

Georgian Dream's Escalating Crackdown On Dissent



FEBRUARY 11, 2026

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Georgian Dream's Escalating Crackdown on Dissent

February 11, 2026

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 2:02 p.m. to 3:15 p.m., Room 2358-A, Rayburn House Office Building, Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. NISHANOV: [In progress]—because of the weather conditions. Unfortunately, subject of—the subject of today's briefing, the Georgian Dream government, decided to take credit for that. Unless they can actually have some control over the weather, there is no credit to be taken. We have reassembled here, in the full—it is the same contingent of experts. Truly, this is an amazing panel of stars and experts on Georgia. Let us just dive into why we are here.

If you know anything about Georgia, if you know—if you met Georgians, you know, Georgians are people who are quietly confident about their role in the history of human civilization, but also fiercely adamant about the future of their nation and people. That future, to them, to the vast majority of them, according to all the polls that we have seen, is in the West. That is what makes what is happening in Georgia right now a tragedy, because the government of Georgia that came to power in an election that was, if you are being diplomatic, marred by major inconsistencies, is pulling the country away from that path.

Georgian Dream, the ruling party that is the ruling party in Georgia, has plunged the country into its worst human rights crisis in the last thirty years. This is probably since its independence. They have passed more than 20 new laws and regulations that expand State power to suppress dissent and strip the judiciary of its independence. The crackdown has swept up civil society, journalists, and political opposition. Authorities have frozen the bank accounts of organizations providing legal aid, arrested journalists, and summoned opposition figures to sham proceedings—jailing them for refusing to show up to these trials, sham trials. If you are someone who has been following Georgia, the Georgia of today is completely unrecognizable to someone who saw Georgia even five years ago, ten years ago. At a time, ten years ago, five years ago, there was a sense of optimism, there was a sense of direction, there was a sense of confidence in the future of Georgia. Unfortunately, sadly, it is not there today.

We are here today to talk about that, to talk about how we got where we are right now, and to talk about what potential solutions could be there. Georgia is one of very few

countries where the interests of Georgian people and U.S. Government fully align. This is the prism through which we are going to look at the developments in Georgia. To do that, I will introduce our distinguished panel today. I have asked each of them to cover certain aspects of it. We have picked these experts because they bring different views on what's happening in Georgia and how this could be resolved.

First, we have Laura Thornton. She is a senior director for global democracy programs at McCain Institute, where she leads—and I really appreciate this—where she leads efforts to support Senator McCain's legacy for standing for freedom. Previously, she was senior vice president at the German Marshall Fund, where she led efforts to support civil society across Europe, including Georgia, because Georgia is Europe. She served as director of global programs at International IDEA, and spent more than 20 years overseas with the National Democratic Institute, where she worked across Asia and, again, in Georgia, on elections, political parties, and countering disinformation. She holds an MBA from Princeton University, and she pursued graduate studies at Oxford University, earning her B.A. from Northwestern University.

We have Olesya Vartanyan, who is currently working on her Ph.D. at George Mason University. She has 15 years of experience conducting field research and producing policy analysis on armed conflicts, foreign and security policy, with a particular focus on the South Caucasus. She has worked with leading international organizations and think tanks, including OSCE, the International Crisis Group, and Freedom House. She began her career in journalism, where she reported on wars and conflicts in Georgia for The New York Times, RF/RL, and others. She has received several honors, most recently, the International Young Women's Peace Award.

Last but not least, we have Dr. Claire Kaiser, who is head of strategy and senior managing director for Eurasia at McLarty Associates, where she helps clients navigate policy issues throughout Eastern Europe and Eurasia. She also leads the firm's marketing and external communications efforts and other projects. She is a historian of Russia and Eurasia. She is also a professor at Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies. Importantly, she is the author of a book on the politics of nationality in Georgia. She has lived and worked in Georgia, Russia, and other countries, and she speaks Georgian, which is a rare feat. I mean, it is a very difficult language, so she—so thank you for that. Thank you for speaking Georgian. We appreciate that. Claire earned her Ph.D. in modern Russian history at the University of Pennsylvania, an M.A. in Eurasian, Russian, and Eastern European studies, and a B.S. in foreign service from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. She is also a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

With that, Laura, I would just ask you to talk a little bit about how we ended up where we are, and what is going on right now in terms of civil society, human rights, and everything else in Georgia.

Ms. THORNTON: Thank you so much. It is such a pleasure to be here with so many familiar faces out there. I really want to give my greatest thanks to the Helsinki committee because this hearing could not be more timely or relevant. As Bakhti said, I have been asked to reflect briefly on the trajectory. I am going to focus on the trajectory of the ruling Georgian Dream regime, and its rising autocratic repression in Georgia—how we got to where we are today.

I have, sadly, had a front row seat to Georgia's decline. I moved there in 2014 to lead the National Democratic Institute. It was just after the successful and democratic transfer

of power from the former government of the United National Movement to the Georgian Dream coalition, which was a diverse coalition of parties across the ideological spectrum that united to defeat UNM, and it was really an exciting time. It was filled with promises of reform and renewal. Georgia was hosting and leading the Open Government Partnership. We were working in parliament on a whole slew of democratic reforms. The country was, you know, speed-racing forward with their EU and NATO membership process.

I have to say, though, that this period was short-lived. Many people think that Georgia's democratic decline is very recent and rapid. I would argue, actually, the signs took place quite a while ago. First, there was a fatal flaw from the very start of Georgian Dream's role. That flaw is Russian-made oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. He was the—he is the person, the purse, behind the formation of Georgian Dream, served as its first prime minister. Ivanishvili has never, ever been committed to democratic principles or processes. More importantly, has always been tied to Russia, the country that made him rich.

Second, that broad coalition that I described started to crumble 10 years ago, in 2015, as the more pro-democratic, pro-Western parties started to peel away. Third, almost immediately, we started to see illiberal gravitation, starting as it often does with Russian-lubricated narratives and disinformation about minorities, women, and ethnonationalism, and anti-Western rhetoric, quickly moving on to attacks on civil society, enemies of the State, media, and institutions that serve as a check on the government.

