

Impact of EU Policies on Georgia's Choices

Small countries in complex contested environments, such as the Eastern Partnership region, face a fundamental choice between various spheres of influence. On the one hand, the West, in general, and the EU, in particular, and, on the other hand, Russia, are competing to promote their inherently contradictory values and interests in the region. While the EU invests in developing stable and prosperous democracies in its periphery, Russia wages hybrid warfare to weaken and undermine the development and security of its neighbors. Both influence their shared neighborhood through their peculiar ways and means. Thereby, the foreign policy choices of the Eastern Partnership states are guided by how they perceive the balance between the risks and the opportunities of aligning their interests with the policies and visions of the competing actors. Georgia is no exception.

European Democracy and Prosperity vs. Russian Instability and Conflicts

To understand the policies and choices of Georgian society and the political elites throughout the last 30 years, the juxtaposition of Russian and Western (read European and American) hard and soft power projections could help understand the rationale of Georgia's foreign policymaking. For the purpose of this exercise, Georgia-EU relations will be divided into four qualitatively different stages – (1) cooperation under the Part-

nership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) from 1996 to 2009, (2) the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative from 2009 to 2014, (3) the Association Agreement (AA) agenda from 2014 until 2022 and (4) the enlargement path from 2022 until today.

In the first stage, when Georgia's statehood was still in the embryonic phase, the objective of the EU was to lead Georgia toward respecting the principles and provisions contained in the Helsinki Final Act and fundamental OSCE documents. The primary modus of the PCA was to support Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while helping it build political and economic systems based on democratic principles. On the other hand, Russia was the main source of instability in Georgia during that period. Russia's total control over the conflicts in Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions was the main limiting factor for Georgia's state-building opportunities. Georgia's economy also depended on Russia, which often used this leverage to exert political pressure on Tbilisi. Russia enjoyed total comfort in achieving its objectives in Georgia at that time. However, Russia quickly lost influence in Georgia after the 2003 Rose Revolution because of accelerated Western-oriented reforms. This was also when the European Union created the European Neighborhood Policy, offering Georgia the "stake" in the internal market and prospects of good neighborly relations. As Georgia quickly implemented the democratic reforms and Eu-



ropeanized its way of life and administration, European influence increased while the Kremlin's decreased. The culmination of this process was the 2008 war – when Moscow used conventional military power as a last resort to ensure that Georgia did not escape its sphere of influence.

The next stage of Georgia-EU relations was forced by the EU's need to respond to Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, introducing the new engagement concept with the six former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) under the Eastern Partnership umbrella. A mixed model of multilateral and bilateral initiatives was focused on supporting democracy, the rule of law reform, and economic opportunities based on "common values and mutual interest." The EU's immediate response in the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Georgia was marked by the assistance package of EUR five billion to stabilize the Georgian economy and reconstruct war-damaged infrastructure. Also, the EU quickly decided to deploy the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) – the EU's unarmed civilian mission to monitor conflict-affected areas in Georgia. In the conflict resolution context, the relationship between the EU and Georgia in the aftermath of the 2008 war was framed by the controversial [report](#) of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (Tagliavini Commission) established by the Council of the European Union to inspect the causes of the 2008 war. The report failed to blame Russia for its aggression against Georgia openly. Such a stance gave an unfortunate context for adequately analyzing the war and justifying Russia's aggressive regional strategy; however, the EU crafted the policy of

“non-recognition and engagement” shortly after the war, which remains a conceptual basis of its policy towards Georgia's occupied regions.

Further developments in EU-Georgia relations took place in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the instigation of the conflict in Donbas, Ukraine. The signing of the AA marked a qualitatively new stage of relations between the EU and Georgia. In contrast to the PCA and the Neighborhood Policy, the AA was designed to promote Georgia's political association and economic integration into the EU, opening paths for deep and comprehensive free trade and visa liberalization agreements. By then, it had become clear that Russia had abandoned forms of civilized competition with the EU and resorted to brute force and hybrid warfare to achieve an upper hand in its neighborhood. It took the EU a long time to digest this dramatic shift in Russia's policy; therefore, the EU continued with its strategic ambiguity policies during the third period, giving enough space and stimulus for Russia's aggressive bid to dominate the region. Strategic ambiguity was also demonstrated in the failure to acknowledge the ambitions of associated members to join European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Finally, the monumental turning point in the EU's policy towards its Eastern neighbors was once again triggered in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, opening a long-awaited membership perspective to Georgia and granting official candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine. The cooperation and integration process details for all three countries still need to be clearly defined. There are still divisions

