



## What's Behind Georgian Dream's Anti-Western Rhetoric and Foreign Policy Behavior

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The solidarity exhibited by the West in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened up a historical window of opportunity for some of the European Union's eastern neighbors. This means that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia now have a chance to accelerate the process of their European integration. However, while the three countries have long been seen as a single group (all three have Association Agreements with the EU) recent events have threatened to break the trio apart. While Kyiv and Chisinau were granted candidate status by the European Commission, this was postponed for Tbilisi. In this context, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party has adopted a paradoxical strategy. On the one hand, the party states that it remains committed to Euro-Atlantic integration and, on the parliamentary level, it has already started work on fulfilling the conditions set by the EU for candidate status. Conversely, however, the rhetoric of the ruling party is at odds with this stated aim. Senior party figures have responded to Western criticism of alleged democratic backsliding in the country by levelling wild accusations such as the claim that the West is demanding that Georgia engages in the war with Russia (Interpressnews 2022). US and EU representatives have repeatedly denied these claims (Civil.ge 2022).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the founder of Georgia Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has not contradicted particularly outlandish anti-Western accusations made by a group of MPs who left the ruling party but whom many commentators suspect are still acting on behalf of Georgian Dream. Furthermore, Irakli Kobakhidze, the party chair of Georgian Dream has made 57 critical comments about the West since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war as opposed to only nine critical statements about Russia as the aggressor (Kincha 2022).

Such rhetoric deals serious damage to the national interests of the country and threatens Georgia with gradual alienation from its strategic partners, potentially leaving it to face Russia alone. Understanding these risks, many in Georgian society wonder what benefit Georgian Dream seeks to gain by entering into open confrontation with US and EU officials. President Zourabichvili, who was elected with the support of the ruling party, has also noted that the rhetoric of the Georgian Dream is not conducive to obtaining candidate status and gives rise to numerous questions (Parulava 2022). Considering the allegations of democratic backsliding in the country and the postponement of its candidate status, the unleashing of such unprecedented aggressive discourse against Georgia's closest partners raises questions about the loyalty of Georgian Dream to the foreign political course that has been pursued by the Georgian people for decades.

### **Possible explanations for Georgian Dream's anti-West rhetoric**

There are various explanations that have been posited for the Georgian ruling party's bizarre accusations against the West. One explanation is that Georgian Dream is seeking to mobilize social-conservative voters to offset the electoral damage caused by Georgia's failure to join Moldova and Ukraine as candidate states. The departure of several MPs from Georgian Dream on the pretext of gaining "freedom to speak openly" only for them to engage in anti-Western conspiracy theories (რადიო თავისუფლება 2022) may serve the aim of appealing to relatively Eurosceptic voters for the 2024 parliamentary election. The dominant thinking amongst a segment of the opposition is, however, that the ruling party has never been truly interested in obtaining candidate status because Georgian Dream's founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, pursues the interests of the Kremlin in Georgia (Interpressnews 2022b). Another explanation is that the aggressive rhetoric against Western partners may also be a reaction to recent criticism by Brussels and Washington of Georgian Dream (RFE/RL's Georgian Service 2022), which has been exacerbated by the relatively weak ties between Georgian Dream and Brussels and Washington.

There is also a more domestic explanation. In this view, the ruling party's radical rhetoric may also be a manifestation of internal Georgian political culture and may not directly imply a sharp revision to the well-established pro-Western foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> According to a former US Ambassador to Ukraine, the Georgian government seems to be more concerned

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<sup>4</sup> It is also a fact that in contrast to the political elite of the United National Movement, which sees Russia as an existential threat and any compromise with it as the infringement of national interests, the political elite of the Georgian Dream believes that by pursuing a policy of appeasement with Russia they will be able to find a common language with Moscow without damaging national interests (Kakachia et al 2018).

about maintaining its political advantage over its opponents than about improving relations with the EU (ჭვჭბსტო 2022) and that this may be the reason for this rhetoric. The ruling party may perceive Western calls for power sharing with the opposition as a threat to its political future.

