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Georgia's look to the future

One eye on Russia, the other on the West

About Security Radar 2025

For Security Radar 2025, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe polled 14 countries in September 2024 on public attitudes towards foreign policy and security questions. FES surveys countries under the aegis of Security Radar at regular intervals. More information can be found on our website.

Introduction

Disputed parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 2024 drew increased attention to the small South Caucasus state. Only ten months previously, Georgia had been granted the status of EU candidate, an accelerated decision taken in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Amidst allegations of fraud, voter intimidation and other irregularities prior to and during the elections, documented by observers, the ruling »Georgian Dream« party secured a comfortable majority and a fourth consecutive term in office. The people of Tbilisi have taken to the streets in protest, however, demanding new elections, while opposition deputies have vowed not to take up their seats in parliament. The ongoing protests do not seem to be gaining momentum, but they do provide a clear signal that the dispute over the legitimacy of

the elections is far from resolved, and tensions are likely to persist.

Many see the struggle over Georgia's future direction as part of a wider geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West. Protesters on the streets of Tbilisi have labelled the new restrictive laws »Russian laws« and regard the Georgian Dream party as aligned with Russia. They demand real steps towards EU integration. Georgia's president Salome Zurbishvili defends Georgia's European path and accuses Russia of meddling in the elections, although without concrete evidence. Many European leaders have adopted the Russia-versus-the-West framing that was used by the Georgian opposition during the election campaign.



EU responses to the disputed election have been critical but muted. Victor Orbán's flight to Tbilisi to congratulate Georgian Dream on their victory drew immediate criticism from senior EU officials, highlighting the EU's lack of unity. Hungary currently holds the EU presidency. EU–Georgia relations had soured even before the elections, in the wake of the adoption in summer 2024 of controversial laws curtailing sexual minority rights and targeting civil society organisations receiving funding from abroad. These laws raised serious concerns about Georgia's commitment to EU values and led the EU to halt Georgia's accession process. Outgoing EU High Representative [Josep Borrell put it most bluntly](#), emphasising that EU candidate countries must choose between maintaining ties with Russia or pursuing EU integration.

This either/or framing oversimplifies the situation. It even risks dragging Georgia into a geopolitical antagonism that is likely to hurt the country. It also overlooks the fact that the ruling party is driven not by geopolitical choice but primarily by a desire for self-preservation. To remain in power, it is increasingly resorting to an authoritarian playbook, including election fraud and curtailing the rights of anyone who might challenge it. By the same token, Georgian Dream's seemingly contradictory moves with regard to the EU may reflect a wish to join a national-conservative, Christian EU of sovereign states, as envisioned by Victor Orbán, not a liberal-democratic version of the Union that includes LGBT rights. A detailed analysis of public perceptions, undertaken in the Security Radar 2025 survey, can help contextualise the complex realities on the ground.

Aligned with Europe and Russia?

The reality is that geopolitical influence from both Russia and the European Union have been crucial in shaping the situation in Georgia. The EU is Georgia's largest trading partner and a key source of foreign investment. Ever since attaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia has oriented itself westwards, aspiring to join the EU and NATO early

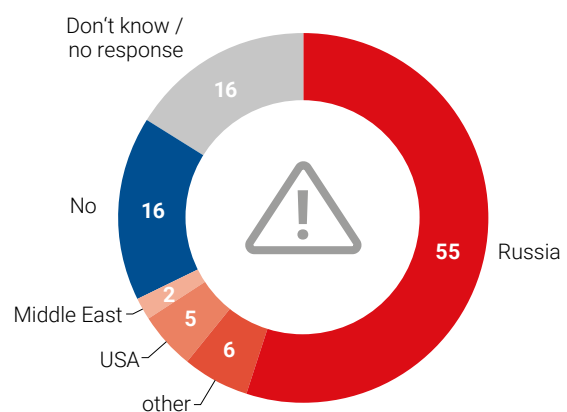
on. The Kremlin seeks to prevent EU or NATO membership for Georgia, viewing the country as vital to its sphere of influence and part of a broader strategy to halt further »Western expansion«. At the same time, Russia is an important trading partner and a traditional destination for [Georgia's crucial exports](#): wine, mineral water, vegetables and fruit. Tourism from Russia is another important source of revenue.

Polling results reflect these complex realities. The overwhelming majority in Georgia would like closer cooperation with the EU – at 85%, this is the strongest support in the poll next to Ukraine. At the same time, opinion is split on whether EU policies regularly conflict with Georgia's interests (43% each agreeing and disagreeing).