The Russian invasion, full-scale invasion, of Ukraine, however, I think, represents Georgia's final break from the West and full descent into authoritarianism. Georgia quickly came to Russia's aid, not Ukraine's. They still serve as a key sanctions-evasion route for Russia, which is really ironic given that Ukraine and Georgia have a lot in common, and Georgia is occupied 20 percent by Russia. Georgian leaders endlessly attacked Ukraine and Zelensky, and were pretty quiet on Russia.

Then they turned their attacks to Europe and the United States, framing us as hostile actors, accusing us of being part of a global war party that is dragging Georgia into a second front, and accusing Europe, in particular, of what they called "liberal fascism." In contrast, Georgian Dream openly calls China and Iran their friends, allies, and partners. There is a photo, for example, of the Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze standing next to Hamas in Tehran. The Georgian Dream has really flipped the script on who Georgia's friends are and who Georgia's foes are.

I am happy to discuss the 2024 elections. I have observed every election in Georgia for more than ten years. Let us just say they—in the view of an election observer—were flawed beyond repair and were riddled with intimidation and other malfeasance. Georgian Dream pushed its way into power, immediately pulled out of the EU accession process, and even introduced a ban on political opposition. Georgians have protested every day since. They have been met with violence. They have been arrested. Civic leaders, journalists, and politicians are in jail, including the journalist Mzia Amaglobeli, who the McCain Institute is fighting for her release. There are 121 political prisoners in Georgia. Many are my friends.

Now, today, in terms of what is happening, it is an endless weekly barrage of new legislation, all violating international and constitutional provisions and obligations to protect free speech and assembly. I can go into great detail about these laws, but as an example, there is the so-called sidewalk law, where, in fact, one man, I think, was fined an equivalent of \$113,000 U.S. for standing on a sidewalk during a protest. You cannot wear a face mask to protect yourself from gas. They even have the ability to imprison

minors. They have criminalized—or, they are promising to criminalize anyone who declares the government illegitimate, in other words, free speech. Detaining people for verbal insults. They have given the police the power to preemptively detain people they think are suspicious.

They have amended the law on grants that will forbid the receipt of foreign money to such a degree that if I want to send a birthday present to my Georgian stepchildren, it might be criminal because they protest every evening. Just this week, they did a collective prosecution of eight political leaders for very vague sabotage charges and speaking negatively about Georgia to foreigners. GD recognizes something that is true. Civil society, independent media, and the Georgian people are the last bulwark of Georgian democracy. They want to extinguish this, and they want to put the final nail in the coffin. Every day, the legislation is attempting to do that.

Now, I know I have exceeded my time, but I just want to quickly put this into a broader context with three points. One, Georgia is part of a broader Russia strategy to destroy democracy and pull frontline nations into its sphere. This is not original. We have seen this playbook before. Two, Georgia has a domino effect. Georgia will affect security in the Black Sea. It will affect countries like Armenia, which are struggling now to get out from under the wing of Russia after all these years. It sends a message not only to Russia but to other autocrats that the West is not defending democracy. That is certainly not helped by the U.S.'s cut of USAID. Finally, Georgian Dream made a calculation on the full-scale war in Ukraine. Their calculation, sadly, might have been correct, that the West was not going to come to defense, and Russia would win. What we do in Ukraine has had, and frankly will have, an impact on political regimes like the Georgian Dream.

I will end there. I have other thoughts about what the U.S. Should be doing, but I will save that maybe for another round.

Thanks.

Mr. NISHANOV: Laura, thank you so much. I should point out this is a congressional briefing, therefore the audience will have an opportunity to ask questions once all of our experts deliver their remarks. If you are thinking about something, please feel free to do that. We will have a microphone over there, so just letting you know.

I have asked Olesya, and I think the timing of this is actually fascinating because we just had the vice president of the United States in the region. Again, to someone who follows the region, it is a shocking development that he went to Azerbaijan and Armenia but skipped Georgia. It is a massive, massive, massive change in our approach to the region. I have asked Olesya to talk about the regional dynamics, and how Georgia's just rapid descent into this situation with human rights and everything that is happening at home affects the region and security, and our United States interests there as well.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Absolutely. Thank you so much for hosting with a timely briefing and for the invitation to contribute. In my introductory speech, I will focus not just on the regional dimension, if you allow, but also on the efforts to introduce some sort of a reset in Georgia and U.S. relations. I have been specializing in negotiations, and this is definitely something where I would definitely want to have an input, if you allow.

Well, I was here a year and a half ago. We were discussing ways the U.S. could support peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Back then, there were so many skeptics who said the U.S. could do nothing, and the conflict is too complex, they argued, and Americans have no direct stake in the region. Well, with everything that is going on, with vice

president traveling to the South Caucasus, with the accords still here at the White House, well, oh, boy, were they wrong.

Today, you may hear similar skeptical statements about the situation in Georgia. I am here to argue for proactive U.S. involvement in efforts to resolve Georgia's political crisis. To share several elements that are essential when planning a diplomatic intervention aimed at resetting the relations. Georgia is a small country, but it has a very active society that has gone through many turbulent events—civil war, Russian invasion, and revolution, to name a few. No matter how difficult those periods were, Georgian society emerged stronger, more resilient, and ready to consolidate its independence and move the country and the whole region forward.

That said, the current crisis in Georgia is not unique in Georgia's modern history. Over the past decades, there have been moments when dialog was necessary to resolve political deadlock. Sometimes that happened through snap elections or direct negotiations between political forces inside the country. At other times, foreign mediators were needed, as we saw with the EU involvement following the previous parliamentary electoral crisis. Well, with experience, they offer important lessons. One of these key ones is no process will succeed without a real prospect of equal access to power for all political groups.

Politicians, civil society representatives, and others can spend endless hours debating amendments to electoral laws, lowering the threshold, reforming procedures, and adjusting technical details. None of that matters if the ruling leadership shows no willingness to share power, or even readiness to step down if it loses the election. There is no point in entering a political process if there is no credible path to changing power through peaceful means. This is true for Georgia and for many other places. Members of Georgia Dream should understand that they will continue facing instability if they do not demonstrate readiness for a fair political process in which they could, in fact, lose.

Then here I am getting to another lesson learned from Georgia's recent past. No process can succeed without a strong external guarantor. Several years ago, that role was played by the European Union, which leveraged Georgia's EU integration prospects as part of its conditionality. Today, we have a Georgian Dream leadership that has openly declared it will not pursue that path anytime soon. The United States is well positioned to play a role in this situation. The sanctions related to Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili are one potential lever to move the process forward. Sanctions are already in place. They clearly affect the founder of Georgian Dream. They should be used strategically in support of pushing a real political process in Georgia.

