

FROM PARTNER TO PROBLEM: GEORGIA'S ANTI-AMERICAN TURN

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Wednesday, September 10, 2025.

The hearing was held from 2:35 p.m. to 3:51 p.m., Room 2358–C, Rayburn House Office Building, Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Co-Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Commission Members Present: Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Co-Chairman; Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member; Representative Marc Veasey [D-TX]; Representative Greg Murphy [R-NC]; Representative Jake Ellzey [R-TX].

Witnesses: President Salome Zourabichvili, President of Georgia; Tinatin Khidasheli, Former Minister of Defense of Georgia; Luke Coffey, Senior Fellow, Center on Europe and Eurasia, Hudson Institute.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, CO-CHAIRMAN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Co-Chairman WILSON: Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome everyone to a[n] open hearing on behalf of the Commission/Organization Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is a great honor for myself to be co-chair. Our chairman, Senator Roger Wicker, the Senate is in session, and so has conflicting. We have these issues. The bottom line, we are really grateful to be here and to have such distinguished witnesses.

It is so important for the Caucasus, ultimately for Central Asia. Over and over again, the importance of the Republic of Georgia just cannot be underestimated. First of all, the people, and the people are being victimized by what is going—the current government. I am just so grateful for the leadership, particularly, of Salome Zourabichvili. Just over and over, everybody here can make a difference, and it is so bipartisan, and I am just so grateful.

With this, we will begin with opening statements, and then we will go to the testimony.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Georgian Dream government, through rigged elections in Georgia, is dragging the people of the Republic of Georgia into dictatorship, stripping away their sovereignty and condemning them to poverty. It is betraying the country's traditional allies—including the United States, which so appreciates our joint service together militarily around the world and the Georgian

troops who are—were just so positive without caveats to defend themselves and defend American troops, and defend Western interests for freedom and democracy. It is betraying our allies. This is undermining the good-faith support from the United States, which for decades has invested heavily to help the Republic of Georgia build a free, prosperous, and democratic State for its dynamic citizens.

What we are witnessing today is the dismantling of that progress by a corrupt regime that has no legitimacy. Georgian Dream came to power through fraudulent elections. It rules as a one-party State. It has arrested opposition leaders, beaten and tortured peaceful protesters, silenced independent media, and turned Georgia into a laboratory of authoritarian control. It is quickly putting itself in the category of Belarus and the Russian Federation.

This betrayal does not stop there. Georgian Dream has chosen to cozy up to the Chinese Communist Party, opening the door for Chinese influence in the Georgian economy and infrastructure; and very important, sadly, giving its Black Sea port to the Chinese Communist Party, blocking American businesses from strategic trade routes, and tying the—tying the Georgian future to a regime that openly prepares for confrontation with the American people. At the same time, it is working hand-in-glove with war criminal Putin, helping Moscow evade sanctions and resell its oil even as Russia still illegally occupies 20 percent of Georgia's territory with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Let us be clear: Georgian Dream does not represent the Georgian people. Time and again, the Georgian people have shown through massive demonstrations and their own voices they want democracy, sovereignty, and a return to a future with the West of peace and prosperity. Today, their aspirations are being crushed by a small group of oligarchs and autocrats who answer not to the people but to the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing and war criminal Putin in Moscow and also spending time with the dictatorship—the regime in Tehran.

This hearing will discuss how far Georgia has fallen under Georgian Dream and what that means for America's security and interests. We will also discuss what tools the United States has to push back, including the bipartisan MEGOBARI Act, to hold Georgian Dream accountable while standing firmly with the people of Georgia.

The House of Representatives has stood with the people of Georgia with a remarkable vote of 349 to 42. Ninety percent of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats and Republicans—90 percent; I do not think we can find another bill like this, okay? But 90 percent voted yes, and that is for MEGOBARI, for fair and free elections.

I am grateful to our witnesses: Indeed, President Salome Zourabichvili; additionally, former Defense Minister Khidasheli, a very easy name, okay—[LAUGHTER]—here we go, Luke Coffey, okay.

Mr. COFFEY: The only reason why I am here.

[LAUGHTER.]

Co-Chairman WILSON: No, no, no. Hey, no, no. No, no, hey. Hey, he is here because he is with the Hudson Institute, which makes

a difference in providing assistance to Members of Congress, and I want to thank you. You had the Bulgarian—the minister of energy from Bulgaria visit your office yesterday. What a difference the Hudson Institute makes in promoting free markets and limited government.

The people who are here today understand better than anyone what is at stake. The Georgian people have marched, bled, and even died for freedom, and there were recent arrests within the last 24 hours and attacks. They have fought alongside Americans in Afghanistan, across the world. They have proven their friendship with us. Now, as Georgian Dream sells them out to Russia and China, it is our duty to prove our friendship in return. We must not stand by as the Republic of Georgia is stolen from its people.

With that, I now yield to the ranking member of the Commission, the high honorable Congressman Steve Cohen of the Republic of Tennessee. [LAUGHTER.]

STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TENNESSEE

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you all for attending and having an interest, members of the committee here.

I was in Georgia, I think it was 2015. Was that the year that the Dream—and I went there to look at the elections and be a witness to the elections. I was really impressed by the people in the streets and their enthusiasm for the opportunity to vote, for democracy, and for a new government. I saw in the hotel I was in Mr. Ivanishvili. I hate to say that I judge people sometimes by how they look, but when I first saw him he had all the appearances that I know—because I did not know much about Elon Musk at the time, but he had all these things that later I have seen, it was an Elon Musk feeling: Rich, arrogant, elitist, and very well thought of himself. I thought: This is the good guy. He swept in, and I saw him there, and that Georgia Dream has turned into the—to the Georgia nightmare because it has not been what it was—professed to be.

They have had all kinds of problems, and Mr. Wilson explained them well. Dissent has been discouraged, surveillance and intimidation of citizens have been regular, and violence against peaceful protesters has been common. I see on the television all these tens of thousands of people in the streets protesting on a regular basis, and it makes you realize how much democracy's important, and it is important in America too, and sometimes we do not seem to appreciate it or realize it. They seem to show that in Georgia. Of course, we saw Russia—I think it was just a little bit before that when Russia went in and took part of Georgia, and they will do it again if they can. Now they have got an ally there in Mr. Ivanishvili, so it is an easier way to take over from within than from without.

It is unfortunate that the Senate did not pass the—looks like they are not going to pass the MEGOBARI law, and there were some problems over there, and might have related to one particular business that is building a port and some issues. I am not sure what it is. While Mr. Wilson's right there is such a great majority—Democrats and Republicans in a bipartisan fashion supporting

the bill, and it is almost unheard of; there is great support—that over there one person was able to apparently kill it, and that is news—it is amazing that has happened and why it has happened. I do not understand it.

I am impressed by the Georgia people and what they have done, and I will continue to support them in their quest for democratic values and a democratic State. Those are universal values, and we should be obligated and are obligated to defend them. I support the people of Georgia. We must hold those people responsible for repression. We must support independent voices and civil society and stand clearly and unequivocally on the side of those fighting for democracy.

Thank you very much.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you, Ranking Member Steve Cohen.

If there are any other members. We are really grateful to have Congressman Veasey from Texas here with us, and also Dr. Greg Murphy and—from North Carolina; and then we have Congressman Jake Ellzey, another Texan. Texas is well-represented today.

Representative ELLZEY: We are outnumbering everybody.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Well, that is—[LAUGHTER]—in so many different ways, all right? But—

Representative COHEN: We are not going to redistrict.