Opinions on Russia reflect a complex relationship. Most Georgians perceive it as a security threat (see Figure 1). Some 74% believe that Georgia could not defend itself if Russia declared war – a fear that the ruling party skilfully exploited in its election campaign, accusing the opposition of – allegedly – dragging Georgia into war. Nonetheless, 43% of polled Georgians desire more cooperation with Russia (50% oppose closer ties). At the same time, there is also a wish to reduce reliance on Russia, even if it has a negative impact on living standards in Georgia (58%).

Figure 1
Is there a country that constitutes a threat for Georgia?

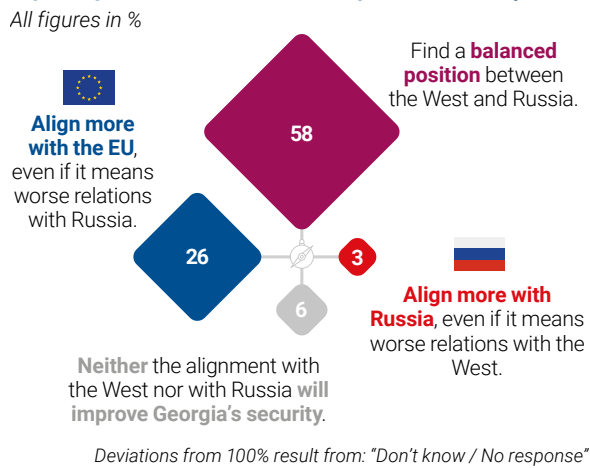
All figures in %





While Georgian Dream rose to power in 2012 on the promise of EU integration and maintains that commitment today, it has also sought a pragmatic relationship with Russia. Our survey results reflect this balancing act: a majority of Georgians polled (58%) support a balanced approach between the EU and Russia to maintain Georgia's security, rather than aligning with one side at the cost of deteriorating relations with the other (see Figure 2). Overall, our data indicate that Borrell's suggestion that Georgia should choose between Russia and the EU would put the country between a rock and a hard place.

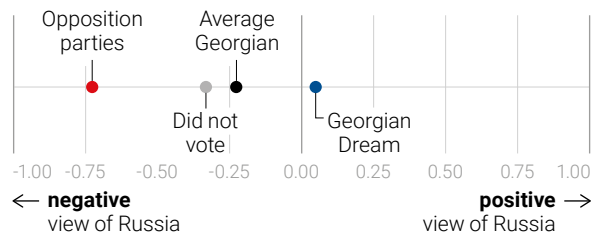
Figure 2
In your opinion, how should Georgia position itself regarding Russia and the West to improve its security?



Pro-Western society

Analysis of our survey data, which includes attitudes toward alignment and cooperation with Russia as opposed to the EU, as well as perceptions of sanctions against Russia, reveals that anti-Russian attitudes are more closely associated with support for various opposition parties, while support for Georgian Dream aligns more with pro-Russian views. Georgians on average as well as non-voters are somewhat more critical (see Figure 3). A closer look at the election results also reveals an urban-rural divide: Georgian Dream performed particularly well in rural areas, but failed to secure a majority in big cities such as Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi, where opposition parties made significant gains (despite electoral manipulation).

Figure 3
Attitudes towards Russia according to party preference



The index combines multiple items concerning Georgian sentiments toward Russia that were selected via factor analysis: Georgia should collaborate more with Russia than before; Georgia should reduce its dependency on Russia even if this has a negative impact on the living standard in Georgia; sanctions against Russia should be widened; Russia is responsible for the war in Ukraine; In your opinion, how should Georgia position itself regarding Russia and the West to improve its security?