Any basic textbook on sanctions will tell you they are most effective when complemented by diplomacy. Without diplomatic followup, sanctions can backfire, cornering their targets, which prompts them to strike back at the most vulnerable. In the Georgian case, this is opposition activists, civil society representatives, journalists, and others. The involvement of an external guarantor is especially important in today's Georgia reality, where political actors struggle even to imagine shaking each other's hands.

Then, here I will get to the third key element for resolving the Georgian crisis. Well, no process will succeed if the issue of trust is not addressed. The last two years have been extremely difficult for Georgians. Highly controversial laws have been adopted. Dozens have gone through prisons, and many still remain there. People have lost their jobs and careers within the Georgian bureaucracy. Many have left the country. I continue to learn about more talented individuals moving away from their homeland because they see no future there, or face the real risk of ending up behind bars.

Georgia is a small nation where almost everyone is either a relative, a classmate, or a friend of a friend. When the crackdown like the one we are witnessing takes place, it affects the entire society, no matter what political preferences one may have. The trust problem will have to be addressed through public investigations, amnesties, and other carefully designed transitional mechanisms. Without deliberate trust-building efforts, no political process will hold. Well, when laying all of this, one might say, this is too complex for the U.S. to handle. I would argue the current administration has little choice. Yes, it has much on its plate—the war in Ukraine, the crisis in Middle East, upcoming mid-terms. We understand that, but without meaningful contribution to a political resolution, no reset in U.S.-Georgia relations will be sustainable.

If the roots of—if the roots of the crisis are not addressed, Georgia will continue to cycle from one political crisis to another, growing weaker and more vulnerable to external pressure and dependence. I am not sure that this is the country and this is the Georgia that serves anyone's interest, either in the region, in the South Caucasus, or even here in Washington. Well, I will probably stop here. Then I will be ready to engage in the discussion, and thank you once again for inviting me to make my contribution.

Mr. NISHANOV: Olesya, thank you so very much. I think one of the most important things that—we talk about, but I think it is important to say it explicitly—we care about Georgia because we care about Georgian people. We want to make sure, as you said, Olesya, that Georgian people have an opportunity to express their political will, and their votes matter, and the process is fair and free. Ultimately, it is about Georgian people. As I said in my opening remarks, I do believe that the interests of Georgian people, the United States national security, and other economic interests, and everything else, actually converge nicely. I think in supporting Georgian people and their aspirations, we support the interests of the United States.

Which is a nice segue to Dr. Kaiser's remark about—I have asked her to talk about, given the complex situation that we have, and sort of lack of attention to Georgia that we are seeing, what are some of the ways that the United States can nudge the country to move forward? The status quo is not sustainable. How do we move beyond the status quo to ensure that the interests of Georgian people are fully protected and supported?

Please.

Ms. KAISER: Well, thank you, Bakhti. Thank you to the Commission for convening this very timely panel, even if we had to try again due to the weather. I am honored to be here today, and hope to provide at least some new ideas, potentially, for, on the U.S. side, what we can do to help Georgia, given that, as Bakhti aptly said, the status quo is not going to solve anything for anyone.

I am addressing you today as a historian of Georgia and the Caucasus, but I am really attempting to focus my remarks on the future. In particular, what the U.S. Government can do with regard to Georgia policy, for all the reasons that have been noted previously. My esteemed fellow panelists have described in detail the immense challenges faced by Georgians today. We have seen Georgians take to the streets and protest on a daily basis for more than a year, at great risk to, you know, their personal lives, at great cost in some circumstances. Let us not forget that they are still out on the streets as we speak.

Moreover, this Commission is well aware of the extent to which U.S.-Georgia relations have deteriorated over the past several years. You know, of course, it has intensified

over the past year and a half or so, but this is not a new phenomenon, necessarily. This is definitely exacerbated since the October 2024 parliamentary elections that Laura spoke about, and the corresponding measures taken by Georgian Dream that both Laura and Olesya described in detail. The suspension of the 2009 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Charter in November 2024 as one policy response has been notable, as well as the imposition, shortly thereafter, of U.S. sanctions against Ivanishvili and other key enablers of the Georgian Dream's crackdown and further erosion of democracy and human rights in the country.

It is worth noting, I think, that since coming into office, President Trump's administration has kept these measures intact, while injecting an otherwise, I think, unforeseen energy and focus into the Caucasus region, writ large. I think that probably caught most people by surprise, to be honest. As we speak today, and as others have noted, the vice president is wrapping up a visit to both Yerevan and Baku, the first sitting U.S. vice president to ever visit Armenia and the seniormost U.S. official to visit Azerbaijan in decades. The visit, of course, demonstrates the priority the administration is placing on the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, announced last year during a White House meeting between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, and the concurrent elevation of U.S. relations with both countries.

While, of course, much remains to be determined regarding the implementation of the TRIPP project, as well as broader contours of Armenia-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish normalization, what is clear is that the U.S. is making a strategic choice to increase its engagement in the Caucasus regions at this precise moment. Of course, noticeably, and even glaringly, absent from this new U.S. policy vigor in the Caucasus is Georgia. Once the U.S.'s steadfast partner in the region, a model democratic and market reformer, who fought alongside U.S. forces, and whose territory remains to this day 20 percent occupied by Russia, the Georgian government has chosen to recuse itself from this profound positive political and geopolitical transformation underway in the Caucasus region. Armenia and Azerbaijani rapprochement presents a new opportunity not just for those two countries, but for the broader region in the Caspian and Black Sea region, and U.S. engagement and strategic interests throughout.

Some have discussed the punitive measures against Georgian Dream officials and their enablers to date. I mean, we could go on about what those look like. Unfortunately, however, they have not changed the behavior of those it has targeted, even if such measures, from a punitive perspective, are absolutely warranted. In any discussion about additional tools in the toolkit, I think, with regard to sanctions, you know, the objective is important to keep in mind. Punitive has its place, but if we are trying to actually change behavior and improve conditions in Georgia for the sake of the Georgian people, we need to, I think, think a little bit more creatively about what that toolkit looks like and how they are applied.

