

Georgia turns away from Europe: Examining the dead-end in EU policy

Georgia used to be one of the best partners for the EU in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, and the country was granted EU candidate status in December 2023. Presently, however, the relationship is effectively frozen. In the wake of the manipulated parliamentary elections in October 2024, the authoritarian drift in Georgia has accelerated to such a degree that Georgia wasn't invited to the EU Enlargement Summit in November 2025. This policy brief analyses the erosion of Georgia's European orientation and suggests ways out of the current impasse. While the drivers for this erosion are primarily domestic, the EU needs to strategically rethink the aims of its policy in order to sustain the EaP enterprise.

Brief Points

- Public support for Georgia's ties with the EU remains strong, but the curtailing of democratic reforms by the ruling party undercuts the basis for cooperation.
- The strong emphasis on promoting values in the EU policy of engagement with Georgia clashed with many traditional perceptions and has been counterproductive.
- The impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine on the Georgian political environment is profound and detrimental for building ties with the EU.
- Disengagement is not an option for the EU. A strategic recalibration of its aims and means is necessary.

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Introduction

The consolidation of the illiberal pseudo-democratic regime in Georgia is a bitter disappointment to many stakeholders in the modernization of this South Caucasian state, which used to pursue a firmly pro-Western political course. The causes of the ongoing authoritarian drift are multiple and variegated, and it is too easy to reduce them to the malign Russian influence channelled through one corrupt oligarch. The European Union (EU) invested plenty of effort and resources into promoting reform agendas in Georgia and granted it EU candidate status in December 2023, when curtailing of the democratic reforms was already apparent. The suspension of the accession negotiations by the Georgian government marks a major setback in the EU policy, resembling the fiasco of the United States' (US) policy of strengthening security ties with Georgia in the mid-2000s, which was broken by the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008. As with every bureaucracy, the EU is reluctant to evaluate the errors of judgement that shaped its policy, and the annual enlargement report published in November 2025 merely rebuked Georgia's democratic backsliding (Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 2025). The really difficult question, however, concerns the possible negative impact of the EU's efforts on the acceptance of democratic rules by the Georgian polity and the internalizing of democratic norms by its society. This analysis cannot give a full answer and focuses on the EU's role in fostering agents of its value-promotion policy and on the impact of the Ukraine War, offering suggestions for the way forward.

Values promotion by cultivating NGOs

Georgia was a key member in the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, which was launched in May 2009 to upgrade cooperation with six post-Soviet states, particularly through promotion of the broadly defined European values. One intrinsic feature of this endeavour is direct support for NGOs committed to advancement of human rights and humanitarian agendas. The controversial impact of this value-based policy on the transformation of many 'recipient' societies is resolutely downplayed in Brussels, and the potential alienation of numerous conservatively-minded social groups by the activities of pro-European NGOs

remains an outcome too disagreeable to internalize. Georgia has delivered a proof positive of this under-assessment of a deeply rooted and often emotional conflict.

Following the 'Rose Revolution' in late 2003, Georgia embarked on the course of democratic reforms. The peaceful transfer of power in 2012 from the political forces supporting President Mikheil Saakashvili to the broad coalition formed by the Georgian Dream (GD) party was perceived in the West as evidence of democratic maturity. In fact, the combination of the broad public support for democracy and the sustained normative influence by the EU was far less solid than many Western friends of Georgia presumed. The GD initially positioned itself as a centre-left coalition focused on curtailing corruption associated with the influx of Western-educated elites into the government. That agenda gradually changed toward consolidation of a socially conservative power base underpinned by the ideology of 'sovereign democracy', echoing Russian political concepts designed for justifying the authoritarian mutation of President Putin's regime.

This political transformation was accelerated by the 2016 parliamentary elections, in which the GD secured a constitutional super-majority, campaigning on the platform of nationalist populism. The policy of prioritizing national identity helped the GD in building an alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church, which enjoys wide authority in Georgian society (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). The consequences of the promotion of traditional family values came into the spotlight in May 2021, when the Pride parade in Tbilisi was disrupted by an angry right-wing counterdemonstration. That clash paved the way for the Georgian Parliament's adoption of the 'Family Values' law, which directly targets the LGBTQIA+ community and outlaws public displays of the rainbow flag.