## **Political vendetta: An unwritten tradition in Georgian politics**

Georgian politics is viewed by its leading actors as a zero-sum game in which defeat entails vulnerability to political retaliation, marginalization, and even total disappearance from political life. The Georgian political class perceives defeat or concession as weakness.<sup>5</sup> These features of Georgian politics are, in essence, incompatible with a European democratic model that rests on consensus and where defeat in elections doesn't equal political repression as government doesn't control judiciary. Georgia's political history is replete with examples of powerful officials who end up in prison or otherwise repressed after losing power. This can, to some extent, explain radical changes in the rhetoric and behavior of ruling parties when they perceive it to be necessary for their own political safety. Political radicalism and the suppression of opponents have been characteristic of Georgian political culture since the period of the national liberation movement. It was precisely its uncompromising stance in the late 1980s that distinguished Georgia's independence movement from its Baltic analogues. Since regaining independence, each new government that came to power on promises of consolidating democracy has ended with a slide towards authoritarianism (Jones 2013, 5). There are several reasons for this. For example, Jones names three factors behind the cycles inherent to Georgian politics: a tendency towards centralization, a rift between the government and people, and the failure of reforms in the judiciary (ibid, 6).

The radicalization of Georgian politics has been a feature since independence, shortly after which the country was plunged into a bloody civil war which led to the expulsion of the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, from the country and his death in mysterious circumstances. Gamsakhurdia's allies either left public life or became a small, marginalized force. The same fate was shared by Shevardnadze's allies after the 2003 Rose Revolution. The former ruling party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia, was immediately disbanded and its officials largely either left politics or were subjected to criminal prosecution (Jones 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Georgian Dream's stance that it will not consider any foreign policy initiative proposed by the United National Movement <https://fortuna.ge/fortuna/post/mmartveli-gundi-sagareo-politikastan-dakavshirebit-nacionaluri-modzraobis-da-misi-danayofebis-iniciativebs-arc-ki-ganikhilavs-mamuka-mdinaradze>

From the perspective of viability, the United National Movement (UNM) proved to be an exception to this rule. Despite its defeat in the 2012 election, it has clearly maintained its position as the largest opposition party. However, Georgian Dream continued to follow the unwritten Georgian political tradition of conducting political vendettas. Although it came to power peacefully, via elections, the ruling party, much like its predecessors, soon began to apply various punitive measures against political leaders from the previous regime under the pretext of “restoration of justice.” The government lacked the political will to establish a truth commission and, by using this international practice, tackle the problems that had accumulated during the UNM era (Austin 2018, 255). Therefore, the criminal prosecution of several former officials was perceived by many observers of Georgian politics as the use of the justice system for political aims (Amnesty International 2022).

The precedent of the past 30 years has been that the loss of power and moving into opposition subjects (former) ruling parties to the threat of falling victim to a political vendetta. It is therefore vitally important for them to monopolize political power and maintain political influence. This is especially true for Georgian Dream which has been elected for a third term and whose style of informal governance<sup>6</sup> has clearly lost popularity (კუნჭულია 2022). In addition, the slide into traditional authoritarianism comes in tandem with anti-Western rhetoric, which is a novel feature in traditionally strongly pro-Western Georgia. Recent statements by representatives of the government (კობახიძე 2022) heightens the impression that the government is really guided by the oligarch’s interests. Moreover, the government not only continues to aim aggressive rhetoric against Western partners, but also sets conditions for Brussels. For example, the ruling party has declared that Georgian Dream will adopt a constitutional amendment setting a 2% electoral threshold for entry to parliament only after the EU grants Georgia candidate status (კობახიძე 2022b). For his part, Prime Minister Gharibashvili has called on the European Commission to ensure that the European Commission’s evaluation of Georgia’s progress on de-oligarchisation is not “misinterpreted” to be about Georgian Dream’s founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili (Interpressnews 2022c).

