

What Georgia Needs to Do to Join the West



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Georgia and the EU

Executive Summary

In recent years, Georgia made major advances in its relations with the EU and Georgia's pro-Western orientation has always enjoyed high approval ratings from the public. However, recent trends show a decline in these approval ratings and a corresponding rise in pro-Russian sentiments. Coverage of Georgia has tended to focus on Misha Saakashvili's United National Movement, which instituted reforms that transformed Georgia from a failed state into a modern one. The latter half of UNM's predominance, however, was marked by controversies relating to media freedom, legal overreach, undue pressure on political opposition and a prison scandal.

Coverage of Georgia has largely overlooked the role of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his ruling Georgian Dream

Coalition, which has continued some of the worst policies of the UNM, such as undue pressure on the opposition, the unequal application of the law and the lack of an impartial, effective campaign finance monitoring vehicle. Moreover, Ivanishvili has expressly promoted the ascent of pro-Russian forces, contributing to the erosion of public support for membership in the EU and NATO. At a time when the Russian government is working hard to re-establish its “sphere of influence” in its “near abroad,” a reset of GD policies is necessary if it is to have a chance at realizing its stated vision of joining the EU and NATO.

Incremental Progress and Public Drift

In the film classic, “Casablanca,” Humphrey Bogart’s casino proprietor asks a Vichy French police officer, “How can you close me up, on what grounds?” to which Claude Rains’ Captain Renault replies, “I’m shocked, shocked to find out there is gambling going on in here,” as he pockets the evening’s winnings from the croupier. Recently the 2016 US Intelligence annual [report](#) stated that “Rising frustration among Georgia’s elites and the public with the slow pace of Western integration and increasingly effective Russian propaganda raise the prospect that Tbilisi might slow or suspend efforts toward greater Euro-Atlantic integration.” Polling has [shown](#) a decrease in the majority of Georgians who support their government’s goal of joining the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, respectively at 58% and 65% in November of 2015. What has led to this decrease in public support for Georgia’s pro-Western direction? It is the zero sum approach to Georgian politics among successive ruling parties, and a “man behind the curtain” reminiscent of “The Wizard of Oz,” Bidzina Ivanishvili, which have played a significant role in this development.

Since the autumn of 2011, when the billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili emerged from his Japanese designed futuristic mansion, overlooking the right bank of the Mtkvari River,[\[1\]](#) to rally the opposition and remove President “Misha” Saakashvili from his Italian built marble palace overlooking the left bank of the Mtkvari River, their zero sum approach to politics has shaped the political landscape leading into the upcoming 2016 parliamentary elections. The fallout from their rivalry could undermine the aspiration of deceased former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania’s declaration before the Council of Europe in 1999, “I am Georgian and therefore, I am European.”

To be sure, it is the stated policy of the Georgian Dream coalition government, as it was under the previous United National Movement government, to join both the EU and NATO, and there have been concrete advances in the pursuit of these goals. While the Ukrainians rose up in the Euromaidan demonstrations of 2013 to demand President Viktor Yanukovich reverse his decision not to initial the EU Association Agreement, Georgia did initial it in November 2013 and then signed it in June of 2014. Moreover, within the past two months, the EU has extended the proposal of visa free travel to Georgia, which will likely be enacted later this year. Additionally, the US has increased aid from the Economic Support Fund from \$38 million to \$63 million and the Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force from \$11 million to \$18 million. The Georgian Dream government has also had some success in improving their nation’s ratings from Freedom House and Transparency International. In one of the rare bi-partisan moments of the UNM-GD power sharing period in 2013, the Georgian Parliament unanimously endorsed a compromise resolution reaffirming the nation’s pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Other important factors include the continuance of Georgian participation with NATO in Afghanistan and EU-FOR in the Central African Republic as well as the UNM government’s previous success in securing both the promise of future NATO membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and then participation in the EU Eastern Partnership in 2009. These accomplishments altogether are the foundation for Georgia’s presumed eventual ascension into both Western organizations.

