian rhetoric, reluctance to adopt most of the Western sanctions against Moscow, and as a result having greatly benefited from a surge in trade with Russia have also reinforced it. Moreover, Tbilisi has also sought to expand its economic options through increased trade and investment ties with Turkiye, in addition to a newly established strategic partnership with China, since 2023. (<https://responsiblestatecraft.org>) For example, at the end of May 2024, the Georgian Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development,

L. Davitashvili, announced that a Chinese-Singaporean consortium had won the tender for the construction and management of the Anaklia Deep-Sea Port. This controversial decision (given the long-standing U.S. opposition to it paired with the most recent Russian decision to build a naval base at the Port of Ochamchire, in occupied Abkhazia, just a few kilometres from Anaklia) might have been the latest sign that the GD government was moving away from the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

The growing ideological gap between the GD government and the mainstream West might spearhead a possible re-alignment of Georgia closer to the Turkiye-Azerbaijan axis, as well as to China, and would most likely also shift, to a certain extent, relations with Russia. Rumours that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway regions of Georgia, might be used by Moscow as bargaining chips in exchange for Tbilisi dropping its aspirations to NATO and EU membership are swirling around in local and regional media. (E. Avdaliani on <https://carnegieendowment.org/>)

Others believe that by adopting the law on "foreign agents", the GD is inviting Russia and the West to compete for Tbilisi's favour. They referred a statement by the chairman of the GD, I. Garibashvili, allegedly inviting the EU to bargain Georgia's immediate accession to the Union against amending or repealing the "foreign agents" law. (V. Solovyov on <https://carnegieendowment.org/>)

In conclusion, Georgia is going through a chronic, deep-rooted, and highly consequential political crisis which seems to be shifting its foreign and security policy turning it away from the West and closer to Turkiye, Azerbaijan, China, and, so far indirectly, to Russia. The latter possible *rapprochement* might depend on how Moscow would respond Georgian interests to re-integrate its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The current “*geopolitical storm*” in the WBS and the waning influence of the West in the South Caucasus have created strategic incentives for parts of the Georgian elite (mostly drawing their political and economic power from the business interests of billionaire and founder of the GD, B. Ivanishvili) to review their geopolitical approach and upend relations with the EU and the U.S. The precarious state of play in the war fought by Ukraine with Western support against Russia, and the outcomes of the European, and U.S. presidential elections in 2024 might also play a crucial role in Georgia’s geopolitical re-orientation. From this perspective, if Ukraine succeeded to balance and potentially freeze the current frontline, and the freshly elected EU leaders and U.S. president maintained a reasonable interest for the region, then there would be a fair chance for the West to stay in the South Caucasus geopolitical game for the foreseeable future.

Last, but not the least, the outcome of the October 2024 legislative elections in Georgia might be decisive for the future domestic and foreign policy orientation of the country. However, having free and fair elections could not be taken for granted, in spite of any efforts by the EU, and the West more broadly, to monitor and support them. The stakes are quite high, and the ruling GD party and its leaders might not be inclined to let them play out in full impartiality and transparency. Nevertheless, the EU’s possible decisions on sanctioning the Georgian regime before the elections would be counterproductive. The tougher the sanctions the least impartial and transparent would the Georgian government play them out. Before the October 2024 elections, freezing Georgia’s EU candidacy (in contrast to the concrete progress made by Ukraine and Moldova lately) has been the safest and wisest European approach to deal with the current Georgian political crisis.

Over the longer term, it is naïve to believe that Georgia could play the West against Russia and make wins on both accounts. More likely, a possibly re-

elected GD government might attempt to mimic Turkiye's geopolitical play, possibly in coordination with Ankara, while the fresh strategic partnership with China might turn into its trump card.

In Georgia, the EU is facing a tough choice: if it sanctions the government and the ruling elite risks repeating the 2020 scenario of Belarus falling into Moscow’s lap. It should rather adjust policies to its fading influence in the South Caucasus region and keep Tbilisi on its toes. Either way would involve a strategic loss, but, in the latter case, the EU could at least keep a foot into the region.



About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at www.gpf-europe.com.

About the Author

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