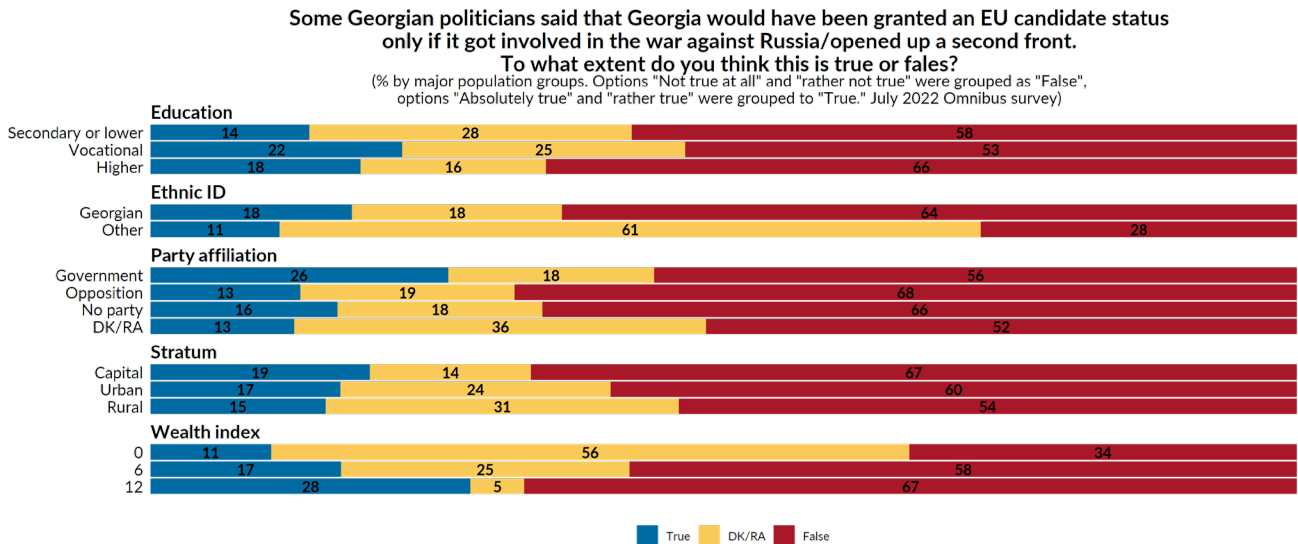
It needs to be noted that so far it is difficult to estimate the impact of such anti-Western rhetoric on Georgian public. On the one hand, according to the results of a public opinion

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<sup>6</sup> While outside democratic control and beyond any institutional checks and balances, Former Prime minister Bidzina Ivanashvili is believed to be the overarching controller of the Georgian government, even though he has not held any official post since he stepped down as prime minister at the end of 2013. The Ivanishvili factor alone makes many Georgians question the government’s transparency and complain about the persistent, informal system of political governance.

poll conducted by CRRC Georgia in July, 60% of population, on average, believes that the statement that Georgia was asked to get involved in the war against Russia in order to obtain candidate status is “rather not true” or “not true at all”. This figure among the supporters of the Georgian Dream stands at 56% (Figure 1).

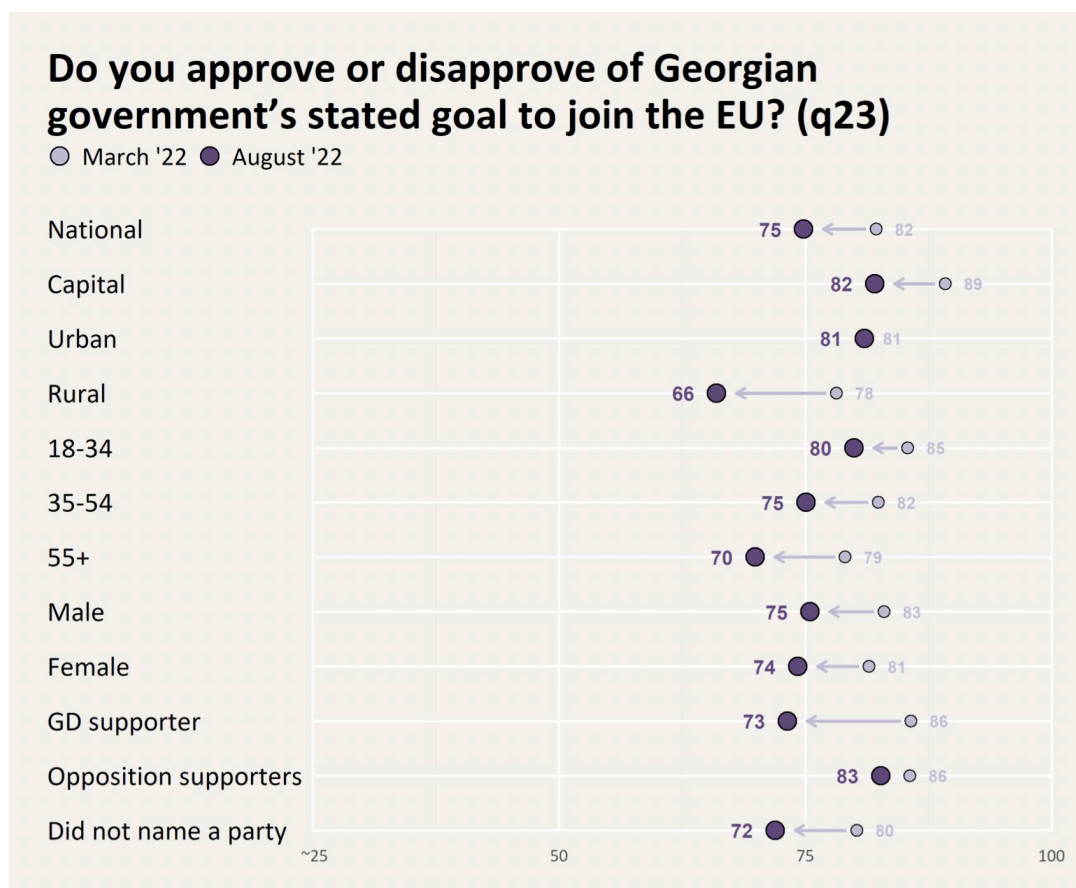
**Figure 1.** To what extent do you think it is true that Georgia would have been granted EU candidate status if it got involved in the war against Russia/opened up a second front?



