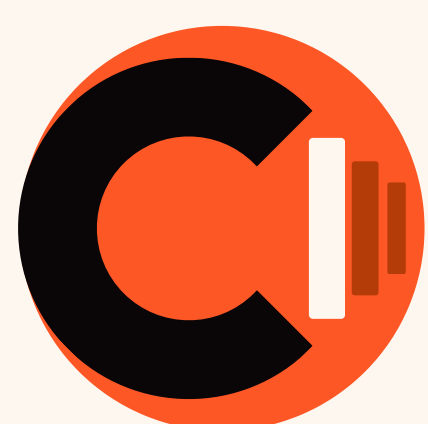


CIVIL INSIGHT

**Is Georgian Dream acting on Russia's
behalf?**

Arguments that support the hypothesis



1. About us

Meeting challenges by expanding our breadth and focus

You are reading the fourth issue of Civil Insight, a publication by the network of researchers, journalists and practitioners with deep professional knowledge of the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions.

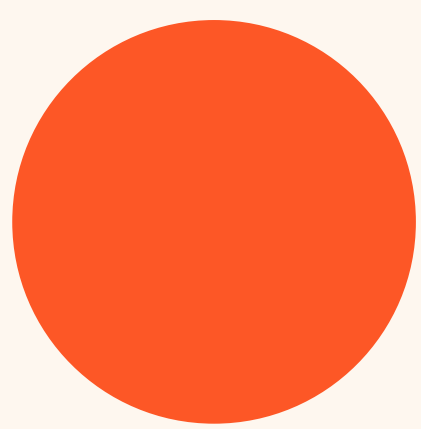
The publication is born from the professional network created by **Civil Georgia (Civil.ge)**, the leading Georgian English-language outlet, its networks and alumni from some 25 years of operation.

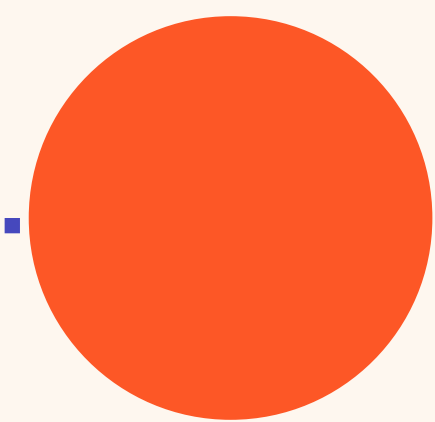
Civil Insight brings you an actionable perspective on the politico-economic context and trends. It is intended for policy-makers and as a reference accompaniment to the field practitioners.

Our mission is to contribute to informed decision-making, and we strive to tap into the best possible expertise available on the ground.

For each issue of the insight, we conduct meetings, interviews, and cross-check our Main Insight with active professionals who review and comment the initial draft.

We are happy to hear your comments.





2. Main Insight

Is Georgian Dream acting on Russia's behalf? Arguments that support the hypothesis

What is happening

The geopolitical U-turn undertaken by the successive Georgian Dream governments since 2021 has accelerated following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. One hypothesis is that this change was suggested, encouraged, or even imposed by Russia through various forms of pressure. One indication of the Russian involvement is an enterprise of eradicating pro-Western feelings, desires, and aspirations of the Georgian population and elites, by fully echoing Russian propaganda and policy in Ukraine.

Significance

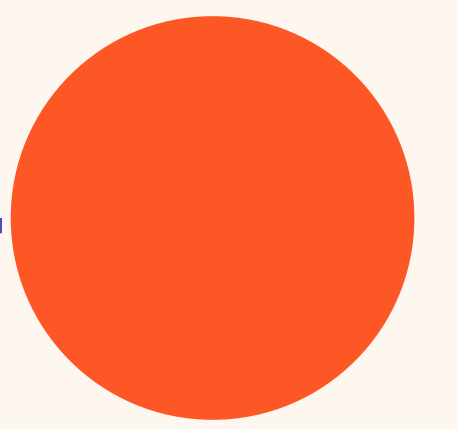
If Moscow is indeed behind the maneuver, then its entire ambition is to push the South Caucasian republic to sever its ties with the West and ensure that it falls within its sphere of influence. In Ukraine, Russia has adopted a policy of treating what it considers the roots of the problem - the pro-Western feelings among the population - through hard power. In Georgia, a soft-power approach could be tested.

