

A photograph of a person standing on a wet street at night, holding a large Georgian flag. The person is wearing a dark jacket with "UTC-4 (USA) 'METROPOLITAN' ALL RIGHTS RESERVED" printed on the back and olive green pants. In the background, there is a large fire, possibly from a burning car, and smoke rising into the air. The scene appears to be a protest or a demonstration.

# Can the EU Untie the Georgian Knot?

Johan Engvall  
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## Executive Summary

Whereas the Georgian people remain steadfast in their support for European integration, the ruling Georgian Dream party's gravitation toward Russia, coupled with strong anti-Western statements, raises serious doubts regarding the government's commitment to Europe. The crisis over Georgia's future trajectory is taking place on several levels simultaneously. First, there is a geopolitical tug-of-war between Russia and the West over Georgia. The government is siding with Moscow, in a move that runs counter to both the Georgian constitution and the will of its people. Second, domestic politics is characterised by political polarisation and informal rule. Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune on Russian assets, has captured the state, using it to service his own interests. Third, the broken link of public representation means that the Georgian people are forced to make their voices heard through civic engagement. Polarisation between the government and the people over the relationship with Russia has reached a critical level, threatening the country's stability.

In addressing the deteriorating situation, the EU should consider the following key points in its engagement with Georgia. First, the disentanglement of state and citizens is at the core of Georgia's crisis. The EU should therefore think about how to promote a more inclusive political system that would give citizens a participatory role. Second, the Georgian people are strongly pro-European, but existing divisions make society vulnerable to government propaganda and disinformation, as well as pro-Russian groups who play on religious and traditionalist sentiments. The EU should therefore seek to enhance its direct engagement and communication with Georgian society. Third, there is untapped potential in the EU's engagement with the younger generation. Finding novel ways of interacting with and supporting youth groups would be a useful complement to the existing support to nongovernmental organisations. Finally, EU policy would benefit from strengthening the tools of conditionality in EU-Georgia engagement. To avoid confusion, misinterpretation, or outright sabotage, EU conditionality towards Georgia must be made more specific and measurable.

### **A Geopolitical Tug-Of-War Between Russia and the West Over Georgia**

Outside the Baltic states, Georgia was the first nation formerly under Soviet occupation to make a concerted attempt to break away from Russian domination and seek Euro-Atlantic integration. The decisive move occurred with the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought to power the United National Movement (UNM), a political party representing a new generation of Georgian leaders, largely educated in the West. After the change of government, in 2012, the Georgian Dream party officially continued to pursue the policy of Western integration, but abandoned the predecessor's confrontational policy towards Russia.

Georgia's aspiration to join the EU appeared to take a decisive step forward after Russia had launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022. Soon afterwards, the Georgian government applied for EU membership, as did its counterparts in Ukraine and Moldova. However, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia failed to receive immediate candidate status. The European Commission did give Georgia a "European perspective," but listed 12 recommendations that Georgia must fulfil to qualify for candidate status, the



implementation of which will be evaluated in autumn 2023, before the European Council takes a decision, in December 2023.<sup>1</sup>

Brussels' decision to leave the country in the waiting room was not well received by the Georgian government. Rather than initiating reforms and intensifying the dialogue with EU representatives, the ruling Georgian Dream party has adopted an increasingly hostile rhetoric, accusing the West of punishing Georgia for not opening "a second front" against Russia.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Russia is restoring its leverage in Georgia. Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision, in May 2023, to lift a ban on direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi and the introduction of visa-free rights for Georgian citizens to Russia were but the latest manifestations of the Moscow-Tbilisi rapprochement.

The Georgian Dream's decade-long policy of normalising relations with Russia has created several dependencies.<sup>3</sup> Russia has re-emerged as Georgia's main trading partner, and a growing Russian influence is visible in several crucial economic sectors, including tourism and agriculture. In addition, it is estimated that 100,000 Russian citizens have relocated to Georgia since the outbreak of war. Of the 17,000 Russian companies registered in Georgia as of November 2022, more than half of them registered after 24 February 2022.<sup>4</sup> While the government has emphasised the economic benefits of the migration of Russians into Georgia, ordinary Georgians hold a much more sceptical view on the matter. A poll conducted by the International Republican Institute showed that 78 percent of Georgians oppose a visa-free regime for Russian citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Politically, the Georgian government has also become much more subservient to Russia. The full extent of this turnaround became clear after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Georgian government has abstained from criticising Moscow's action and refused to join Western sanctions against Russia. Over the past year, Georgia is increasingly seen as one of the countries that are taking advantage of the new situation and providing Russia with some of the products hit by sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