inside the EU about when the accession talks should start with the candidate states. In November 2023, the European Commission [recommended](#) granting candidate status to Georgia and starting accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. The EU's priorities in Georgia and the wider region stayed in the realm of implementing a "democratic and the rule of law agenda through ambitious political, judicial and anti-corruption reforms," as [stated](#) in the EU-Georgia association agenda for 2021-2027. After the unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia degenerated its leverage as a factor in the EU's decision-making process; however, through its so-called Trojan horses, such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the Kremlin still has a chance of vetoing essential decisions related to the EaP countries.

Through all four stages, the EU's priorities and general objectives outlined in the corresponding framework agreements and all other political declarations can be summarized as helping Georgia develop and consolidate its economy, democracy, and the rule of law. The EU's decisions on moving forward with cooperation or integration with the EaP countries never preceded but followed Russia's aggressive actions. Russia indirectly influenced EU decisions regarding the EaP countries throughout these four stages. While the EU's policies exclusively aimed at assisting Georgia with economic and democratic development through soft initiatives, conditional assistance, and a push for reforms, Russia used a combination of soft and hard power, establishing hotspots of insecurity and grey zones in its neighborhood, which were then used as leverages, albeit not always successfully.

Conditionality vs. Coercion

The EU's support for Georgia has been focused on helping Georgia implement its objectives and [priorities](#) based on the conditionality principle, meaning that the EU [sets](#) certain value-based conditions for the partnership and requests that the partners follow them, in return offering them closer political, people-to-people and economic association. The EU-Georgia Association Agenda clearly [states](#) that the "EU's assistance is bound to jointly agreed strict conditionalities related to the progress on reform." According to the [Constitution of Georgia](#) and confirmed in all conceptual [documents](#) related to foreign and security policy, integration into the European Union is one of Georgia's top national priorities. Article 78 of the Constitution reads that "the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." EU-Georgia relations are driven mainly by the shared interest in strengthening democracy, the economy, and the rule of law – the priorities also outlined in the preamble of the Georgian constitution. Therefore, it is unsurprising that through all stages of EU-Georgia relations, democratic reforms were always the primary condition and critical determinant of the partnership agenda.

To assess the effectiveness of the EU's policies on Georgia's choices, it is essential to analyze the historical and cultural context in which Georgia's national identity has been taking shape. Due to the numerous invasions and occupations by different regional superpowers, the protection of freedoms and liberties has been historically the defining value

for Georgian society. The value-based civilizational choices drove Georgians to seek independence from the USSR, join the Council of Europe (CoE), and Europeanize many economic and public administration sectors. The Western choices and aspirations of the Georgian people were consistently visible in various public opinion surveys conducted by reputable international agencies. A recent [survey](#) published by the International Republican Institute in April 2023 and all other previous studies of a similar nature showed that around 90% of Georgians are interested in European integration. According to the same study, the EU is primarily associated with economic development and a general improvement in the standard of living, protection of freedoms, and security for most Georgians.

The strongly pronounced will of society was the scene-setter for the foreign policy agenda for the consecutive governments of Georgia since regaining independence. Various governments at different times had fluctuating success in rapprochement with the EU; however, the declared policy has always been unequivocally pro-European.

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cooling of relations between Georgia and the EU. Strains have been especially obvious since the Georgian government failed to support Ukraine and its Western allies after Russia launched its war of aggression in 2022, despite the population's strong solidarity towards the Ukrainian cause. It became evident that Georgia's foreign policy moved away from the solid pro-Western course for the first time, and the foreign policy choice of the political elites contradicted public preferences.

Evolution of the Georgian Dream's Foreign Policy

There have been three stages in the evolution of the Georgian Dream's foreign policy leading to the current anti-European policy, which has been in effect since 2022.

