



EU-Georgia Relations at a Critical Juncture: A Case for European Strategic Autonomy

EU INSTITUTIONS & POLICIES

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September 2022
Policy Paper #107/2022

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Summary

- Despite the substantial progress that Georgia has made in implementing the EU Association Agreement and related reforms, it has been experiencing democratic backsliding since 2018.
- The divergence of Georgia's ruling party from a pro-European trajectory, as well as the political polarization that has been dominant in recent years, have contributed to the deterioration of ties between Georgia and the EU.
- Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia, which was once seen as a "reform pioneer," was not given candidate status in June 2022.
- Georgian public opinion has always supported membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions, with more than 80% of Georgians today being Euro-enthusiasts and overwhelmingly in favour of joining the EU.
- The EU is Georgia's largest donor and trading partner.
- Georgia's key strategic option boils down to Russia vs. the West.
- Georgia should foster closer relations with certain EU member states that could provide key support for its EU membership aspirations.

EU-Georgia relations from 1992 to 2022: Milestones and challenges to the EU integration path

Since the EU recognized Georgia's independence in 1992, diplomatic and economic relations have developed between the two sides; at the beginning, these were primarily focused on dealing with Georgia's severe humanitarian situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as domestic issues.

Between 1992 and 2003, the EU spent more than a billion euros on humanitarian, financial, and technical assistance to Georgia.

Nonetheless, the EU's financial assistance eased humanitarian conditions to some extent, while its political support was crucial for determining Georgia's initial relations with the EU and the country's acceptance into the international community.

Since the EU recognized Georgia's independence in [1992](#), diplomatic and economic relations have developed between the two sides; at the beginning, these were primarily focused on dealing with Georgia's severe humanitarian situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as domestic [issues](#). Being absorbed in internal political turmoil and the battle for survival, the newly independent state did not place a high value on close ties with the [EU](#). Similarly, the EU paid less attention to Transcaucasia than it did to [Southeastern Europe](#). Despite this, the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) initiative, which began in 1992 with the goal of assisting post-Soviet states in their transitions to a market economy and democracy, marked Georgia's first step in its cooperation with the [EU](#).

Between 1992 and 2003, the EU spent more than a billion euros on humanitarian, financial, and technical assistance to Georgia. However, these programs had limited tangible impact due to Georgia's fragile state institutions, weak rule of law, widespread poverty, high levels of corruption, and external debt. Nonetheless, the EU's financial assistance eased humanitarian conditions to some extent, while its political support was crucial for determining Georgia's initial relations with the EU and the country's acceptance into the international community. As a result of the EU's political backing, Georgia joined the Council of Europe in [1999](#) and the World Trade Organization in [2000](#).

In 1996, the EU and Georgia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in [1999](#). The PCA could have been a pivotal point in EU-Georgia relations, since it allowed for regular political dialogue and included a wide range of partnership aspects in which the EU and Georgia pledged to collaborate to achieve political, economic, and social [goals](#) in relation to which, rather than establishing long-term goals, the legally binding agreement envisaged a continuous process of approximation and harmonization with EU [standards](#). However, following the PCA's entry into force, EU-Georgia relations did not reach a breakthrough due to weak commitment on both [sides](#).

However, EU-Georgia relations did improve and deepen from [2003](#) on. One of the key reasons for this was a renewed foreign policy approach and the adoption of the European Security Strategy ([ESS](#)), which for the first time emphasized the importance of a stable and secure neighbourhood for the EU. In addition to changes within the EU, Georgia's foreign policy shifted radically toward the West after the 2003 "Rose Revolution," which was followed by pathbreaking reforms. As a result of strategic considerations and the country's pro-European posture, the EU deepened its interest in Georgia. In 2004, at the executive and legislative levels, the Office of the State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration¹ and the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration were set up. This was followed by the establishment of the Information Centre on NATO and the EU in 2005. Georgia's strong political will and EU forces promoting integration with post-Soviet Republics paved the way for the country's further rapprochement with the EU through its participation in regional initiatives, despite internal controversies within the EU over the accession perspectives of its South-Eastern [neighbours](#).