Impact:

If the hypothesis is true, then Georgian Dream's policy is not merely the repression and destruction of political opponents. It is the eradication of all pro-Western sentiment within the country. This suggests:

- The establishment of a very authoritarian and brutal regime, imitating the Russian one;
- Pursuit of a long-term, intrusive policy that aims to ensure that Georgian society no longer dreams of becoming part of the West.
- A country that will side with non-liberal regimes globally.

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Analysis

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Georgian Dream intensified a systematic policy of breaking with the EU and the U.S., building on Russia-aligning trends that started openly emerging in 2021.

Observers and diplomats have wondered whether the reasons for such a shift are primarily intrinsic, motivated by the fear and anticipation of Russia's direct aggression, or extrinsic - a result of the Kremlin's direct instructions, pressure, and/or control of Georgian Dream and its patron Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Hypothesis of Control

There is no direct "smoking gun" available to confirm the hypothesis of direct control from the Kremlin. Yet, many decisions made by the Georgian Dream government since 2022 could not have been motivated solely by internal political imperatives.

The overall policy of the Georgian Dream since 2021 seems aimed at eradicating the pro-Western aspirations of Georgian society and the elite.

If we hypothesize that Moscow discreetly incited and encouraged this geopolitical U-turn, the Russian approach in Georgia can be considered as the "soft-power" version of the policy it pursues in Ukraine through arms. In both cases, the goal is to bring these countries back into the Russian sphere of influence despite the popular rejection.

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Isolating Georgia from West

Over the past year, the Georgian Dream leadership has acted in ways that appear irrational from a domestic political standpoint, yet align closely with Moscow's interests. For example:

- Six months before a parliamentary election that promised to be difficult, Georgian Dream adopted the foreign agents law, modelled on a similar law in Russia that has been in place since 2012. The law triggered a strong domestic outcry and international condemnation, damaging the party's reputation. Similar laws were almost simultaneously promoted by Russia in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Central Asia, as a signal of symbolic acceptance of the Kremlin's narrative of Western-driven conspiracy being implemented through NGOs.
- During the election campaign, in September 2024, Ivanishvili implied that Georgia should apologize to the South Ossetian separatists for the 2008 war - a deeply unpopular proposition, which no politician claiming to carry 2/3 of the popular vote would make.
- On November 28, 2024, Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced a freeze on the EU accession process, triggering a powerful, unprecedented, and lingering protest movement.

• Laws Against Western Influence

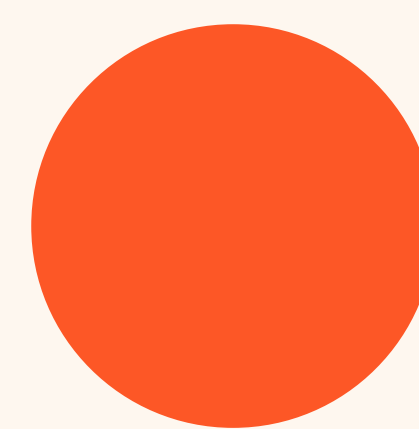
The adoption of the foreign agents law, renamed the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," which would require civil society organizations and media outlets to declare that they pursue foreign interests, directly contradicts one of the twelve conditions set by the European Commission for candidacy in June 2022: ensuring the involvement of civil society in policymaking at all levels.

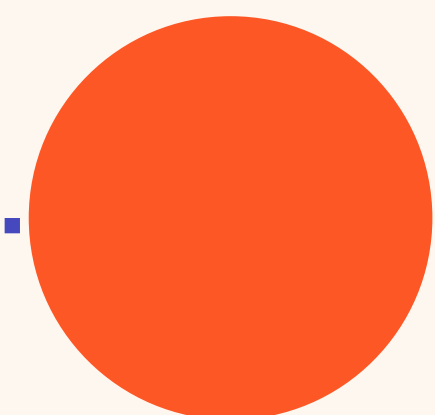
In September 2024, parliament passed the anti-LGBT law "On Family Values and the Protection of Minors," under the guise of combating so-called "LGBT propaganda." In the summer of 2025, GD doubled down by enacting its own version of the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), increasing

pressure on NGOs, media, and individuals. Taken together, this expanding legal arsenal has come to resemble elements of Russia's repressive legislative model.

Especially with the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", the Georgian Dream was keenly aware that it was highly unpopular and would trigger protests. Yet the ruling party took the risk of imposing the law by force. The imposition of that law created a breach for further legislative acts that consolidated the legal regime similar to Russia.

