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POLICY BRIEF

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Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: How Georgia Can Resist Authoritarian Pressure

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia is at a crossroads regarding its democratic development and European Union (EU) integration. Despite being a poster child for democratization in the post-Soviet space, its progress in consolidating democratic institutions has stagnated since the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party won a constitutional supermajority in 2016. Untrammelled by parliamentary opposition and operating within a system of weak checks and balances, GD's parliamentary majority has made a number of moves that cast doubt on its commitment to further democratic consolidation. Making matters worse, Georgia is being pressured by two authoritarian neighbors – Azerbaijan and Turkey – to flout its human rights obligations. This has occurred as the country is attempting to obtain a membership perspective with regards to integration with the EU. This paper addresses a crucial question: Can Georgia continue to functionally integrate with its authoritarian but economically powerful neighbors – namely Azerbaijan and Turkey – without jeopardizing its ambitions for full EU membership? If so, how can Georgia's government strike an adequate balance in this regard? This paper addresses the above questions in detail while providing specific policy recommendations for maintaining regional economic integration while continuing to democratize and politically integrate with the EU.

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Introduction

Georgia is at a critical juncture regarding its democratic development. In 2012, the country achieved its first-ever democratic, unchallenged change of government when the Georgian Dream coalition (GD) defeated the United National Movement (UNM) in parliamentary elections. From 2012 to 2016, the country's democratic institutions appeared to gain strength, due in part to relative balance between the governing and opposition parties. Since late 2016, however, when GD won a constitutional supermajority, a number of developments have cast doubt on the ruling party's commitment to further democratization. In 2017, GD's parliamentary majority approved a new constitution with no support from opposition lawmakers and despite protests from a number of influential non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The new constitution will replace direct election of the president with an electoral college starting in 2023, and in 2024 will introduce a bonus rule allocating extra parliamentary seats to the party winning the largest percentage of votes as well as a ban on electoral blocs.¹ These provisions threaten to consolidate GD's control over executive and legislative power.² Moreover, media pluralism has diminished and the country's State Security Service remains unaccountable to the public.³

Democratic stagnation has occurred against the backdrop of an unfavorable regional environment.⁴ Neighboring states include overtly authoritarian regimes (Azerbaijan and Russia), a once-aspiring democracy descending into authoritarianism (Turkey), and a semi-authoritarian country consistently dominated by a single party (Armenia). Levitsky and Way identify geographical location as an important factor in a given state's democratic development, finding that "Georgia is a case of high leverage and low linkage. A small, weak, and regionally isolated state, Georgia was highly dependent on the West ... In terms of linkage, Georgia possessed weak economic, political, technocratic and communication ties to the West."⁵ Put simply, Georgia's lack of geographical continuity with the EU weakens the pull of Europe and makes it more vulnerable to pressure applied by its neighbors.

As Georgia works to strengthen its democratic institutions and integrate with the EU, it will get no help from its immediate neighbors. In fact, these countries may attempt to undermine its development, as the presence of a democratic Georgia with a robust civil society and strong human rights protections is not in the interests of regional authoritarian leaders. This policy brief focuses on Georgia's bilateral relationships with Azerbaijan and Turkey, the two countries with which it enjoys the deepest and most important strategic ties – and which pose challenges to its democratic development and adherence to human rights norms. This policy brief addresses a crucial question: Can Georgia continue to functionally integrate with Azerbaijan and Turkey without jeopardizing its ambitions for EU membership? If so, how can Georgia's government strike an adequate balance in this regard? This paper addresses the above questions while providing specific policy

¹ It should be noted that GD's parliamentary majority is currently in the process of repealing the bonus rule, which was approved in its first reading in December 2017. However, it remains in the constitution as currently written. For more information, see: "Constitutional Changes Passed with First Reading", Civil Georgia, 14 December 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30727>.

² Larsen, J. (2017) "Georgia's Constitutional Reform is Good for the Ruling Party, Bad for Georgian Democracy", The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 16 May, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13446-georgia%E2%80%99s-constitutional-reform-is-good-for-the-ruling-party-bad-for-georgian-democracy.html/>

³ "Georgia", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/georgia>.