¹ In 2017, the Office was abolished and merged with Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a move criticized by civil society organizations.

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In 2004, Georgia joined the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) initiative, which "was designed to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and to offer them the chance to participate in various EU activities through greater political, security, economic, and cultural [cooperation](#)." Beginning in 2006, the country implemented a number of institutional reforms that facilitated economic development and reduced poverty, bringing Georgia closer to EU norms through a detailed five-year ENP Action Plan (ENP AP) and financial [support](#). However, the ENP's positive conditionality approach failed to produce strong results, since the economic and political "carrots" were insufficient and there was too much diversity between the countries combined under a single [policy](#).

While the EU failed to adopt a firm and united stance against the Russian military aggression which had violating Georgia's territorial integrity and did not impose sanctions on Russia, Georgians considered the EU to be their only alternative for maintaining the country's security and territorial integrity.

In 2008, Russia's invasion of Georgia had a substantial impact on EU-Georgia relations. Under the auspices of the French Presidency at the Council of the European Union, the bloc played a salient role in the ceasefire agreement ("Six-point Plan"), while the EU emphasized firm support for Georgia's territorial [integrity](#) and has remained committed to its policy of not recognizing Georgia's breakaway regions. With the OSCE and UNOMIG missions in Georgia closed, the EU-sponsored Monitoring Mission (EUMM) became in 2008 the only civilian peacekeeping [body](#). Aside from diplomatic and practical support, Georgia has also received significant financial post-conflict assistance from the [EU](#). At a Donors' Conference organized by the EU and the World Bank, partner states and international organizations contributed 4.5 billion USD to support [Georgia](#). The EU co-formed the Geneva International Discussions² in the same year to cope with the consequences of Georgia's August 2008 [war](#), and it was the only platform on which the Kremlin and Tbilisi discussed security and humanitarian issues relating to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region. From a practical standpoint, regardless of the fact that the 55 rounds of discussions delivered no impressive results for Georgia, and that Russia continues to allege that it is not a party in the conflict, the framework established the EU's role as a mediator. While the EU failed to adopt a firm and united stance against the Russian military aggression which had violating Georgia's territorial integrity and did not impose sanctions on Russia, Georgians considered the EU to be their only alternative for maintaining the country's security and territorial integrity. Overall, the August 2008 war strengthened pro-European attitudes and increased the number of Georgians who supported EU integration; despite some post-war volatility, Georgia continued to make progress toward Europeanization. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war became an early warning to the EU that its security begins far beyond its current Eastern borders, and that developments in the neighbourhood can have a profound impact on its well-being.

In 2009, the EU-led Eastern Partnership (EaP)³ initiative was introduced as an effort to project peace and stability along the EU's Eastern borders through bilateral and multinational [projects](#), while also helping to reduce Russia's geopolitical pressure on the region and keep the countries within the European orbit. The EU has been able to fix the various flaws in its European Neighbourhood Policy through the EaP framework, providing more powerful political and financial incentives under the motto "stronger together." In this regard, the initiative's inclusion of inter-parliamentary (Euronest Parliamentary Assembly) and civil society (EaP Civil Society Forum) components to support institutional

² The discussions, co-chaired by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the EU and the United Nations (UN), brought together representatives of Georgia, Russia, the United States and Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region. The format is currently terminated.

³ This EU initiative is dedicated to political association and economic integration with six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus (Minsk suspended its participation in 2021), Georgia, Moldova, and [Ukraine](#).

commitment and a reform agenda proved to be a significant move toward making the cooperation more inclusive.