The GD government’s demands, bordering on ultimatums, that the EU and NATO admit them while often refuting criticisms of their own actions by local NGOs and international organizations on crucial elements such as rule of law, media freedom and political persecution, likely send a mixed signal to the population as to the value of joining the West. Furthermore, as the American Express ads say, “Membership has its privileges,” and the example of Albania’s ascension to NATO, which scores the same as Georgia on Freedom House ratings, and considerably lower than Georgia on the Transparency International Corruption Index, understandably rankles Georgian elites about some of the criteria by which progress is measured and rewarded. But the GD

government's own failure to have a consistent foreign policy narrative, to improve government oversight and legal institutions, to find common ground with pro-West opposition parties and to be, at a minimum, perceived as subservient to the will of one man, has undoubtedly contributed to the population's drift away from support for joining the West.

Precedents



Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2012

In his selection of opposition parties when forming the Georgian Dream coalition, Ivanishvili chose both pro-Western parties like Davit Usupashvili's Republicans and Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats as well as anti-Western ones such as Gogi Topadze's Industrialists and Gubaz Sanikidze's National Forum. Ivanishvili was simultaneously filling out his own Georgian Dream party with many of the artists and athletes to whom he had provided personal stipends over the years and for whom pro-West aspirations were never a priority. While Ivanishvili effectively parried UNM accusations of being Russian President Vladimir Putin's agent by embracing the government's goals of joining the EU and NATO, he stressed that Saakashvili was responsible for losing the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through an impulsive response to Russian aggression, without commenting on what specifically he would have done differently to avoid their occupation. Ivanishvili also asserted that a more constructive dialogue with Putin's government could potentially lead to the return of those territories, although since 2012 the Russians have acquired more land in Shida Kartli through the "[creeping occupation](#)" and fencing. Ivanishvili sought to minimize the public perception of his Russian-based wealth by claiming to sell off his assets there; however, he has never fully disclosed either to whom or for how much he sold them.

The 2012 parliamentary campaign was defined by the legal overreach of Saakashvili and his UNM party in an attempt to contain Ivanishvili's use of his financial resources, with which he sought to overwhelm the government's use of administrative resources. In the process, the previously highly respected State Audit Agency, which had established a strong reputation for rooting out fiscal mismanagement within the UNM government, became a vehicle for levying multi-million lari fines against Ivanishvili for complicated alleged schemes that appeared to be based on largely circumstantial evidence. Several people close to Ivanishvili and his allies were arrested at the outset of the campaign. An armored car belonging to Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank was seized in an alleged money laundering scheme that was prosecuted in the media but never in court. Violent incidents marred opposition campaign visits to internally displaced person (IDP) settlements near the South Ossetia boundary lines. And perhaps nothing contributed more decisively to Saakashvili's defeat than the prison torture videos released two weeks before the election, which undermined his claims to successful Western-style reforms and law enforcement achievements.

Among the hallmarks of Misha's efforts to westernize the culture of his nation were his crusades to make English

the nation's second language and eradicate social practices such as bride-napping and the harassment of religious minorities. His drive to retake the country from organized crime gangs, known as "thieves-in-law", mimicked the zeal of Kevin Costner's Eliot Ness in "The Untouchables," eliminating corruption from, and modernizing of, the police force became his signature governing achievement. Saakashvili pursued a war on crime, reminiscent of New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's "Broken Windows" law enforcement policy. But while the implementation of that policy provided for one of the lowest crime rates in Europe, the incarceration conditions it created, long criticized by civil society organizations, eventually led to the prison torture video scandal that brought down his government.

Ivanishvili, having won the parliamentary elections with 54% of the vote, far less than the 80% he repeatedly claimed he would receive, quickly demonstrated his willingness to conflate the people's choice with his own prerogative. United States Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), who was in Georgia on Election Day, noted in reference to GD claims of fraudulent elections, "They said the elections would never be open and free and fair, that the people of Georgia would not be free to express their will, and, if they did, President Saakashvili would not concede and step down. I would point out that they were wrong on all three counts."

In the following days and weeks, Ivanishvili's supporters used harassment tactics to force all but four of the 71 local municipalities nationwide to switch from UNM to GD more than a year and a half before the scheduled 2014 elections. Some of the more salacious claims made by GD, such as an alleged election eve murder of an infant by throwing the child down a well in Khaketi, have never been validated by any evidence.

The GD government made reform of the criminal justice system a top priority. They separated a questionable High Council body from its prior role in the judicial system wherein it served as a management and resource entity that provided "advice" to judges, about pending cases. The GD government retained most of the judges appointed by the previous government in an effort to reassure civil society and the international community of their commitment to a judiciary independent of government influence. They also passed amnesty legislation, which eventually led to the release of over 50% of those incarcerated prior to 2013. Yet despite concerns expressed by pro-Western coalition members and UNM, among those they released were several inmates convicted of espionage on behalf of Russia.