Congressional initiatives such as the MEGOBARI Act, with which I suspect people are quite familiar since it originated from this Commission, correctly widened the geopolitical aperture of the stakes here to include not just Russia but also, very importantly, as Laura mentioned, China and Iran, which is important to keep in sight here. Unfortunately, it has yet to be passed, despite considerable bipartisan and bicameral support. I think these should remain policy tools for the U.S., both in the executive as well as in Congress, to consider vis-à-vis Georgian officials and enablers, absent a drastic course correction on their part. Of course, the EU and the U.K. are considering comparable measures for their part as well, and that remains, I think, a parallel track.

You know, keep the sort of punitive sanctions options in sight, of course, given that that is the toolkit we have in the U.S. foreign policy and economic toolkit, but I would also encourage us to think of this challenge not just in bilateral U.S.-Georgia terms, but in regional ones. I would welcome Olesya, in particular's comments on this front. I think Central Asia provides a compelling model in this regard. A decade ago, the U.S. launched the C5+1 platform with the five governments of Central Asia to facilitate regional integration and U.S. engagement therein. While, of course, bilateral relations and the associated nuances with each of the C5 and the U.S. remain, the platform is robust and gaining momentum, as we saw in November with the summit in Washington.

U.S. policymakers could conceive of a similar initiative emanating from TRIPP, and giving it a bit more, maybe, staying power. Something like the C3, for lack of a better word, which could solidify a U.S. stake in the integration and collaboration across the South Caucasus for the longer term. This is not a reset. This is not a reset with Georgia. This is trying to find a way to engage with them on a broader regional, I think, security, regional integration, and regional economic platform, which ultimately should benefit not just the Georgian people but the broader region. I think it will allow us, then, in parallel, to figure out the right, I think, U.S.-Georgia domestic issues and ways to carry out some of the initiatives that Olesya described.

This has a congressional component as well, potentially. You, of course, have a demonstrated track record of encouraging the administration, both the current one and previous ones, to apply a more holistic regional lens to adjacent issues. I am thinking here, Black Sea security, integration, and things of that sort. We could see a similar concept here, alongside developing, again, I wish there were a different term here, a Caucasus Caucus, not confining it just to a bilateral, you know, U.S.-country sort of structure here, but looking at the region as a whole, trying to get some long-term kind of creative thinking here across the board. This could complement any administration action around an expanded TRIPP and C3 format, again, with a long-term in mind.

In conclusion, Georgian history is long. Its people are resilient. Ultimately, Georgia's future will be determined by Georgia, not by Washington. Still, at this moment in time, in February 2026, we are seeing an unusual and unforeseen dynamism in the Caucasus region, including with a U.S., you know, element in it. We should at least be open to thinking creatively about a regional approach to capitalize on this opportunity, in hopes that the interests of the people of Georgia and the people of the U.S. could be best served by these developments in the long term. I think that is probably a good jumping-off point for questions.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you so much. You can see why we selected these particular members of—witnesses, because they bring this holistic approach to what can be done, what is happening, and what can be done about Georgia. I am going to do rapid kind of just questions to each one of you, and then, please, anyone, if you have questions, right there, a microphone. Introduce yourselves, and please ask your questions.

Laura, you have talked about the sanction evasion, how Georgia is helping with that, vis-à-vis Ukraine—Russia, and helping Russia vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. If you could talk about that. Olesya, a question for you. If U.S. were to engage in some sort of conversation, you would talk about a reset. What are the interests of the United States? Because, I mean, we know this administration is very focused on very specific and tangible things, economic outcomes, I think, take priority over everything else. What can Georgia offer to the United States? Claire, a question for you. Can you talk a little bit

about the role of Georgia vis-à-vis TRIPP? I mean, what—how are they—is it—are they competing with TRIPP? Is it a separate thing? Or can they integrate? If you could talk about that, I would appreciate that.

Laura, please begin.

Ms. THORNTON: Yes. We see that Georgia, in many ways, is serving as a sanctions evasion route. A lot of countries, by the way—we are not naïve here—have continued to do business with Russia. Georgia is not alone in that regard. However, I would just like to quickly move beyond sanctions. I will come back to it. In that it is not just that it was a wringing of hands, like, you know, we are a poor country. We are very dependent on Russia. We need to continue to trade. That is one thing. They took several actions that changed the dynamic that had existed in Georgia for some time, resuming flights with Russia. The kind of people that they allowed to come into Russia versus the kind of people they did not. For example, Russian dissidents or democratic allies from Russia are not allowed. You know, Lavrov's daughter or niece getting married, allowed. You know, it goes beyond just—in terms of their cooperation with Russia, it goes beyond just the sanctions.

Also, there has been some excellent reporting, I think it was by a journalist from Finland, who was also talking about repurposing certain equipment in the Black Sea to send to Russia. I just heard—just read today, and I am sure someone here can clarify, that they are going to sanction one of the ports in Georgia for the sanction's evasion. There are movements to try to take action against what is happening. It just goes it—I think it shocks many Georgians, who naturally feel a sisterly affection with Ukraine, understanding, also, as an occupied country, that we have all said. I think it shocked many Georgians to see which side their government was on after the full-scale invasion. I do not think the Georgian economy is propping up Russia the way, say, India, China, or other bigger trading partners. It does symbolize sort of where they are aligned. I think it is part of a broader shift in Russia's foreign policy outlook.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Well, usually people speak about some immediate things, you know, that the U.S. can receive from Georgia. I will not be new in that sense. I mean, Georgia has been a very important place for transport corridors for a very long time. Then, even with the development of trade between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and definitely a huge contribution to not just South Caucasus but others as well. Georgia will remain very important. In that sense, Georgia definitely has things to offer with very administration. this is—like, has to do with the existing roads, but also the seaport that we—that often gets into the discussion, and others.

I would say that there is something—and then this is what I was trying to say during my introductory remarks—that we probably also need to look from the perspective of even the current U.S. administration's engagement with Armenia and Azerbaijan. We see that President Trump is very proud of the achievements of last year. That is why vice president was in the region. We hope that it will continue successfully. None of these can be sustainable for the longer term if Georgia remains weak, destabilized, and dependent on external actors. We know it, you know? Like a country like this, even in the South Caucasus, we had Armenia that was very—that has been becoming more and more dependent on Russia, exactly because of its conflict with Azerbaijan. Then for always years, even when discussing, like, reforms in Georgia and all different programs, we always looked at Armenia and Azerbaijan and said, no, it is not going to work, you know?