Source: Sichinava et al. 2022. | *Who's to blame for Georgia's EU candidacy debacle?* OC Media. Available at: <https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-whos-to-blame-for-georgias-eu-candidacy-debacle/>

On the other hand, among voters of the Georgian Dream, the share of those who are opposing Georgia's membership in the EU, according to the recent NDI poll, has increased by 7% (Figure 2) and this change could be associated with the radical discourse of the ruling party.

Figure 2: Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU?



Source: Results of August 2022 Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. The National Democratic Institute. Available: <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

This indicates that the anti-Western rhetoric of the ruling party might be a mechanism of self-defense, rather than one prompted by demand from voters, and serves the aim of retaining power, even at the expense of souring relations with the West.

### Power sharing as a threat to the ruling party

Georgian Dream's anti-Western turn is, at first glance, illogical because fulfilling the recommendations of the European Commission and gaining candidate status would be politically rewarding in the short term. On the other hand, however, power sharing with other political forces or loss of power as a result of reforms required by the EU is perceived

as an existential threat by the ruling party (ცხინძიძე 2018). It may be the case that by adopting this hardline stance and setting conditions to the EU and the USA, the ruling party is trying to secure acceptance from the West of a less robust reform agenda that will be more favorable to Georgian Dream's aims. This may imply the implementation of reforms necessary for obtaining candidate status in such a way that will cause minimal loss of influence and power to the ruling party. For example, representatives of Georgian Dream admit that the lowering of the electoral threshold will entail an increase in opposition representation in the legislature and even power sharing with them, which, in the words of the chairman of the party:

Will provide the UNM with an opportunity to return to power and it must be worth for us to let g the UNM do that ... We, of course, are sure that even with 2% threshold the UNM will not be able to make a comeback to power in 2024 either. People will not allow that, including with our help (კობახიძე 2022c).

This attitude towards the lowering of the electoral threshold indicates that the reluctance of the ruling party to implement the recommendations of the European Commission is fueled by a fear of losing power, which may entail political retaliation against them.

The same logic may explain the attitude of the Georgian Dream government towards the reform of the judiciary, which has become the Achilles heel of Georgian democracy over the past decades. Despite severe criticism from Western partners, the government refused to suspend the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court. This provides grounds to suspect that by ensuring that people loyal to it remain in the court, the current ruling party is attempting to insure itself against the threat of repercussions in the event that it moves into opposition. This, in turn, may help them avoid the fate experienced by some UNM members after they lost power in 2012. However, without root-and-branch reform and de-politicization of the judiciary, this may prove to be short-term insurance because the appointment of judges supportive of the current government does not guarantee that they will not change their political allegiance after a change of government (Bolkvadze 2022).

Ambiguity in Georgian Dream's position towards the war in Ukraine is also most likely motivated by the desire to retain power. Through its opportunistic foreign policy, the ruling party is attempting to maximize short-run economic benefits and build its election campaign on that success. A clear indication of this is the constant reference by the government and persons affiliated with it to economic stability and "double-digit growth" (ღარიბაშვილი



2022) and also constant allegations that candidate status will only be granted if Georgia gets involved in the war (Civil.ge 2022c). This rhetoric may be aimed at preparing the ground for the 2024 election, especially if an explanation is required for why candidate status has not been granted.