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(...)

• Picking on Old Wounds

Ivanishvili's September 2024 statement about apologizing to South Ossetians for the 2008 war is also notable.

One overt dimension of that narrative was to blame Mikheil Saakashvili's administration for the war and to lay the groundwork for banning the then-ruling United National Movement (UNM) through the courts. But there was also a covert subtext: such an apology would logically be framed as a step toward the formal reintegration of the two breakaway regions into Georgia's constitutional order.

GD repeatedly hinted that Moscow might be open to such a scenario. Given that many Georgians believe the separatist conflicts of the 1990s were instigated by the Kremlin, and therefore that Moscow ultimately "holds the key" to their resolution, this narrative had a clear political function. GD sought to present its increasingly repressive measures and Russia-leaning posture as painful but necessary trade-offs on the path to restoring territorial integrity. GD and, especially its spinoff, People's Power, and the newly created anti-EU United Neutral Georgia are pushing for such an arrangement.

Stopping Rapprochement with the EU

The timing of these electorally and politically irrational decisions matters.

In June 2022, the EU declined to grant Georgia candidate country status after Tbilisi applied for membership alongside Kyiv and Chişinău, amid what appeared to be a geopolitical window opening in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion. Twelve "priorities" – in essence, preconditions – were given to Georgia, which it was expected to fulfill by the end of the year to be granted the EU "candidate" status.

Having applied with one hand, GD began undermining the deal with the other. Only a few weeks after the application, the Georgian government launched a campaign claiming to possess information that Western countries had decided to open a "second front" (against

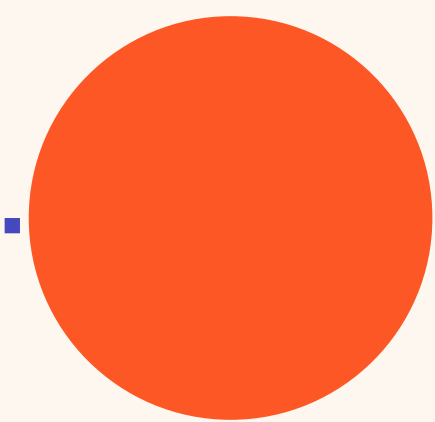
Russia) in the South Caucasus, to drag the region into their proxy war with Russia. Using this conspiratorialist device, the Georgian Dream tried to derail the rapprochement with Europe without openly declaring itself anti-European. The approach echoed the negative soft-power tactics of Russia and its European allies, such as Hungary. GD planted the seeds of fear and presented the West as a malign and decadent power, associated with the danger of war.

Much like Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yanukovich in 2013, Georgian Dream sought to create the impression that the EU had rejected Georgia, rather than the other way around.

Although Tbilisi had not met the EU's conditions and had even attempted to adopt a foreign agents law in 2023, Georgia was nevertheless granted candidate status in December 2023. Months later, the ruling party reintroduced the foreign agents legislation and, despite renewed strong opposition, succeeded in passing it.

In the summer of 2024, following the adoption of the foreign agents law, the EU made clear that Georgia's EU accession process had been halted.

Taken together, the nature and symbolism of the repressive legislation, the speed with which it was pushed through, the politically illogical public statements, and the refusal to consider potentially politically advantageous alternatives lend credibility to the hypothesis that the process may have been steered from outside. We have seen similar patterns before: in Ukraine in 2013 and in Armenia shortly before Yerevan was forced to abandon the Association Agreement with the EU – cases widely understood to have been steered from Putin's administration.



Analysis (...)

Killing Pro-Western Sentiments At Its Roots

Just as the hard-power pressure on Ukraine now seems increasingly, almost unjustifiably, costly, Georgia would present the Kremlin with a unique proof of concept for its soft-power tactics. But unlike 2013 Ukraine or Armenia, Georgia is profoundly anti-Russian. Subjugating it requires sapping the widely shared pro-Western feeling.

Many aspects of Georgian Dream's policy indeed appear aimed at "reshaping public consciousness" across broad segments of the population. This includes efforts to cleanse the cultural sphere, repress pro-Western groups, and introduce controversial education reforms.

• Cleansing Cultural Field

Purges in the cultural field started after Tea Tsulukiani, one of Ivanishvili's most trusted officials and GD's longest-serving Justice Minister, assumed the post of Culture Minister in 2021. She removed most of the experienced managers from their positions and appointed political loyalists instead. This policy affected museums, cinema, literature, music, cultural heritage preservation, etc.

