

May the Force Be With EU

When Ian Manners [introduced](#) the concept of “Normative Power Europe” in 2002, he described the European Union as an actor that derives its influence from values rather than military or economic might. Unlike traditional powers, for two decades, the EU was viewed as an actor that could shape the international order through norms related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These values form the core of the EU’s identity, codified in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and are promoted globally, primarily through its enlargement policy. As seen in past decades, this policy has encouraged political and economic reforms in aspiring member states. Yet, as Georgia’s experience demonstrates, projecting this normative influence is not without challenges, particularly when geopolitical realities complicate the EU’s aspirations.

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aiming to occupy the entire country. In response, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days later, rekindling the EU enlargement policy and open-

ing the door for Georgia and Moldova, which bandwagoned Ukraine on the way to the EU. This marked a turning point, as the EU enlargement policy—once considered one of the world’s most successful democratic state-building projects—had been largely dormant for years.

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Historically, EU enlargement has promoted the rule of law and human rights in aspiring nations, but it has also served as a tool for achieving the EU’s geopolitical aims. Observing EU–Georgia relations over the past two years reveals the shifting EU approach toward Georgia and the underlying tension between the EU’s role as a normative power and a geopolitical player.

Geopolitics vs. Norms

The EU’s response to Ukraine’s application revitalized its enlargement policy, opening a path for



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Georgia and Moldova. This was a pivotal geopolitical moment as the EU moved to accelerate the enlargement process in response to Russia's aggression. Yet normative standards remained in place; thus, the EU attached conditions to all three applicants, aiming to leverage the newly opened EU pathway to motivate these governments to fast-track democratic reforms.

Initially, it seemed plausible to balance geopolitics with normative principles: Ukraine and Moldova achieved candidate status and pursued reforms. Georgia, however, due to its government's pro-Russian leanings, was offered only a "European perspective." The EU outlined 12 conditions Georgia needed to meet for candidacy, reflecting the EU's attempt to uphold its commitment to democracy, freedom, and the rule of law within a broader geopolitical strategy.

But the EU's normative approach hit a roadblock

as the Georgian Dream (GD) government showed little willingness to address the 12 conditions. Despite enacting three minor reforms, the GD resisted significant changes—such as depolarization, de-oligarchization, and judicial reform—that might undermine its power. In response to this backslide, the EU opted again for a geopolitical approach in December 2023, granting Georgia candidate status to prevent a widening gap with Ukraine and Moldova despite Georgia's limited progress on EU conditions.

This move was intended to assure the Georgian people of the EU's commitment and encourage resistance to the GD's anti-European agenda. However, it also suggested to the GD that the EU might accept superficial reforms, signaling tolerance for the government's reluctance to implement meaningful change.

This decision emboldened the Georgian Dream, im-

plying that as long as the EU prioritized geopolitical strategy over democratic standards, they could continue bending human rights and democratic norms. GD leaders frequently reminded the EU of its strategic interests in the region, almost in a form of blackmail: if the EU was focused on countering Russia, why would it care about democracy in Georgia? After all, the EU appeared lenient on democratic lapses in countries like Azerbaijan and Serbia. Receiving candidate status allowed the GD to portray itself as pro-European, misleading the public to believe this status reflected support for its “balanced foreign policy” rather than genuine alignment with the EU.

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In October, the GD orchestrated the most flawed election in Georgia’s recent history, “winning” against the backdrop of a campaign that pitted the opposition’s vision of a European future against the ruling party’s warnings of an inevitable war with Russia. This “victory” unfolded as political ties with the EU soured and hit the lowest in history. In the spring, the EU effectively paused Georgia’s accession, with the European Council [stating](#) that the government’s actions “de facto halt the accession process.” EU-Georgia relations are at rock bottom currently and the EU has never faced such a stark choice between its normative and geopolitical priorities as it does now with Georgia.

The EU must now confront the reality that tolerating democratic erosion in Georgia could irreparably damage its credibility and values, reducing its leverage in the region. This is no longer just about balancing strategy with values; it is about whether or not the EU stands firm on its principles or allows them to be compromised in the name of geopolitical expediency.