Co-Chairman WILSON:—[LAUGHTER]—and as Congressman Cohen just said, no more politics here, okay?

[LAUGHTER.]

Just so with that in mind—and again, this is such an important time in the history of the Republic of Georgia, and so we are so grateful to have the fifth president of the Republic of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili. Each one of our witnesses will have five minutes, and then try to stay within that, so that we can then have questions from the panel that is here today.

Thank you.

TESTIMONY OF PRESIDENT SALOME ZOURABICHVILI, PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA

President ZOURABICHVILI: [Off mic]—by a government that represents them, and I think it is important that their voice comes to you, comes to Washington. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

You have described the situation that we have currently in Georgia. I have to recall that a hundred years ago, the commission of the Congress was already holding a hearing about the situation in Georgia. That was 1926, and the situation was extremely dire in Georgia at that time. I hope that the parallel stops there and that we can see things evolving in a different manner.

I want to talk, not to describe the situation in Georgia. We all know, and it has been at length explicated in the media also, that the situation is extremely difficult in terms of all the democratic rights/freedoms and the human condition. I am also here representing the people who are today sitting in jail, and maybe symbolically, I want to mention Mzia Amaghlobeli as a journalist, a woman who is sitting in jail for absolutely no reason.

For all these people, I am here to talk about the relations between Georgia and the United States, to recall that for more than 30 years, the United States has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Georgia and has been there to help us build an independent, stable, pro-Western, reform-oriented State, which we are losing right now. It has invested a lot of resources in Georgia, financial resources, but also human resources. That was not just a gift; it was a commitment to Georgia's freedom, to Georgia's security, and a European future. It has contributed to the development of Georgia's economy, of democratic institutions; helped equip and train Georgia's defense forces; built schools and hospitals; and trained teachers, civil servants, and medical professionals.

Those actions secured peace and stability in Georgia, a country that became increasingly decisive for Black Sea security for the Middle Corridor, for the energy routes linking the Black and Caspian Seas, and beyond to Central Asia and its vast resources. Of course, it was also acting—Georgia was acting as a reliable partner of the United States, joining the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. That is the most important—the Georgian people massively supported this partnership.

In short, Georgia was a strategic win for the U.S.—a win over Russia—and a peaceful one. After more than a century of Russia attempting to keep the Caucasus and, hence, Central Asia under its exclusive domination, America had become a full-fledged actor in the region that inspired our people and defined new standards.

Today, for the first time in more than three decades, the ruling regime in Georgia has turned its back on this partnership, distancing and isolating both itself and the country from its trusted ally while increasingly aligning itself with the United States' adversaries. Russia is playing its hand to recover its dominant position.

Georgian Dream has grown increasingly anti-Western and pro-Russian. GD's public positions have increasingly taken an aggressively anti-American tone. Public attacks on the U.S. representatives—I think that the Ambassador sitting behind me will not disagree with that—on U.S. policies, accusing the USA of pushing for the opening of a second front against Moscow, hostile attacks on President Trump, personally, and on his administration. In parallel, GD leaders have been actively deepening ties, first and foremost with Russia, of course. Copy-cattling the rhetoric of the Russian leaders. With China, enacting a strategic partnership following the suspension of the strategic partnership with the United States, visa-free with China, and Iran.

Three hundred eighty degrees turn from the former foreign and internal policy, compromising the independence of the country that was achieved at a very high cost—because we still have 20 percent of our territory that is occupied, and the war that Russia started against Georgia in 2008, after two other aggressions against Georgia in the same century—a direction directly opposite to U.S. national interest. Russia's new hybrid war against Georgia's independence—Georgia has—Russia has intensified its interference policies in Georgia to undermine democracy, instill societal division. Not with armed forces this time, but with new hybrid techniques.

For the first time in recent history, Russia is mastering soft power propaganda allied to modern technology, and to the use of the leaders who are in place. These Kremlin-style methods are from one and only handbook that has been tested already in Russia in the past decade—total control and consolidation of power, seizure of government institutions, violation of fundamental human rights, ignoring the constitution, politicizing the courts and the police forces. Opposition has been practically abolished. Civil activists are jailed. Non-governmental organizations are deprived of founding and paralyzed. Political parties are facing threats, very directly, of being eradicated.

Russia is clearly playing a strategic card in Georgia to recoup its domination of the east-west route, its control over the Caucasus. Russia has known forever that Georgia was central to controlling the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Thus, reversing the strategic win of the Western partner in the past 30 years since independence. Testing a new strategy, a new hybrid strategy, that can be implemented in other countries, and not only in the countries that share borders with Russia.

Let there be no doubt, the people of Georgia are not accepting this subversive capture of the State. They remain fully committed to democracy and to restoring their strategic partnership with the U.S., as well as to their European future. That is the meaning of 368 days of uninterrupted protest against the pro-Russian policies. That is the meaning of the resilience of civil society.

Why should Georgia matter for the U.S.? Without democracy in Georgia, there is no stability, and we risk entering a period of instability. Without stability in Georgia, there is no peace in the South Caucasus. Georgia's future constitutes a strategic challenge for the United States, as well as for the European partners. Russia recognized in the past centuries that who controls policy in Tbilisi controls the Caucasus.

It is time that our Western partners recognize this strategic reality and prevent that the Black Sea and their increased Chinese and Russian influence escapes the Western powers, that Georgia's increasing economic and political ties with Russia and China isolates the country, prevents that Georgia's ruling regime courting Iran and terrorist leader reunites with those forces, and prevents that Georgia becomes a gray zone where all forms of sanctions circumventions, but not only, of trafficking, of migrant routes would be flourishing.

The U.S. has to—and our Western partners—have to consolidate the geopolitical shift in the region. The U.S.-brokered agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan has opened new avenues for regional stability, connectivity, and economic cooperation. It has been a big win for, and the success personally, of President Trump. This geopolitical ship should not be allowed to wither away if Russia were allowed to expand its influence over Georgia, thus blocking the potential of a united and peaceful Caucasus, bridging Black and Caspian Seas, the EU, and Central Asia. Connectivity, diversification of energy routes are major opportunities for the U.S. and the European partners, but all depend on preventing Russia from recovering its exclusive domination over its southern flank.

In conclusion, complacency with Russia is dangerous. A conciliatory approach by the U.S. toward Georgia's de facto leadership has failed in the past and will not succeed now. There is no time for ambiguity. There is a need for a clear policy toward Georgia, stating U.S. interests. What the ruling regime in Georgia is doing is not just a betrayal of Georgia's people's will and its democratic values. It is a direct "no" to the strategic partnership with the United States. American taxpayers, diplomats, and servicemen have invested heavily in Georgia's success, and to watch that investment being wasted through actions that contradict the U.S. security interests and hostile rhetoric should be unacceptable and stated as such.

Accountability, finally, is essential. There must be real consequences for those who think that being in power means that they can do anything they want, stifling dissent, jeopardizing the country's future. The Georgian people deserve better, and so do their friends, the American people, whose support has always been rooted in the hope of a free, stable, and democratic Georgia.

Thank you very much.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Madam President.

Now we proceed to the former minister of defense, who has been so successful, Tinatin Khidasheli. We are so grateful to have you here.

**TINATIN KHIDASHELI, FORMER MINISTER OF DEFENSE OF
GEORGIA**

Ms. KHIDASHELI: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me here and for having this discussion. Also, thank you very much for the support the Georgian people always had from the United States, from the Congress, from the House of Representatives, as well as the Senate.

