

## Georgia's main oligarch's speech displays anti-Western and authoritarian tendencies

In a [recent speech](#) at a pro-government rally, Georgian political leader Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, outlined a trajectory for the nation that signals a worrying shift towards authoritarianism. It is crucial to explore the link between this authoritarian shift and broader dynamics shaping Georgia's domestic and foreign policies.

Some experts refer to this dynamic as '[Orbanisation](#)', similar to Viktor Orbán's illiberal measures in Hungary. Moreover, Ivanishvili's speech, while not explicitly mentioning Russia, suggests a possible shift in Georgia's foreign policy orientation towards Moscow. However, this should be seen in the context of Georgia's broader relationship with Europe. By examining the speech in more detail, we can infer clues about Georgia's geopolitical trajectory, balancing European aspirations, normalization with Russia, and regional dynamics.

### *Ivanishvili's speech: an Orbanized vision*

Before addressing Ivanishvili's speech, it's important to note Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's [appearance](#) at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest with leaders like Viktor Orbán and Tony Abbott. This highlights Georgia's growing alignment with European conservative movements, continuing a [trend](#) seen under former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

After the Georgian Dream passed the controversial [Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence \(the so-called "Foreign Agents Law"\)](#), the EU attempted to formulate a unified response. However, the [EU diplomats revealed](#) that Hungary, supported by Slovakia, blocked a joint EU statement condemning the law.

With the implementation of this law, together with the [anti-LGBT law](#), Georgia is not only mirroring Russia but also [Hungary's restrictions on civil society](#). By framing the law as a defense of sovereignty and national security, Orban, like Ivanishvili, justifies stifling dissenting voices and criticism, particularly from those labeled as "left-wing journalists," "pseudo-NGOs," and "dollar politicians". This dynamic is shared within the conservative European group, which is targeting what it perceives as internal enemies.

Both Orban's actions and the policies pursued by the Georgian Dream (GD) challenge the EU. Orban's targeting of civil society is a direct challenge to European sovereignty, as it undermines the representation and dissemination of ideas within the European framework. Actions against civil society reflect an assertion of ideological power, which is

central to sovereignty. Moreover, Orbán's intention to instill a [religious](#) and conservative orientation in the country further complicates this dynamic.

Similarly, the GD's policy in Georgia addresses what it perceives as an imbalance in the power dynamic between NGOs and the legitimately elected government. These policies reflect a challenge to European norms and values, particularly regarding the role of civil society and democratic institutions. Both Orbán's actions and the GD's policies thus contribute to challenging the very fabric of European politics and governance.

In addition, Georgian Dream's targeting of NGOs reflects the shortcomings of civil society organizations (CSOs). Many CSOs are funded by Western sources, influencing their agendas to align with donor interests. Their legitimacy was solidified during the Rose Revolution, where they [played a crucial role](#) in Georgia's democratic turn under the United National Movement (UNM). Georgian Dream's attacks on these organizations and allegations of their ties with the UNM and other opposition parties emphasize an important internal dynamic, especially with upcoming elections. Ivanishvili's statement that "after the elections, the National Movement will be strictly accountable for all the crimes it has committed," underscores the political tensions and hints at a possible crackdown on the opposition.

The second aspect concerns the ambiguity in the rhetoric and strategy employed. Both Ivanishvili and Orbán [criticize liberal Western values while still maintaining a strong connection to Europe](#). Indeed, Ivanishvili mentioned multiple times Europe in his speech, maintaining that "Georgia could join the European Union by 2030". However, "it is with these unique national traditions and identity that we should join the common European family," Ivanishvili said, recalling the line Georgia is not ready to cross to join the EU.

Orbán's stance reflects the benefits of EU membership while challenging its founding principles, exemplified by Hungary's laws justified under the guise of sovereignty in contravention of European legal norms. This echoes ongoing debates in Europe about the hierarchy of norms and the autonomy of member states in implementing EU directives, which are likely to intensify in the upcoming European elections. This position, similar to [Russia's efforts](#) against a politically unified Europe, aims to exploit divisions among member states and reflects a [growing trend among far-right movements](#) that oppose a unified policy of shared values without rejecting Europe's cultural identity.

