



The European Union's Strategic Test in Georgia

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► Key Takeaways

- The political crisis brewing in Georgia is of an existential nature for the country. What is at stake is Georgia's future as a democratic and sovereign European nation (EU).
- The EU's indecisive approach to the crisis in Georgia proves that it is still not up to the task of defending its interests and values in its own neighborhood.
- Georgia's reversal of its European accession path undermines the conventional rhetoric about the success of the EU enlargement policy as a major driver of democratic consolidation.
- As part of a broader clarification of its strategic approach to Eastern Europe, the EU needs to calibrate its approach to prevent Georgia falling into authoritarianism and pivoting toward Russia.

Introduction

Georgia is at a critical crossroads. Georgian Dream (GD), the ruling party that has been in power since 2012, abruptly decided to derail the country from its European path soon after claiming victory in parliamentary elections that domestic and international observers have assessed as fraudulent¹ and marred with irregularities.² This decision triggered the ongoing massive protests in Georgia, marking the culmination of yearlong unrest provoked by a series of measures that the ruling party took with the aim of eroding democratic institutions and suppressing dissent. Georgia's turn from pursuing an ever-closer partnership with – and eventual membership of – the European Union (EU) to self-inflicted alienation from Europe has been dramatic. Most surprisingly, this shift reached a new peak right after Georgia gained the status of candidate for EU accession³ that it had long sought.

The political crisis brewing in Georgia is of an existential nature for the country.⁴ What is at stake is Georgia's future as a democratic and sovereign European nation. Besides, if consolidated, Georgia's U-turn will undoubtedly affect the regional balance in

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the South Caucasus to the detriment of democratic and pro-European forces. Furthermore, an illiberal Georgia estranged from Europe and increasingly aligned with Russia would enable Moscow to reassert its influence in the South Caucasus – a region that is “integral to the Kremlin's wider ambitions of dominating the Black Sea”.⁵

The crisis that Georgia has been plunged into is also consequential for the EU, for its identity and for the declared goals guiding its foreign and security policy.⁶ It tests the EU and its political will and resolve to uphold security and the values it stands for on the continent. Ensuring that the enlargement process is not hijacked by the ruling party of a candidate country against the will of its people should be a strategic goal for the EU.

1. See European Parliament Resolution, “Georgia's Worsening democratic Crisis Following the Recent Parliamentary Elections and Alleged Electoral Fraud”, 2024/2933 (RSP), November 28, 2024, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

2. See European External Action Service, “Georgia: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the Latest Developments Following the Parliamentary Elections”, October 29, 2024, available at: www.eeas.europa.eu.

3. See European Council Conclusions, *EUCO 20/23*, December 14 and 15, 2023, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

4. See T. Giuashvili, “Georgia's Watershed Moment”, *LSE Comment*, December 5, 2024, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk>.

5. N. Melvin, “Retying the Caucasian Knot: Russia's Evolving Approach to the South Caucasus”, *RUSI Occasional Paper*, November 18, 2024, available at: www.rusi.org.

6. See European Council Conclusions, *EUCO 24/22*, June 23 and 24, 2022, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

Despite the high stakes for Georgia and for the wider region, the EU's response to the political crisis has been feeble at best, triggering frustration among Georgians and criticism among the proponents of a more resolute European stance.⁷ The absence of a strong, united EU position following the flawed elections and the repression of the demonstrations against the GD's decision to stop Georgia's accession process has exposed divisions among its member states and within EU institutions.⁸ Opposition from Hungary and Slovakia at the EU summit on 18-19 December⁹ has prevented the EU from adopting sanctions against the individuals involved in the crackdown on protesters. The only measure that Brussels is expected to adopt in the coming days is to suspend visa-free travel for Georgian officials.¹⁰ The problem, however, cannot be reduced to the veto of illiberal outliers among EU member states. The deeper issue is a lack of motivation from those, in national capitals and in Brussels, who would rather not spend too much political capital on this crisis, among many other emergencies, in the hope that some sort of transactional relationship with Georgia will eventually follow the current disruption. This is, however, delusory. Of course, the EU cannot be expected to advance reforms in neighboring countries if the latter do not aim to pursue this course; change cannot come solely from the outside. And the EU has interests to protect as well as values to uphold. But, in the case of Georgia, the vast majority of the people have endorsed the reform agenda of European integration, and they are proving it. If neglected, the crisis in Georgia risks carrying broader ramifications for the EU, challenging its geopolitical, transformative and soft power.