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In light of Georgia's growing European integration dynamics, the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014, which included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement ([DCFTA](#)),⁴ was a pivotal point in EU-Georgia relations. The AA commits the country to approximating and harmonizing its legislation with the *Acquis Communautaire*, resulting in a crucial strengthening of contractual and sectoral ties with the EU as well as encouraging reforms based on its core values. The AA contributed significantly to the EU emerging as Georgia's leading trade [partner](#) and largest [donor](#) (along with the US); in 2014-2024, the EU allocated up to 700 million euros for these [reforms](#).

In relation to its narrative of accruing additional EU-related benefits, Georgia passed another critical juncture in its European path in 2017: Following the successful implementation of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan ([VLAP](#)), Georgian nationals were granted visa-free travel to the [Schengen Area](#). The EU's assistance during the pandemic should also be pointed out, as the bloc acted quickly and effectively in mobilizing a tailor-made response package consisting *inter alia* of 183 million euros in grants and nearly two million pieces of medical equipment delivered to Georgian [laboratories](#).

Over time, along with Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia has developed a strong commitment to EU integration, achieving substantial progress within the EaP framework. While the remaining EaP states have distanced themselves from the idea of EU membership, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova have made it a strategic aim, forming the "[Associated Trio \(AT\)](#)" to work together in establishing bilateral and trilateral cooperation for political dialogue. This followed the AT's Petra Summit in 2021, at which the states urged the EU to acknowledge their perspective on becoming EU members in the [future](#); this was accepted by the EU in the EaP's 2021 Summit [declaration](#).

In light of Georgia's growing European integration dynamics, the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014, which included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement (DCFTA), was a pivotal point in EU-Georgia relations.

Georgia's EU aspirations are underpinned by the following national and strategic documents: According to the Georgian Foreign Policy [Strategy](#) for 2019-2022, EU membership is listed as one of the country's primary strategic goals, while European integration is the country's main interest in its National Security [Concept](#). At the same time, the [Georgian constitution](#) contains an article that specifies that state bodies shall make every effort to ensure Georgia's integration into the EU. However, recent political developments have cast serious doubts over the relevance of these statements and whether Georgia is still following a European path. In this regard, several key occurrences should be highlighted: Beginning in 2019, while Russia has occupied 20% of Georgia and solidly anti-Russian sentiments permeate Georgian society, a Russian parliamentary delegation led by Sergei Gavrilov officially visited the country and addressed session of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in the Georgian Parliament from the Speaker's [chair](#). This triggered a large-scale anti-government demonstration, one of the main messages of which was that Georgia has chosen a Western course and will never allow this to be diverted to a Russian [path](#).

For various reasons, political relations between the Georgian government and Brussels were seriously strained during 2021. Contentious appointments to the [Supreme Court](#) and the [High Council of Justice](#) led to strong criticism from the EU, since Brussels has always been firm about and sensitive to the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary. Another crisis centred on [EU diplomats](#) being spied on in the country. And aside

⁴ Providing the country with a number of political and financial benefits, including expanding the market for Georgian exports, attracting foreign investment, and upholding the rule of law.

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from that, the Georgian government turned down⁵ a pre-emptive conditional EU loan worth [75 million euros](#), though, given the principle of conditionality, the loan would not have been made. This was preceded by the EU warning the Georgian authorities that financial assistance would be cut if they did not demonstrate a commitment to democratic reforms relating to the judicial system and the conditions outlined in the EU-brokered [agreement](#) of 19 April 2021⁶. This has temporarily brought an end to a deep and long-running internal political crisis between the ruling and opposition parties following the 2020 parliamentary [election](#). However, the ruling "Georgian Dream (GD)" party subsequently denounced the [agreement](#), while opposition forces either did not join the agreement on time or did so on their own unilateral terms.

Tensions have escalated further in 2022. Since the beginning of this [year](#), representatives of the GD party have lashed out against the EU Ambassador to Georgia [multiple times](#). In January 2022, several members of the European Parliament cancelled their visit to Tbilisi, since the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia "did not find the time to [engage](#)." To balance these positions, the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabishvili, visited the EU institutions and reaffirmed the country's commitment to the EU [agenda](#).