EU’s New, But Familiar Dilemma

The EU’s engagement with Georgia has included persistent efforts to promote EU norms and enforce accountability. Leading up to the October 2024 elections, the EU consistently warned that the Georgian Dream’s trajectory threatened the country’s EU aspirations. Through various resolutions, high-level statements, and funding restrictions, the EU emphasized that adherence to democratic principles was essential for candidacy. Yet, this pressure proved ineffective; the Georgian Dream maintained its anti-European rhetoric, neglected necessary reforms, and failed to conduct fair elections despite EU appeals.

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Now, the EU faces a familiar dilemma: should it adopt a pragmatic geopolitical stance or uphold its identity as a normative power? This tension boils down to whether the EU should effectively legitimize the Georgian Dream or continue to deny recognition to governments that seize power against popular will.

The Georgian Dream is counting on two main factors. First, it aims to withstand opposition pressure and protests, solidifying the legitimacy of the recent parliamentary elections by early December. By doing so, it hopes to present the EU with a *fait*

accompli, banking on Europe's shift from principles to pragmatism. The Georgian Dream bets that the EU will "get realistic," accept its limited leverage over power dynamics in Georgia, and seek a workable relationship with Ivanishvili. If Europe resists, the GD warns of Georgia's potential drift toward Russian influence—a veiled threat that has worked in the past.

The second factor upon which the GD relies is Donald Trump. After Trump's return to the US presidency, the GD intends to leverage its relationship with Viktor Orbán to reestablish ties with the new US administration. Their calculation is that if Washington resumes regular relations with the GD, Europe will likely follow, given its history of aligning with US foreign policy on key international issues.

The Georgian Dream has a well-established record of pressuring the EU into concessions. A tactic they have often employed involves arresting opposition leaders only to trade their freedom for concessions. The detentions and eventual releases of [Gigi Ugulava](#) and [Nika Melia](#) in 2019 and 2021 (the so-called 8 March and 19 April agreements), with EU mediation at both the ambassadorial and Council President levels, resolved political crises and led to renewed EU cooperation. With street protests in Georgia set to intensify, another round of "Freedom for Freeriding" seems likely.

But the current scenario may signal a more ambitious strategy. Ivanishvili's primary objective has always been to stay in power. Laws on LGBT propaganda and foreign agents are likely just bargaining chips he would gladly abandon in exchange for foreign legitimacy to secure another four-year term. With limited leverage from the EU, GD leaders hope that member states and EU institutions will ultimately accept the GD's hold on power, so long as the more extreme, Russian-style laws are rescinded. If, as part of this arrangement, soon-to-be-detained political figures and activists are

released, the GD assumes all sides would claim victory—except, perhaps, the EU's credibility as a steadfast defender of democratic norms.

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Unlike the United States, the EU lacks effective tools to counter countries drifting toward authoritarianism, where leaders resist democratic reforms out of fear of losing power. This absence of practical mechanisms places the EU in a difficult position as it fluctuates from geopolitics to upholding its normative power. Balancing these interests is challenging as the EU risks either undermining its security priorities or compromising its core values. In the wake of the 2024 election crisis, Georgia has become a test of the EU's credibility and its capacity to align its geopolitical aims with its commitment to democratic principles.

In essence, the EU now faces a choice: it can either tacitly accept Georgia's transformation into a Serbia or Belarus of the Caucasus, continuing business as usual with a government that retained power through electoral fraud, or it can adhere to its principles by suspending or significantly downgrading its relations with Ivanishvili and his circle.

The EU has several options at its disposal; let us consider a few.

Before the October 2024 elections, the EU had repeatedly [floated](#) the idea of suspending Georgia's visa-free regime. This action could have weakened the Georgian Dream (GD) party's position ahead of the elections, potentially swaying intimidated or "bought" voters away from supporting the government. However, with the elections now in the past, imposing visa restrictions on Georgian citizens would serve little purpose.

There are four main reasons for this. First, removing visa-free travel would primarily hurt Georgian citizens rather than the Georgian government.