The crisis in Georgia risks challenging EU geopolitical, transformative and soft power

Testing the EU's geopolitical power

Former High Representative Josep Borrell claimed that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine provoked "the belated birth of a geopolitical EU".¹¹ The outbreak of the war in Europe has triggered unprecedented action by the EU and its member states to counter Russia and support Ukraine since February 2022. As part of this new, resolute stance, European leaders endorsed "the geopolitical imperative to ensure that countries in the EU's neighborhood are fully integrated into European structures and kept out of Russia's orbit".¹² Georgia slipping toward authoritarianism and drifting into Russia's sphere of

7. "The EU Should Act Now to Sanction the Violent Regime in Georgia", EURACTIV, December 12, 2024, available at: www.euractiv.com.

8. T. Lavrelashvili, "Views from Brussels: Is the EU Handling Georgia's Crisis?", Georgian Institute of Politics, December 25, 2024, available at: <https://gip.ge>.

9. European Council Conclusions, *EUCO 50/24*, December 19, 2024, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

10. European Commission, "Commission Proposes to Suspend Visa-free Travel for Officials from Georgia", *News Article*, December 20, 2024, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

11. J. Borrell, "Europe in the Interregnum: Our Geopolitical Awakening After Ukraine", March 24, 2022, available at: www.eas.europa.eu.

12. K. E. Smith, "The European Union's Strategic Test in Ukraine", *Current History*, Vol. 123, No. 851, pp. 83-88, available at: <https://online.ucpress.edu>.

influence would, therefore, invalidate claims about the EU as a geopolitical actor, exposing them as complacent at best.

First, Brussels' inaction in Georgia undermines claims that the EU is a viable foreign and security policy actor. To be a geopolitical power and to be perceived as such, the EU should be able to make timely decisions and act firmly upon them. The EU's indecisive approach to the crisis in Georgia proves that it is not up to the task of defending its interests in its own neighborhood. This is all the more damaging when these interests fit both its values and the democratic aspirations of citizens in partner countries.

Second, Georgia's U-turn is not only a domestic political crisis but a part of the larger geopolitical struggle escalated by Russia to reassert its sphere of influence in

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Eastern Europe, which includes curtailing Western influence in the South Caucasus. At a time of war in Europe, the EU seems to have neglected the fact that opening the prospect of accession for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia also means being prepared to protect these countries. That involves, first and foremost, backing up Ukraine in its military struggle with Russia, which is decisive for the future of the European order, and also dealing effectively with various forms of destabilizing Russian interference, such as in Moldova and Georgia. In this context, EU

enlargement is not just a technical exercise to guide aspirant countries on their paths to reform but also a geopolitical undertaking to confront a revisionist adversary seeking to undermine this project by all means.

The situation in Georgia and the war in Ukraine are connected in numerous ways. For one, GD would hardly have disrupted its relations with the EU and the United States (US) had it not perceived that time was working in its favor. GD and its founder, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, appear to have calculated that Putin's Russia will make further gains in Ukraine and that the new Trump administration will either further disengage from the region or at least take a transactional approach to countries there, regardless of their democratic credentials. For another, should the US and Europe actually fail to support Ukraine before and after a possible (if uncertain) ceasefire, it is the whole Eastern neighborhood of the EU that would fall under Russia's control. The interconnection between developments in Ukraine and those in the South Caucasus confronts the EU with the dilemma between much stronger, comprehensive engagement and *de facto* acceptance of Russia's sphere of influence.

While Europe is divided and lacks the geopolitical reflex it claims to have developed, in terms of adequately backing up its closest partners, a different and more cynical geopolitical instinct might help explain Europe's inaction. A form of misplaced geopolitical realism might suggest that the EU should not strain relations with the

Georgian Dream government further, since doing so would only push Georgia further into the arms of the EU's competitors in the region: Russia and China. After all, so the argument goes, the EU pursues a transactional foreign policy with various non-democratic regimes, including in the region.

