

# For Tbilisi, Kyiv Holds the Trio Key

## EU Enlargement - Regional Approach in Action

All seven successful waves of the EU enlargement had a regional dimension. In 1973, Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom joined the European Community for the first Northern Enlargement. They were followed by the Southern/Mediterranean enlargement, with Greece (1981), Spain, and Portugal (1986) joining the community. After the end of the Cold War, the Community smoothly incorporated Finland, Austria, and Sweden in 1995, which, even though geographically distant, fit in the economic EFTA region. The Central and Eastern European 'big bang'

enlargement came in two waves, with the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia knitting ties with the European Union on the same day in May 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria joining in 2007. Croatia's EU accession in 2013 can be considered either the end of the Central and Eastern European enlargement or the start of the Balkan accession, depending on the point of view.

***All past waves of enlargement clearly show that when it comes to the accession of the new member states, the regional approach prevails over that of the individual.***



**Vano Chkhikvadze**  
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is an EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), specializing in EU-Georgian relations and advancing projects for Georgia's European integration. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



The pause between the waves of enlargement varied from a minimum of three to a maximum of nine years. Now is the longest period (11 years) in EU enlargement history that the club has not enlarged. The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), as well as Eastern Partnership's Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, are queuing up. All past waves of enlargement clearly show that when it comes to the accession of the new member states, the regional approach prevails over that of the individual, even if the EU's formal approach is based on the principle of individual merit.

This means that Georgia does not have much choice but to unite forces with other countries of the region in its European

quest. The key question is which ones.

Even though Türkiye and the EU have been engaged in accession negotiations with fits and starts since October 2005, the process has stalled after 2018, mainly due to the democratic backsliding in the country. It does not look like the accession process will be unfrozen anytime soon.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are also not the best partners for Georgia's European vocation. Azerbaijan pursues a multi-vector and balanced foreign policy strategy. The EU is Azerbaijan's leading trading partner, scoring first for exports and second for imports. However, strong trade links are not mirrored in politics as Azerbaijan does not seek EU membership.

Armenia, while having successfully [negotiated](#) the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU, decided to stick with the Russian-led Customs Union in the end. On 3 September 2013, while visiting Putin in Moscow, then-President Serzh Sargsyan [announced a detour from the European course](#). The current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is indeed more sympathetic to Armenia's European future, especially after Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh; however, whether Pashinyan will manage to make another U-turn away from Moscow to the EU is still anybody's guess.

***The regional Association Trio's debut was promising, but Georgia has recently been drifting away.***

Thus, short of alternatives in its immediate neighborhood, Georgia has little choice but to push engagement with other countries of the Black Sea region, like Ukraine and Moldova, which have the same foreign policy goals of EU membership. This was also reflected in Georgia's last Foreign Policy Strategy 2019-2022 (the new one has yet to be adopted). The document stressed the need to strengthen the trilateral cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The regional Association Trio's debut was promising, but Georgia has recently been drifting away.

## Evolution of Trio Format

In December 2019, the civil society platforms of three associated countries signed the memorandum on cooperation that aimed to push the governments to establish regional cooperation among Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The trio format got an endorsement from the European Parliament. The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, co-chaired by Lithuanian MEP Andrius Kubilius in December 2019, adopted the [resolution](#) On the Future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: Building a Future of Eastern Partnership. Later, Kubilius and his cabinet published the [memo](#) stressing the need for EU institutions and the Member States "to come out with a much more ambitious agenda to provide a new momentum of EU integration process for the Association Trio."

In December 2019, the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova issued a joint statement calling for the EU to introduce differentiation in the Eastern Partnership format. That statement also stressed that "considering the will of our people, we will consider applying for the EU membership in accordance with article 49 of the Treaty on European Union."

The Association Trio was officially inaugurated in May 2021 with the signature of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Kyiv between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and Georgia and the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova. The document referred to the right of three countries to apply for EU membership based on the EU Treaty article 49. The [memorandum](#) also set the modalities of cooperation by setting up the trilateral consultation formats, establishing Association Trio coordinators at MFAs, and holding regular Association Trio meetings at experts, senior civil servants, and minister levels. The memorandum put the main emphasis on cooperation between the Trio and EU but fell short of strengthening the trilateral cooperation among the countries. Three years after it was signed, little is known about how Trio countries apply MoUs in real life and how the existing modalities operate.