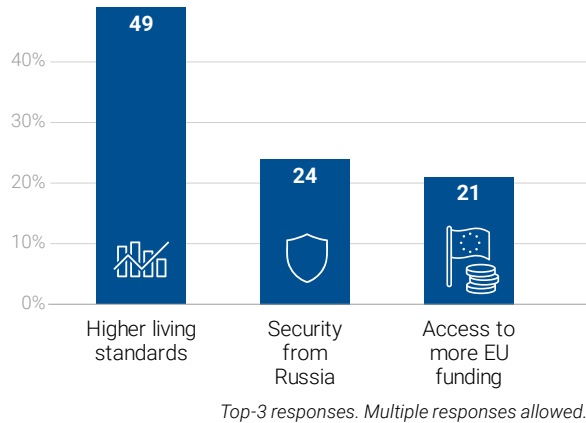
Although the results suggest some divisions, Georgian society largely shares a common perspective on key issues. Georgians still very much believe in the Western-dominated security order. Of all other countries polled for Security Radar 2025, respondents in Georgia have the lowest rate of agreement that the era of American supremacy is over (28%), and the highest level of approval that Europe is becoming a global power (44%). Among 18–29 year-olds, this percentage rises to nearly 60%. Georgians are least convinced that middle powers such as Turkey or Brazil are emerging as new centres of influence, and also show the lowest agreement that international law is no longer relevant.

The majority of Georgians have wanted their country to join the EU for many years. When asked about reasons for EU membership, most people choose higher living standards (49%) (see Figure 4). They also cite security against Russia, followed by access to EU funding. Value-based reasons ranked lower, for instance democratic governance, rule of law or freedom of expression. Hence strong popular support for the EU goes well together with considerable support for the national-conservative course (and possibly vision of the EU) that Georgian Dream stands for. The primacy of economic reasons for joining the EU reflects the country's widespread poverty. Georgia's per capita GDP is only about one-eighth of the EU average. Many people are jobless



Figure 4
What do you see as the most compelling reasons for Georgia to join the EU?

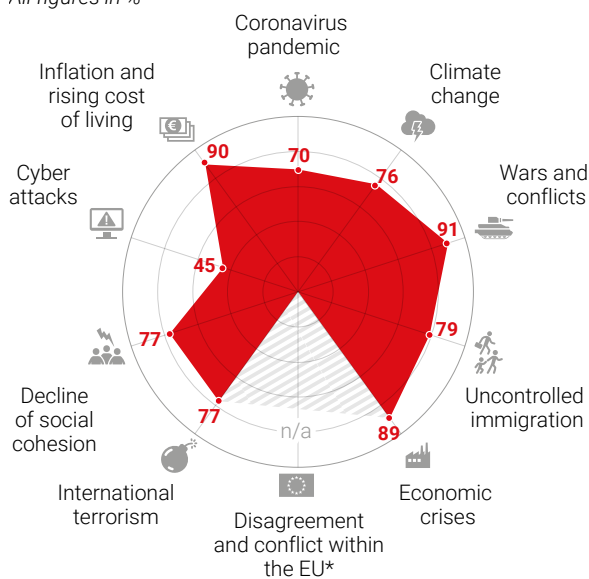
All figures in %



(youth unemployment reaches 30%) or informally employed. Hence it is not surprising that 86% express concerns about their personal future, the second highest level of concern in the entire poll after Ukraine. Some 90% of Georgians, along with Turks and Ukrainians, are concerned about inflation, the cost of living and economic crises.

Figure 5
To what extent are you personally concerned about the following current events?

Combined responses "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree".
 All figures in %



War in Ukraine

Georgians suffered from Russian aggression in the five-day war in 2008, after which Russia recognised the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which subsequently became even more dependent on Moscow, which continues to maintain bases and troops in those regions. Against this backdrop, Georgians have avoided taking a strong position on the war in Ukraine. Instead, they favour a neutral stance (40%), the highest endorsement in the poll, and support diplomatic efforts to end the war (38%). A majority (58%) hold Russia responsible for the ongoing war, while 33% point to the United States and 24% to Ukraine. Notably, among younger people, the perception of responsibility on the part of Russia and Ukraine is stronger, while less blame is attached to the United States (see also box on p. 6).

Moreover, the conflict is mostly perceived as a proxy war between the West and Russia (42%), an opinion shared only in Serbia and Turkey. Some 36% of Georgians view the war as an attempt by Russia to expand its territory, a perception that is even more pronounced among those aged 18 to 29 (43%), but lower than in European nations such as France, the United Kingdom and Sweden, where the proportion exceeds 60%. Less than 5% lean towards the third characterisation, namely that it is a war between democracy and autocracy. However, the geographical proximity to Russia is reflected in the fact that most people are worried about nuclear escalation (76%). This is not surprising given Russia's recent nuclear weapons exercise and repeated threats to use nuclear weapons.