However, in the case of Georgia, such stiff geopolitical realism would not amount to business as usual, but to a sharp turn in the EU's policy stance. It would deny over two decades of transformative partnership and damage the EU's credibility. Throughout that period, the EU has been Georgia's primary partner, investing in its economic development, reform and transformation. The decision to disrupt the EU accession process belongs to a political party that has managed to stay in power through unfair and irregular elections. This decision runs counter to both the will of the people and the constitution of Georgia, whereby the government should "take all measures [...] to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization".¹³ Besides, the EU's (un)strategic patience with GD has not produced the intended results in the past and is unlikely to do so in the future. In fact, the EU's cautious approach to dealing with the GD government for the sake of stability (alongside the fragmentation of Georgian opposition forces) has strengthened the negotiating position of Georgia's ruling party and enabled it to hedge its bets, diversifying its range of partners. In particular, the GD government has turned to China to build the country's strategically important, first deep-sea port of Anaklia,¹⁴ one of the key elements within the Middle Corridor. Supposed geopolitical realism might, therefore, produce the opposite outcome, undermining Europe's geopolitical power and its normative power simultaneously.

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Testing the EU's transformative power

If the EU fails to act in Georgia, not only will the EU's geopolitical aspirations be greatly diminished, but also its transformative power. First, Georgia's anti-democratic and anti-European turn would underscore the limits of the EU's transformative power. Second, Georgia's reversal of its European accession path undermines the conventional rhetoric about the success of the enlargement policy as a major driver of democratic consolidation.

Georgia's illiberal turn¹⁵ marks a major setback for the EU policy of promoting democracy in its Eastern neighborhood. Since the late 1990s, the EU has invested heavily

13. Constitution of Georgia, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge>.

14. "Minister of Economy Announces Sino-Singaporean Consortium Winner in Anaklia Port Selection Competition", *Civil Georgia*, May 29, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

15. See N. Sabanadze, "EU-Georgia Relations: A Local Show of the Global Theater", *Carnegie Europe*, November 16, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

in Georgian democracy not just as an objective in itself but also as a way of ensuring Georgia's stability. The 2014 Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement, and the visa liberalization agreement in 2017, marked milestones in the deepening bilateral partnership. However, this policy has been neither driven by a long-term vision aimed at enabling Georgia's eventual accession to the EU (which was not on offer until 2022) nor framed by a sharper understanding of regional geopolitics and Russia's behavior. The EU's emphasis on political and economic reforms was essential, but never sufficient, because it lacked a geopolitical dimension and the

recognition of the Russian threat. In the absence of a long-term strategic vision for the country and the entire region, and of adequate tools and political will to address democratic backsliding, progress has turned out to be fragile.

For too long, the EU overlooked GD's creeping illiberalism and underestimated the political aims driving the regime, namely the consolidation of its grip

on power. In Georgia's toxic domestic political context, even the decision to grant Georgia the status of a candidate country,¹⁶ albeit conditional on the accomplishment of a number of reforms¹⁷ and celebrated by Georgian society, ended up further emboldening the ruling party, which pushed for the adoption of the law on "transparency of foreign influence" (the so-called "foreign agents" law) in May 2014. In response to this and other measures last summer, the EU decided to halt Georgia's accession process,¹⁸ downgraded political contacts and suspended financial assistance (€30 million under the European Peace Facility assistance and €121 million in direct assistance to the government). This sequence of events marked the end of GD's double game of pretending to advance EU accession while pursuing state capture,¹⁹ but the EU's reaction has come too late to reverse the government's course of action.

The EU has also been unable to confront the GD government's propaganda and conspiratorial rhetoric. While not openly turning its back to the EU until after the recent parliamentary elections, the GD's subtle strategy has been to gradually discredit the EU, what it stands for, and the role that it has been playing in the country. Since February 2022, GD has intensified aggressive attacks against the EU,²⁰ associating the

16. See European Commission, "Commission Adopts 2023 Enlargement Package Recommends to Open Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to Grant Candidate Status to Georgia and to Open Accession Negotiations with BiH, Once the Necessary Degree of Compliance Is Achieved", *News Article*, November 8, 2023, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

17. Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, "2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (extract about Georgia)", November 8, 2023, available at: www.eeas.europa.eu.

18. European Union External Action, "Georgia: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary on the Recent Parliamentary Elections", November 13, 2024, available at: www.eeas.europa.eu.