However, the geopolitical situation of Hungary and Georgia is not the same. Hungary is part of the EU and has full sovereignty over its territory, whereas Georgia is outside the EU and 20% of its territory is occupied by Russia. So why was there no direct mention of Russia in Ivanishvili's speech?

*Full adoption of the Russian narrative*

Moving from Orbanization to normalization of relations with Russia, Ivanishvili's speech marks a critical moment in Georgia's history. While the former reflects an alignment with illiberal measures similar to Viktor Orbán's Hungary, the latter raises questions about Georgia's stance towards Russia and its geopolitical implications. Ivanishvili's speech offers insight into Georgia's evolving foreign policy.

"Russia" is mentioned only 2 times in Ivanishvili's speech. When it is mentioned, it is to describe the 2008 war and to place the blame on the West. Ivanishvili argues that "Despite the promise made at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were not allowed to join NATO and were left outside. All such decisions are made by the Global War Party, which has a decisive influence on NATO and the European Union, and which only sees Georgia and Ukraine as cannon fodder."

In the oligarch's speech, the main enemy is "the global party of war" - purportedly, the West, and Georgian opposition, represented by the United National Movement (UNM) and other parties, NGOs' and free media. Ivanishvili labels the opposition as a "bloody regime," attributing responsibility for actions like violence, corruption, election fraud, and conflict. According to him, Saakashvili and UNM supporters lack independence and agency because they are portrayed as being entirely controlled by outside influences. He suggests they are puppets of the West, insinuating that their actions serve foreign interests rather than the welfare of Georgia.

For Ivanishvili, the adversary is not Russia, but rather the West, which allegedly orchestrated the 2008 war through corrupt Georgian elites. Ivanishvili's elaboration on this notion echoes the Russian narrative of the [besieged fortress](#). It portrays Russia as a nation constantly threatened by external and internal enemies, forced to defend itself against incessant aggression. This narrative was often used to legitimize authoritarianism, repression, and expansionism.

The myth of the besieged fortress has been particularly exploited by Vladimir Putin since his rise to power in 1999. Putin has presented NATO's eastward expansion and the color revolutions in the former Soviet republics as [threats](#) to Russia's security. He has also used this myth to justify the war in Chechnya, Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the invasion of Ukraine.

This narrative was used by Russia as a tool to rationalize the occupation of Georgian territory, claiming the protection of its borders, and imposing red lines on the "buffer states" along the Russian border. By embracing this narrative, Ivanishvili is saying that the 2008 war was a direct result of the Georgian elite's compliance with the EU and NATO directives, misled by the belief that they could join these organizations. Notably, Russia's culpability in the occupation is ignored.

To reiterate, what Ivanishvili is saying is that the 2008 war showed: 1. that the West does not want to integrate Georgia into NATO and will give in to Russia; 2. that Saakashvili, following NATO's strategy of expansion and confrontation with Russia, pushed Georgia into a war that it lost in 2008.

These accusations also apply to Ukraine's situation, serving as a warning of what Georgia might have faced if the Georgian Dream had not been elected. Ivanishvili argues that the West sought to incite Georgia into a confrontation with Russia, thereby exacerbating tensions similar to those in Ukraine. He suggests that the West's actions have contributed to worsening Ukraine's predicament, stating that they tried "to put Ukraine in an even more difficult situation."

### *Conclusion*

Ivanishvili's recent speech highlights a worrying trend towards authoritarianism in Georgia, particularly in his attitude towards the political opposition, civil society, and media, driven by two key factors: the adoption of illiberal tactics reminiscent of leaders such as Orbán, and the fluctuating nature of Georgian-Russian relations. The speech underlines Georgia's alignment with conservative movements in Europe, evident in policies that mirror those of Russia and Hungary. By portraying the West as the main adversary rather than Russia, the Georgian oligarch perpetuates the narrative of a besieged fortress, downplaying Russia's role in conflicts and portraying Western integration efforts as misguided. Overall, the speech raises concerns about Georgia's domestic and foreign policy direction, potentially leading to closer alignment with authoritarian regimes and distancing from Western alliances, with significant geopolitical implications.