The anti-Western motivation was not made explicit in this process, which was largely carried out under the banner of efficiency-driven "reorganization." However, most of those who were dismissed were experienced professionals, largely pro-Western, and, at a minimum, not supporters of Georgian Dream.

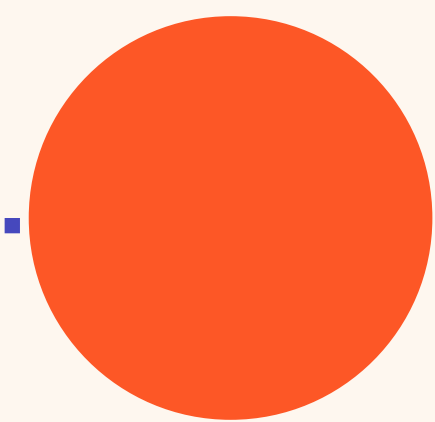
And while the driving motive may not have been explicitly anti-Western, the outcome clearly was. The arrests of actors and directors during the 2025 protests demonstrated that Georgian Dream targeted precisely those segments of society that shape the cultural mainstream. It was important for the ruling party to strike against the most socially active members of society: the country's opinion-makers, including intellectuals, artists, bloggers, and others.

• Repressing Pro-Western Groups

The systematic intent to curb Western influence in the country became evident with the introduction of the Foreign Agents and FARA laws, as well as the measures that followed. The wording, content, and clear Russian inspiration of the original text leave little doubt about the authors' policy intentions. While the law's immediate aim may have been to hinder Georgia's EU integration, at a deeper level, it aimed to curb Western influence over the country.

Once the Russian-inspired legal framework was adopted, all that remained was to implement it and turn the symbolic break with the West into reality. Even though the laws were not fully enforced, they already had a chilling effect on civil society actors.

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Analysis (...)

Repression became more systematic with the pro-EU protests that erupted in November 2024, with authorities employing a combination of physical violence, arbitrary arrests, and the selective enforcement of laws restricting freedom of assembly.

This further deepened the country's isolation from its European partners. To further strengthen its control, the ruling party introduced a suite of laws to deter citizens from gathering and protesting against government policies.

This again bears striking similarities to what happened in Ukraine in November 2013, when President Yanukovich returned from Moscow to announce the suspension of talks on the EU trade pact. In both cases, leaders sought to signal their capacity to suppress strong public support for EU integration. Yet whereas Yanukovich failed and ultimately lost his grip on power, Ivanishvili managed to retain control.

• Banning Pro-Western Opposition

The instrument chosen to initiate the outright banning of pro-Western parties, while giving it a veneer of legality, was the creation in February 2025 of the "Parliamentary Temporary Investigative Commission Investigating the Activities of the Regime and Its Political Officials in 2003–2012." Chaired by Tsulukiani, now the MP, the commission was presented by Georgian Dream officials as a "Nuremberg trial" of Mikheil Saakashvili's administration and his party, the United National Movement.

The commission quickly exceeded its stated mandate, evolving into a broader trial of pro-Western policy itself. Many of those summoned to testify had no connection whatsoever to the Saakashvili-era government. Political figures who refused to participate in what they called a "masquerade" were jailed.

Moreover, in its conclusions, the Tsulukiani report recommended that the Prosecutor General's office investigate these individuals, potentially subjecting them to lengthy prison terms on highly dubious legal grounds. As of early 2026, the legal process to permanently ban the main opposition parties is underway, potentially blocking any pro-Western party from participating in elections.

• Education reform

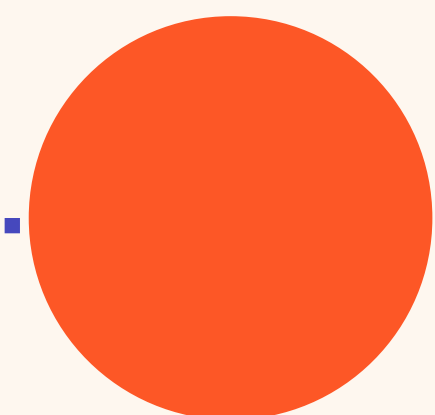
The de-Westernization process received further confirmation with the announcement last October of sweeping reforms across the board, including higher education. The anti-Western efforts extended beyond targeting political opponents to a broader strategy aimed at reshaping public attitudes and mindsets.