⁴ "Freedom in the World 2018: Democracy in Crisis", Freedom House, http://civil.ge/files/files/2018/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf.

⁵ Levitsky, S. & Way, L. (2010) *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

recommendations for continuing regional economic integration while democratizing and politically integrating with the EU.

A Troubled Neighborhood

In 2017, two major scandals cast doubt on the government's ability to resist pernicious influences from Azerbaijan and Turkey. The first case involved Mustafa Emre Chabuk, a Turkish school teacher arrested by Georgian police on May 24.⁶ The arrest allegedly came at the behest of Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım just days after Chabuk was accused of having ties to US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. Chabuk was sentenced by the Tbilisi City Court to pre-extradition detention the next day. In July, Georgia's Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees refused to grant Chabuk refugee status. According to a report by Amnesty International, Chabuk risks torture and other human rights violations at the hands of the Turkish authorities if extradited.⁷ In addition to protests by human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Transparency International, and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association,⁸ European Parliament member Rebecca Harms urged the Georgian authorities not to extradite Chabuk.⁹

The situation is still fluid. The pre-extradition detention period has been extended for the second and final time and will expire on February 24. It is now up to Georgia's Ministry of Justice to decide whether to extradite. The crime Chabuk is accused of, facilitating the purchase of a stake in Tbilisi's Demirel College by a US-based company linked to the Gülenist movement, occurred entirely on the territory of Georgia and involved no Turkish entities, meaning there is a sound basis for refusal. Moreover, the Turkish government has requested the extraditions of numerous persons from a multitude of countries. In many of these cases, the requests have been rejected for lack of evidence. The Chabuk case is not exceptional in this regard. In a February interview with Georgian media, Harms renewed calls not to extradite and referred to the situation as "an opportunity for Georgia to prove that the rule of law and human rights are very serious."¹⁰

Moreover, Chabuk's detention is not an isolated incident. Rather, it is one of several signs of Georgia's growing political dependence on Turkey.¹¹ For instance, Georgia's government has closed a number of Turkish-run schools following requests from Turkish officials.¹² The school closures – such as that of the Şahin Friendship School in Batumi, which was accused of "serious violations" of

⁶ "Turkish Citizen Sent to Pre-Extradition Detention Over Alleged Links to Terrorist Organization", Civil Georgia, 25 May 2017, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30129>.

⁷ "Georgia: Teacher at Risk if Extradited to Turkey: Mustafa Çabuk", Amnesty International, 26 May 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/6372/2017/en/>.

⁸ "Decision of the Ministry of Refugees in Cabuk's case is illegal, unfounded and politically motivated", International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 10 July 2017, <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1251/eng/>.

⁹ "The Government of Georgia should not return him to Turkey – European Parliament member speaks about extradition of Mustafa Emre Chabuk", Rustavi2, 16 June 2017, <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/80431>.

¹⁰ "ჩაბუკის საქმე - „პოლიტიკური წნეხი“, რომელსაც საქართველომ უნდა გაუძღოს", liberali.ge, 8 February 2017, <http://liberali.ge/articles/view/34166/chabuqis-saqme--politikuri-tsnexi-romelsats-saqartvelom-unda-gaudzlos>.

¹¹ For more information, see: Mikhelidze, N., "Turkey's Policy in the Black Sea Region: Oscillating Between Pragmatism and Opportunism" in Toperich, S. & Ünver Noi, A. (eds) (2017) *Turkey & Transatlantic Relations*, Washington D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, <http://transatlanticrelations.org/publication/turkey-transatlantic-relations/>.

¹² Owen, E. (2017) "Georgia: Gülen School Loses Licens", EurasiaNet.org, 6 February, <https://eurasianet.org/node/82261>.

enrollment regulations – have been justified on procedural technicalities. However, in each case the schools in question were accused by the Turkish government of ties to the Gülenist movement prior to closing, feeding speculation that Georgia’s Ministry of Education is acting at the behest of Turkish officials.