I am here today to try, at least, to represent the majority opinion of the Georgian people. Georgian people who have been fighting for partnerships, standing together with the United States over the years, for over three dozen of years, and building a viable democratic State. I am here to defend Georgia's single most important foreign policy priority, maintaining and strengthening our strategic partnership with the United States. It is very important for us to expose the authoritarian drift and present alarming evidence that the Georgian Dream government has systematically and rapidly abandoned these national interests of the country, turning instead toward alliances with the authoritarian powers. Finally, I will try to show why Georgia matters to America. Madam President already identified some of the points. I will try to echo them and add some additional arguments.

The concrete evidence I bring here today speaks not just about the Georgian government's departure from the strategic partnership with the U.S. but speaks first and foremost about their departure from the will and strategic interests of the Georgian people. This is a departure from the cause that led Georgian hero Giorgi Antsukhelidze to sacrifice his life while being tortured by Russians in 2008. This is a departure from the cause that led journalist—Georgian journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli to sacrifice her freedom just a couple of months back while protecting the cause of

Antsukhelidze from the increasing anti-Western and pro-Russian government of Georgia. I speak here as a former minister of defense of a country that proudly fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the American army in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. Georgia was the largest non-NATO, the second largest, contributor of troops in Afghanistan. We paid a heavy price with the highest casualty rate and 435 wounded servicemen.

Let me begin with the simple truth. There is no security for Georgia without a partnership with the United States. It never was, and there is no viable option for it to ever exist. Without the United States' assistance and commitment, Georgia's statehood would not have been secured and would not have survived. It was U.S. involvement in 2008 that stopped Putin in Georgia during the August war. U.S. leadership has been, and remains, central to the non-recognition policy of our breakaway territories occupied by Russia. It was U.S. assistance that helped us build the modern army and State institutions. It was the U.S. assistance that helped us build hospitals, schools, and develop university programs—the list is very long. We hope this partnership can be saved and will stay there.

Georgia matters for the United States, Europe, and the international community for three fundamental reasons. First, it is geography. Second, it is strategic connectivity, and third, it is a democratic example. Georgia lies at the very heart of the middle corridor, the modern Silk Road route linking east and west, north and south, bypassing Russia and Iran. We may be small in size, but our competitive advantage has been our role as a gateway and a connector. Within Central Asia and European markets, through pipelines, railways, and ports. This is not only the trade route. It is what I call the corridor of freedom—corridor where goods, energy, data, and people fly without interference, without political blackmail that is so much present on the northern route and in the south of Georgia. Unlike its northern alternative, it is the road where there is no political blackmail. It is both practical and politically reliable for the United States and its allies.

For the United States, the middle corridor offer is invaluable. Resilience in the face of authoritarian strongholds. Given the fundamentalist threats from Iran, the authoritarian menace of Russia seeking to weaponize its geography, and China cementing BRI, obviously, the middle corridor provides a democratic alternative to all of that. Georgia is its anchor. Without Georgia, there is no free corridor. Lose it, and the door opens to Russia, Iran, and China. Here is the report I distributed at this hearing about Iran's ambitions in Georgia—modern ambitions in Georgia. About the ways Georgian Dream tries to avoid sanctions set on Iran. How Iranians see Georgia as a haven for their economic activities, using Georgian territory, and using companies established in Georgia. I will not go into details of it, but here is evidence-based proof of all those problems the Georgian Dream represents in today's world, from this very particular point of view.

A free, democratic, Western-oriented Georgia is unacceptable to Moscow, Tehran, and increasingly problematic for Beijing. Unfortunately, today's ruling party, Georgian Dream, has chosen a path that serves those authoritarian interests rather than resisting

them. They undermined institutions, manipulated elections, criminalized dissents, arrested opposition leaders, used violence against peaceful protests, and refused to protect the will of the Georgian people expressed at the ballot box. Georgian Dream has deepened ties with authoritarian powers. They court Chinese companies while blocking U.S. businesses from opportunities in the middle corridor.

Georgian Dream has created a textbook-level case of Anaklia seaport, where the American Georgian consortia were kicked out and the promise was made for the Chinese company to come. Fortunately, it has not happened yet, but there is a very strong interest on the Georgian Dream side to pave the way for the Chinese company. Here you can see lots of—all these reports are about the Chinese involvement in Georgia and are about the Chinese kleptocratic deals with the Chinese companies made by the Georgian government. Very important point not to be mistaken, China is not investing in Georgia. There are no Chinese investments in Georgia. Instead, they win procurement bids one after another under the favorable conditions and reap benefits from Georgia.

Here, we have been investigating, researching, writing about those dirty deals over the years, company after another. While the United States has invested billions in the Georgian economy and provided over \$4 billion in aid for the Georgian State institutions, the Chinese, exploiting the corrupt and kleptocratic nature of the Georgian Dream government, are gaining more and more. They secured over 4.5 billion[dollars]. This represents only a small portion of the contracts they have received. Let me share this point again so as not to be misled. There is no significant FDI coming from China to Georgia. It is all your money, international financial institutions' money, American money, European Union taxpayers' money, Georgian taxpayers' money.

This is the chart of the FDI to Georgia. You can see it starts with the United Kingdom, all countries across, and China comes very end—at the very end of it. Even more, for the demonstration, I have made another chart comparing the small country Malta to big country China in terms of FDI to Georgia, and on this chart, you can see that it is not in the United States, the European Union, the U.K., or other big players. Even a country like Malta is dominating Chinese investments in Georgia. I think this speaks volumes about their actual interests and involvement. Finally, this is the chart of the 10 largest foreign direct—countries with the largest foreign direct investments in Georgia over the course of the last 10 years. There is no China among the first top 10 investors in Georgia.

Again, as it was said, they won all the contracts. They benefit from all the money that is coming as aid or through the financial institutions to Georgia. Using those kleptocratic networks of the Georgian government with the Chinese, implementing those projects. The consequences are grave. Georgia is drifting into authoritarianism. It does not threaten only its own people, but we believe it directly undermines U.S. interests in the region. It weakens the reliability of the middle corridor. It weakens the security of the transit roads that fly through Georgia. It reduces U.S. influence in the Black Sea and Eurasia at a time when Russia and

China are fighting to expand their. It emboldens authoritarian regimes by providing that Western allies can be peeled away and democratic experiments reversed.

This is not simply Georgia's internal problem. It is a strategic setback for the entire transatlantic community. Our competitive advantage was never oil and gas. It was a democratic Georgia, European, free, and ready to stand side-by-side with the United States and European allies. It has threatened Moscow's imperial projects and ambitions. If Georgia can succeed, then Russians may ask, why not us? If Georgians can live under the rule of law, then Belarusians will wonder, why not us? Georgia's transformation was infectious, starting from the Rose Revolution all across the board. It was dominating the debate. For Russia, China, Iran, and every other authoritarian power, this was deeply alarming and dangerous. That is precisely why Russia, and now increasingly China, have a vested interest in undermining our sovereignty, corrupting our institutions, and dragging us back into the orbit of authoritarianism.

For the conclusion, I should say that there is good news. Georgian people have not given up, despite depression, propaganda, ruling party's betrayal of our democratic aspirations, Georgians remain overwhelmingly pro-Western. Poll after poll shows support for European Union and NATO membership at highest heights. The people continue to believe in freedom. And they continue to believe in the United States. This distinction matters because when we speak of Georgia today, we must not confuse the government with the Nation. Georgians continue to wave American and EU flags at protests. They continue to demand Georgia belong to Europe and to the democratic world.