The EU was aware of these developments and sought to counter them by expanding programmes for strengthening civil society by supporting various NGOs, with limited and not always positive impact (Mikhelidze, 2025). Instead of a mature and well-informed civil society, a particular milieu of activists, journalists, analysts and project managers has emerged, with useful expertise in fundraising in Brussels, but without roots in or influence among the majority of the population. The

more these networks and media platforms came under pressure from the GD-controlled government, the more desperate were their efforts at gaining international support by convincing various sponsors of the strong impact of their work for promoting European values. The disconnect between the activities of pro-Western NGOs and the interests of real civil society helped the authorities in enforcing the legislation on Transparency of Foreign Influence (modelled after the Russian 'Foreign Agents' law), approved in May 2024. This triggered a sequence of street protests, but these were not strong enough to make a difference.

Authoritarian degradation of Georgia's political institutions proceeded in sync with the promotion of illiberal values, and the attempts by the EU to reverse the former were undermined by the inability to check the latter.

The war makes many differences

It may seem that Russia's aggression against Ukraine (launched in February 2022) has produced less impact on Georgia's political trajectory than could have been expected given the profound distortion of the European security system by this still ongoing war. In fact, this impact is much stronger than the superficial view on the continuation of the GD's control over the political system would suggest. What is happening in parallel with the democratic backsliding is the effective reversal of Georgia's constitutionally affirmed course on integration with the West, which leaves the EU struggling to revise its strategy of building relations with this candidate country. The GD government has reinforced its self-presentation as the guarantor of stability, with the depiction of the EU criticism as pressure aimed at exposing Georgia to severe risks of conflict with Russia.

The war signified an abrupt shift in relations between Russia and the EU, from a pattern of tense but broadly cooperative interactions, to a rigid confrontation that Moscow tends to portray as an existential 'civilizational' conflict. The EU seeks to build a broad international coalition for opposing the blatant Russian aggression and expects the states aspiring for accession to contribute to the urgent and sustained collective efforts. This Western coalition-building presented Georgia with a difficult choice, and the GD government has opted to abstain from aligning with the EU policy



Bidzina Ivanishvili at a campaign event ahead of the October 2024 elections.

Photo: Nicolo Vincenzo Malvestuto / Getty Images

and to chart a course of neutrality, not dissimilar from Turkey and many states of the Global South, which suits Russia's interests just fine.

Rational and pragmatic as this choice is, it determines a divergence between Georgia and the EU, which grows wider as the Europeans assume greater responsibility for supporting Ukraine due to the curtailing of US aid by the Trump administration. The main instrument in the EU policy of confronting Russia is sanctions, which are unprecedented in scale (the 19th package was approved in October 2025) and are proving significantly less effective than many economists initially expected. Georgia has opted not to impose its own sanctions and to maintain full compliance with the EU sanctions regime, but in reality, the country has become one of the key channels for circumventing restrictions on trade and capital flows. Its trade with Russia surged in 2022, but since mid-2023, as the EU enforced measures aimed at punishing sanctions evasion, the banned exports were re-routed via Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Partsvania & Pirveli, 2024).

Economic benefits for Georgia from the business of circumventing the EU sanctions come together with the influx of Russian investments and acquisitions of real estate, driven by the wave of migration caused by the mismanaged mobilization in Russia in autumn 2022. The

activity of this new Russian diaspora, which has created parallel urban societies, culturally distinct and disconnected from Georgia's civic structures, may not be a part of Moscow's policy, but it adds to the density of cross-border ties and aggravates Georgia's dependency upon its difficult big neighbour. Many of the new connections are of dubious legality and contribute to the spread of the culture of corruption, which makes ordinary truck drivers and wine-makers a natural constituency for reclusive oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who maintains effective control over Georgian politics.

The EU authorities were alarmed by Georgia's creeping authoritarianism and by its economic drift toward Russia and decided to counter these developments by granting this presumably pro-European country the long-desired status of EU candidate in December 2023. In hindsight, this move by the European Council – which didn't go as far as opening the accession negotiations – can easily be deplored as a serious blunder, but a passive eschewal of any attempt to influence Georgia's political trajectory would also have been a mistake, perhaps an even more regrettable one. The EU's need to focus its efforts on sustaining support for Ukraine prevented it from allocating material resources to promote reforms in the new candidate country. Nevertheless, the expectations in Brussels and among Georgia's Western friends of a surge in pro-European sentiment and of a mobilization of opposition in the campaign

aimed at the parliamentary elections in October 2024 were not without rationale.

