

# Ukrainian-Georgian relations: All love lost?

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## Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s, apart from a few short periods, Ukraine and Georgia have shared similar perspectives on Euro-Atlantic integration and the need to constrain Russian influence in the shared neighbourhood. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, Georgia departed on another track, aligning its policies with Russia's and distancing itself from the EU and Ukraine.

Georgia's move away from EU integration has significantly destabilised the South Caucasus and Black Sea regions. It has created a critical geopolitical vacuum that bolsters Russian influence and isolates democratic-leaning neighbours such as Armenia, while triggering deep domestic unrest and economic uncertainty in Georgia itself.

Together, Ukraine and the EU can influence Georgia through a mix of political leverage, targeted sanctions and civil society pressure to counter democratic backsliding and push back against the pro-Russian policy of the current Georgian Dream government. Armenia is the latest country in the neighbourhood to express a desire for closer cooperation with the EU. Its success will largely depend on Georgia coming back on track, and how the EU deals with the situation.

## Introduction

Ukraine and Georgia were once close allies on similar historical trajectories but now face their deepest political crisis in bilateral relations. If 2022 was a year of unification around support for Ukraine from its allies, Georgia was different. Facing its own security threats, the Georgian Dream government chose "not to provoke Russia". In addition, after years of pro-European reform, Georgia is now experiencing a huge backward step in terms of EU integration and the respect of international law more generally.

As of 2026, relations between Kyiv and Tbilisi remain politically strained and diplomatically downgraded – as is the case for Georgian relations with the EU. The situation is both a symptom and a driver of Georgia's strategic drift away from Europe, which has growing implications for wider security in Europe and the South Caucasus. For instance, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan has publicly identified the frozen political dialogue between Brussels and Tbilisi as the “biggest obstacle” to Armenia's own EU ambitions.

On 4 May 2026, however, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze had their first meeting on the sidelines of the European Political Community Summit in Armenia. Could this herald a change in relations? Can Ukraine help the EU to address this crisis?

## **Russia's full-scale war: a test and an eye-opener**

Russia's 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine was a turning point for European security and a test of Georgia's strategic orientation. For many years, Ukraine and Georgia had been linked not only by their shared post-Soviet trajectories and pro-European aspirations, but also by their experience of Russian aggression and occupation. For Georgia, Russia's war against Ukraine exposed and accelerated a different tendency: the growing gap between Georgian Dream's declared European course and its actual political behaviour.

The first signals came in March 2022 when Ukraine recalled its ambassador from Georgia over what Kyiv called Tbilisi's “unfriendly actions” in obstructing Georgian volunteers seeking to join the war on Ukraine's side, and Georgia's refusal to align itself with EU sanctions against Russia. Arguing that it was “avoiding further escalation with Russia”, Georgian Dream chose an increasingly cautious line that gradually developed into a broader warming of relations with Moscow. This policy change was rooted in domestic power politics, as well as the personal economic concerns of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the real leader of Georgian Dream and the country. The survival of the regime is intertwined with his business and influence interests. Georgia was attempting to remain more neutral towards Russia even before 2022 as, according to Georgian Dream, western reforms and influence did not serve these interests. Since then, the crisis in bilateral relations has only deepened.

The shift was visible not only in rhetoric, but also in practice through democratic backsliding, the adoption of Russia-like laws and political methods, and Georgia's role in mechanisms that help Russia reduce the impact of international sanctions. All this was supported by diplomatic signals. Georgia and Russia have not had diplomatic relations since the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. In 2025, however, Kobakhidze attended a forum in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, also attended by Vladimir Putin, alongside other authoritarian leaders. It was the first official encounter of a Georgian leader with the president of Russia for 15 years. Russia, for its part, also recognises this shift and in 2025 reclassified Georgia as a “relatively friendly/unfriendly communication regime”, with 19.4 points out of 100, compared to 2023 when Georgia had 12 points and “unfriendly” status.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine has been a central feature of Georgian domestic politics, especially during national elections in 2024 and local elections in 2025. The memory of the war in 2008 and the continued vulnerability of Georgia to Russian pressure gave Georgian Dream a powerful argument. The threat of war was not only feared but also instrumentalised by Tbilisi for the purpose of political consolidation – the government increasingly framed restraint and “neutrality” as the only responsible choice. In this narrative, Ukraine and, at times, the

EU were portrayed as actors ready to make Georgia a “second front” with Russia. In 2025, Georgian Dream’s electoral campaign contrasted images of destroyed Ukrainian cities with peaceful Georgian cities, with a message of choosing “peace over war”.