With Armenia and Azerbaijan, they know better than anyone what it means to have a neighbor next to you in this small region that is constantly posing a threat. In that sense, if the current U.S. administration is serious about, like, a longer-term stability and development, and then success in the South Caucasus, and I would say Central Asia as well, it should definitely engage with Georgia. Then, again, not just do it, like a one-day deal. It will have to be a very complicated and intensive process that will have to stay in the hands of Georgians. The U.S. has a very important leverage there, and then definitely has an interest in engaging.

Ms. KAISER: Building off a little bit of what Olesya was talking about with regard to TRIPP, I mean, I think there is the sort of formal definition of what TRIPP is, and then there is the sort of symbolic and potential there. Of course, physically speaking, TRIPP does not touch Georgia. You know, in a literal sense. I think it is really the pathway that it is intended to provide in terms of not just improving connectivity between Armenia and Azerbaijan and overcoming, you know, decades of challenges in that regard, but using that as the first of, hopefully, many building blocks, not just for, I think, increased engagement between those two countries but also bridging kind of throughout the middle corridor.

The middle corridor concept is trans-Caspian. You know, it is bringing the Caucasus and Central Asia together in many ways. It is only at its most effective if it actually includes all parties. [LAUGHS.] A weak Georgia, as Olesya indicated, means that the sort of the TRIPP concept, the middle corridor concept, just does not work. It is not sort of reaching its maximum potential. I think if the U.S. is going to engage on this sort of early stage initiative with regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan, it can only really achieve its maximum impact if it accounts for, you know, having a strong Georgia in partnership with that, and that kind of broader geopolitical ecosystem, if that makes sense.

Mr. NISHANOV: Perfect. Thank you so much. Any questions from the audience?

Please. Please, yes.

Thank you.

It is quite a walk. You are on camera, so please say hi.

QUESTION: Okay, now it is on. Okay. Hi. My name is Anna Hardy. I am a research fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council.

My question is, you discussed a bit about anti-American rhetoric that has been part of GD's approach. I was hoping you could go into more detail about how this anti-Americanism has been escalating in recent months. Particularly thinking of the attacks on Georgians who previously worked for the U.S. embassy, as well as a specific denial of entry case of Maggie Osdoby Katz, an American tourist who was a former official at the U.S. embassy, as well as the State Department, and the OSCE. Why are we focusing on private individuals rather than public officials with this? Should addressing this be part of any reset discussions?

Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Feel free to jump in.

Ms. THORNTON: Yes. Well, that is a good question. It was not just private individuals. When I was living—I lived in Georgia for seven years. During the time I was there, actually, one of the—they certainly attacked my institute, the National Democratic Institute, and me personally. They attacked the International Republican Institute. They attacked, importantly, the U.S. Ambassador ruthlessly. It is not just private individuals. It was dip-

lomats. They also—and this was, by the way, five, six years ago. I mean, so this has been going on for quite some time.

In addition, they, you know, would take ad hominem attacks, very personal attacks. I was called—the prime minister called me an “old, moldy mothball,” which is super fun.

Mr. NISHANOV: You are not an old, moldy mothball.

Ms. THORNTON: Well, thank you. [LAUGHS.] I do not like moths, so maybe. Anyway, they also had very choice words for elected European members of parliament. Anyway, so the anti-American rhetoric I started noticing quite early on, I would say even in 2016–2017. It was mostly coming from, at that time, the Patriots Alliance, which is a pro-Russian political party, at the time, that had some authority, and some other leaders. Then it gravitated to Georgian Dream as well.

You know, the effect of that, absolutely, in terms of a reset, which I am very skeptical of. I should just put my cards out there. Obviously, that kind of rhetoric does not make the United States very warm and friendly toward Georgia, particularly when its diplomats are involved, and Members of Congress as well have come under the ire of the Georgia Dream regime. So, yes. I think this has only escalated and also been included, as I mentioned in my remarks, to accusing, more broadly, the United States, but also Europe, of being—actually pushing Georgia toward war, for example, like an official policy. Even though that is not an official policy, they were accusing us of that. They have also accused the United States of fomenting revolution in the country. Were absolutely thrilled that USAID was shut down, because they believed that that was part of a radical coup attempt supported in the country.

Anyway, that is going hand-in-hand with the praise and choice words that they have for their new friends in Iran, China, and Russia. It is really—as I said, it is really flipped the script, but that rhetoric has been around for some time.

Mr. NISHANOV: I should also just point out that we have received reports from two Georgian organizations that are going to be a part of the record that names all political prisoners that are currently in Georgia. We will make sure that it is part of the record. You know who you are. We are not going to name names here. We appreciate that, and I just want to point that out.

Anyone else?

Please.

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Bradley Campos. I am an intern for the U.S. House of Representatives.

You mentioned USAID for a bit, briefly. I kind of wanted to more or less inquire about that. As you know, USAID was cut. Georgia was a country significantly impacted by those cuts. I believe it was around \$95 million worth of aid toward democratization and infrastructure building. I want to know if it is possible for Georgian and U.S. relations to possibly build back to pre-USAID cutting. Is there a possibility for that to be rebuilt—for Georgia rebuild, without the necessary aid from USAID?

Ms. THORNTON: Well, I think in terms of—I think you stated in your question the main impact, which is—obviously the main impact globally of cutting USAID is hundreds of thousands of people dead. Another big impact is on democracy and human rights around the world, and in Georgia. For example, the lawyer—the lawyers who are helping the political prisoners and protesters in their cases are coming from organizations that

were supported by USAID. The people who are supporting this small, barely left, independent media in the country were supported by USAID.

The organizations that are able to go to the polls and observe elections and tell the world what the truth is, and what happened, and do parallel vote counts, et cetera, were funded by USAID. I am not saying there are no other donors there. Thank the Lord. I have also spent a lot of time working in Moldova. The cuts to USAID were basically, you know, putting the thumb, I am sorry, on the scale for Russia, by withdrawing all of our support for countering disinformation and countering foreign malign influence, et cetera. I think it is devastating.