19. "A Dangerous Stand-off in Georgia", *The Financial Times*, December 5, 2024, available at: www.ft.com.

20. "DISINFO: Despite the Western Pressure, the Georgian Authorities Managed Not to Get Involved and Not Open a Second Front", *EU vs DiSiNFO*, October 29, 2024, available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>.

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European path with war and destabilization and making allegations that Europe and the US aimed to push Georgia to open a “second front” of the Ukraine war²¹ in the Caucasus, instrumentalizing the traumatic memory of the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. In addition, the ruling party insinuated that mainstreaming “LGBT propaganda” was one of the conditions for Georgia²² to join the EU and framed the pursuit of EU integration as a threat to Georgian identity and traditional values.²³

Georgia's drift demonstrates that the EU has been unprepared to deal with illiberal regimes, anticipating and neutralizing the hybrid strategies that they deploy. Before the irregular elections in Georgia, Russia's intrusion in Moldova's 2024 presidential vote and in the referendum on EU membership (to enshrine the goal of EU accession in the country's constitution) exposed the vulnerability of partner countries in Eastern Europe to Russia's interference and hybrid campaigns. A technical approach to monitoring the adoption of the EU acquis under the enlargement process is completely inadequate if either the ruling party hijacks the country's future, as it is the case in Georgia, or a large share of public opinion is swayed by Russia-driven propaganda and financial means, as happened in Moldova.²⁴

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Developments in Georgia are consequential for the EU's enlargement agenda, praised as “the most far-reaching, geopolitical, and strategic of all the EU's responses to Russia's invasion” and a primary tool to reshape the European political and security order.²⁵ For one, Georgia's anti-European turn has challenged deeply-held confidence about the effectiveness of the enlargement policy as “a powerful tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights”.²⁶ For another, Georgia might set a dangerous precedent for other candidate countries, or those aspiring to this status. If Georgia drifts away from the EU, Armenia's recent efforts to emancipate itself from Russian influence and diversify its foreign policy will suffer, and its chances of deepening cooperation with Europe²⁷ will shrink. As for the accession countries in the Western Balkans, leaders who are playing a balancing act between the EU and its

21. “The Fearmongering ‘Global War Party’ and Other Tools of the Georgian Ruling Party's Propaganda to Discredit the US and the EU”, *European Digital Media Observatory*, October 14, 2024, available at: <https://edmo.eu>.

22. N. Gabritchidze, “Georgian Dream's Oppressive Anti-LGBT Law Comes into Effect”, *Civil Georgia*, December 2, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

23. “Twists and Turns: Georgian Dream Rhetoric on the EU”, *EU vs Disinfo*, October 23, 2024, available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>.

24. See F. Parmentier, “Moldavie : après une victoire étonnante au référendum sur l'Union, le spectre du ‘syndrome Gorbatchev’”, *Le Grand Continent*, October 22, 2024, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

25. K. E. Smith, “The European Union's Strategic Test in Ukraine”, *op. cit.*

26. European Commission, “2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy”, *COM(2023) 690 final*, November 8, 2023, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

27. See G. Gavin, “Armenia Floats EU Referendum Amid Split with Russia”, *Politico*, January 9, 2025, available at: www.politico.eu.

competitors might be tempted to gain more room for maneuver, distancing themselves from the EU while consolidating their power at home.²⁸

Testing the EU's soft power

The political crisis in Georgia and the EU's lukewarm response to it ultimately challenge the identity of the EU as an actor upholding democratic norms, which is central to its soft power. The Georgian people's struggle for the country's European future demonstrates the depth of their European aspirations and the enduring appeal of the EU in the country. The vast majority of Georgians endorse Europe's values and embrace the European way of life.²⁹ What makes the ongoing protests all the more significant is that they are not fueled by opposition parties but driven by citizens, cutting across generations and social groups and resulting in massive popular mobilization.

As they wave blue-and-gold EU flags, defying intimidation and violence, Georgian protesters have proven their readiness to fight for their country's European future and "their attachment to democratic values".³⁰ Georgia's society is, therefore, Europe's

principal ally in the country, and the recent declarations by EU officials³¹ expressing solidarity with the Georgian people and placing the whole responsibility for the suspension of the partnership on the authorities reflect this reality. Georgia is, therefore, a major test for the EU's ability to adjust its approach³² to supporting civil society in times of acute crisis in individual countries and against the headwinds of mounting anti-democratic trends. Words need to be followed by tangible demonstrations of support. The EU has allocated more

resources to support civil society by redirecting €121 million in assistance from the government to programs benefitting civil society directly,³³ but more needs to be done to protect critical voices from government repression.