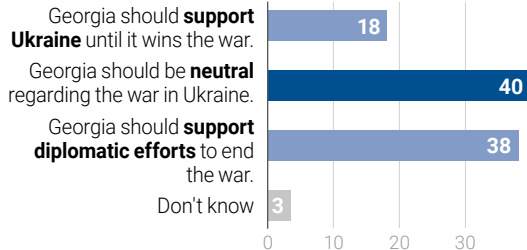
Even though Georgia maintains a neutral, possibly defensive stance, a large majority (74%) advocate continued support for Ukraine, the second-highest level in the poll. Georgian respondents are the strongest proponents of humanitarian assistance. Accordingly, however, they reject the idea of sending troops, the third highest level of rejection in the poll. When it comes to increased weapons deliveries, people are also sceptical, although women are slightly more supportive than men (23% vs 18%). Sizeable majorities of Georgians support Ukraine becoming a NATO member (64%) and an EU member (72%).



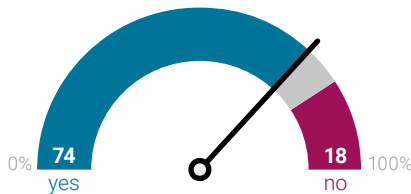
War in Ukraine

All figures in %. Deviations from 100% result from: 'Don't know' or 'No response'.

What position should Georgia take in the war in Ukraine?

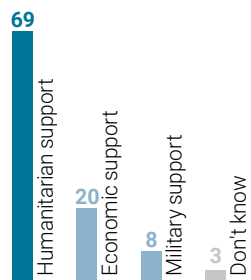


Do you think it is necessary to keep supporting Ukraine?



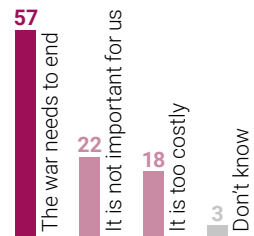
How should Ukraine be primarily supported?

(Respondents who answered that Ukraine should be supported)

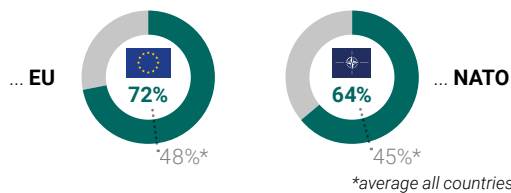


Why do you think Ukraine should not be supported?

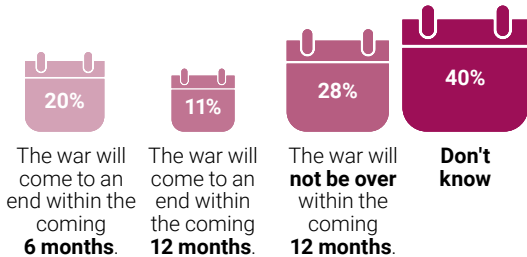
(Respondents who answered that Ukraine should not be supported)



Should Ukraine become a member of...?



When will the war between Russia and Ukraine come to an end?



Regarding the end of the war, Georgians express more optimism for a diplomatic solution than people in any other country polled (48%). This might stem from experience with a ceasefire in their own country, which was brokered by the EU in 2008. The ceasefire neither resolved the conflict with Russia nor brought the occupied territories back under Georgian control, an issue that is an open wound for most Georgians. But it did put an end to hostilities and prevented Russian tanks from entering Tbilisi, so that Georgia retained its independence and statehood.

The way forward

Despite high levels of concern, Georgians express the most optimistic views in the poll about developments regarding peace and security over the next five years in Georgia, Europe and globally. Women are overall more positive than men.

Georgia seeks to play a more engaged role, with nearly 71% supporting a proactive foreign policy to address international problems, crises and conflicts. Alongside Kazakhstan, they show the highest levels of agreement with taking on more international responsibility and cooperating with any country that promotes peace. Foreign policy priorities should include concerns about human rights violations (36%), geopolitical tensions (33%), and fighting terrorism and extremism (25%), while trade wars and global inequality play a minor role.

However, Georgian's commitment to international responsibility is somewhat limited: almost 70% indicate that Georgia should focus on its own well-being and avoid international involvements, with only 20% in favour of military interventions. Together with Ukraine, united by Russian aggression, Georgians exhibit the highest approval rate for increasing military spending (77%), although about two-thirds (59% men, 67% women) prioritise economic and social over defence spending. As in many other countries polled for Security Radar 2025, this widely shared opinion points to future difficulties for Georgian governments balancing social and military spending.