Crucially, despite the [far from "rosy" relations](#) between the incumbent GD party and Brussels, the EU has not dimmed its enthusiastic rhetoric towards Georgia, which it still considers a key ally in Transcaucasia.

However, as stated in the 2022 Freedom House [report](#), the state of democracy in Georgia has been deteriorating since 2018, while the Bertelsmann Stiftung's [Transformation Index 2022](#) reported that "Georgia's reputation as being committed to European values such as the rule of law, democracy, and an independent judiciary is at risk." The polarized political climate, which "undermines democratic consolidation," plus political parties' desire to seek power and destroy each other overshadow critical societal issues, as was pointed out in the 2021 report by the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ([PACE](#)). The recent [assessment](#) of the implementation of the EU-Georgia AA released by the European Parliament in 2022 was critical, stating that "Georgia has seriously backslid with respect to the basic democratic principles and key political commitments," while also noting that "Georgia has kept working on the implementation of the ambitious AA, which is estimated to cover around 70% of the EU *acquis*, and the EU has welcomed the country's progress on its European path."

One should also note the Georgian government's ambivalent stance towards Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which is guided by "not irritating and provoking Russia". *Inter alia*, the government has refused to join the Western sanctions against the [Kremlin](#)⁷ and stated that Georgia is in "no danger," while Prime Minister (PM) Irakli Garibashvili, talking about the likelihood of a supportive visit to Ukraine, stated that "going to Ukraine for the sake of going is [useless](#)." However, at the same time, the country fully supported Ukraine by [backing](#) the UN [resolutions](#), while Georgia is ranked first among 191 states in terms of humanitarian aid to [Ukraine](#). Moreover, President Zourabishvili put herself at odds with the government by adopting a strongly pro-Ukrainian stance. Zourabishvili has offered support to the tens of thousands of solidarity [demonstrators](#) in Georgia who have demanded that the government respond more firmly and adequately to the war in Ukraine. Zourabishvili flew to Paris and Brussels to support Georgia's hasty EU

⁵ The Prime Minister justified the decision by claiming that the country had avoided taking on additional foreign debt and did not need financial assistance in a growing economic cycle.

⁶ Formally known as "A Way Ahead for Georgia," informally as the "Charles Michel Agreement."

⁷ The government argued that sanctions against Russia would be ineffective.

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membership application and to publicly address suspicions about Georgia's position in relation to Ukraine and [Russia](#). In response, the GD party warned Zourabishvili that these visits would exceed the ambit of her presidential [duties](#) and threatened to [sue](#) her. In the wake of these developments, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy even stated: "There are times when citizens are not the government, but better [than] the [government](#)."

Undoubtedly, the EU integration processes of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova have gained significant strategic and political impetus in 2022 as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. When, on 28 February 2022, Ukraine submitted an official application for "fast-track" EU [membership](#), Georgia and Moldova followed suit on [3 March 2022](#). Almost until the last minute, Georgia's ruling GD party continued to claim that, despite the current developments, Georgia would still be applying in [2024](#), as they stated in their 2020 pre-election [program](#). The decision was only reversed as a result of wide-scale public protest and pressure from civil society organizations and opposition political parties. On 11 April 2022, Georgia handed in its EU membership [questionnaire](#).