This puts Georgia in an awkward position. Turkey is its main trading partner and a major source of foreign direct investment; it has also historically backed Georgia’s interests within NATO.¹³ Turkey thus holds disproportionate leverage in the bilateral relationship. However, by extraditing Chabuk amid protests by the human rights community and some EU politicians, Georgia would tarnish its hard-earned reputation as the regional frontrunner on human rights. Given there is little appetite in Brussels to offer additional benefits to Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, the onus is on Georgia’s government to make the case why it deserves deeper integration.¹⁴ Brussels is looking for reasons not to extend the membership perspective – therefore, Georgia’s government must avoid providing justification.

The Mukhtarli Abduction

A second and even more troubling scandal broke on May 29 when Afgan Mukhtarli, an Azerbaijani dissident journalist who had been living in Georgia since 2015, was reported missing by his wife, Leyla Mustafayeva.¹⁵ He was confirmed to be in a detention facility in Baku two days later. According to statements made by Mukhtarli’s lawyer, Elchin Sadigov, the journalist was kidnapped near his home in Tbilisi by people he believed to be representatives of the Georgian State Security Service.¹⁶ According to Sadigov, the captors covered Mukhtarli’s head and drove him across the border into Azerbaijan, despite the fact he was not in possession of a passport.

Georgia’s Ministry of Interior opened an official investigation into the incident on May 31. On June 9, without releasing any information to the public, the State Security Service categorically denied any involvement in the kidnapping.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the incident damaged Georgia’s reputation within the EU. On June 15, the European Parliament passed a resolution urging the Georgian authorities to ensure a “prompt, thorough, transparent and effective investigation into Afgan Mukhtarli’s forced disappearance in Georgia and illegal transfer to Azerbaijan.”¹⁸ The resolution also called on the Georgian government “to bring the perpetrators to justice” and reminded of its obligations to protect political asylees under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Moreover, the incident has severely damaged Georgia’s reputation among the Azerbaijani dissident community, for which the country had been viewed as a relative safe haven. Mustafayeva has accused the government of refusing to protect her and of purposely delaying the investigation.¹⁹

¹³ For more information about relations between Georgia and Turkey, see: Cecire, M. (2013) “Georgia-Turkey Relations in a Georgian Dream Era”, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, Vol. 48, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-48.pdf>.

¹⁴ Lebanidze, B. (2017) “Life Without EU Membership: The Case for a Multi-Speed EaP”, *Georgian Institute of Politics*, 18 December, <http://gip.ge/life-without-eu-membership-case-multi-speed-eap/>.

¹⁵ “Azerbaijani Journalist Alleges Georgian Security Complicit in his Abduction”, *Civil Georgia*, 31 May 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30141>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Statement of the Security Service of Georgia”, *State Security Service of Georgia*, 9 June 2017, <http://sbg.gov.ge/en/news/248/saxelmtsifo-usaftrxoebis-samsaxuris-gancxadeba>.

¹⁸ “European Parliament Adopts Resolution on Mukhtarli Case”, *Civil Georgia*, 15 June 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30196>.

¹⁹ Mustafayeva, L. (2017) “Afgan Mukhtarli: after the abduction”, *Open Democracy*, 13 October, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/levla-mustafayeva/afgan-mukhtarli-after-abduction>.

The wider public has also expressed disappointment with the government. According to a June 2017 poll by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 82% of Georgians with knowledge of the kidnapping said the government should take responsibility for the incident because of its human rights obligations.²⁰ Another 56% said they expected the incident to damage Georgia's reputation as a regional leader in human rights protection.²¹ Only 14% said they believed the government did not bear responsibility.²²

Despite Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili admitting the kidnapping was a "very serious failure" on the part of the Georgian authorities, more than eight months after the investigation began, the public is still in the dark as to whom is responsible.²³ Prime Minister Kvirikashvili demoted Interior Minister Giorgi Mgebrishvili on November 13, although there is no indication the move was connected to the Mukhtarli kidnapping.²⁴ Prior to being demoted, Mgebrishvili sacked the heads of the country's border police and counter intelligence services, ostensibly for failure to prevent the kidnapping.²⁵ Nonetheless, confidence in the Ministry of Interior has eroded.