The first year of the GD government, the only one in which PM Ivanishvili chose to stay in office, overlapped with the final year of President Saakashvili's term of office in 2013. This power sharing arrangement was strongly resisted by GD. As with the post-election period of seizing local governments by means other than the ballot, GD seemed to question the legitimacy of UNM's role in government at any level. The day after the GD coalition was declared the winner of the parliamentary elections, Ivanishvili demanded that Saakashvili resign the presidency, an office to which he was directly elected. In February of 2013, the GD controlled parliament refused to schedule the President's state of the nation address unless UNM MPs would agree to provide the votes necessary to attain a super-majority to amend the Constitution, including ending the direct election of the President. The re-scheduled address was to be held in the National Library, however it was marred and eventually had to be relocated to the presidential palace, when an angry mob, including recently amnestied prisoners, beat a UNM MP, pelted others with eggs, and forced guests to enter through the initial venue's rear door while police seemed either unwilling or unable to control the crowd.

This cycle has been repeated over and over: any violence in which either pro-West NGO activists or opposition members have been the victims has been greeted at best with GD leaders issuing perfunctory admonishments that "all sides" should refrain from violence and investigations which either rarely reach a conclusion or result in minimal prosecution of the perpetrators.. This approach was reflected by the government's weak effort to prosecute four from among the thousands who attacked gay rights activists and injured police officers on International Anti-Homophobia Day in 2013 on live television. At worst, they comment on how such violence may have justification based upon past transgressions, as in October of 2015, when following the public release of a poll showing a sharp decline in GD support, another previously unseen prison torture video was released and angry mobs, some allegedly led by GD local officials, attacked UNM offices in the regions outside of Tbilisi. Former PM Irakli Garibashvili, Ivanishvili's 33 year-old hand-picked successor and former director of his charity fund, [declared](#) of UNM that "they must be grateful that people haven't done the same to them as what is shown in this (video) footage, during these (past) three years. This might be a harsh [thing to say], but they deserve it.

They haven't been able to appreciate our democratic attitude.”

Just this past week, the comments of GD parliamentary leader, Zviad Kvachantiradze and MP Nukri Kantaria, implied *a priori* that the [shooting](#) of Free Democrats party leader Alex Petriashvili, the former GD Minister for European Integration, may have been the result of personal revenge. In contrast, the responsible and appropriate remarks by PM Kvirikashvili provide some hope that this “attitude” may be changing.

Directional Detours

In the era before Ivanishvili entered politics, former President Saakashvili said that he yearned for a legitimate opposition, preferring to marginalize pro-Western opponents like Giorgi Targamadze and Davit Gamkrelidze, as well as Usupashvili and Alasania, in an effort to corner international opinion on UNM being the sole responsible steward of pro-Western development. Then in April of 2013, PM Bidzina Ivanishvili went further when he expressed his desire to see UNM eclipsed as the parliamentary opposition by former Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze, who has traveled to Russia repeatedly to meet with Putin and leaders of his United Russia party, and by a former journalist, Irma Inashvili, who was instrumental in disseminating the prison torture tapes. Now a leader of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Inashvili has picked up one of the 2012 GD campaign themes, the “restoration of justice”, against UNM, with the expressed intent of jailing more UNM leaders and desire to see the party either outlawed or otherwise forced out of existence. The Burjanadze and Inashvili parties have garnered enough support in either or both of the past two elections, in 2013 and 2014, that they could pass the threshold for having at least one faction each, or almost 10%, of the membership in the new parliament after the 2016 elections. Burjanadze's Democratic Movement-United Georgia hadn't participated in any election since its formation in 2008 until 2013. Inashvili's APG hadn't existed until just after the 2012 elections and passed on participating in the 2013 election, therefore neither of the parties qualified for state funding. Yet they both were able to hold large events, buy television ads and billboards nationwide without any questions being raised about their sources of funding. The 2012 politicization of the Georgian State Audit Agency by UNM has left Georgia without any real mechanisms for even tracking, let alone enforcing, campaign finance laws. The GD has done nothing to indicate that campaign finance practices will be monitored or regulated more effectively in 2016.