Georgia has always relied on U.S. support, and in these difficult times, we need it more than ever. We need you to stand by us while we talk to our friends or our enemies. At the heart of these conversations are the questions of EU membership, NATO membership, and the realities of Russian occupation. We fight every day. We need all the support we can get—sanctions, diplomatic measures targeting the political elite of the Georgian Dream, enablers of the regime, Russian-style propaganda machinery, and the ideologists of Putin-driven policy.

This brings me to the role the United States can play with very concrete issues. First, targeted accountability. Sanctions and visa bans should be directed at the ruling elite, their families, and their enablers. Punish those who betray Georgia. More sanctions for GD leadership, more scholarships for Georgian youth and students. Two, support for democratic institutions and civil society, assist independent media, civil society organizations, and grassroots movements. These are the lifelines of democracy in Georgia today. Three, stand explicitly with the Georgian people. Make clear that your support is for democracy, sovereignty, and independence, not for the ruling party undermining the most important values of the Georgian State.

Four, support bipartisan legislation, the MEGOBARI Act, that represents exactly the kind of sustained strategic support that can help Georgian civil society, independent media, and reformers to survive. Targeted sanctions against those who undermine democ-

racy and tirelessly make friends with the Axis of Evil, enemies of the U.S., and democratic transatlantic partners are equally vital. MEGOBARI Act sends the strongest possible signal that Georgia's democratic future remains a U.S. strategic priority. It provides tools to hold accountable those who undermine democracy, while strengthening the capacity of civil society. Invest in the middle corridor and connectivity. Georgia's strategic geography must not be left to Chinese, Russian, or Iranian influence.

Six, deepen security cooperation. Georgia has shown through its contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq that it is a reliable security partner. Renewed defense cooperation, joint training, and strong deterrence measures in the Black Sea are not gifts. They are mutually beneficial investments. Finally, maintain people-to-people ties. Scholarships, exchanges, and cultural programs are very important. Georgian story is not finished. We stumbled, but we have not fallen. Georgian people remain committed to the values that made us partners of the United States in the first place.

We are at a moment of profound danger. Yet, if left to drift, Georgia may indeed slide deeper into authoritarianism and away from the West. With U.S. support—steadfast, bipartisan, principled—Georgia can reclaim its role as a beacon of democracy, stability, and business opportunity in the Black Sea.

Thank you very much. Looking forward to your questions.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, former Minister of Defense for the Republic of Georgia.

We now proceed to Luke Coffey. Luke is a senior fellow with the Hudson Institute, but he also has a background of being a very highly respected member of the Army of the United Kingdom, having served in Italy, Southern Command, and also in Afghanistan. Mr. Coffey.

**LUKE COFFEY, SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER ON EUROPE AND
EURASIA, HUDSON INSTITUTE**

Mr. COFFEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman Wilson and Ranking Member Cohen, and distinguished commissioners. I am honored to speak before this Commission today. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of Hudson Institute.

Democratic backsliding in any partner country is troubling, but in Georgia, the consequences are serious because they undermine U.S. national security. In recent years, as you have heard today, the Georgian Dream has embraced a Kremlin-aligned worldview. It has claimed that NATO enlargement was responsible for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It has criticized Western sanctions while at the same time increasing trade with Moscow. This has made Georgia an economic gray zone through which sanctions are circumvented. It has also made it difficult for volunteers from Georgia to go to Ukraine and fight. Those who do are often harassed when they get home.

Mr. Chairman, there is also the issue of Tbilisi's cozy relationship with Iran. In July, the Georgian deputy foreign minister actually went to the Iranian embassy to sign a condolence book honoring those killed during American and Israeli airstrikes. Earlier this year, a Georgian national was convicted in a U.S. Federal

Court for his role in an assassination plot directed by the IRGC against an Iranian American journalist. In a separate case, another Georgian national was arrested in neighboring Azerbaijan after being recruited by the Quds Force to help carry out an attempted assassination of a Jewish leader. Open source evidence suggests that the Al-Mustafa International University, sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury for its ties to the IRGC, operates at two different locations inside Georgia. These examples show how the Georgian Dream's willingness to get closer to the Islamic Republic has created space for its intelligence services and proxies to operate more freely in the country.

Georgia's deepening ties with Beijing are also concerning, as you have just heard from my fellow witness. The prime minister described China as one of the best examples of State modernization, suggesting that it offers a positive model for other global powers. At a time when many European countries are pushing out Chinese investments, Georgia is moving in the opposite direction. For example, after a U.S.-Georgian consortium was blocked to lead the Anaklia deepwater port project in 2020, it now seems we are on the verge of a U.S.-sanctioned Chinese company running this project.

This could hinder the Trump administration's efforts to access rare earth minerals in places like Central Asia. In the telecommunications sector, the trend is equally concerning. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of Georgia's government institutions use surveillance cameras made by Chinese firms, while Huawei is embedded throughout Georgia's telecom networks. Now, as a small country on the Eurasian landmass, it is natural for Georgia to want to seek cordial relations with Beijing. What is alarming is the amount of enthusiasm at which Georgian Dream officials show as they pursue their closer relationship with China.

Now, this geopolitical assessment leads to three questions. Why, as Russian influence wanes across much of the post-Soviet space, is Moscow now more influential in Georgia? How is it that the Islamic Republic of Iran is able, or even allowed, to operate so effectively in Georgia? Why, while Europe pushes out Chinese involvement, does Georgia appear to welcome Beijing? Now, some Georgian Dream officials see themselves as aligned with President Trump. In fact, the opposite is true. Cozying up to Iran is not in line with President Trump's worldview. Inviting the CCP into your critical infrastructure is not consistent with President Trump's worldview. Enabling Russia to circumvent sanctions undermines President Trump's ability to broker peace in Ukraine, a top foreign policy priority for this White House.

The Georgian Dream also falsely claims that Western officials are pressuring Georgia to open a second front against Russia, referring to these people as the "global war party." This is nonsense. It is important to set the record straight. I have never heard anyone in Washington, DC. suggest that Georgia should open up a second front against Russia. The long-standing policy regarding Georgia's two occupied regions, based on a non-use-of-force pledge dating back to 2010, remains the best policy for Georgia to pursue.

Mr. Chairman, in a riverside park in Tbilisi, there's a bronze statue of Ronald Reagan facing north, toward Russia. For Georgians, it symbolizes how far they have come since the Soviet times

and how bright their future can be. For the West, it recalls that the cold war did not simply end, but that it was won. It was won because liberty and capitalism trumped oppression and communism. These ideas turned out to be more powerful than any army that NATO had to field. Lasting partnerships, like that between the U.S. and Georgia, require effort from both sides. Though Moscow's grip is painful, it has only been a short chapter in Georgia's long and proud history.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, when it comes to Georgia, U.S. policymakers should be strategic. We should play the long game, and we should be ready to get the relationship back on track when the circumstances allow. I love Georgia, the Georgian people, the food, the wine, the culture. I know one thing: You never bet against the Georgian people and their resilience.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Coffey. We appreciate your enthusiasm.

We will begin with questions now. I will enforce the five-minutes, beginning with me, except that I am going to let the first five minutes go to Congressman Cohen, our ranking member. Then I—because I want to give a chance to the other members who are here today. Ranking Member Cohen of Tennessee.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me ask this question to the group. What influence did Radio Free Europe play, if any, in Georgia? Madam President, do you have a perspective on Radio Free Europe and the importance it was in Georgia?