Georgia faces significant challenges on both the domestic and geopolitical fronts. Allegations of manipulation and fraud, put forward by election



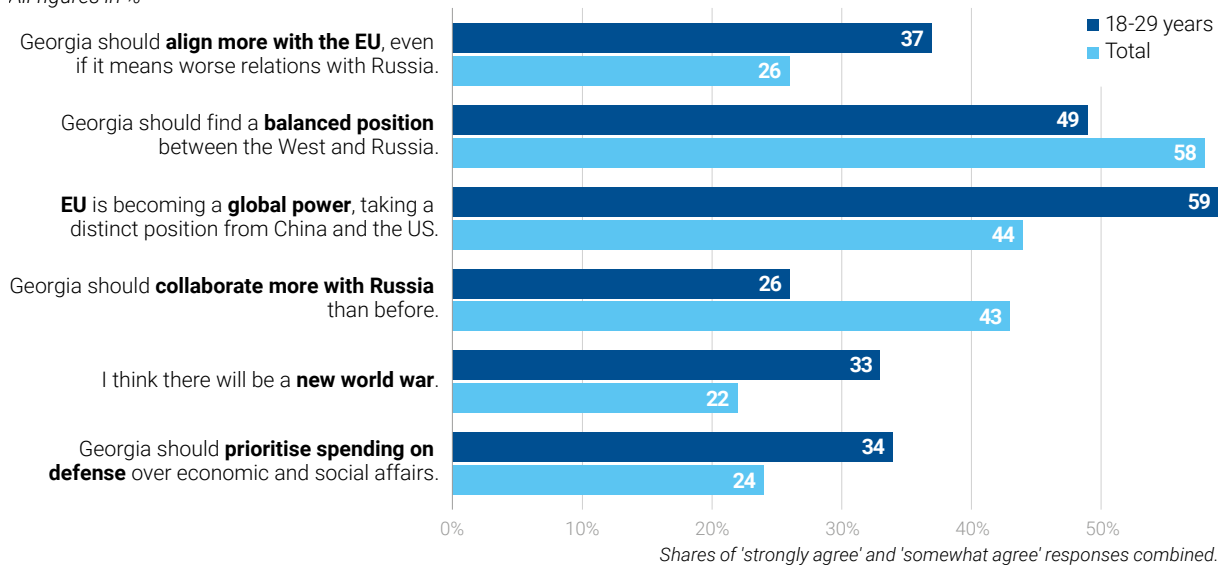
observers, will loom over Georgia and continue to stir public dissatisfaction, especially in cities, even if ongoing protests will lose momentum and dissipate. The fourth term of Georgian Dream, which looks all but certain, will shape key aspects of Georgia's domestic and foreign policies, especially regarding EU

membership prospects. If Georgian Dream continues down the authoritarian path, life for most people in Georgia may deteriorate and the EU membership option may recede into the distant future.

Figure 6

How should Georgia position itself regarding Russia and the West to improve its security?

All figures in %



The young dream

Our survey reveals significant generational shifts in perceptions, with the 18–29 age group envisioning a future that differs markedly from the vision of older generations. Young Georgians strongly favour closer ties with the EU and the United States, while expressing clearer disapproval of Russia. When it comes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they assign greater responsibility to Russia and Ukraine, with less blame directed at the United States and the EU. This reflects a more Western-oriented mindset and a belief in taking concrete actions to support Ukraine's sovereignty, including increased military aid.

While the majority prioritise social and economic spending over defence, the 18–29 age group demonstrates a relatively higher inclination toward prioritising defence, likely driven by concerns over

potential Russian aggression and the need to protect national security.

Furthermore, 37% of young Georgians wish their country to align more closely with the EU and perceive fewer conflicts in EU–Georgia relations, signalling strong support for deeper integration with the EU. From their perspective, the primary reasons for joining the EU include not only improved living standards (54%) and security from Russia (29%), as in the case of older generations, but also the rule of law (20%) and democratic governance (20%).

Taken together, these findings suggest that young Georgians are more pro-Western, particularly in terms of foreign policy and international alliances. This generational shift could have significant implications for Georgia's future direction, possibly with regard to closer ties with the EU.

FES ROCPE in Vienna

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security. It also works closely with the OSCE on integrating young voices in European security debates and the interface between security and environment.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches.

In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris Charter (1990) and the Istanbul Charter (1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

- regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;
- a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;
- regular public opinion polling on security matters;
- cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

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