This is a major foreign policy failure for Georgia, as it demonstrates one of two things to its EU partners: either the elected government does not have control over the State Security Service; or (even worse) the government is willing to flout human rights norms when pressure is applied by one of its more powerful neighbors.²⁶ If indicative of a deeper problem, such a state of affairs obviously precludes further EU integration. In order to restore confidence both internally and externally, Georgia's government must hold those responsible to account while establishing an effective mechanism for preventing such abuses in the future.

Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Trilateral Group

The three countries discussed here are interdependent. However, Azerbaijan and Turkey are problematic partners for a number of reasons. In addition to having authoritarian political regimes, both states have drifted away from the EU – in the Turkish case, the relationship has become overtly antagonistic.²⁷ Azerbaijan's flagrant human rights abuses have also become problematic for the EU, although the country's centrality to the Southern Gas Corridor has shielded it from criticism to a certain degree.²⁸

While the incidents involving Chabuk and Mukhtarli are deeply troubling, Georgia does not have the option of limiting ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey. These strategic relationships are

²⁰ "Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2017", Caucasus Research Resource Center, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/AZJRPHR/>. According to the same poll, a full 72% of the population had knowledge of the incident, meaning a clear majority felt the Georgian government should take responsibility.

²¹ "Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2017", Caucasus Research Resource Center, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/AZJRINF/>.

²² "Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2017", Caucasus Research Resource Center, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/AZJRNRS/>.

²³ "Afgan Mukhtarli Sentenced to Six Years in Prison", Civil Georgia, 13 January 2018, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30793>.

²⁴ "PM Announces Structural, Staff Changes in Cabinet", Civil Georgia, 13 November 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30623>.

²⁵ Krikorian, O. (2017) "The Curious Case of Afgan Mukhtarli", Stratfor Worldview, 19 November, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/curious-case-afgan-mukhtarli>.

²⁶ Because the results of the investigation have not been released, it cannot be known for certain which government officials, if any, had knowledge of or were complicit in the kidnapping.

²⁷ Sanchez R. (2017), "Erdogan calls on Turkish Families in Europe to have five children to protect against 'injustices'". The Telegraph, 17 March, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/17/erdogan-calls-turkish-families-have-five-children-bulwark-against/>.

²⁸ "Southern Gas Corridor", tap-ag.com, <https://www.tap-ag.com/the-pipeline/the-big-picture/southern-gas-corridor>.

indispensable to Georgia, especially in the economic sphere.²⁹ Perhaps most importantly, Azerbaijan provides nearly all of Georgia's imported natural gas—a relationship which helps ease the geopolitical pressure applied by Russia. Azerbaijan's dominant position in this aspect of the bilateral relationship gives it strategic leverage. That leverage was clearly abused in the Mukhtarli incident.

Georgia's political dependency is highlighted by the growing importance of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral group, a regional format launched in 2011 to promote economic cooperation. The group primarily functions as a mechanism for facilitating the flow of energy from Azerbaijan and Central Asia to Turkey, with Georgia acting as the geographic fulcrum.³⁰ The three countries jointly host the Tbilisi-Baku-Kars railway, Tbilisi-Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Tbilisi-Baku-Erzurum gas pipeline. There is also a security component, with the trilateral group holding annual defense ministerials since 2014. Somewhat ironically, the 2012 Trabzon Declaration—the document setting out the key principles and priorities of the trilateral group—specifically stipulates adherence to “the fundamental principles and norms of international law” as well the “political independence of states.”³¹ Ironically, both respect for international human rights norms and for Georgia's sovereignty are enshrined in the trilateral group itself, although they are not adhered to in practice.

Regional integration presents a catch-22. Georgia must deepen its ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey for reasons of international trade and energy security. Moreover, Georgia's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative hinges on its status as a bridge between Europe and Asia; in the local context, that means a bridge between Azerbaijan and Turkey.³² However, overdependence on authoritarian neighbors can slow Georgia's democratic development and hamper its EU integration. Georgia must compartmentalize its economic and security relationships with Azerbaijan and Turkey from its political integration with the EU.