President ZOURABICHVILI: Yes. In Georgia, it was Radio Liberty. I remember from my husband that when he was young, he and his fellow students were listening to Radio Liberty at night, wherever they could catch Radio Liberty. That was what forged really the first contact with the West, and the possibilities of having this communication established. Then, over the years, Radio Liberty had an extremely important role in educating, I would say, the young generation of Georgians. Maybe today's spirit of freedom that is still inspiring them comes from there, and was sustained over the years because more recently the role of Radio Liberty and then Radio Free Europe has been to be part of the intellectual scene and the free thinking scene in Georgia.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, ma'am. Mr. Coffey or Ms.—Khidasheli?

Ms. KHIDASHELI: Yes.

Representative COHEN: Ah, thank you. Anything you would like to add concerning Radio Liberty?

Ms. KHIDASHELI: Just one sentence. When we talk about the Chinese influence operations in Georgia, or fighting propaganda, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was probably one of the most instrumental tools, and successful at the same time, in disclosing, investigating, and reporting about those malign activities in Georgia. In a very polarized, politically polarized media environment, there are only a handful of media outlets that stand truly independent and unbiased in their reporting. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty definitely is one of those.

Representative COHEN: Thank you.

Mr. Coffey, do you think the demise of Radio Europe/Radio Liberty for Europe is harmful to the prospects of the United States and Georgia having a democratic society in Georgia once again?

Mr. COFFEY: Yes. I do agree with that. In fact, I have written on how we should be expanding these programs and modernizing for the 21st century. These were very effective tools during the cold war. Now, I was speaking to someone who lived on the other side of the Iron Curtain during the cold war. He said, back then, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was cool. It was about, you know, Ford Mustangs, rock and roll, Marlboro Reds. [Laughs.] Now it is a bit stale, and it needs updating for the modern age. Also, I think we need to understand how people consume their information and media in the 21st century. I think we should think more creatively about different language services that we provide, to reach more local communities not only in the South Caucasus, but the broader Eurasian region.

Representative COHEN: How effective was USAID in Georgia?

President ZOURABICHVILI: Oh, that is a very big chunk of U.S. presence in Georgia. One can surely say that the whole health system, and education system, and agricultural development there, together with the European investments. Those three main fields were the essence of the presence of the Americans, and the USAID was very instrumental—

Representative COHEN: Healthcare, education, and what was the third one?

President ZOURABICHVILI: Agricultural development, education, and health.

Representative COHEN: Agriculture. That was—

President ZOURABICHVILI: What is remaining today is just a small part in the health sector, with the Lugar Institute, which is essential because if we are talking about the prevention of epidemics, viruses, Lugar has been central in Georgia and in the Caucasus.

Representative COHEN: The Georgian people were aware of that, and aware that that was United States aid?

President ZOURABICHVILI: They were very aware. You can go around Georgia in the smallest villages, and you see the stamps of USAID in different—where they have the equipment for agriculture or the schools.

Representative COHEN: Mr. Wilson is going to call my five minutes in about 10 seconds. Mr. Ivanishvili is a businessman. He does business, right? Does he do business with China? Does he make money out of these relationships with Iran, China, and Russia? Or is it just a philosophical thing?

President ZOURABICHVILI: The main characteristic of Mr. Ivanishvili's business is that it is completely non-transparent.

Representative COHEN: Mr. Coffey, do you have—

Ms. KHIDASHELI: Can I?

Representative COHEN: Please.

Ms. KHIDASHELI: If I can respond to that. Absolutely yes. There is evidence-based research available that proves that Mr. Ivanishvili is personally involved with the Chinese businesses. One of the very first cases that we investigated, starting in 2018, was of a very famous Chinese company, CEFC. I believe some of you

might remember it; it is the company whose CEO was arrested here at JFK carrying volumes of cash with him, bribing U.N. high officials. That is the company that holds some stakes in Georgia, and even Ivanishvili's offshore companies, where his name is shown—it is very transparent, it is all on the record—were linked.

This is how it all started. This is how bringing Georgia into Chinese orbit has started, with this huge deal in Poti, which is one of the seaports of Georgia. Ivanishvili linked up with this very famously corrupt Chinese company. Even after those guys were arrested here in New York, even after there was an investigation in different parts of the world, they still carry on and continue cooperating with them. That is not the only case, but that is one of the cases that is very well documented and investigated by us.

Representative COHEN: Thank you.

I yield back. Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Indeed, thank you very much.

We now proceed to Dr. Greg Murphy from North Carolina.

STATEMENT OF GREG MURPHY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM NORTH CAROLINA

Representative MURPHY: Thank you all for coming today. I just sit back and I am scrolling on my phone. I have to admit my ignorance just of what is—all that is going on. I just—I am sorry that you are having to go through it, but I applaud you that you are still pushing through it. Is there any evidence that the Russian or Chinese military has had anything to do with the Georgian military?

Ms. KHIDASHELI: We do not have direct, so far, fortunately. There is no direct cooperation between the two on a military level, Army-to-Army level. In 2020, when the former minister—former prime minister, came back to the government as a minister of defense, the very first procurement contracts were concluded with the—with another Chinese company that was later on blacklisted and sanctioned by the U.S. Government, Ukrainians, and lots of European governments. That was for the air defense systems. That is how it all started. There is cooperation at the military academy as well with the students. From the U.S. programs, we moved to the China programs.

Most importantly, when it comes to the national security issues and Chinese involvement, that will be what Luke mentioned with the surveillance cameras. We did a serious investigation into the case. There are hundreds of cameras, millions of dollars paid to the Chinese companies, all of them sanctioned by the U.S. Government—all of them. Every single one of them. The Georgian government keeps buying equipment from them and using against the protesters. These are the tools they use for identifying the decent, and then hunting them down, and arresting them using the AI installed in Chinese cameras that are used on the streets of Tbilisi.

For the last year, year and a half, the procurement has increased dramatically. Obviously, it is all China-sourced. We have them installed at the Ministry of Defense as well. Unfortunately, the army that is supposed to be going to NATO and cooperating with the U.S. Army, at the same time, is using Chinese—American-san-

tioned Chinese surveillance cameras installed at the Ministry of Defense.

Representative MURPHY: Interesting.

President ZOURABICHVILI: The field in which there are also very—increasingly links is the intelligence field, which there it has been growing extensively in the past two years. There is evidence of visits of FSB officials that are directly linked to Mr. Ivanishvili, who has been visiting Georgia back and forth without any limit—restrictions on the border, and is initially—the ex-prosecutor general that has been sanctioned by the United States. For his—because of his links with the FSB—has now become a Russian citizen and named Ivanov [sic; Romanov]—has changed his name.

Representative MURPHY: Has the unduly elected—

President ZOURABICHVILI: Romanov, sorry.

Representative MURPHY: —leader, has he been out in public much? I was just looking that, seemingly he now, and Putin and Xi, are into the regenerative medicine, living forever kind of thing.[Laughter.] Has he been out? I can just give him a little message. He is not going to live forever. The medicine's not there.

President ZOURABICHVILI: Well, he would love to.

Representative MURPHY: Yes.

Well, I will yield back. Thank you. Please persist.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Dr. Murphy.

We now proceed to Congressman Marc Veasey from Texas.