Now, to your question, can support be rebuilt? I would say, I sure hope so. I would like to see—I believe in absolutely strangling support for the Georgian government, but tripling support for Georgian civil society. I know that it is really complicated because of all the legislation that is now in place. As I just described, you can—I cannot send my kids—step kids money, right, because it is a criminal offense. We are very good at this. United States and organizations like the [NED] National Endowment for Democracy, [GMF] German Marshall Fund, and other groups like Soros and others have been supporting small civil society organizations in very closed countries.

We are very good at figuring—I do not want to give away means and tactics—but we can support people in closed environments, and we can adapt. There are ways we can continue to support a civil society and independent media in Georgia. I would like, inshallah, to get to the point where the U.S. Government is building up foreign aid and support for democracy and human rights in countries like Georgia. I do not think it is impossible that it could be resumed at some point.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Just two words on that. Well, I have been working on the conflicts. I can tell you that the USAID has been very important when it comes exactly to the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Then the people, not just in Georgia proper but also in this region, could definitely see how the withdrawal of the USAID impacted the lives of people on the ground. It is very spectacular, you know, when you go to some places right next to the barbed wires and patrolled by the Russian soldiers, and you see people working on some farms and then some enterprises. They are producing amazing things. You understand that it was—it happened just because USAID was investing a relatively small amount of money. You know, so, I mean, in that sense, the contribution was enormous. Then, USAID has played a very important role, especially when it comes to conflicts.

Since we are discussing the situation in Georgia, look, I mean, we have been having a situation with the restrictive legislation. Then the government introduced what they call a law on foreign agents. We now see how they are, again, kind of trying to somehow cluster, you know, like, the loopholes. Then it is, like, more than a year without USAID. People still continue protesting. People still continue monitoring, and they are working. They have to work in a very careful way, but you can see how so many public initiatives are taking place. Of course, it could be so much more and better if only a very small amount could be added to that. What I am trying to say is that this whole narrative, that everyone and each person in Georgia who received a penny, or like a dollar, from the USAID, they are foreign agents, it just proves wrong. We can see it even today.

Mr. NISHANOV: I think that is—I think that is absolutely key. I think what both of you are saying, if I may, please correct me if I am wrong, USAID was a tool. There are ways to support Georgian people if there is political will. I think what Olesya was saying

is absolutely critical. Georgian people, not just in Georgia, but obviously, since we are talking about Georgia, will continue doing this because they care about their own country, and that is a very important point.

You had a question.

Please.

QUESTION: Press—oh, there it goes. Hi. My name is Rowan Humphries. I am a global advocacy officer at the International Press Institute, which advocates for press freedom worldwide.

I wanted to touch a little bit more on the new amendments to the law on grants, which you just discussed a little bit. Given that the amendments add even greater restrictions for foreign funding for Georgian groups. Can you describe, in maybe a bit of greater detail, what this means for civil society, and then more broadly what strategies exist for countering laws like these, and how effective diplomacy can really be at this point?

Thank you.

Ms. THORNTON: No, no—[LAUGHS]—I do not want to be the—okay, yes, so, right. There has been—there have been several laws that have impacted journalists, as well as just practices by the State that have impacted journalists. As I mentioned, there are several journalists who have been imprisoned for being journalists. The first law that impacted journalists, which I think we have talked about, was the so-called foreign agents law, which they claim—Georgian Dream claims was modeled after the U.S., but we can—I can go through why that is not true. It actually is almost cut and paste from Russia, but it is not just Russia. There are other countries that have adopted this. Actually, it seems to be part of the autocratic playbook. They basically just translate the same document.

That made it very complicated for a lot of independent media organizations to receive money, because you would have to then, if it is coming from abroad, register as a foreign agent, and there were several procedures. Then—we thought that was bad—then they keep updating, and I mentioned already the law on grants. That is—amendments to the law on grants. It is not even just, you know, registering when you get a certain percentage of foreign money from a foreign donor. Now, it is any money from—and I have the law here if you are interested. I could share it with you. Any money that is coming from a foreign entity or foreign individual, and if you do not go through the approval process, then you can actually—there are punitive measures, including possible detention.

There are some of the—I have lived all over the world. These are some of the strictest laws I have ever seen, to be honest. They have sort of—even Russia's legislation kind of pales in comparison. I think in answer to your second question, so what do you do about that? Like I said—and, again, I do not want to get into too many details—but donors have found good, creative ways to get funding to organizations in closed societies. It is not impossible. It is risky. I have been involved in funding programs in Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia. We have to take great—the donor has to take great caution in that. Sometimes it is just not feasible because you are putting someone at risk, so it will certainly limit the flow. These laws will certainly limit the flow of funding to needy organizations in Georgia, but it does not make it impossible. I think that is all I want to say. [LAUGHS.]

Thank you.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Well, just kind of two things from my side. I think when discussing restrictive legislation and also the amendments that were just tabled, we probably also

need to look into, like, why GD is doing that. Then it is clear that this is, like, how they see, like, their conversation going with their external partners, or, like, some external actors. In that sense, when they are introducing some new legal amendments, sometimes it has actually nothing to do with the people on the ground. It actually has to do with, like, people here in D.C., so they want to be heard. They want a kind of, you know, people to pay attention.

During the summer, I spent some time, like, looking into how, for example, the Georgian civil society has been adapting, also, like, different sectors, and to see, like, what can be done. Then you know, it is really fascinating, because the government in Georgia is adopting some legislation which is not implementable, per se. I mean, we have some new structures, some new officials getting announced, and then they disappear. When I, for example, now speak to some of my very good and dear friends in civil society in Georgia who continue to protest, they tell me, like, whatever, you know? Let them adopt as many restrictions and as many things as possible. It is just that they cannot really arrest each of us.

Then there is a saying, and it is mainly used, like, in the context of the Soviet Union, you know, if you start implementing it, just be careful because you can end up on the list yourself, you know? If you look at the situation in Georgia, I think we also need a healthy attitude, you know, in the sense, and also understanding why GD is doing and how much they can really do.

Ms. THORNTON: I just want to add one more thing. I have seen amazing creativity in terms—I have seen this everywhere—in terms of organizations that are trying to figure out what to do. Because they know that money is really difficult, and Georgia is not the richest country in the world. It is hard to crowdsource locally. However, there have been efforts. I just recently was with a woman who set up outside of Georgia, she lives in the countryside, a—she raised money through the community. She actually built a[n] entire civic center by Georgians coming and contributing a brick to build it—like, physically. I mean, a physical brick. Not a single penny from abroad or even a single penny from an established organization. It was all community-based.