²⁹ “External Merchandise Trade in Georgia”, Geostat, 20 November 2017,

http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/english/bop/FTrade_10_2017_ENG-with%20cover.pdf.

³⁰ Cecire, M. (2013) “Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan: Trilateralism and the Future of Black Sea Regional Geopolitics”, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 16 October, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12837-turkey-georgia-azerbaijan-trilateralism-and-the-future-of-black-sea-regional-geopolitics.html>.

³¹ “Trabzon Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Turkey”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, 8 June 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/trabzon--declaration-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-georgia-and-the-republic-of-turkey_-08-june-2012_-trabzon.en.mfa.

³² For more information, see Larsen, J. (2017) “Georgia-China Relations: The Geopolitics of the Belt and Road”, *Georgian Institute of Politics*, http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chineti%20Saqtartvelo%20Eng_Ydit.pdf.

Georgia's Relations with the EU

Georgia signed an Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union in 2014. While the bulk of the 752-page document concerns economic issues under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), adherence to international human rights agreements is stipulated in Articles 1, 2, 4, 12, 13, and 15 of the AA.³³ In particular, Article 15 sets out Georgia's obligations to respect the rights and status of lawfully residing non-nationals. Accordingly, failure to protect Mukhtarli and other dissidents is not only a scandal, it's a violation of the country's obligations further to its EU integration.

Georgia also has specific obligations to the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights body. Georgia joined the organization in 1999 and accordingly has obligations to strengthen the rule of law and human rights protections, including the prevention of torture – all things put in question by the Chabuk and Mukhtarli cases. In November, the Council of Europe's co-rapporteurs for Georgia issued the following statement regarding the Mukhtarli case:

Georgia until now has rightfully had an excellent reputation as a safe haven for persons from other countries who fear prosecution for their beliefs and thoughts. Therefore the authorities should fully investigate these allegations and resolutely and promptly put a stop to any harassment of Azeri citizens in Georgia, irrespective of who the victims or perpetrators may be.³⁴

While it is unlikely the Chabuk and Mukhtarli cases per se will seriously impede Georgia's further EU integration, they could be symptoms of deeper problems: lack of oversight over the country's security services; lack of political will to resist pressure applied by more powerful neighbors; and lack of commitment to international obligations regarding democratization and human rights. Worst of all, Georgia's failure to prevent the Mukhtarli kidnapping and to resist calls for Chabuk's extradition could encourage further actions by Azerbaijan and Turkey. In order to continue to strengthen its democratic institutions and human rights protections in a manner conducive to EU integration, Georgia's government must take steps to strengthen its position vis-à-vis its neighbors.

Conclusion

Georgia is currently at a crossroads regarding its democratization and EU integration. While it has made democratic progress since 2012, the consolidation of its democratic institutions appears to have stalled. On the EU integration front, it has attained the main benefits offered through the Eastern Partnership—the DCFTA and visa-free travel. The logical next step would be the membership perspective. That is something enlargement-weary EU member states are hesitant to offer; thus, deeper integration will grow more difficult to achieve as Georgia moves farther along in the process.

³³ "EU/Georgia Association Agreement", European External Action Service, 13 September 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia_en/9740/EU/Georgia%20Association%20Agreement.

³⁴ "Georgia: call for stronger system of checks and balances, including for security services", Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tbilisi/-/georgia-call-for-stronger-system-of-checks-and-balances-including-for-security-services>.

Given that backsliding now carries higher costs, Georgia's government must redouble its efforts to further democratize and demonstrate its successes to the EU. Unfortunately, those undertakings are not aided by its strategic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. For economic and security reasons, Georgia must continue to privilege its regional relationships, especially within the trilateral format. However, it must functionally integrate with its two neighbors in a way that doesn't impede its democratization or adherence to international human rights norms – i.e., it must compartmentalize its relationships with Azerbaijan and Turkey from its EU integration efforts. Moreover, Georgia's government must demonstrate to domestic constituencies that it will safeguard democratic and human rights norms within its own borders.