STATEMENT OF MARC VEASEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TEXAS

Representative VEASEY: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Madam President, I want to thank you for also being here today, just because the relationship between the U.S. and Georgia—we need it to be a strong relationship. We need Georgia to, obviously, remain an independent, legitimate republic that is recognized by the EU and the rest of the world. I want to thank you for—and your country—for your bravery.

I wanted to ask you—I do have a line of questions, but I did—there was something that I have been curious about that I wanted to ask you. How would, do you think, election observation—how would that be helpful in the type of situation that Georgia finds itself in now?

President ZOURABICHVILI: That is a question I like. [LAUGHS.] Because I think, and the last elections that we have had, the parliamentary elections that were rigged in big dimensions, with the support, the interference, and the technology that Russia provided, and propaganda, is something that we should be looking closely than we have been looking at. Because the same—not exactly the same, but adapted to each country—but the same strategy has been used and attempted against Romania, against Moldova. We will see what happens in other countries that are having elections. It is something that can be spread around to other countries.

I think that the tools that the Western democracies have to counter this type of rigging the elections are not efficient today. The classical observation missions that we have had over the past 30 years in Georgia are not able to detect today the type of sophisticated manipulation of elections that we have had. Where there was a use, for instance, of 3,000 call centers. That is something

that you cannot see when you go to any polling station. There are many, many things that were happening, the manipulation, the pressure on the people through their jobs, or through their family links, or through their medical expenses, because you control all the personal data. The head of the personal data agency, who was a woman, had been fired one year ago, so it is a long-term planning of rigging the elections.

Representative VEASEY: What can be done? Like, what do you think—since traditional observation may not be enough, what do you think can be done?

President ZOURABICHVILI: Well, first of all, we have—which has not been done—there was some attempt or ideas in the European Union to send a mission to study what has happened. And that never happened. We should look clearly, concretely at how elections are rigged in different cases, and devise new instruments to counter the rigging of elections. I cannot say in advance what would be the ideal observation mission, but what I can say that the means that we have today are no longer sufficient to counter these massive attacks that we have had—soft attacks.

Representative VEASEY: Let me ask you this in the brief time that I have: I am a co-sponsor of the MEGOBARI Act, which is designed to hold corrupt officials accountable while reaffirming U.S. support for the Georgian people. How do you think this legislation would be helpful to Georgia? How do you think that would make ordinary Georgians, you know, feel, as far as them having support, you know, from the U.S., and also how they are viewed from the European Union?

President ZOURABICHVILI: Well, if there is one thing in Georgia that is really inspiring people, it is a sense of justice or injustice. What they have not been seeing is from our partners outside, the feeling and the demonstration of the fact that people who are responsible directly for what is happening in the country, for these tragedies, and for this, really, suppression of all the freedoms, are not held accountable and are not responsible anywhere. Some limited sanctions have taken place. There is a feeling, generally in the population, that those people continue to benefit of their privileges. They continue to travel. They continue to amass huge sums of money.

What we have seen in the last weeks is internal feuds within the ruling party, where they are accusing each other of having stolen \$300 million, \$200 million, and asked to bring back part of this money to the party or to some pockets, I do not know, so all of that is very shocking for the normal citizen of Georgia. The normal citizen is wondering whether these very powerful partners of ours, the European Union and the United States, really cannot do anything more than what has been done until now.

Representative VEASEY: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Veasey.

We now proceed—we continue in Texas, okay? We have Congressman Jake Ellzey.

STATEMENT OF JAKE ELLZEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TEXAS

Representative ELLZEY: Thank you, Joe. Thank you for holding this hearing.

President Zourabichvili and Minister Khidasheli, thank you for being here, and, first, I would like to say: Watch out for yourself, because we know who the enemy is. Evil can never be eradicated. It can only be suppressed. If we take our feet off the neck of evil, it emerges stronger yet again. In 1994, we made a deal with the Russians and the Ukrainians that we would not allow them to be attacked. If they were, we would back them if they just gave up their nuclear weapons. In 2005, 2008, Georgia stood side by side with us when I was flying over the skies of Afghanistan, and I was flying over the skies of Iraq in my Super Hornet. You guys were right there with us, on a per capita basis, more than any other country. We are still right here with you.

It has been 30 years. It seems like yesterday since the Rose Revolution. You think you have got these hard-fought battles, but after 26 years in power, Vladimir Putin has shown that he is the enemy. The enemy only kills, steals, and destroys, and that is in the Bible. He is proving himself to do that, and his unnatural fascination, his obsession with Stalin, makes Georgia a mark. In 2008, when he was going to see—he was going to see what the countries of the free world would do if he started down this path, a shot heard round the world about what Vladimir Putin's true intentions were in his power, started in Georgia.

Then it went on from there, and it really does not matter what you see in the news. This is proof we have just a few members—but we are all very busy doing other things. I—as I apologized, and I apologize to you—I have been stepping out to do votes on the Appropriations Committee hearing right across. I am deeply interested in this, and I care deeply about your country. I do not have any questions today, and we can talk about the corruption. Ultimately, this is big evil versus good going after them. It looks a lot like 1938, 1939, and 1940 to me right now, with four nations with genocidal tendencies.

All these four nations—the Iranians, the North Koreans, the Russians, and the Chinese—are actively committing or have plans for genocide for the countries that they want to take over. What they are doing in Ukraine is not a war. It is a genocide. They have designs. They are doing false flags with Finland right now. They are claiming that Finland is going to attack them. The playbook is being heard over and over and over again. I am very proud that Europe is standing up the way they are. We need to keep in mind that Georgia has always been there for us. They are a Western-oriented country that we need to continue to support in any way we can.

Because when you are not paying attention, people like Putin gobble up small nations of small populations, but with a lot of spirit, because he is the enemy. I am not afraid to say that, because he has proven it. There are more than you might see up here, and there are more in Congress than you might see on any TV station that still believes in the ideals of freedom and democracy around the world. It does not have to look like ours. Ultimately, we believe in it, and we will support it, especially with Joe Wilson, who has

been a strong advocate. I mean, everywhere he goes. You want to know what we really think? Ask Joe Wilson.

We understand the cost of Vladimir Putin being able to pick off small nations. We do not want to see that. While some nations are members of NATO, we know what is coming, and we are paying attention to history. If we do not pay attention to history, the whole world will be engulfed again. Putin has to be stopped. Georgian Dream has to be stopped. I just want to say, with just a little time, that we are on your side. I think it will manifest itself in real ways, and so stay strong, but watch yourself, because we know what the enemy does.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Ellzey.

President ZOURABICHVILI: Thank you. If I may?

Co-Chairman WILSON: Yes, please.

President ZOURABICHVILI: Just react to that. I fully share what you said in 2008, that Russia was testing in Georgia the renewed military aggression that we had known from the Soviet times and before. For the first time, the new Russia was testing its military aggression in Georgia. In fact, after the aggression in Georgia, it revised its military strategy, some components of the military force, and some modernization. It was really a test case for Russia, and that is from this test case that they moved to Crimea, and then to 2022. What I think is happening today is that the military aggression in Ukraine has not worked in the way that Mr. Putin was expecting. In fact, he has suffered a defeat, militarily speaking, because three years and a half for the big Russian military, without succeeding to move but some kilometers, is not a success.

Without publicly admitting that, and continuing certainly their attempts to reduce Ukraine, they are looking at alternative strategies. Georgia is again the test case for the alternative strategy. The alternative strategy is, how do you capture a State without arms but with rigged elections, propaganda, some money, but not that is not the decisive form, and the proxy government that—

Representative ELLZEY: Georgia and Moldova are both suffering from that right now.