The political temperature has risen significantly since: on 17 June 2022, the European Commission (EC) issued an [opinion](#) on Georgia's EU membership application. Therein, in relation to political criteria, it states that the country "has a foundation in place to achieve the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities." As for economic criteria, "Georgia has achieved a good degree of macroeconomic stability with a track record of sound economic policy and a favourable business environment." Considering the capacity to fulfil the obligations of membership, "[Georgia] has an overall positive track record of implementation, while in some sectors the country is more advanced than in others. Overall, Georgia has established a solid basis for further [alignment](#)." In light of the above, the Commission recommended to the European Council that Georgia should be given the perspective of becoming a member of the EU. The EC set conditions and recommended that Georgia be granted candidate status upon addressing the 12 issues, which included tackling political polarization; guaranteeing the full functioning of all state institutions; ensuring a judiciary that is fully and genuinely independent, accountable and impartial along the entire judicial institutional chain and capable of safeguarding the separation of powers; addressing high-level corruption cases and strengthening the independence of its Anti-Corruption Agency; acting on its "de-oligarchization"⁸ commitment by eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political, and public life; guaranteeing a free, pluralistic and independent media environment; and ensuring the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes at all [levels](#). On 23 June 2022, the European Council [Summit](#) shared the Commission's opinion, and the bloc decided to give Georgia a "European perspective",⁹ but not candidate status along with Ukraine and [Moldova](#). This decision was expected and signalled, as beforehand the EU Ambassador to Georgia, H.E. Carl Hartzell, had stated that "the EU is increasingly concerned about the country's current trajectory, and Georgia could be better prepared for a membership [bid](#)."

Although it is sometimes argued in Georgian expert circles that the AT format was disbanded by decision of the EU, the Trio was actually dissolved when the Georgian government did not take a clear political position in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and did not employ rhetoric indicating strong solidarity, even though the initial goal of the format was for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to unite under the joint goal of

⁸ This refers to the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is the founder of the incumbent political party, "Georgian Dream (GD)," which has been in power since 2012. Ivanishvili formally declared his retirement from Georgian politics in 2021.

⁹ The status implies that Georgia's strategic future lies with the EU.

EU membership. In any case, within the format, the Georgian government had already de-linked the country from Ukraine in practice. As indicated by the European Parliamentary Research Service publication "Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine's EU Association Agreements: The Roads to EU Membership", published in July 2022: "[Although] the three Eastern Partnership countries with agreed EU AAs have presented themselves as an 'Association Trio', a point of differentiation has emerged. Their roads to EU membership will possibly follow different [timelines](#)."

According to the EC President, Ursula von der Leyen, "It is a huge step forward for Georgia to get the European perspective; it is a big achievement," and "The sooner you deliver, the sooner there will be progress. Therefore, it is in the hands of Georgia to speed up and move through the open [door](#)." Recognition of its European perspective is definitely a big step on the path to EU membership, since Georgia has long craved integration with the EU and this will advance Georgia's membership prospects. On the other hand, Georgia has lost a unique chance to achieve much more: candidate status, along with Ukraine and Moldova. However, it is not too late. The Commission stated that the "door is still open as by the end of 2022," and that the EU would publish another report on Georgia's efforts to meet the aforementioned [conditions](#) and then decide whether to give it candidate status or not. Later, the EC [announced](#) that it would be postponing Georgia's year-end deadline for completing the required "tasks" from 2023 forward, the Commission will present a report on Georgia's progress in achieving its goals as part of the enlargement package, while the EC will also submit its evaluation on Georgia's capacity to take on and successfully carry out the responsibilities linked to membership by the end of 2022. This decision was taken, it was explained, so as to "give the Georgian political system sufficient time to thoroughly work on these priorities" and so as "not to rush the Georgian political elite in their attempts to depolarize the [country](#)."

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Despite the fact that Georgia has been the leader among associated states on a variety of fronts, it was placed on the waiting list for candidate status. One should point out that EU pre-membership functional integration is critical. Nevertheless, as Georgia is showing some progress in terms of implementing the AA and EU *acquis* harmonization,¹⁰ there was an expectation that, in addition to current financial and institutional backing, a more ambitious framework would be proposed by the EU, was outweighed by the political decision. Meanwhile, the European External Action Service (EEAS) released the AA implementation progress prior to the meeting of the EU-Georgia Association Council, which will take place on September 6, 2022. Given that the European Parliament's most recent report was [scathing](#), the EEAS report is also largely critical while reiterated that "renewed and serious commitment to democratic consolidation, judicial reforms, and action to reduce political polarisation and to strengthen the rule of law, in line with the 2021-2027 Association Agenda, will be [key](#)."