### **In search of a solution**

Historical experience as well as the current high level of polarization and radicalization in Georgian politics suggest that defeat for the ruling party in elections presents not just an existential threat to the existence of Georgian Dream but could also pose a threat to the physical safety of its leaders. Therefore, it is very possible that the key goal of Georgian Dream at this stage is to maintain its monopoly of power. This aim clashes with the implementation of EC recommendations and reforms as these would imply a reduction of influence for Georgia's informal ruler, Bidzina Ivanishvili. This prospect is perceived as an existential threat by the party leadership.

The degree of trust among political parties is extremely low because of the failure of the April 19 agreement<sup>7</sup>, media polarization, and an election campaign dominated by hate speech. In this context, and while the strategy of Georgian political actors is focused on survival in the conditions of a zero-sum game, the international community may play an important role in the democratic transformation of the country. This happened in 2003 when international efforts led by the former US Secretary of State James Baker brought stability to the negotiations between the leaders of Rose Revolution and President Shevardnadze.

In particular, Georgia's international partners can facilitate the achievement of consensus on the principle of peaceful succession and an end to the culture of retribution among Georgian political parties. To this end, it is necessary to develop stronger mechanisms for the democratic transfer of power and protect the former ruling party in opposition from politically motivated persecution. The existence of institutionally sustainable and impartial mechanisms that ensure fair justice, is in the interests of all political forces in the long run. It will be a guarantee that whoever is in power will lack the resources to conduct politically motivated persecution of opponents, which, in turn, will reduce the perception of political power sharing as a threat.

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<sup>7</sup> On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Georgia's ruling party and the opposition signed an EU-mediated agreement to end a months-long political deadlock. However, as Georgian Dream later declared the agreement annulled, vital reforms put in the document were never implemented fully



Naturally, such an approach should not exclude the investigation of cases that contain clear evidence of crime. However, such proceedings must be conducted in courts (perhaps with international involvement) that enjoy a high degree of public trust across the political spectrum. This would decrease polarization and increase the readiness of ruling parties to move into opposition peacefully. The engagement of international partners, the development of effective mechanisms and fair trials where necessary must facilitate the maintenance of the principle of peaceful political transition and the protection of political parties against political retaliation. This is extremely important for the formation of a stable and sustainable political system.

## **Conclusion**

Since regaining independence, Georgia has been caught in a vicious circle. Despite numerous attempts, the country has failed so far to consolidate democratic institutions. This is because political parties in power are often oriented towards the short-term goal of maintaining power by authoritarian methods. The sadly traditional practice of expunging predecessors from the political field or applying political persecution against them encourages any ruling party to follow its predecessors in prioritizing keeping power by any means necessary. These undemocratic processes inflict substantial damage on the national interests of the country and its European future.

Georgian Dream's recent radical anti-West rhetoric may, among other factors, be prompted by this fear. The fulfillment of EC recommendations could lead to power sharing among political parties and, consequently, reduce the influence of the founder of Georgian Dream. The ruling party likely perceives that prospect as a serious threat due to the culture of vendettas that has been established as an unwritten law over the last few decades in Georgian political culture. Fearing these results of power sharing, Georgian Dream prioritizes retaining an exclusive hold on power over speeding up the country's European integration.

To remain firmly committed to its chosen course of European integration and to obtain candidate status, Georgia must put an end to a deeply rooted practice of vendettas in Georgian politics. To achieve this, prominent Western politicians and partners need to get actively engaged in this process. They should facilitate the establishment of a transparent election system in the country that will put it beyond reproach and lead to the recognition of results by all parties. It is also necessary to develop mechanisms that will prevent politically

motivated persecutions and repressions against the opposition. However, no less important than the involvement of foreign partners is the establishment of a permanent platform of interparty dialogue within which political leaders will be able to take important decisions independently in the best national interests of the country. The Georgian political class must also show its maturity and set aside narrow partisan interests by displaying readiness to seek effective solutions. Only time will tell whether political parties possess the resources for the creation of such an institutional framework and, in general, for arriving at a common national consensus over these matters.

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