President ZOURABICHVILI: Both are in the same situation. Moldova saved itself, thanks to the diaspora, which we could not use because, despite all our efforts, we were not allowed to. I did not have the powers that Maia Sandhu had to open the precincts that we needed in the foreign countries, because our diaspora, which is one million more out of four million within Georgia, was not—practically not allowed to vote, because just 17,000 persons were allowed to vote. We were not saved by the diaspora. We were not saved by the constitutional court, like in Romania, because our constitutional court was already under the full control of the one-party system. This trilogy of rigging elections, propaganda, and proxy government is something that, if it works in Georgia to the end—and we are still resisting that—if it works, it will be used elsewhere. That is a given.

Representative ELLZEY: Well, I would just like to close by saying that evil is ruthless. We learned that—I mean, it has always been true. In World War II, that is the only way we won. They eat kind-

ness for a snack. They eat deals and negotiations for a snack. I just hope that the Western powers recognize how do you—how do you push back against that, without going to a worldwide conflagration? It has to happen, but kindness is not the path, and I just hope we do not have to redo this because we have forgotten what history has shown us.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Indeed, thank you so much, Congressman. Madam President, Defense Minister, senior fellow, I am on my five minutes. I would just want to—we could tell you the American people are with you, okay, but you can see it. You have got a Democrat, amazingly, a Democrat, a Republican—and Republicans standing together, and there—oh my God, and standing together, okay? I want to reiterate, the vote for MEGOBARI in the House of Representatives was 348 to 42, okay? There is no other bill that I am aware of that has that much support. It is just an automatic issue—in democratic societies, people do not always agree. We already know it is the worst system there is, except for all the others.

It is really unusual to have 90 percent support. That is what the American people truly believe, and why? Because we have been inspired by the people of Georgia. We want the people of Georgia to ultimately prevail. I really want to give credit to both of these gentlemen, that—it is just so inspiring to hear both of them understand what the issues are, and how we will be standing. Madam President, you are so correct. Indeed, war criminal Putin just miscalculated. He told his troops—he lied to them, can you believe it, where he told them to take their dress uniforms for the parade in Kyiv. Well, there was no parade. They did not make it, and they are not going to make it. The people of Ukraine are going to stand up.

Did he ever imagine that Sweden would join NATO? Two hundred years of neutrality, giving up, with extraordinary defense capabilities. Then the brave people of Finland? How incredible. He claimed he did not want to have NATO next door. Well, he has got it, 830 miles. He already had 120 in Norway, okay? Over and over again, the people of Georgia have been an inspiration to others, standing up. Then I am really grateful too that, indeed, NATO is standing firm, as never before. We see that President Trump stands firm. He sent Javelin missiles to help Ukraine stop war criminal Putin. He put American troops in Poland to stop war criminal Putin. He stopped Nord Stream 2 to stop the financing of war criminal Putin.

I am confident that President Trump will be working, as he successfully is. Then we have to put it in context, too, that now NATO is at 5 percent. Who would have ever imagined, and how and what that means for the people of Georgia, that NATO is more united than ever? Then who would ever have imagined that your next-door neighbors, okay, Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan, would be meeting in the Oval Office of the United States with the president of the United States to sign agreements for a pipeline? Now it is really pretty cool. It is called the Trump pipeline. The bottom line is that, again, so much of this has been an inspiration by the people of Georgia standing up, not giving up, and you have inspired your neighbors.

I am just very, very hopeful. Madam President, indeed, something the American people need to know more about the rigged elections in Georgia. With the rigged elections in Georgia, we know that the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the OSCE, and every independent organization pointed out that the elections were rigged.

I am glad you pointed out something that Americans can understand—and sadly, this has not been published—and that is the Georgians abroad were not able to vote. That the diaspora, and there are so many here today, and Georgian Americans are so prominent in our country. We saw in Moldova, because they did, Moldovans abroad were able to vote. That was the difference to stop the subversion by President Putin. Are there other examples that you can again verify how the elections were rigged and what can be done to address this in the future?

President ZOURABICHVILI: There were elections in Romania, where it was a different technology was used. It was through TikTok and social networks that the propaganda was. What we know about Moldova today, where we are going to see the next elections pretty soon, is that the Russians have opened bank accounts in Russia for Moldovan citizens that they cannot use because there are sanctions, and they cannot be used today. They promise them that as soon as they vote to overthrow the current government, they will open up these accounts and allow them to benefit from the sums of money that have been put in those accounts.

That is just one of the small, maybe, technologies that are being used, and there are as many as can invent the FSB services. They know very well, and that is something that we have to keep in mind, that all these countries from the former Soviet space—and I hate these words—[laughs]—but they have been studying these countries forever. They know the mentality. They know some of the habits, and they know these countries very well. They can adapt their strategies to each and every country.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Well, and, hey, as we conclude again, thank you. It is very perceptive that the military conquest that war criminal Putin thought he could achieve, he is not going to do it. Then he is going to use democracy against itself. Then people need to see that. Accept that, indeed, he failed in Moldova. He failed in Romania. Over and over again, we need to be ever vigilant. We know his failures in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

A final point, what a reminder today. There were 19, maybe 23 drones launched out of the puppet State of, again, another rigged election, Belarus, okay? Drones were launched over NATO territory and Poland today, and it is not an accident. It was over nearly 100 miles. The American people need to know this. This was not an incursion on the border. It was an intrusion into the country, and it was a test. Just as you had the testing of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. How can the world react? I am just confident—[laughs]—President Trump has had some not-friendly statements about Mr. Putin today.

That is going to be followed, I am confident, by sanctions, by secondary sanctions. It is going to be provided by Europe finally com-

ing together, with the encouragement of people like Admiral Margaret Kibben, to provide that there would be no sale or purchase of oil and gas from dictator war criminal Putin. What an incredible time in history. Every day, war criminal Putin, in my view, is mocking President Trump. He is insulting President Trump, and—but there will be consequences. As President Khamenei—or, as the Khamenei regime found out, there are consequences.

If there is no further, we shall adjourn. Again, God bless the—hey, God bless the Republic of Georgia.

[Sounds gavel.] Let us get a picture. [Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 3:51 p.m., the hearing ended.]

Additional Submission for the Record

A LETTER TO HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

It is our privilege to submit to the Commission this note for consideration at the hearing scheduled on September 10, 2025. Our written testimony is prepared to express great concern regarding the future of Georgia and hope for your support for Georgia's democracy. We would like to thank you for your efforts to this end, as the rapid deterioration of the human rights and the rule of law situation in Georgia mandates swift action of the international community. The Helsinki Commission has been at the forefront of these efforts, already organizing a second hearing on Georgia.

Equally important, the current direction of the Georgian Dream[GD]-led government is contrary to U.S. interests. The Georgian Dream party, led by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who amassed his wealth in Russia in the 1990's, assumed control over Georgia in 2012 with a great promise of democratic reforms and the rule of law. However, Ivanishvili's true intentions have become clear over time and have accelerated in recent years toward consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Massive election fraud perpetrated by the ruling Georgian Dream party during the parliamentary elections of October 2024, followed by a decision of the Georgian Dream government to put Georgia's EU membership process on hold, have led Georgia into a deep political crisis. Given that the opposition refused to accept the election results as legitimate and did not take up seats in the Parliament, Georgia now has a one-party parliament, with 89 members instead of 150. Both the opposition parties and protest movement demand new, free and fair parliamentary elections as the only way out of this political impasse. Protest rallies have continued for close to 300 days despite a violent crackdown by the state's security apparatus on demonstrators, the imposition of fines and jail terms on hundreds of activists for "administrative" offenses [misdemeanors], the arrest and imprisonment of over 50 civic activists on criminal charges, and, most recently, criminal prosecution and imprisonment of the majority of the country's opposition leaders.