In tandem with the aforementioned political events, several large-scale civil [demonstrations](#) were held in front of the Georgian Parliament in support of, and to defend, the country's pro-EU [course](#). According to the Caucasus Research Resource Centre's (CRRC) "Georgia 2022" poll carried out for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Georgian public is committed to the country's European aspirations, with 82% favouring Georgia's EU [membership](#), while the latest poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) [reported](#) that, overall, 88% of respondents supported the idea of Georgia joining the EU. Given the political context discussed in this paper, the positions of the general public should be detached from those of the ruling GD party.

¹⁰ According to the EaP [Index](#) for 2020-21, Georgia, having scored 0.65 (out of 1), has already attained a substantial approximation and harmonization with the EU legal basis.

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What were the reactions of the Georgian political parties when the EU leader's statements and decision were made? Both the GD and opposition parties have reactivated a [blame-game mode](#), rather than reflecting on the recommendations. Irakli Kobakhidze, the chairperson of the ruling GD party, blamed [geography](#) for the country's failure to receive candidate status rather than the democratic performance of his own government. He also said that "We understand, however, that Georgia, unlike Ukraine, and even Moldova, has not made the necessary sacrifices to obtain this status today. We understand that the sacrifices and bloodshed of 14 years ago [meaning the 2008 Russo-Georgian war] and even 30 years ago and 300,000 IDPs have, unfortunately, already lost their relevance for our European [partners.](#)" Kobakhidze also asserted that: "If Georgia were to go to war against Russia before December, the country would be guaranteed EU candidate [status...](#) Receiving such a status is certainly not worth [it.](#)" The hearing of PM Irakli Garibashvili's yearly report on 23 June 2022 in the Georgian Parliament swiftly turned into a tense exchange of mutual insults and [accusations](#), with Garibashvili criticizing the Commission's opinion which separated Georgia from Moldova and Ukraine, claiming that it was not grounded in sound reasoning and was influenced instead by the geopolitical situation and the fact that Ukraine is at [war](#). The PM repeated the mainstay of the GD narrative that certain Westerners were aiming to "pull Georgia into war" and reiterated that Georgian troops had sacrificed their lives for European principles and NATO missions, but that for some reason that sacrifice had not been acknowledged. The Georgian PM remarked firmly that Georgia was being "punished for not being at war [today,](#)" and stated that any discussion about "de-oligarchization," one of the Commission's requirements for Georgia being given candidate status, is "connected more to Ukraine than to us [...] we do not have any such problems, we never did and never [will.](#)" Nonetheless, Garibashvili congratulated Ukraine and Moldova on being granted status as an "incentive and gift" and promised to fulfil the recommendations as soon as [possible](#). Following these statements, on 20 July 2022, as the EU Ambassador to Georgia, H.E. Carl Hartzell, announced the end of his term, Kobakhidze claimed that Hartzell "unfortunately, played a strictly negative role in relations between the EU and [Georgia.](#)" Similarly, Nikoloz Samkharadze, a GD MP and the head of the Georgian Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee, commented that the Ambassador could have worked better for Georgia to have received EU candidate [status](#). The EU's Lead Spokesperson for External Affairs rejected these criticisms, underscoring that "delivery on reforms and the EU agenda is a task for domestic politicians. Blaming others for your own unfulfilled ambitions only confirms the need to have more time to understand how the EU works and that reforms are [homework.](#)" Prior to this, Garibashvili complained in a [letter](#) to the President of the European Commission about the "falsehoods" in the [resolution](#) passed by the European Parliament on 9 June 2022, which criticized the governing GD party for its handling of press freedom and demanded personal sanctions against GD founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