The far-reaching university reform seeks to restructure degree programs, establishing a three-year bachelor's and one-year master's as the standard, alongside an 11-year school education cycle. This change is feared to severely disadvantage young Georgians who wish to pursue higher education in Europe or elsewhere abroad.

The reform also represents a centralization of control over universities, moving Georgia away from the model of university autonomy established after its accession to the Bologna Process. The accompanying reorganization is feared to lead to purges of pro-Western and pro-democracy academic staff.

These concerns have been amplified by the recent announcement to merge Tbilisi State University and Georgian Technical University, the two oldest higher education institutions in the capital.

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Is Evidence of Moscow Control Too Flimsy?

Georgia is in a typical post-colonial context, which prevents the ruling party from openly stating that its policy aims to return to Moscow's sphere of influence. Overt Russian interference in Georgian politics, for example, the presence of Russian spin doctors working for Georgian Dream or openly issued "orders" from the Kremlin to local authorities, would likely undermine the government's capacity to function effectively.

On billboards used during the October 2024 parliamentary election campaign, Georgian Dream merged its blue-and-yellow logo with the European flag to portray itself as the country's only truly pro-EU party. In a manner reminiscent of Russian "political engineering" tactics, the government insists it remains committed to European integration, while advocating for a "different Europe of genuinely sovereign states," a phrase borrowed from Viktor Orbán.

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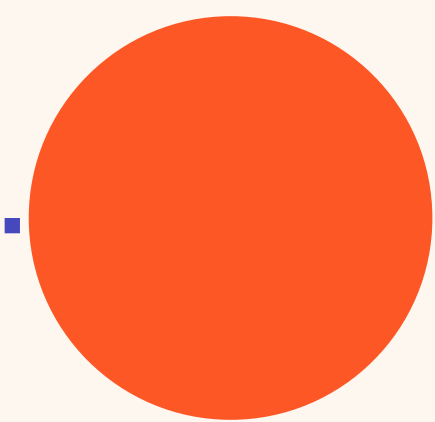
- **A different Europe?**

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gave Georgian Dream a convenient rhetorical cover and a European veneer. Orbán and his ministers have been telling Georgians that their ruling party is genuinely pro-European - not liberal, but traditionalist. A party that seeks to join Europe "with dignity," meaning not as a supposedly decadent nation turning its back on traditional and family values. This framing allowed Georgian Dream to appear pro-European without endorsing Moscow, casting Brussels' "unelected bureaucracy" as anti-European.

While Georgian Dream seeks to cultivate a traditionalist narrative, Ivanishvili's personal ties to the Georgian Orthodox Church remain ambiguous. The Georgian electorate is similarly conflicted: many support EU integration without embracing liberal values. A notable minority may be pro-European liberals, but others view Europe primarily as a source of prosperity and opportunity, while some associate it with the civilizational idea of Christianity. In principle, these latter two groups could be reconciled with the notion of belonging to the "Russian World" and the Russian sphere of influence.

Could it be that Georgian Dream is simply responding to the will of the plurality of the electorate, and that the notion of Moscow's manipulation is nothing more than a conspiracy theory? Two points contradict this argument:

1. Support for the pro-Western (as opposed to pro-Russian) political project appears to be widespread. Otherwise, Georgian Dream would not be facing continuous protests since November 2024, nor would it feel compelled to introduce new repressive measures to maintain control.
2. The "cultural traditionalism" often assumed to be intrinsic to Georgian culture and mentality is far from politically neutral. Under the USSR, the promotion of "ethnographic nations" was a deliberate policy, used to maintain control by stoking ethnic divisions. The Kremlin has since adopted this tool in its influence arsenal, positioning itself as a defender of traditional values (religion, family, masculinity, and the rejection of sexual liberation) both domestically and abroad.
3. If we accept that a larger-than-expected portion of Georgian society is "compatible" with the Russian world, why does the ruling party not openly advocate a pro-Russian course? To achieve its geopolitical objectives, Georgian Dream must conceal its true intentions, presenting itself as pro-EU, while much of its strategy since 2022 has aimed to weaken ties with the West and subtly return Georgia to Moscow's sphere of influence.



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• **Ivanishvili's Mindset**

It is commonly believed that Georgian Dream's narratives and policies are guided and orchestrated by its founder and patron, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili amassed his wealth in Russia during the 1990s and was among the fewer than ten individuals who helped shape the Russian oligarchy by 1996.