Well, back to your point of motivation. Do you think that that spares her? Of course not. The local authorities are going and trying to shut down her civic center, even under the FARA law. Just digging—they will find it. Like, they do not need—that is the other thing. They do not need these new laws because they are using existing laws. They are using the tax law. They are using other laws. They are—to your point, what is their purpose? Their purpose is to silence democracy and civil society. The Foreign Agents Law is just one tool that they can use, but they do not need it. They will do it no matter what.

Mr. NISHANOV: Please. I think we have time for maybe two more questions. Yes. Well, three, if we—yes.

QUESTION: Hello. Good afternoon. My name is RebeccaAlvesco [ph].

Oh. I work in tech, and I am struggling with tech.

My question is regarding the role of social media and major tech companies, and how it affects, like, civil society in the Georgian conflict right now. With the misinformation/disinformation campaigns that have taken hold of civil society, and also, you know, political life, ever since 2016, and with the advancement of social media. Like, obviously, there are major campaigns. I guess, like, what I am asking is what roles do you see major tech

companies as how do you see them participating in these conflicts, if at all, as agents or as contributors? How does that shape the region's future?

Thank you.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Well, you know, in that sense, I do not know how much we can really contribute with the Georgian experience there, yes. I mean, it is clear that Georgia definitely got affected by major developments that have been taking place, both here in the United States and globally. Then the fact-checking removal, you know, and support to that, it has been a real problem because, in fact, there were some very important successes in the past. When the Georgian civil organizations actually—they played a major role in taking down some fake pages, and not to mention how all of that is getting used by some external actors for disinformation and also other problems. I mean, it is probably going to show up more and more with the time going, but I am not sure. I have not done my own research in terms of, like, telling you exactly like this is how it played out in Georgia.

Ms. THORNTON: I will say that because I work—I have worked a lot in the disinformation space and tracking foreign align influence, and I work with a lot of groups in Georgia like MDF and some others that have been really excellent at this, they have over the years struggled more with the tech companies in terms of removals, and flags, et cetera. I would say that in the election environment, both in Georgia, but you asked broadly about the region, I would say also in Moldova, where I was a lot last year, it is an unbelievably powerful and effective tool for Russia. I mean, as it is in the United States. The ability for Russia to pump information about the elections, or to discredit the elections, or to discredit opposition parties, et cetera, through social media, was—it had a huge impact on the election.

To the point where in Moldova, for example, priests—like, majority of priests, were sent to the Kremlin and trained in Twitter tactics. Then sent back to Moldova to create endless Twitter feeds about how Moldova should rejoin the Russian empire, and et cetera. [LAUGHS.] It does not mean it cannot be used for good as well. I mean, there were counter efforts by civil society, both in Georgia and other countries, to take advantage. In terms of the removal process, the tech companies have become not as helpful. Like MDF, for example, partnered with Facebook for years. They described to me how Facebook used to be quite good and cooperative, and not so much anymore.

QUESTION: My name is Karlis. I am a policy fellow with the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America.

What can Europe do, either at the EU level or at the national government level, to support democracy in Georgia?

Mr. NISHANOV: Let us take your question as well, and then maybe we just—

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Milana [ph], representing the CSO sector from Georgia.

I do not have any particular question, I just want to thank you all of you for having us here, and just outline that, on one hand. I am impacted by the government of Georgia as a CSO representative, and on another hand, my husband is here, who is a former colleague of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and how threatened we were by the regime. We are here right now in the USA as a family—and thank you, the country, for that—to survive, but we continue working for our country as well. Not only surviving my family itself, but also surviving as a country.

Also, I would like to thank you to the USA for supporting Azerbaijan and Armenia. I remember several years ago, once I was working across the Caucasus region and implementing different international projects in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. I vividly remember how difficult it was to create the linkages between Armenia and Azerbaijan itself. Now I really appreciate this progress, because the Caucasus is a quite small region, and a great neighborhood is crucial for its development, and so congratulations. I really appreciate that.

I would like to use this opportunity to ask you. Once I have an experience of working on a very grassroots, the Georgian people have hope of support coming from the United States. I would like to expand your work on sanctions, and move favored MEGOBARI Act as well, and any kind of economic support would be great for the Georgian people as well. My family and I are here to contribute as much as we can in any direction that would be helpful and supportive for my country.

Thank you.

Ms. VARTANYAN: I am so happy that we finally have this word here in this room, "Europe," because Europe has been very central to Georgia for more than a decade. Then you probably know that, like, initially, even the current protest cycle has started, in fact, around support, and also getting closer to Europe. I mean, in that sense, it is obvious that—and then for many years, especially after the 2008 war, Georgians were told that your pathway is going to Europe, and then many Georgians understood it. I would say that with European identity, it is definitely part of the DNA and blood. I mean, it is something that you cannot really take, and then even Georgian Dream has to acknowledge that.

There is another side to that. You might remember that I was describing how the EU had been helping the Georgian ruling party at the time and also the opposition, and how instrumental that support was for resolving the crisis that we had after the previous parliamentary election. Well, the EU back then worked hand-in-hand with the United States. Then they coordinated very closely. They shared messages. They had people who knew who to call, you know, when to call, what messages to pass, and all of that. EU and the United States are absolutely perfect and very strong when they work together, and then it would be so good to see what is happening right now.

I understand that it is a bit kind of a big ask in today's situation that we have even, like, on the Armenia-Azerbaijan front, we see that there are some different opinions, you know, in terms of the involvement of the EU, to what extent, how it should be, and so on. If you ask me, this is, like, the way to go, definitely. You know, to find a way to coordinate with your EU colleagues, those who are sitting in Brussels. They are experiencing exactly the same problems we had a case raised here about the U.S. citizen who was prevented from entering the country. You know how many EU member states citizens they had exactly the same issues? In that sense, if we can see any kind of cooperation and coordination taking place, that could be fantastic. Then they definitely could reinforce and support each other.