Afraid of Trio countries losing interest in the Eastern Partnership, the European External Action Service representative, commenting on the MoU signature, made a cautious [statement](#) - on the one hand, recognizing the fact of the signing of the memorandum but on the other hand, stressing that those countries need to focus on the implementation of the Association Agreements.

The cooperation on EU integration between the three countries was nothing new. It started even earlier among the legislative bodies of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In 2015, the three countries' Chairs of the EU and Foreign Affairs

Committees signed the joint [declaration](#) launching the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Initiative (IPCI). This cooperation deepened when, in June 2018, the Chairs of the Parliaments of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed an agreement to establish an inter-parliamentary assembly. The first session of the assembly took place in Tbilisi in 2018.

In July 2017, ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit, the three Parliaments sent a joint [statement](#) to the European Parliament calling it to “adopt a resolution before the EaP Summit reflecting political support and reaffirming the appeal to the European Council to opening the perspective of membership to the three Associated Countries in line with Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union.” This was followed by a joint [communiqué](#) of senior members of the Parliaments of the three countries calling on the European Union to open the EU membership perspective.

The cooperation of the Trio countries gained further political weight once the Presidents of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, in the presence of the European Council President in the Georgian Black Sea city of Batumi, signed the declaration in July 2021 stressing that “accession to the European Union is a goal that unites three states” and that they “stand united in their determination to work towards achieving acknowledgment of the European perspective for Georgia, Moldova,

and Ukraine opening the way for future membership of three states in the EU.” It was the first [time](#) the European Council President mentioned the „Trio“ to describe the Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine cooperation format.

The Batumi meeting was followed by the online meeting of the three Trio Prime Ministers in November 2021, ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021. Slowly but steadily, the EU also started to change its standing on the Trio. Ahead of the Summit, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, held a separate meeting with the Prime Ministers of the Trio countries. It followed the recognition of the Trio format by EU Member States. The EaP Summit [declaration](#) stressed that the “EU acknowledges the initiative of the Trio of associated partners Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, to enhance the cooperation with the EU, and takes good note of the increased coordination amongst them on matters of common interest related to the implementation of the Association Agreements and the DCFTAs, and on cooperation within the Eastern Partnership.”

***Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought a new reality to the Trio format.***

Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought a new reality to the Trio format. On 28 February

2022, Ukraine made a bold step by applying for EU membership. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova followed on 3 March 2022.

But just as the possibility of EU membership became real, the Trio format has wavered. On the one hand, the relations between official Tbilisi and Kyiv got increasingly strained in the context of Russia’s aggression. On the other hand, the diplomatic relations between Tbilisi and Chisinau remained low-key.

***Kyiv’s position on Trio also changed as Ukrainians engaged in multi-dimensional resistance against Russia on the land, sea, air, and diplomatic fronts.***

Kyiv’s position on Trio also changed as Ukrainians engaged in multi-dimensional resistance against Russia on the land, sea, air, and diplomatic fronts. Ukraine pushed for special treatment from Brussels at the expense of the earlier efforts to promote the regional format. The feeling has emerged that for Kyiv, the Trio was becoming an anchor that could weigh down Ukraine and keep it stuck in the EU waiting room, with underperforming Georgia and, to a lesser extent, Moldova.

## **Georgia-Ukraine Relations Undermine the Trio Format**

After the United National Movement (UNM) lost power in Georgia in 2012, some

of the former officials went to Ukraine and were appointed to high political posts in Kyiv and Odesa. The now-ruling Georgian Dream party launched criminal investigations against many of them and demanded – unsuccessfully – their extradition from Ukraine. The harsh exchanges of the first years later softened, leading to the signing of the agreement in 2019 to establish a high-level strategic council of Ukraine and Georgia. The body aimed to cover four main areas: political, trade & economics, defense & security, and cultural & humanitarian. The working groups set up in each direction were to be led by the relevant ministers, ensuring a high level of comprehensive bilateral dialogue. However, this cooperation never took off.