This position should not be conflated with the views of Georgian society as a whole. Even as official relations with Kyiv deteriorated, public sympathy between Georgians and Ukrainians remained significant and Georgian society largely preserved its pro-European orientation – around 70% of population – and its opposition towards Russia’s war in Ukraine. Many Georgians have supported Ukraine not only symbolically but also directly, including the approximately 3,000 Georgians who have joined the Ukrainian army since 2022. Since the 2024 Georgian elections, which saw wide-scale protests in Georgia, Ukrainians have become more critical of Georgian government policies: 60% disapprove of Georgia’s economic growth strategy through economic ties with Russia and western countries, and 66.2% of Ukrainians disapprove of Georgia’s abandonment of European integration.

## **Security risks for the region**

The importance of this shift goes beyond bilateral diplomacy. Georgia’s reaction to Russia’s war in Ukraine has become part of a wider regional security problem. The issue is not that Georgia is likely to enter the war directly but that, by using the language of neutrality, Georgia becomes increasingly useful to Russia politically, economically and strategically, while the unresolved conflicts remain a vulnerability in the Black Sea region. The Georgian case is therefore important not only for Kyiv, but also for the EU. Georgia can no longer be approached only as a democracy and enlargement issue but must instead be treated as a security issue shaped by Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine.

Even without Georgia’s direct involvement, it is still used by Russia in its hybrid war against Ukraine, the EU and against Georgia itself – especially its pro-European citizens. Moreover, the issue of Georgia’s occupied territories remains unresolved. The country’s territorial integrity is the main factor preventing Georgian Dream’s full alignment with Russia. Is there a risk that Russia will attack Georgia if it starts to ally itself more with Ukraine and the EU? Given Russia’s war with Ukraine and recent threats by Putin to Armenia of a “Ukrainian scenario”, the risk is never zero. This suggests, not unreasonably, that Georgian Dream does not trust any potential future western security guarantees.

## **Where do we go from here?**

Both Ukraine and the EU lack a strategic approach to Georgia. For the past four years, the Ukrainian embassy in Tbilisi has been operating without an ambassador, mainly focusing on consulate work with Ukrainians living in Georgia. In January 2026, however, Zelenskyy appointed a new ambassador to Georgia, although the official communication from the embassy in Georgia indicates that he is not yet in Tbilisi. This might suggest, however, Ukraine’s recognition of the Georgian Dream government, and that it is engaging in dialogue with Georgian authorities – albeit at lower, usually technical, levels.

At the same time, EU governments have predictably different approaches to communication with Georgia. Many still have ambassadors in Tbilisi, but no high-level contacts in government. Hungary was one of the main remaining supporters of Georgian Dream and its channel to the EU, and former prime minister Viktor Orbán was Georgian Dream’s principal ally. He vetoed EU sanctions against Georgian Dream officials, validated contested parliamentary election

results and advocated for Georgia's EU accession while defending its socially conservative and sovereignty-focused policies. The new Hungarian Prime Minister Peter Magyar is likely to be more aligned with general European trends. The EU has not imposed individual sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili, however, while both Ukraine and the United States have sanctioned him in 2024.

Current changes in the Ukrainian approach could indicate that the government sees Georgia as important and might be open for dialogue, even with the current government. The meeting between Zelenskyy and Kobakhidze, who is under Ukrainian sanctions, is a signal that Ukraine sees a weakening in both Russia's and Georgia's positions, and wants to take advantage of the window of opportunity. The European Union could also use this window, but with caution, so that Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream do not obtain regime benefits from the EU without genuine democratic change.

## **Policy recommendations**

- Ukraine and the EU should coordinate their policies on Georgia to create a shared comprehensive strategy. Ukraine could contribute to the wider strategy towards Georgia through its key leverage: as a security provider not only for itself, but also for wider Europe, including Georgia. The fear of a possible war with Russia is seen as outweighing the political and economic benefits from cooperation and integration with the EU. Europe communicating that it can provide security guarantees for Ukraine would place it in a better light for those countries trapped in security dilemmas, including Georgia.
- The EU and Ukraine should work with Georgian civil society inside and outside the country, as well as other groups such as the Georgian volunteers who managed to reach the Ukrainian frontline. These groups often face persecution and repression inside Georgia and also transnationally. Addressing this would provide leverage in work with Georgian Dream.
- At the same time, communication with Georgian Dream should continue – but with clear restrictions as part of a comprehensive strategy. These might include limiting the participation of Georgia in some international formats and finding new forms of diplomatic communication with Georgian Dream at a high level that cannot be interpreted ambiguously. Europe should also be more open to using individual and other types of sanctions against Georgian political figures and companies – but only with a clear requirement that it should reverse its democratic backsliding.
- The EU should redraft its strategic communication with Georgia's government and people. The EU's positions should be crystal clear in articulating the tangible benefits of cooperation and warning of the risks of siding with Russia. The trigger words instrumentalised by Georgian Dream, such as peace and war, should be reframed: from neutrality and not provoking Russia to encouraging Georgia to standing up for international law and engaging in upholding the security architecture of Europe.



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