Ms. THORNTON: They could also have an enormous, and have had some impact, but could do more, with regard to sanctioning behavior. They just did a sanction on visa-free travel for diplomats, which was, I think, a welcome decision. I think there is more potential. Let us see how the elections in Hungary go in June, because I think that could make a huge difference in how they respond to Georgia and their ability to put more financial constraints on the regime. Also outside of the EU, the United Kingdom, which is where,

for example, the owner of Imedi Television has his wealth, and I think citizenship, if I am not mistaken. Now, because of just even threats of going after his assets, he is now getting rid of Imedi Television, which is the propaganda channel of Georgian Dream, aka Russia. I think that the EU can have a lot.

Then also on the softer side of diplomacy, there were the Charles Michel format, Carl Hartzell, who was the Ambassador to—EU Ambassador to Georgia. Was one that was really working a lot on reconciliation, but also working a lot—and they could do more on—uniting the opposition. Which is something—you know, the change in Georgia can happen in many different ways, but ideally it would be through elections and through a very strong and united opposition. The EU had played a very positive role in working on that.

Mr. NISHANOV: We are going to do one last question.

Please.

QUESTION: Perfect. Hi. I am Lauren Williamson. I work for the Alexander Hamilton Society now, but I lived in Georgia for a year doing a Fulbright and then working with the Rondeli Foundation.

Yes, so the opposition has been fractured for quite some time. Many of them were jailed by GD. What political actions can the opposition take, even under the current restrictive laws, to become a unified coalition or set of coalitions again? How can they convince the population that there is a credible alternative to GD? For that matter, how can they signal to the U.S. that Georgia is worth the investment and worth the effort to support and fight for their democracy?

Thank you.

Ms. KAISER: I can try. I mean, honestly, that is, like, the—I do not know, the billion-dollar, trillion-dollar question here, because if anybody had the answer, I feel like they would have done it already. That has been one of the, I think, enormous frustrations of the past several years, is seeing, you know, so much—so much discontent with the current political sort of situation in Georgia, yet not having kind of the clear template for, okay, if—you know, these are the players, this person has the mic, this person has the policy playbook, and let us just unite and do it. That has not happened yet. I do not know that I have a good crystal ball to see, you know, who is going to sort of take up that mantle and really unite the population to such an extent that it would be, you know, the critical mass needed to actually have—be able to overcome the immense challenges that GD has put into place. I know Laura and Olesya will have thoughts as well.

Ms. THORNTON: This is a hard question because we—I worked specifically—our mandate is to train political parties, at the National Democratic Institute, and our colleagues at the International Republican Institute. Working in Georgia to try to develop any sort of coalition proved one of the more frustrating, unfortunately, experiences. You know, for a variety of reasons. As you pointed out in your question, I think, now there are just so many constraints on their ability to do so if they are in prison. Let us say before the 2024 election, I do think there was still space and opportunity, but yet it was very difficult to get them to unite.

There was another challenge that always existed. On top of training political parties, I did political opinion polling. All the issues that Georgians cared about, we would pass on the polling results to the parties in the hopes that they would platform and campaign on the issues that people care about. That proved very complicated. It was very difficult to get the parties to focus on the bread-and-butter issues that Georgians, and anyone any-

where in the world, care about. We would tell them over and over, you know, it is the roads, it is the economy, it is this. Yet, the campaigns would devolve into attacks, and again, this is not unique to Georgia. This happens all over the world. I do think that it is the million-dollar question. I would also say that it is something that we cannot give up on, because a united opposition, if we are hoping to have some sort of change through elections, is going to have to happen that way.

I am sorry, but I have worked in countries where parties have come together that were far, far less aligned than the opposition parties in Georgia. I worked in Malaysia, where there was a political party that wanted to establish Sharia law and a political party that was Chinese Christian. They managed to come together and form a coalition to beat Mahathir. It is feasible. And I would say the differences in the Georgian opposition are not great enough that that should have happened. I had also hoped that we had a moment in December 2024, where maybe even the former president of Georgia could have served as that unifying figure and brought people together. Anyway, it is something that I think still needs to be tried and explored, even though the stakes are very difficult.

Ms. VARTANYAN: Just two words on that. I absolutely share what has been said, and there is a huge frustration. You can see how Georgians are coming together to get to the protest. Then, like, the main topic that they are discussing, not even GD, but the position, and the fact that they are so dispersed, and they are not talking to each other, attacking each other, and so on, and then, I kind of have this question. You know, so if we cannot really get the United opposition, maybe we just leave them alone and then let them continue doing their opposition, very important work, without really having an expectation that they need to get together. Then maybe in that sense we will start discrediting also the efforts with opposition to get stronger, to get their messages through.

Then, when I listen to different opposition groups and parties, we have new ones now emerging from the civil society, from people who have been protesting, and these speak with very different voices. Then each of them has their own, like, constituency. They have the people who will be ready to take on board what they are saying and what they are promising. Sometimes I ask myself, maybe we are asking for a bit too much, you know, and then let them be on their own, and then let them be different. Let some of them participate in the election, and some of them not take part in that. Let some of them be more radical and less radical. There are moments when they come together. In fact, we have moments when thousands of Georgians come together, right? I mean, in that sense, I wonder whether we need to stop complaining about the opposition and get to the work, which is—again, for me, it is about finding a way to resolve the political crisis.

Mr. NISHANOV: We went 15 minutes over the time limit—allotted time limit, but just a couple of, I think, concluding words. I am sure members of the Georgian Dream party are watching this, since we had gotten so much attention prior to this. Just explicitly, I would like to say that everyone here are friends of Georgia. We are friends of the Georgian people, and we are friends of everyone in Georgia who wants to live in a free and fair society. That is who we are. We are not partisan. We are not here to pick a side. We are here to ensure or talk about a process whereby Georgians—everyday regular Georgians—have a say in the political process. Georgia had, for years, just defied all expectations. It had been a democracy. It had just, in the face of the Russian occupation, in a face of economic pressure, being where they are, they had defied every single expectation. They had been amazing, and we know that.

There is an example of excellence in Georgia, and Georgians can live up to it. This is why we are talking about Georgia, and this is why we have convened this panel. I just want to make it very clear to everyone who might be thinking that there is some nefarious, some sort of plans here in Washington. This is not it. This is absolutely not it. We are here to support the Georgian people on their path toward democracy and the West. This is—please join me in thanking our incredible, incredible panel. Thank you so much. [Applause.]

Thank you.

With this, we conclude this briefing. Thank you so much for being here.

[Whereupon, at 3:15 p.m., the briefing ended.]





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