So what role do these mixed signals on acceptable dissent and the importance of the West play in the lead up to Georgia's 2016 parliamentary election? In her remarks at the US Peace Institute in August 2015 Georgia's Minister of Defense Tina Khidasheli said that the failure of NATO to confer either a [MAP](#) or membership to Georgia in 2008 was the primary reason for Russia's aggression, and not just a result of Saakashvili's response to the build-up of Russian forces in South Ossetia.

This represents a reversal of one of the main GD indictments of UNM's tenure in office, although scant attention has been paid by the media to this change in rhetoric. This change in the GD narrative poses an opportunity to find common ground with the largest of the pro-West opposition parties on foreign policy, UNM, as well Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats, who were forced out of the GD coalition in 2014. However, since Ms. Khidasheli's remarks preceded the violence that former PM Garibashvili encouraged just two months later, it is more likely this message was meant primarily for consumption in Western capitals, to be interpreted either as an ultimatum or scapegoat electoral strategy (rather than accept responsibility for voter displeasure with a weak economy) for achieving membership by this year's Warsaw Summit. But GD risks raising likely unrealized expectations which could further undermine popular support for Western aspirations. In combination with Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze's negotiations to increase Georgia's gas supply from Gazprom rather than Azerbaijan, this raises concerns about Georgia's energy independence and Ivanishvili's alleged history as a Gazprom shareholder.

The Saakashvili government's tactic of leaking wiretaps of accused mobsters and political opponents to national broadcasters was seen as an unethical practice during his tenure. Civil society organizations launched a combined effort, “This Affects You”, to protest and reform the government's surveillance policies in the lead up to the 2012 elections. The GD said these alleged surveillance practices induced public fear. During the recent Rustavi-2 controversy, in which the only remaining pro-UNM national broadcaster was subject to questionable (by numerous NGOs and several diplomatic missions, but apparently not the 2015 Freedom House media report) judicial efforts to change its ownership, wiretaps of Saakashvili, station director Nika Gvaramia, and UNM party leader Giga Bokeria were released. The leaked audiotapes revealed Saakashvili as consumed with visions

of another Rose Revolution to return him to power, without any agreement from the other participants on the call. In a 2015 National Democratic Institute [poll](#), 50% of respondents who speak Georgian said they feel unsafe to share an opinion on current political events in Georgia on the phone with a friend, this included 28% of GD supporters. Does this mean that public fear of wiretapping has returned or at least does it foreshadow the use of intimidation tactics by the GD government, in the upcoming parliamentary elections?

Georgia's third Prime Minister in three years, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, has set a positive public tone and has more governing experience than his two predecessors, combined. Tbilisi is also rampant with stories of Western-educated NGO leaders and activists being recruited to ostensibly replace non-Western oriented members of the GD coalition currently in Parliament. Given the GD denunciations of NGO policy critiques over the past two years as proof of bias towards UNM, this development can be seen either as an effort to initiate an internal course correction and achieve an unambiguous pro-West policy narrative or potentially the repeat of an alleged error by UNM at the outset of the Rose Revolution, when their recruitment of NGO leaders was deemed detrimental by some observers to government oversight for several years.

Whatever the case may be, if the outcome of this year's elections requires the GD to form a coalition, the question becomes With whom would they partner -- their UNM nemesis, the coalition outcast Free Democrats, either of the two pro-Russian parties previously lauded by Ivanishvili or perhaps the new to politics millionaire singer-philanthropist Paata Burchuladze, a heretofore advocate of closer cultural ties to Russia? Burchuladze publicly deferred to Ivanishvili's hand-picked candidate, current President Giorgi Margvelashvili, now disavowed by Ivanishvili as too close to UNM, when Burchuladze chose to demure from his own presidential run in 2013.

In the end, the next governing coalition will likely come down to the choice of one man, the billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. He resigned as PM days after Saakashvili left office and before Georgia initialed the EU Association Agreement, as if symbolically demonstrating that removing UNM from office was a more important accomplishment than taking the first step towards joining the EU. Additionally, Ivanishvili's appointment of Davit Usupashvili as Speaker of Parliament could be undone following the 2016 election, if the price of a coalition with either of his preferred opposition parties were to be the removal of the pro-West social liberal. It is almost impossible to imagine the current critical mass of GD members would have ever voted for Usupashvili as Speaker in 2012 without Ivanishvili's anointment. If the construct of his coalition doesn't more thoroughly reflect the government's stated Western foreign policy goals, "democratizing" the choice of who leads the next Parliament could make the election of a sympathetic Speaker difficult, if not impossible.