This suggests that Ivanishvili is likely still tied to the Kremlin, as is the case with many billionaires and oligarchs, whether Russian nationals like Fridman, Abramovich, and Vekselberg; those who made their fortunes in Russia, like Ivanishvili or Alisher Usmanov; or those who benefited from Russian support, such as Ukrainian oligarchs like Rinat Akhmetov or Dmytro Firtash.

There are almost no exceptions. It is hard to believe that the Kremlin would treat Ivanishvili differently, a man who emerged from the very heart of Russian power as a member of the "semibankirshchina," the small group that helped create the Russian oligarchy in 1996, and who now governs a geopolitically significant country that Putin's regime fought over in 2008.

However, some argue that, given an understanding of how the Kremlin operates, Ivanishvili has chosen a "realistic" approach toward Russia. As a source with insight into the billionaire's thinking told us, "Ivanishvili thought that after the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nobody would win that war. In the end, the West and Russia would divide spheres of influence in the region to halt hostilities. Georgia would inevitably fall on the Russian side, so it's better to demonstrate a positive disposition toward Moscow early."

We often hear this kind of argument from various experts and sources from the former Soviet republics. "Yes, we can fight, but we know that we can receive the war as a result, as it happened to Saakashvili in Georgia in 2008 and as it is happening now in Ukraine. Or we can perform the act of allegiance, and put our honor in our back pocket", as a respected

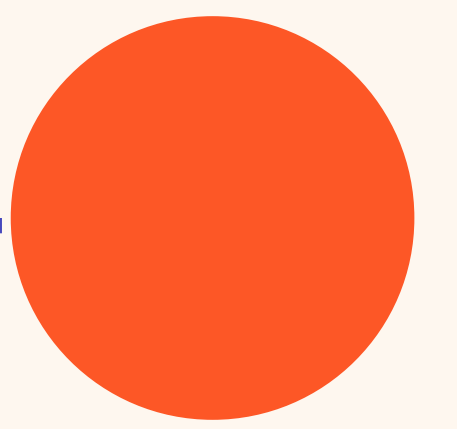
Moldovan political scientist told us in Chisinau. We cannot exclude the possibility that Ivanishvili is indeed guided by such calculations. However, this perspective does not contradict our analysis, which views him as a former "Russian" oligarch closely tied to the Kremlin. Oligarchs typically adopt the worldview and strategic interests of their "home" polity.

• **Local Dynamics**

To implement this deeply unpopular geopolitical U-turn, Ivanishvili and his team had to lie extensively to the Georgian public. They had to monopolize information channels, saturate them with conspiracy and propaganda, while relying on threats and brutality to silence opponents. They also needed personnel to carry out this policy: ministers, state officials, security and police officers, and journalists.

Most of them echoed Georgian Dream's propaganda and narratives. They embraced the party's "criminalization" of political opponents, allowing themselves to be driven more by narrow, local political battles than by broader geopolitical considerations. One example is Tsulukiani's tenure as Minister of Culture. In her efforts to purge the cultural sector of critical voices, she cited combating Saakashvili-era policies, rather than advancing a broader strategic agenda. Tsulukiani harbors her own grievances against Georgia's pro-Western elite, whom she blames, among other things, for supporting Saakashvili and his party.

Her case illustrates how personal and local motivations, without even considering the financial or careerist incentives of many Georgian Dream members and appointees, can drive a pro-Russian policy orchestrated by Ivanishvili.



Conclusion

Moscow has clearly chosen to push the Western actors outside its sphere of influence by eliminating the local elites that support liberal values.

This much has been clear from Vladimir Putin's statements against Russian renegade elites, as well as with regard to the so-called "denazification" of Ukraine as one of the objectives of the invasion. Whether or not the Kremlin is directly steering it, GD's action in Georgia follows the same path, allowing the Kremlin to pursue objectives it is pursuing (without success so far) in Ukraine.

To what extent Ivanishvili is a "realist" actor vis-à-vis Russia, or simply a tool of the Kremlin, can only be determined empirically. If Moscow is directly pressuring Ivanishvili to pursue this policy, it will likely push him to take it as far as possible, irrespective of domestic costs.

If, however, Ivanishvili is guided by his interpretation of the endgame in Ukraine and the consequences for the region, then his policy is likely to be more adaptive and responsive to battlefield conditions and to changes in U.S. and EU policies towards Russia.

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