The Georgian government is no longer just pursuing a "normalisation policy" vis-a-vis Russia, but actively pushing policies approximating Moscow's playbook, rather than EU norms and

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1 "The European Perspective for Georgia," Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 20 September 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/european-perspective-georgia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/european-perspective-georgia_en). The 12 priorities are: (1) depolarisation, (2) electoral and institutional reforms, (3) independent judiciary, (4) anti-corruption measures, (5) deoligarchisation, (6) fight against organised crime, (7) media freedom, (8) protection of vulnerable groups, (9) gender equality, (10) involvement of civil society, (11) taking into account the ECHR judgements, and (12) independent public defender.

2 Thorniké Gordadze, "Georgia: The End of Illusions and Need for Clarity," *SCEEUS Guest Commentary No. 18*, 21 April 2023, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeu/georgia-the-end-of-illusions-and-need-for-clarity.pdf>.

3 Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 September 2022, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13732-georgian-foreign-policy-strategy-in-uncertain-times.html>.

4 Transparency International Georgia, "Georgia's economic dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine war," 14 November 2022, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-impact-russia-ukraine-war-0>.

5 Nadia Beard, "How the War in Ukraine Has Exposed Georgia's Fault Lines," *RFE/RL*, 27 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-ukraine-war-russia-fault-lines/32195659.html>.

6 Gabriel Gavin and Sarah Anne Aarup, "Leaking Russia sanctions send floods of cash to ex-Soviet countries," *Politico*, 26 April, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-russia-vladimir-putin-stop-turning-blind-eye-to-back-doors-for-russian-trade-top-diplomat-tells-eu/>.

values. Similarly to Russia, the government juxtaposes traditional national values against decadent Western values. The attempt to push through a piece of legislation on “agents of foreign influence,” in March 2023, was partly explained as necessary to prevent alien influence on the country. The bill was only withdrawn due to massive public protests.

There are also other actors doing Russia's bidding in Georgia. One of them is the Conservative Movement, which was officially registered as a political party in December 2021. It is the political party of the right-wing media outlet, Alt-Info, which is infamous for its openly anti-liberal, anti-LGBT+, and anti-Muslim positions. The Alt-Info/Conservative Movement holds pro-Russian views, is in favour of a Russian military presence on Georgian soil and cooperates with Russian ultra-nationalists, such as Aleksandr Dugin. Another pro-Russian force, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, holds four seats in the 150-seat Georgian parliament. The views of these forces often overlap with that of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which holds considerable political and societal sway over Georgia.<sup>7</sup>

Russian authorities have not been late in praising Georgia for “resisting pressure from the West.”<sup>8</sup> While there is support among the public, especially the Georgian Dream's core electorate, for a cautious approach to Russia, this does not explain the government's fiercely anti-Western rhetoric. In fact, the Georgian government's behaviour stands in sharp contrast to other governments that are equally vulnerable to Russian pressure, such as those in Armenia, Azerbaijan and in the Central Asian countries, but less dependent on the support of Western countries and organisations.

The Georgian government is abandoning the values considered to be at the heart of the EU, such as freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights. Its rate of alignment with EU foreign policy is falling rapidly.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the government is playing on Georgia's elevated strategic importance for Europe. The country is the bottleneck of the east-west transport corridor linking Europe with the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and beyond. As a transit hub, Georgia is an ever more important part of the EU's plans for energy diversification.

Georgia is not only a battleground in the war of values between Russia and the West, but also the site of a battle of narratives. On the one hand, the government exploits the threat of Russian aggression, to sow fear and draw public support. According to this narrative, the current government is the sole guarantor for peace and, ultimately, the country's survival. The opposition, on the other hand, views Georgia's situation as a choice between Russia, or the EU, and faults the government for siding with Putin.

Tbilisi's transactional foreign-policy approach resembles how Viktor Yanukovych acted in Ukraine, between 2010 and 2013, in his attempt to extract benefits from both the EU and Russia. This is a delicate balancing act under any circumstances, but the difference now is that the divisions and animosities between Russia and the West are so fundamental that pleasing both sides is no longer possible. There is an inherent incompatibility between the Georgian

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7 Jakob Hedenskog, “The Political Crisis in Georgia: Stakes and Consequences,” *SCEEUS Commentary*, 21 December 2021, <https://sceeus.se/publikationer/the-political-crisis-in-georgia-stakes-and-consequences/>.