The Cul de Sac

Saakashvili left the country after his term of office ended in November of 2013, he is under indictment, no longer a Georgian citizen, but a preternaturally ambitious regional governor in Ukraine. Ivanishvili is now acknowledged by most observers as the grey cardinal of the GD government. In an April 2015 NDI [poll](#), 59% of respondents agreed with the statement that he continues to be a decision maker in the government and 71% either preferred that he not be involved as a decision maker or only in an official capacity, which hasn't been the case since he left office in 2013. When UNM ruled the country, it was often said that regardless of the actions of Parliament, all governmental decisions were made by President Saakashvili, Interior Minister then PM Vano Merabishvili, Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava and National Security Adviser Giga Bokeria. Of those remaining in Georgia, both Merabishvili and Ugulava have been prosecuted and imprisoned amid some controversy, since GD took office. Meanwhile, there are few in the salons of Tbilisi, or likely among the population nationwide, who believe that there is anyone's consent more decisive in the actions of this government, than a man who doesn't even hold office.

Like Captain Renault's reaction to casino gambling at the beginning of "Casablanca," Ivanishvili and his supporters can pretend that they are unaware of their culpability for, and short-term benefit from, the ascendance of pro-Russian forces. To give them the benefit of the doubt would be to say that they have decided to go one better than Saakashvili, to not merely impugn the most popular pro-West opposition parties as unworthy of leading the nation, but to actually ensure that the leading elements of their coalition are the only viable pro-Western political force, because they are sanguine about all other competitive opposition being pro-Russian. The problem of course with this formulation is that even if the GD coalition were to succeed in lasting

until 2030, the year in which Ivanishvili has said Georgia may finally become truly European (presumably under his tutelage), the only opposition that would represent the “change” which democratic populations tend to demand after long periods of one coalition/party rule, would be pro-Russian. This further assumes that having occupied the primary opposition mantle that Ivanishvili has said he would prefer they occupy, the pro-Russian forces wouldn’t adhere to the Kremlin’s opposition to Georgia joining the EU and NATO by attempting to destabilize the country. After all, the first President that former PM Zurab Zhvania served under, Eduard Shevardnadze, accommodated Russian demands that much of the country’s national security and state security infrastructure be led by those acceptable to the Kremlin, and still they attempted to assassinate him, at least twice. But like Renault before the final credits of “Casablanca,” Ivanishvili still has time to elevate the aspirational agenda of Zhvania and (yes) Misha’s Rose Revolution, to a more democratic Georgia, with real government accountability. Like the great and powerful “Wizard of Oz,” Ivanishvili could emerge from behind the curtain and fully disclose his assets, as the price of leading his nation. Doing so would demonstrate that his commitment to governing is as great, or greater, than his business interests. After all, his business interests are now deeply intertwined within the nation’s economy such as the Sovereign Fund and Cartu Bank, capital projects like Tbilisi Panorama, as well as government contracts for his Elit and Elit Burji companies.

The arc of Georgian politics under Saakashvili and Ivanishvili bears some resemblance to the transition of Hungary’s Viktor Orban. Like Saakashvili, Orban emerged on the political scene as the most resolute anti-Putin leader in his nation and subsequently took a hardline against his political opposition, comparing them to Soviet sympathizers. Orban even campaigned for UNM in the closing days of the 2012 election and provided safe haven for several important former members of UNM’s law enforcement apparatus seeking to avoid potential prosecution after Ivanishvili’s government came to power. But since that time, like many GD coalition MPs, Orban has become increasingly outspoken in his objection to the critiques of Western governments and civil society watchdogs as his right-wing populism rebels against EU cultural liberalism, and just as some interpret Kaladze’s recent Gazprom negotiations, is looking to increase the nation’s dealings with Putin on energy. Even if one dispenses with the Orban foreign policy analogy, Ivanishvili and many GD MPs also bear some resemblance to Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s Law and Justice Party government of Poland in which Kaczynski holds no publicly elected office, yet by most accounts guides the government as it seeks to punish members of the former government and increasingly chafes at the cultural liberalism of the EU. Given that the EU hasn’t figured out how to deal with these unsettling developments among current members, they may be less than enthusiastic about adding members who show signs of similar backsliding. If Ivanishvili and the GD want to succeed in attaining EU membership for Georgia, they should focus on taking actions that would speak louder than their repeated demands to be allowed entry into the EU and NATO. They have to make a fundamental break from the zero sum politics of the past.