The real outcome was depressingly different, and the political crisis of late 2024 may signify a reversal of Georgia's pro-Western political trajectory. The GD saw the elections as an existential threat and resorted to massive manipulations and inventive falsifications in order to secure victory with a solid margin. Its main electoral weapon, however, was the fear factor – and the risk of triggering a disastrous war with Russia was indeed prohibitively high for a large part of the polity. The trauma of the swift defeat in the August 2008 war was still fresh and aggravated by the stark impressions from Russian missile strikes on Ukrainian cities. The divided opposition wasn't able to produce a convincing narrative that could disprove the argument that a vote for the pro-Western parties would jeopardise economic benefits and invite military aggression.

The chain reaction of the political crisis started with mass protests against the announced GD victory in Tbilisi, where the opposition in fact managed to gain more votes. The suppression of protests prompted the European Parliament to adopt a resolution on non-recognition of the legitimacy of the elections. The government responded by announcing a suspension of preparations for the accession negotiations, which triggered a new and more powerful wave of protests. The harsher suppression of public discontent led to Georgia's effective expulsion from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and freezing of most development programmes by leading European states, including Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). Local elections in October 2025 brought new protests, further repressions and more castigation from the EU (Anjaparidze, 2025).

Mutually agreeable deadlock

The exhaustion of protests and the consolidation of the GD's grasp on power leaves the EU with the problem of setting a useful and appropriate pattern of relations with this democracy-eschewing candidate country. Giving up on Georgia's democratic transition and writing off sustained political investments in nourishing its civil society might appear bad policy for the EU, which is struggling to strengthen the capacity of its foreign and security policy. It is still a better choice than pretending that the

plans for implementing the accession guidelines continue to make sense. The deadlock in relations may in fact answer the interests of both the European authorities and the GP's leaders, frustrating as this consent may be for the domestic pro-democracy constituencies and for Georgia's many friends in Europe (Chkhikvadze, 2025).

The Georgian government will maintain the façade of reform, while disregarding the conditionalities attached to candidate status. Public trust in the EU has declined, but the preference for the European orientation remains strong, so the government resorts to selective use of anti-EU rhetoric. What began as useful ambiguity has hardened into overt antagonism: in response to the criticism in the EU's 2025 enlargement report, GD leaders accused Brussels of 'value regression', 'political bias' and 'destructive interference' (Civil Georgia, 2025). The GP has few concerns about possible sanctions, expecting the decisions to be blocked by Georgia's reliable ally in the European Council: Hungarian President Viktor Orban (Menabde, 2025). What the Georgian rulers keep hoping for is an improvement of relations with the USA and, in particular, lifting of the personal sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili imposed by the Biden administration. President Donald Trump's team has so far been entirely inattentive to the signals from Tbilisi.

For the EU leadership, freezing out the GD's regime is an entirely acceptable option, which removes from the overloaded agenda the issue of managing the accession process and eliminates budget expenditures on supporting reforms in the troublesome candidate state. This indifference could have been challenged by Georgia's drift into Russia's sphere of influence, but such a drift is limited not only by strong public disapproval, but also by the insurmountable obstacle of Moscow's official

recognition of quasi-independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the August 2008 war. The GD politicians have explored possibilities of finding a compromise and found none, so the restoration of normal diplomatic and political relations with Russia remains a hypothetical proposition.

Georgia's stalled democratic transition and growing estrangement from the EU reflect not a temporary deviation, but a deeper structural dynamic – one rooted in elite strategies and societal preferences. The ruling Georgian Dream party is firmly set on preserving domestic power through state capture and patronage, while maximizing external strategic autonomy by using occasional overtures to Moscow as leverage to inflate its strategic worth in Western eyes. For the EU, disengagement cannot be a way out of this impasse, but a strategic recalibration can preserve the achievements of the engagement policy and sustain the EaP enterprise. Recognizing the shortcomings of earlier approaches does not imply withdrawal from the Caucasus, but rather a reckoning with the reality of Europeanization as a contested, non-linear process shaped by disruptive geopolitical dynamics. While normative influence has proven insufficient, it retains potential when paired with credible forms of leverage, such as targeted conditionality, carefully calibrated incentives and long-term support for bottom-up democratization. Advancing Georgia's European trajectory depends on a shift toward a more flexible, interest-conscious and principled framework of EU accession, grounded in strategic realism. ■

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THE PROJECT

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