Georgia is a major test for the EU's ability to adjust its approach to supporting civil society in times of acute crisis

28. D. Bechev, "Georgia Has Set a Precedent That Could Undermine EU Enlargement", *Aljazeera*, December 11, 2024, available at: www.aljazeera.com.

29. "Georgia Annual Survey 2024 – Country Report", *EU NeighboursEast*, November 19, 2024, available at: <https://euneighbourseast.eu>.

30. European Commission, "Statement by the European Commission and the High Representative Josep Borrell on the Parliamentary Elections in Georgia", *News Article*, October 27, 2024, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

31. European Commission, "Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos on Georgia", *News Article*, December 1, 2024, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

32. See R. Youngs, "The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support", *Carnegie Europe*, March 14, 2024, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

33. "Borrell: Elections in Georgia 'Will Have to Be Investigated'", *EU NeighboursEast*, November 19, 2024, available at: <https://euneighbourseast.eu>.

The European aspirations of Georgia's people are deep-rooted but should not be taken for granted. The EU's political inertia in the face of the Georgians' fight would speak volumes about its credibility. The resulting disappointment might undermine the attractiveness of the EU – its main asset. It would also fuel GD's narrative that Georgia has gained very little out of its partnership with the EU and has been subjected to “unfair, hypocritical treatment”.³⁴ A lack of concrete action in support of the demonstrators would, therefore, damage the EU's soft power, all the more so because the EU's gridlock is, in part, the product of rising illiberalism within the EU itself. The visit of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to Georgia to endorse and legitimize the contested election results, congratulating GD on its “overwhelming victory”³⁵, directly undermined the EU's leverage and credibility.

Conclusion

Georgia's future as a free and democratic state depends on the people of Georgia and their determination to make their voices heard despite repression, pressuring the government into concessions. Yet, it also depends on the policies that the EU will implement in the near future. On this score, procrastination is not a strategy. The EU needs to calibrate its approach to prevent Georgia from falling into authoritarianism and pivoting toward Russia. That requires a firmer stance toward the GD government, raising the costs for those responsible for the crackdown on demonstrators and the capture of state institutions. So far, the EU has failed to take meaningful action primarily due to its internal divisions and the veto of a few EU member states. Political fragmentation within the EU, therefore, precludes adequate action on the crisis in Georgia, damaging the EU's credibility. While the veto by Hungary and Slovakia to sanctions on GD is the proximate cause of the EU's botched response, the gridlock testifies to a lack of a vision and political will to deal with the broader geopolitical standoff in the region.

Devising an effective approach to the political crisis in Georgia and reversing its drift away from Europe, in accordance with the will of its citizens, cannot be disconnected from the larger priority of countering Russia's takeover of Europe's Eastern neighborhood. The EU needs to redefine its interests with respect to Georgia as part of a broader clarification of its strategic approach to Eastern Europe. This is all the more urgent, given the uncertainty over the future of American engagement in the region. This exercise should reject the false dichotomy between interests and values that some present as an excuse for inaction. The EU's interests in Georgia have always been about promoting values. It is far from clear what interests would be served by letting Georgia down.

34. “Politicians React to PM's Speech at GLOBSEC Discussion”, *Civil Georgia*, May 30, 2023, available at: <https://civil.ge>.

35. J. Rankin and P. Sauer, “Orban Arrives in Georgia After Hailing Ruling Party for ‘Overwhelming Victory’”, *The Guardian*, October 28, 2024, available at: www.theguardian.com.

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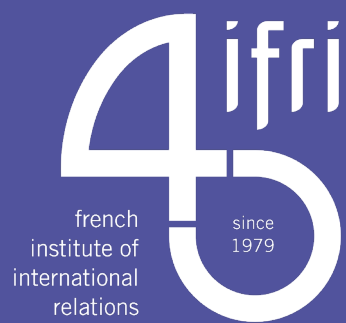
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