The Way Forward

If Georgia’s PM Kvirikashvili continues to focus on maintaining a more positive tone in both his words and style of governance, especially as compared to both Ivanishvili and the petulant Gharibashvili, this could demonstrate a sea change in GD thus far. It could be buttressed further by the realization of recruiting efforts to field a more consistently pro-Western slate of MPs in order to put forth a more resolutely pro-Western coalition. A GD coalition, devoid of the Industrialist and National Forum parties and publicly renouncing even the possibility of forming a coalition with Burjanadze, Inashvili, or Shalva Natelashvili’s Labor Party, would further demonstrate a clearer definition of their foreign policy approach. Any attempt to form a coalition with Burchuladze, should he field a slate of MPs, should also be based on whether or not he expresses a consistent pro-West foreign policy narrative.

But for 2016 to be a healthier competitive election than that of 2012, the GD government must empower either the State Audit Agency and/or the Central Elections Commission to have both the resources and independence to conduct real oversight of both government fiscal management and campaign finance enforcement. If the GD is going to recruit current NGO leaders, then perhaps doing so not for electoral gain but for institutional development would be of greater service to Georgia’s Western aspirations. Finally, stopping the double standard approach when it comes to dealing with law enforcement, opposition competition, and media freedom, must be the foundation to a true rapprochement.

No one expects GD and UNM to reconcile or even seek compromise in the foreseeable future. But Ivanishvili must realize that in a true democracy, it is not for him, the government, or anti-Western forces that may be sympathetic to his contribution in removing their foes, to decide whether or not UNM, Alasania's Free Democrats, and possibly one of the new pro-West parties led by former UNM adherents (MP Zurab Japaridze or former Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze) remain or become the main opposition parties. That is for the voters to decide based upon popular support, rather than through Ivanishvili's blessing or opposition by subterranean financial means. If he really does want Georgia to maintain a pro-Western course, he should not be promoting pro-Russian forces, by omission or commission, as the ideal opposition at the expense of those who share his stated goals. The logical conclusion to doing so is to foment doubt about Ivanishvili's commitment to seeing those goals achieved.

Foreign policy concepts such as sphere of influence politics, rebranded as "defensive realism", or Putin's "near abroad" perspective, at their core deny the aspirational desires of citizens whose countries lack the resources to be considered major powers. Those who endorse such approaches will choose stability and sacrifice popular self-determination. More so than even their governing elites, Georgians have kept their faith. Since Zhvania's 1999 declaration through Georgia's 2008 referendum endorsing NATO membership with 77% of the vote (a 22% greater margin than Saakashvili's re-election) to the most recent polling at 65%, Georgians have demonstrated their continued commitment to joining the West. It is this fact which has done the most to thwart Russia's military and soft power efforts to derail those aspirations thus far. It is this fact which poses the most compelling argument for Georgia's admission to the EU and NATO. Like the citizens of Ukraine, most Georgians have a more intuitive understanding of what it means to be European, even if they aren't aware of the details, compared to the familiar Russian alternative. It is this fact that must compel the political elites in Brussels and Washington to be more positively responsive to a nation which has made important strides to belong in their club. And it is this fact that must force the disparate pro-Western forces, inside and outside of the Georgian government, to focus on making the most compelling case based upon measurable and continuous progress in its democratic processes and institutions.

The legacy of Misha Saakashvili and the reality of Bidzina Ivanishvili cast long shadows across the Georgian landscape. Misha inherited a failed state, modernized it and set it upon a Western course. Bidzina arose as a result of Misha's overreach, and now his GD coalition has the potential to bring the nation to its long desired destination. But that could all be undone by Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream's rationalization and short-sighted encouragement of anti-Western/pro-Russian elements inside the coalition and across the political landscape. Accepting the legitimacy of pro-Western opposition parties as the best alternative to the GD's inevitable departure at some point in the future is the nation's best insurance for achieving and sustaining their presumptive common cause. Together, the GD, UNM, Free Democrats, and other self-proclaimed pro-Western interests should take comfort in the knowledge that even opponents who have betrayed and threatened one another in the past can and should reconcile in the face of a greater existential threat. As Humphrey Bogart says to Claude Rains at the end of "Casablanca" while walking through a haze, towards a place that isn't yet visible, but promises a brighter future, "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

[1] Mtkavri River crosses the Georgian capital city Tbilisi.