***The former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, is the main apple of discord between Kyiv and Tbilisi.***

The former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, is the main apple of discord between Kyiv and Tbilisi. Saakashvili made an unusual move in 2016 – giving up Georgian citizenship in exchange for Ukraine becoming the governor of Ukraine’s Odesa region. Wanted in Georgia for largely politically motivated charges, Saakashvili smuggled himself to the Georgian port of Poti in 2021, two days before the local elections. He was swiftly arrested, leading him to declare a hunger strike. The former President’s health started to deteriorate, which prompted Georgian authori-

ties to move him to the prison hospital. In July 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on the Georgian authorities to transfer Saakashvili to Ukraine for necessary treatment and care. Zelenskyy’s [words](#) – “right now, Russia is killing Ukrainian citizen Mykhailo Saakashvili at the hands of Georgian authorities,” show the depth of the problem.

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 further spoiled Tbilisi-Kyiv relations. The war erased the shades of grey, leaving Georgia only two choices – either unequivocally and fully support Ukraine and condemn Russia’s actions (something Kyiv expected) or side with Russia. The Georgian authorities tried to pursue a middle-ground pragmatic policy, supporting Ukraine diplomatically and through humanitarian actions but distancing from joining Western-imposed sanctions and military assistance. This policy was justified by the absence of security guarantees from the European Union or [NATO](#), putting Georgia at risk of Russian reprisals.

The rhetoric of then-Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, however, poured fuel on the fire. A few days after the invasion started, he promptly declared that Georgia would not join EU sanctions so as not to cause significant financial and economic damage to Georgia. He denounced the sanctions as ineffective and declared that there was nobody to stop

Russia from bombing [Kyiv](#). He also repeated Moscow's line that Ukraine's quest to join NATO was the reason for Russia's aggression. Even though Georgia provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, accepted and supported Ukrainian refugees, and joined diplomatic efforts and statements on Ukraine at various international fora, the political rhetorical support was muted.

***The Georgian Government's rhetoric and mistreatment of Saakashvili resulted in Ukraine recalling its Ambassador from Georgia and expelling the Georgian Ambassador from Kyiv.***

The Georgian Government's rhetoric and mistreatment of Saakashvili resulted in Ukraine recalling its Ambassador from Georgia and expelling the Georgian Ambassador from Kyiv. The Georgian side balked at this extreme escalation of diplomatic [relations](#) and held Ukraine responsible. Official Kyiv went further, accusing Georgia of aiding Russia to evade Western sanctions without presenting the evidence. The lack of evidence did not prevent Kyiv from blacklisting Georgian businessmen, including the ones closely affiliated with Bidzina Ivanishvili. Tbilisi's standing on "not joining, but also not violating" the Western sanctions was strengthened after the joint visit of EU, UK, and US sanctions envoys to Tbilisi in

June 2023. All three [stated](#) that the Georgia authorities were taking the necessary measures against sanction evasion.

The Georgian Prime Minister is among the very few leaders of Europe who have not visited Kyiv since the eruption of the war. He [claimed](#) that "going to Ukraine for the sake of going is useless." The ruling party imposed three preconditions for a high-level visit to Kyiv. Namely, Ukraine should bring back the Georgian ambassador to Kyiv, take back the allegations of Georgia aiding Russia to evade sanctions, and fire former Georgian officials from high positions in the government of Ukraine. The visit of the Georgian parliamentary delegation to Ukraine in April 2022, led by the Chair of the Parliament, remains the only physical manifestation of solidarity in official Georgia-Ukraine relations.

Despite deteriorating political ties between Ukraine and Georgia, trade relations were on the [rise](#) until 2022. After the signature of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with the EU, Ukraine and Georgia amended the bilateral trade agreement, paving the way for a functioning triangle of diagonal cumulative trade between the European Union, Ukraine, and Georgia.