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Since 2012, after the Georgian Dream's electoral victory, Georgia's pro-western foreign policy has taken a more balanced turn. The official narrative was that Georgia was pursuing European and Euro-Atlantic integration parallel to normalizing relations with Russia. This was the turning point in Georgia's foreign policy thinking. If before seeking refuge in European and Euro-Atlantic structures was the only possible alternative for mitigating the risk of Russia's aggression, now the newly elected government proposed to bandwagon the Russian threat. Over time, Georgian Dream narratives on NATO integration started to fade alongside a visible

slowdown in NATO-Georgia relations. Compromising on the strategic national interests of Georgia for the sake of not irritating Russia culminated in terminating the development of a US-supported deep-sea port project in Anaklia. Russia was particularly hostile to Georgia's active partnership with NATO and the US. Thus, for the first time, Russia's coercive policies overruled the West's power of attraction in the calculation of Georgia's government. At that point, cooperation with the EU did not exhibit risks to the balance strategy, especially since the EU also encouraged normalizing relations between Georgia and Russia.

The next stage in Georgia's foreign policy change became evident after the Georgian Dream [decided to quit](#) the April 2021 [agreement](#) brokered by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, aimed at defusing a severe post-election crisis in Georgia. The first noticeable signs of the EU losing its leverage came to light when Georgia's ruling party openly started jeopardizing the credibility of the conditionality policy. For the first time, the EU refused to give the Georgian government a EUR 75 million loan as it failed to fulfill the recommendations of the Venice Commission on judiciary independence. The European Union unambiguously [noted](#) that "Georgia failed to address the condition for this macro-financial assistance sufficiently and notably, to increase independence, accountability and the quality of the judicial system."

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Later on, the principles of Michel's agreement were elaborated and expanded into 12 priority areas constituting the European Commission's recommendations and conditions necessary to obtain EU candidate status. The government realized that implementing the reforms requested by the EU would inevitably lead to the proper balance of power between political actors in Georgia. The risk of losing its monopoly on power pushed the ruling party to confront the EU's conditionality openly. Fearing the outrage of the Georgian society over the foreign policy change, the Georgian Dream still maintained a pro-European narrative while openly disregarding the EU's conditions.

The third and current stage of the policy change is marked by the Georgian Dream's 'normalization' policy, accommodating Russia's interest in hampering Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Since Russia started its war of aggression in Ukraine, it became apparent that the government of Georgia failed to support Ukraine, openly confronting it and its Western allies by launching an anti-Western propaganda campaign. While failing to criticize Russia for its aggression, blaming Ukraine and its Western allies for trying to open a second front in Georgia [has become a mainstream narrative](#) for the Georgian Dream's leaders and its proxies. The narrative of the imminent necessity of avoiding war with Russia has been skillfully fused with maintaining power at all costs. Thus, besides open anti-Western rhetoric, the Georgian Dream started testing the resilience of society's support of the pro-Western course by trying to introduce Russia-friendly policies and actions. Georgia opened doors for the uncontrolled waves of Russian migrants fleeing Russia after the war

started in Ukraine. It resumed air connection with several Russian cities parallel to the Western efforts to isolate Russia. Most notably and despite grave [concerns](#), the Georgian Dream initiated a so-called law on foreign agents, primarily seen by Georgian society and Western partners as an attempt to silence civil society and further monopolize power. Although Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are in similar positions regarding formal and bureaucratic progress on reforms, failing to align its foreign policy with the EU turned Georgia from the frontrunner to the weakest link among associated members. As a result, while Ukraine and Moldova aim to start accession talks with the EU by the end of this year, Georgia still needs to get candidate status.


Strategic Approach vs. Formalities and Bureaucracy

Georgia, morphing from presumably the world's most pro-EU country into a Russia-friendly actor, is a clear example that the power of attraction and conditionality policies alone cannot influence the behavior of political elites even if the societies project solid opposition. The gradual degradation of the conditionality policy leading to the change in the foreign policy of the Georgian government was guided by the EU's failure to adjust policies to the strategic context and balance out external and internal factors.

The external context is that the room for effective democratic and economic reforms is minimal, while the Russian Federation is waging hybrid warfare and posing an existential security threat to Georgia. Internally, a key factor is the improper functioning of democratic institutions, allowing for monop-

olizing all power sources under one political group. At the same time, even the loudly pronounced majority opinion cannot make a political change due to insufficiencies of the electoral and judiciary systems.

Only a coherent EU policy addressing external and external factors through abandoning strategic ambiguity, setting clear strategic objectives, and taking real existential problems instead of focusing on formalities and bureaucratic procedures can deliver positive effects. The signs of such a strategic approach could be demonstrated by giving the candidate status to Georgia despite the government's disregard for conditionality while doubling down on empowering the pro-democracy civil society of Georgia and offering meaningful dialogue of existential security challenges.

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Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.