8 “Intervyu Ministra inostrannyh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrovva telekanalu ‘Rossiya 24’ i agentstvu RIA Novosti, Moskva, 2 fevralya 2023 goda,” *Mid.ru*, 2 February 2023, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1852042/?lang=ru](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1852042/?lang=ru).

9 Eka Akobia, “Georgia's (mis)alignment with the EU Foreign Policy,” *Civil Georgia*, 18 May 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/542831>.

Dream's two officially stated goals of progressing towards EU and NATO integration, while maintaining good relations with Russia. In fact, "it cannot be genuine given that the Kremlin will never allow Georgia to join NATO."<sup>10</sup> The Georgian government is undoubtedly aware of this, and as European integration has become a real possibility, the authorities have shown their true colours. According to the Georgian prime minister, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was provoked by the latter's "will and determination to become a member of NATO."<sup>11</sup> This statement should be seen in light of Georgia's own, constitutionally enshrined, policy of joining NATO.

### State Capture à la Georgia

For the past decade, it has become clear that Georgia is *de facto* ruled from the shadows, by the Georgian Dream's founder, the oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili. Mr. Ivanishvili's personal fortune, amassed in Russia during the 1990s, is equivalent to nearly 40 percent of Georgia's annual GDP. His informal control over state agencies, including those of the judiciary and law enforcement, has turned the Georgian state into his personal fiefdom. The personnel needed in this state are recruited on the basis of neither merit nor ideological considerations, for personal loyalty to the leader is the critical factor in appointment.

The current prime minister, Irakli Garibashvili, whom Ivanishvili has described as his "personal secretary," has been affiliated with the oligarch's business ventures since 2004. The minister of interior and the head of the special state protection service are both drawn from Ivanishvili's personal bodyguard, while the state security service is led by an individual who used to hold senior positions in various companies belonging to Ivanishvili. The chair of the supreme court was previously the oligarch's personal lawyer. The list goes on.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary Georgia, thus, represents a classic case of what the World Bank labelled "state capture," to account for a situation when private interests have managed to hijack the state to ensure that administrative decision-making, legislative procedures, court verdicts and state policy in general primarily serve private interests rather than those of the state.<sup>13</sup> Naturally, the subjugation of the branches of power to the will of an unaccountable oligarch has made a mockery of the idea of a democratic system equipped with checks and balances.<sup>14</sup>

For the Georgian Dream, holding on to power after the 2024 parliamentary elections and servicing the interests of Ivanishvili are far bigger priorities than any commitment to democratic development and EU integration.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the EU's reform demands, in particular

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10 Régis Genté, "Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe," *ECFR Policy Brief*, December 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/>.

11 "CHAT: The Tbilisi Two Step: Resisting Moscow, Reclaiming Brussels?" GLOBSEC 2023, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qk1mtEnCn\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qk1mtEnCn_o).

12 See Khatia Ghoghoberidze, "How does oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili de facto rule Georgia?" *JAMnews*, 27 June 2022, <https://jam-news.net/how-does-oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-de-facto-rule-georgia/>.

13 On the concept of state capture, see Joel S. Hellman, Geraint Jones and Daniel Kaufmann, "Seize the State, Seize the Day: State Capture, Corruption and Influence in Transition," *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 2444*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, September 2000. On state capture in present-day Georgia, see Transparency International Georgia, *Is Georgia a Captured State?* 11 December 2020, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state>.

14 In Freedom House's annual ranking, Georgia's democratic score for 2023 decreased. See Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2023: Georgia*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/nations-transit/2023>.

15 Sergi Kapanadze, "Anatomy of Georgia's U-Turn towards Russia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 28 March 2023, [https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/230328\\_FT\\_Kapanadze.pdf](https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/230328_FT_Kapanadze.pdf).

ending political polarisation, strengthening civil society, guaranteeing free and fair elections, a free media, enacting judicial reform and de-oligarchising the country would undermine the very foundations of Georgia's informal ruling regime. According to a Georgian expert review of the state of implementation of the 12 priorities up until the end of March 2023, only one priority was deemed to have been fulfilled, two were mostly completed and four partially completed. No less than five of the twelve priorities had seen no progress at all.<sup>16</sup> These five areas, depolarisation, independent judiciary, de-oligarchisation, media freedom and involvement of civil society, are arguably the most consequential of all.