Key Findings and Recommendations

For Georgia's Government:

- Georgia's Ministry of Justice should strongly consider refusing to extradite Mustafa Emre Chabuk, citing both a lack of evidence against Chabuk and the country's human rights obligations vis-à-vis international norms and agreements signed with the EU. The Georgian authorities are under no obligation to extradite. Such a refusal could result in retaliation by Turkey, however. Georgia must thus cite its international obligations while appealing to the EU for diplomatic support.
- The Ministry of Interior should release the results of its investigation and disciplinary measures should be brought against those found culpable in Mukhtarli's abduction. At best, the Ministry of Interior failed to guarantee Mukhtarli's safety. At worst, members of the State Security Services acted in a criminal manner by participating in his abduction. Delaying the investigation only erodes public confidence in the Ministry of Interior and by extension Georgia's elected government.
- Georgia's government should strengthen oversight of the State Security Service, the lack of which has plagued the country for decades. In particular, it should ensure that a body wholly independent from the Ministry of Interior is given jurisdiction over investigations into alleged abuse. The government has already made an encouraging step in this regard by establishing the State Inspector's Service, an investigative body accountable to the Parliament.³⁵ The body must begin to operate before its effectiveness can be assessed, however.
- Georgia's government should embed itself as deeply as possible in EU structures. By making its EU integration functionally irreversible, Azerbaijan and Turkey will have less incentive to intervene in its domestic affairs. The Azerbaijani and Turkish authorities must be made to understand that Georgia's obligations undertaken under the Association Agreement and other relevant agreements are nonnegotiable.
- Georgia should make the case that Azerbaijani meddling in Georgia's domestic affairs is not beneficial to the bilateral relationship. Azerbaijan's actions – with or without the connivance of Georgia's State Security Service – have alienated Georgia's Civil Society actors and some

³⁵ See: "Gov't launched State Inspector's Service to study alleged offences by law enforcers", Agenda.ge, 31 January 2018, <http://agenda.ge/news/94857/eng>.

part of Political community.³⁶ This limits the Georgian government's space to cooperate with Azerbaijan on issues crucial to the bilateral relationship, ultimately harming Azerbaijan's state interests.

- Georgia's government should be willing to utilize the leverage it has vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Turkey. While both states are larger and economically more powerful, Georgia plays an important role linking Turkey to markets in the Caspian region and Central Asia, including transiting gas to Turkey, a major natural gas importer. Georgia is the fulcrum of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum oil pipeline. Moreover, it is the regional hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative, in which all three states have stakes.

For the EU:

- The EU must walk a tight line. It should offer increased support and tangible incentives to Georgia in exchange for domestic reforms via the "more for more" principle. However, that should be done in a way that avoids the appearance of "rewarding" Georgia for the recent scandals. Recognition of the authoritarian pressure applied by Azerbaijan and Turkey should make support more forthcoming. However, that support should be conditional on swift and immediate reforms in Georgia.
- The EU should put pressure on Georgia's government to release the results of its investigation into the Mukhtarli case. This sends important messages to three audiences: to Georgia's government—that failure to oversee the State Security Services will not go unnoticed by the EU; to Georgia's society—that the EU remains an advocate for democratization and human rights in Georgia; and (most importantly) to the Azerbaijani government—that Georgia's human rights obligations are real and nonnegotiable.
- The EU should increase its focus on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. In particular, it should respond to Azerbaijan's attempts to harass Azerbaijani dissidents living outside the country, including in Georgia.
- The EU should attempt to broker an agreement between Georgia and Turkey regarding the Chabuk extradition question. In particular, that would mean clearly expressing the preference that Turkey drop its claims against Chabuk.

³⁶ It is not possible to accurately assess the attitudes of the Georgian public at large due to the absence of relevant polling data. While polls conducted by NDI and CRRC demonstrate the majority of Georgians hold their own government responsible for the incident, attitudes toward the Azerbaijani government have not been changed.

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