Over the last several months, the Georgian Dream government has intensified repressions, using a parliamentary "investigative commission", created in violation of the Georgian Constitution and Parliamentary Rules of Procedure, as its central tool of political persecution. Nearly all leaders of the democratic political forces, including the founders and leaders of the 'Lelo for Georgia' party, we, Mamuka Khazaradze and Sadri Japaridze, have been arrested and sentenced to 8-month prison terms for refusing to testify before this illegitimate, politicized committee.

In a tactical move, aimed at sowing division in the opposition ranks, the illegitimate government has decided to selectively treat political prisoners and "pardoned" the two of us on September 5, 2025. The move demonstrates blatant disregard for the principles of the rule of law, as six other persons, including several political leaders, remain in jail on charges that are identical to the ones used by the regime to imprison us. These politicians, together with dozens of other Georgian citizen-activists and journalists who were sentenced on fabricated charges to several years in prison, are political prisoners. No justice can be seen until all of them, including the brave journalist, Mzia Amaglobeli, are set free.

But it seems that the government has no intention of backing off from its attempts to destroy the Georgian democracy. The most recent versions of Georgia's "Foreign Agents" legislation [enacted in 2024] have entered into force, so soon we may witness more criminal prosecutions against NGO's, civic groups, the media, and educational institutions. As all leaders of leading Georgian NGO's are questioned by the prosecutor's office on what is labeled as their "subversive activities", it is clear that the pressure on them will only increase.

A new law on political parties makes it extremely easy for the government to declare any political party illegitimate and ban it. The conclusions of the illegitimate investigative commission of the Parliament create grounds to move forward with the

process, which will ban any opposition party of the government's choice. New censorship laws have also been instrumentalized against independent media. It appears that the objective of the Georgian government is the speedy elimination of political opposition, independent media, civic groups, and NGO's, as well as all independent actors in political and social structures.

At the same time, the Georgian Dream government is showing clear signs of weakness. Recent high-profile resignations within Bidzina Ivanishvili's closest circle, including the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Chief of State Security, the Chairman of the Georgian Dream party and former Prime Minister [Irakli Garibashvili], and several other sanctioned officials, show that the regime is vulnerable to international pressure. Resignations of these individuals are evidence that sanctions are effective.

Local elections are scheduled to take place on October 4. Out of four political parties that passed the threshold for parliamentary representation in the October 2024 elections, two have decided to boycott the upcoming local elections. 'Lela for Georgia' and the party of former GD Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, have decided to participate in these upcoming elections, joining forces. We believe that the election process is an important battleground that needs to be used to weaken the ruling regime, even if we have no expectation of a free or fair process.

With the singular few exceptions, all Western countries have stopped any significant interaction and cooperation with Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream government. Many individual EU countries as well as the US have imposed unilateral sanctions. In addition, the EU halted Georgia's EU membership accession process, and all formats of cooperation with the EU are frozen. Potential suspension of the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens to enter the Schengen zone countries is looming ahead, as the GD government refuses to implement the measures demanded by the EU to retain visa-free movement. Following the cancellation of the US-Georgia Strategic Cooperation Framework last year, the relationship between Bidzina Ivanishvili's regime and the U.S. has been deteriorating. It is noteworthy that, while deploying harsh anti-Western and anti-US rhetoric, the Georgian Dream government is desperate for any semblance of international recognition and legitimacy.

Georgian Dream's efforts to thwart any interest it sees as a risk to itself and its agenda go beyond the political sphere. Similarly, GD has sought to undermine economic and investment activities that might favor the US over Russia and China. By way of example, GD actively and—unfortunately—successfully undermined the development of the long anticipated project on the Black Sea-Anaklia Deep Sea Water Port, led by the Georgian and US investors. The Anaklia Port project, seen as strategically vital to the United States for opening the middle corridor of trade between Central Asia, with its wealth of rare earth and strategically important materials, and the West, has been a priority for the United

States for a long time. It has been demonstrated by investment of billions of US taxpayers' money into the connectivity projects related to the Middle Corridor. During the first term of President Donald Trump, his administration explicitly supported the Anaklia project given its strategic interest to the U.S. It soon became clear, however, that Russia strongly opposed such a large, strategic U.S. and European project so close to its borders, and it muscled the Georgian Dream government, initially supportive of the project, into opposing it. Ivanishvili personally torpedoed the port through a series of bad-faith actions against us, undermining international investor confidence. As the founders and primary investors in the Anaklia Development Consortium, with American and European partners, we immediately became a target of Ivanishvili's government, which relentlessly pursued legal prosecutions against us in 2019–2021.

Claiming it still wants to build the project, the GD government announced the award of the investor rights to a sanctioned, Chinese State corporation [CCCC] over a year ago, but has failed to make any significant progress in building the port. These actions have put on hold Georgia's chances for a serious role in the Middle Corridor and thrown the whole Middle Corridor transit concept into doubt. All of this serves Russia's and China's interests in blocking U.S. and European participation in the control of energy and freight transportation through the Middle Corridor. Our goal is to reverse this and return the U.S. presence in this strategically important geopolitical project.

AMERICA'S INTERESTS ARE AT RISK

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has seen the strategic importance of the Southern Caucasus, including Georgia. The U.S. has long recognized the geopolitical and economic importance of vibrant democracies in the region. President Trump's Administration's recent efforts to stabilize the conflict between

Armenia and Azerbaijan are one example of this. Similarly, every U.S. Administration since Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union in 1991 has actively endorsed the mutual interests between the U.S., the EU, and Georgia.

The GD has claimed for a long time that its relationship with the U.S. would change for the better under President Trump, while at the same time increasing its anti-American rhetoric. It seems that these were just empty promises, as there have been no high-level meetings between the Georgian Dream government and the Trump Administration. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, honorable members of the Senate and House from the Republican party, and the former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Robin Dunnigan, have all described the Georgian Dream government as hostile to the United States.

The bi-partisan "MEGOBARI Act," which both sanctions the Georgian Dream regime and supports Georgia's democracy, was adopted by the House of Representatives in a bi-partisan vote of 349–42. In the Senate, the bill was jointly introduced by Senator Risch [R-ID], the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Ranking Minority Member Shaheen [D-NH]. We have been following with great anticipation the progress as the bill is considered by the U.S. legislators. Its speedy adoption would be a great act of support for the people of Georgia and our democracy.

Georgia has embarked on its uneasy path to build a modern democratic State, a close ally of the U.S., EU member countries, and the free world, upon declaring its independence from the USSR in 1991. The support the United States has given Georgia over the past 34 years has been vital for Georgia's statehood and democracy, and the well-being of the Georgian citizens. As Georgia faces a critical juncture of its modern history, your support is as critical as ever.

Please, accept the expression of our highest regard for the esteemed members of the Commission.

On behalf of the 'Lela for Georgia' Party
Mamuka Khazaradze—Chairman
Japaridze—Chairman, Political Council
September 9, 2025





The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency, by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing provisions of the Helsinki Accords.

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