Just like the Georgian people, the political opposition, dominated by the UNM, is strongly pro-European and very much in support of Ukraine in the war, but this has not translated into increased popularity of the opposition. Indeed, the UNM remains deeply unpopular among large strata of the Georgian electorate. Since losing power in 2012, the UNM has been unable to reinvent itself, as the party continues to be highly attached to former President Mikheil Saakashvili, despite his deeply polarising effect on Georgian society.

New political forces are badly needed to breathe life into Georgia's dysfunctional democracy, but the current system is unable to provide oxygen for other parties than the Georgian Dream and the UNM. Despite the public's appeal for a political alternative to the Georgian Dream and the UNM, both parties "have a vested interest in this polarisation because it helps to mobilise their electorate and offers no space to competitors."<sup>17</sup>

### **Georgian Society's Struggle for a Voice**

While the government is turning Georgia away from the West, the prospect of EU integration has galvanised Georgian society. Opinion polls suggest that around 80 percent of Georgians are in favour of joining the EU. But Georgia's petrified political system, designed to service the ruling elite, does not provide any meaningful mechanisms for channelling the popular will.<sup>18</sup> According to an NDI poll released in early 2023, public disillusionment with political parties is growing, and 61 percent of Georgians believe that none of the parties represent their interests.<sup>19</sup> The logical outcome has been a widening gulf between the people and the elite, as well as widespread political cynicism on the part of citizens. This suggests the limits of electoral representative democracy as a channel of political representation under conditions of an uneven political playing field, with state institutions captured by a single party and the oppositional space monopolised by another party.

When institutional channels for public representation are blocked, mass protest becomes "the only available form of civil engagement," as has been increasingly evident in Georgia during

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<sup>16</sup> Open Society Georgia Foundation, EU Candidacy Check: State of Implementation of 12 Priorities, 16 January–31 March 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Archil Gegeshidze and Thomas de Waal, "Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization," *Carnegie Europe Working Paper*, December 2021, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/TdW-AG\\_Future\\_of\\_Georgia\\_Final\\_Report\\_-\\_Polarization.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/TdW-AG_Future_of_Georgia_Final_Report_-_Polarization.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Jones and Natalie Sabanadze, "Elections are not enough: Georgia needs a new model of democracy," *Eurasianet*, 10 March 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-elections-are-not-enough-georgia-needs-a-new-model-of-democracy>.

<sup>19</sup> "NDI poll: EU membership support increases – indicating Georgians' unwavering support for European integration; citizen concerns are dominated by worries over rising prices," 2 February 2023, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-membership-support-increases-indicating-georgians-unwavering-support>.

the past year.<sup>20</sup> The main guardian of Georgian society's desire for European integration and democracy is the country's active civil society. It has constrained the government's room for manoeuvre and is therefore the target of relentless attacks from the authorities. In this context, the "law on foreign agents" aimed to deal nothing less than a mortal blow to Georgia's civil society. The question is how far is it possible for the government to steer the country away from the Western path, endorsed by most Georgians, without provoking a revolutionary scenario similar to Ukraine's *maidan*, a decade ago.

A network of horizontal ties among individuals enables Georgian society to find novel ways of mobilisation. In June 2022, after Georgia failed to receive EU candidate status, an estimated 120,000 people gathered in the streets of Tbilisi, in one of the largest demonstrations since independence.<sup>21</sup> The "law on foreign agents" triggered two days of mass protests and clashes that forced the government to withdraw the bill. The protest was largely made possible by the mobilisation of Georgia's youth. Parts of "Generation Z," born between 1997 and 2010, emerged as the lead force in organising spontaneous protests across cities such as Tbilisi, Batumi, and Kutaisi.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, a generational divide undergirds the struggle over Georgia's future trajectory. The youth have another mindset than those who lived under the Soviet socialist regime. They take fundamental freedoms as their right and are unwilling to give up their voice. Now, they demand to have a say over the country's future. The new form of activism differs from Western-financed civil society organisations, for it is organised through social media, the use of art, and other forms of resistance.

While the prospect of EU membership has brought people together in a manner unseen since the independence movement more than 30 years ago, the overwhelming commitment to Western integration masks several divisions within Georgian society. As noted by Gegeshidze and de Waal:

Georgia is a country that experiences an intense pull in two directions towards the claims of traditional values rooted in its ancient traditions and the beliefs of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and toward its aspiration to be a modern society that is part of the European community of nations and encourages diversity and minority rights.<sup>23</sup>

Traditional and nationalist-oriented values dominate among a large group of citizens, not least in rural areas. The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church plays an important role both as a marker of identity and in influencing public policy. The Church has developed into a powerful political counterforce to the liberal Western values of the European Union. Indeed, it should be noted that surveys from the Caucasus Research Resource Centres, among other, indicate that religion plays a considerably larger public role in Georgia than it does in

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20 Natalie Sabanadze, "Who Is Afraid of Georgian Democracy?" *Carnegie Europe*, 17 May, 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/05/17/who-is-afraid-of-georgian-democracy-pub-89746>.