While it may “punish” those who voted for Ivanishvili under pressure, fear, or financial influence, it would not change the situation at this stage. Second, the GD would likely seize upon this move to fuel propaganda that the EU and the West disregard the Georgian people and only want to draw Georgia into a conflict with Russia. Third, if repression against the media, the opposition, and civil society intensifies, many Georgian democracy advocates may be forced to leave the country. Visa-free travel provides them with a crucial lifeline. Lastly, suspending visa-free travel only makes sense at a pivotal moment when dissatisfied citizens are likely to channel their frustration into anti-government votes. With elections now behind us, the next relevant opportunity for this would not arise until the local elections in fall 2025.

Removing visa-free travel is indeed the simplest action the EU can take as it requires no full consensus: the Commission and a simple majority of member states can override any potential veto from Hungary. However, taking the easiest route without considering its consequences would be short-sighted and likely counterproductive for the EU.

Another tool available to the EU is financial sanctions. Unlike the visa-free decision, however, financial sanctions require unanimous agreement. This makes it unlikely that the EU could bypass a veto from Orbán on sanctions targeting Georgia's oligarch and his allies. Instead, individual EU member states could impose unilateral sanctions on those responsible for election fraud, crackdowns on citizens, and human rights violations. If the Baltic and Western European countries lead this effort, it could result in targeted sanctions against Georgia's autocratic leadership, signaling that the EU is serious about upholding democracy, fair elections, and support for civil society.

The EU's next option is financial assistance. It has already [withheld](#) additional funds within the

ENPI framework from Georgia while supporting Ukraine and Moldova. The EU could further clarify at the Commission level that no funds will go directly to the Georgian government, ensuring that only initiatives directly benefiting citizens and civil society organizations are funded. Unfortunately, this approach has not yet been implemented. In fact, at a recent European Parliament hearing, Enlargement Commissioner-designate Marta Kos [indicated](#) that the EU would be open to providing further financial assistance to both the Georgian government and civil society which risks encouraging the Georgian Dream. This is a misstep that may send the wrong message and embolden the ruling party. Kos also stated that repealing the Russian-style laws could pave the way for EU accession talks with Georgia. If this is not just a slip-of-the-tongue comment but a genuine policy stance, Ivanishvili is likely having a good laugh.

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Under ordinary circumstances, the EU's most powerful lever would be the prospect of opening accession negotiations with Georgia if fundamental reforms were met. Yet this seems unrealistic now. Any suggestion that accession talks could be unfrozen would not only validate the “stolen elections” but would also invite further authoritarian moves from the Georgian Dream.

The EU also holds symbolic and political tools in its arsenal. Declining high-level meetings with Georgian dignitaries, refraining from inviting Georgian leadership to EU events, or suspending Association Council and Committee meetings are steps that could reinforce the EU's normative power and signal discontent with the government's trajectory.

Above all, the EU must clarify its objectives: will it wield its tools to uphold democratic standards, or will it revert to geopolitical calculations with Georgia? The EU faces a clear choice: if it values its normative strength, it cannot proceed with business as usual with a government that disregards democracy. If, however, it chooses to appease the GD government in the hope of reversing undemocratic measures, it must weigh the consequences carefully.

And those consequences are significant. Such concessions would weaken Georgia's pro-democracy movement and alienate the hundreds of thousands of pro-European Georgians who look to the EU as a beacon of democratic values. It would risk shattering the opposition's morale and dismantling the remaining strongholds of democratic resistance— independent media, NGOs, and opposition parties—which Ivanishvili has vowed to quash. With a green (or even yellow) light from the EU, he would complete this crackdown swiftly.

The EU risks a classic geopolitical miscalculation: in exchange for another round of superficial reforms—perhaps the reversal of the Foreign Agents'

Law or the Law on Traditional Values—Ivanishvili would gladly deepen his authoritarian control and stay in power for four more years. The opposition has already been demonized and the state captured, even without these legislative tools.

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If the EU again places geopolitics above its normative commitments, it will not only entrench the Georgian Dream's grip on power but also cripple the democratic opposition and civil society. Now is the moment for the EU to demonstrate that it stands firm on values, not to reveal itself as a partner willing to bargain out of weakness. The stakes are high and the EU cannot afford to falter ■