### Georgia-Ukraine trade in goods



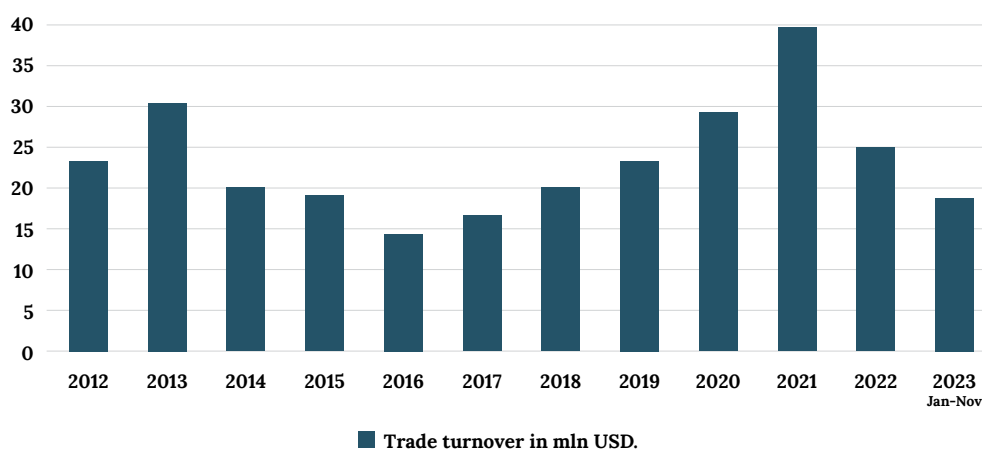
## Georgia-Moldova Relations Do Not Help the Trio Format

Georgia-Moldovan relations can be characterized as a “No News” policy. Moldova is the only Eastern Partner country that does not have an Embassy in Tbilisi. Since 2012, the two countries have only exchanged high-level visits once - the Prime Minister of Georgia visited Chisinau in October 2018, and the President of Moldova visited Georgia in July 2021. These rather negligible political ties are also [reflected](#) in trade relations. The trade turnover figure (USD 238 million) between Moldova and Geor-

gia for almost 11 years (2012-2023) is far less than Georgia-Ukraine trade (USD 326 million) for January- November 2023.

Since the outbreak of the war, Moldova has stopped investing in the Trio format; instead, it is trying to support Ukraine in the war and bandwagon Ukraine into the EU. Moldovan support for Ukraine is far more significant than Georgia's. Since February 2022, Moldova received 852,548 Ukrainian refugees, and over 100.000 Ukrainian refugees chose to settle in the country as of November 2023. This made

### Georgia-Moldova trade in goods





the poorest European country, with a population of just 2.5 million, the largest recipient of Ukrainian [refugees](#) per capita.

Just like Georgia, Moldova stated it would not join in the restrictive measures against Russia after Moscow's aggression in Ukraine. However, the political rhetoric and support drastically differed from Tbilisi's. Shortly after, however, Moldovan authorities reassessed their previous decisions and started implementing sanctions against Russia. As of November 2023, Moldova had joined four out of six sanction packages affecting citizens or legal entities from the Russian Federation. As Moldova's Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu [put](#) it: "There are still some sanctions packages that are being analyzed for their economic impact on Moldova. Our goal is to maintain the stability and security of our country. Absolutely all decisions on Moldova joining new sanctions are analyzed."

## Trio Without an Engine

Coming up with a Trio format took a while and a great deal of effort. Diplomatic investment to get the Trio's recognition from the EU was also quite impressive. Initially, the main focus of the Trio was getting the European perspective and the right to EU membership rather than promoting internal political and economic cooperation between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

***It is in the core interest of Tbilisi to restart the Trio format.***

Ukraine, the real engine of the Trio, lost interest in the format after the eruption of the full-scale war and the submission of its EU membership application. Kyiv does not see the Trio as having added value anymore. It tries to pave the way to EU membership independently rather than deliberately acting as a locomotive to drive Georgia and Moldova into the club.

Considering, on the one hand, the history of EU enlargement, where the regional approach prevails over the individual one, and the reality that none of Georgia's immediate neighbors aspire to go towards the EU, Georgia has little choice but to revitalize the Trio format. It is in the core interest of Tbilisi to restart the Trio format, but it can only happen if the bilateral problems with Kyiv are solved and the support for Ukraine matches Kyiv's expectations. Tbilisi has to get the key to the Trio engine in Kyiv; otherwise, it risks being cut off from the region and staying alone on the European integration path. ■