21 "Tens of thousands rally in Tbilisi to show Georgia's commitment to EU membership," *RFE/RL*, 20 June, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-demonstration-eu-membership-georgian-dream-russia/31907025.html>.

22 Xandie Kuenning and Lukas Baake, "How Georgia's youth mobilised against a controversial 'foreign agent' law," *Lossi* 36, 14 March 2023, <https://lossi36.com/2023/03/14/how-georgias-youth-mobilised-against-a-controversial-foreign-agent-law/>.

23 Gegeshidze and de Waal, "Divided Georgia."

neighbouring Azerbaijan. As in several other countries, this influence manifests itself in a fear that globalisation will destroy national norms and values.<sup>24</sup> More mainstream Western liberal values are mainly concentrated among urban residents, based in Tbilisi. “Despite being smaller in numbers, they have strong social capital and have powerful allies in Georgia’s Western partners.”<sup>25</sup>

In sum, simply equating the Georgian people with urban activists paints a distorted picture of society. There are other segments of the population who have very different values and perspectives. As the government positions itself as guardians of traditional Georgian values, these cultural differences are becoming increasingly politicised. In the process, the government is consciously seeking to undermine the pro-European orientation of Georgian society and to discredit the West.<sup>26</sup>

### What Could the EU do?

The EU has given Georgia a European perspective, but status as an EU candidate state is dependent on implementing twelve recommendations established by the European Commission. Thus far, the Georgian government has done far from enough to implement these recommendations, and it would be illusionary to believe that the ruling party would suddenly change its behaviour. Adhering to the EU’s specified conditions is anathema to Ivanishvili’s continued control over the Georgian state, and therefore not in the ruling party’s interest. But even in the absence of candidate status, European support can still make a difference in addressing the deteriorating situation in Georgia. Going forward, the key points for EU engagement are the following:

- **Reinvigorate democratic representation:** The broken system of political representation is at the heart of Georgia’s crisis. The EU should consider how to support Georgia in devising a more inclusive, consensus-oriented system of political representation, in place of the current majoritarian “winner-take-all” system, which has disentangled the political class from the citizens. In dialogue with Georgia’s civil society, the EU should think in new ways on how to foster a political system that is both participatory and responsive to public expectations. At the minimum, this includes electoral reform that makes voting meaningful for citizens.
- **Direct communication with Georgian society:** Direct engagement between the EU and Georgian society must be strengthened in order to prevent the government from manipulating the pro-EU sentiment of the population. Georgia is a battleground in the war of values between Russia and the West, and there are several political parties and movements promoting Russia’s worldview in the country. EU communication should focus on directly targeting Georgia’s citizens, emphasising the concrete benefits of European integration for the country, its people, and economy. Better coordination among the EU

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24 See, for example, Caucasus Research Resource Centers *Georgia, Future of Georgia Survey Report 2021*.

25 Gegeshidze and de Waal, “Divided Georgia.”

26 Stefan Meister, “Is Georgia on the Path to Authoritarianism?” Georgian Institute of Politics, 10 March 2023, <https://gip.ge/is-georgia-on-the-path-to-authoritarianism/>.



member states, the EU and the US would also strengthen the West's ability to communicate a clear message to both the Georgian government and society.

- **Innovative support to civil society:** Georgia's civil society is both pro-European and reform-minded. Continued EU support is necessary to keep the many nongovernmental organisations active and empowered in the face of pressure from the government. But Georgia's civil society is not standing still. Youth activists are increasingly engaging in the country's future, but they do it through other means than traditional nongovernmental organisations, associated with an older generation. There is thus room to devise novel ways of interacting with and supporting the new generation that is coming to the fore.
  
- **Making better use of conditionality:** The future relationships with Georgia should be contingent on the integrity of the 2024 parliamentary elections. This would represent a litmus test for Tbilisi's European commitment. Overall, the EU's demands on Georgia should be more specific, measurable, and easy to evaluate, in order to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretations. The EU has been Georgia's main provider of financial aid and technical assistance. This gives the EU leverage to use for reform demands. Threatening to suspend aid and impose sanctions against the most odious representatives of the ruling class are other measures to consider.



**Johan Engvall**

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

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