There are doubts and concerns among civil society organization (CSO) representatives and the Georgian opposition parties that the government will not implement the Commission's recommendations in a timely manner, and that the window of opportunity that has emerged with the war in Ukraine could be closed for an uncertain time. In order for Georgia to be given candidate status, CSOs and opposition parties requested the formation of a technical interim government of "national accord" that will be entrusted with putting the EU's twelve recommendations into [action](#). On 1 July 2022, Irakli Kobakhidze revealed a plan to implement the Commission's [recommendations](#), which primarily called for the mobilization of the working groups of Parliamentary Committees. Nevertheless, most opposition parties have not participated, as they have decided to work [individually](#). In turn, CSOs elaborated on the concrete action plan that the government and Parliament could follow in the event of the political will of the Georgian political elite

The question of whether Georgia is ready to join the EU, given its democratic backsliding, is being actively debated, as the EU has consistently emphasized that membership has to be earned. On the other hand, it is essential to recall the country's overall commitments within and beyond the AA/DCFTA, as well as the price the Georgian people have paid for its European aspirations since Russia's 2008 invasion and ongoing destabilization operations.

For its part, Brussels should keep in mind that Georgia remains vulnerable to Russia.

to grant Georgia candidate [status](#). However, the GD ruling party distanced itself from the CSOs' guidelines, even though the NGO sector has [expressed](#) its readiness to actively cooperate with the government to fulfil the "EU tasks," while the EU Delegation recently called for CSO inclusion in the EU reforms [process](#). It should be noted that Georgian civil society organizations have always played a significant role in guiding the country towards European integration. They have accomplished this through, *inter alia*, communication with EU institutions, including European parliamentarians, and close cooperation with the local diplomatic corps, which serves as a counterbalance of sorts to the actions of the government.

More than two months have passed since the EU recommendations were issued, and the GD administration and opposition parties still disagree about how to put them into practice, since they are still more focused on maintaining the edge over their political rivals. Given these circumstances, cooperation among the ruling and opposition parties and civil society has yet to materialize. In addition, the EU recommendations themselves lack clarity, leaving room for a broad spectrum of interpretations that further fuel political polarization.

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For its part, Brussels should keep in mind that Georgia remains vulnerable to Russia. Given that nihilistic and anti-EU narratives (e.g., accusing the EU of "false promises," claiming that the EU has abandoned Georgia, etc.) are expected to gain more solid ground in Georgian society, maintaining public support for EU membership will be highly challenging if the country does not receive candidate status. In this sense, the EU should pay heed to the attitudes of Georgian society and the high probability of frustration linked to prospective membership fatigue. At the same time, the re-activation of the principle of strict conditionality for candidate status gives the EU substantial leverage to change the government's course towards democratic reforms and to increase public pressure on it. In addition, candidate status serves as a valuable reward and powerful incentive for ordinary pro-European citizens, civil society, and political forces. However, the readiness of Georgia's political elites to establish a platform for civil communication and swiftly put the EU's twelve recommendations into practice has to be considered first. Meanwhile, learning from the history of European integration, it is crucial for Georgia to forge political alliances with EU member countries such as Greece, the Baltic states, and Poland, with which it shares historical and cultural bonds as well as economic and security interests. The sponsorship of Georgia's EU candidacy by certain member states could help smoothen the process of Georgia's European integration well beyond the candidate status milestone.

As the EU has made significant investments in addressing Georgia's domestic challenges, the pro-European course enjoys broad public support. The Georgian people aspire to a joint future with the EU. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) has brought the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the forefront of international politics, and neglecting these

The Georgian people aspire to a joint future with the EU. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) has brought the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the forefront of international politics, and neglecting these regions can no longer be an option for the EU. As the bloc strives for strategic autonomy, it is imperative that it protects its regional interests by reinforcing its bonds with those countries that share its political values and security interests in the region.

regions can no longer be an option for the EU. As the bloc strives for strategic autonomy, it is imperative that it protects its regional interests by reinforcing its bonds with those countries that share its political values and security interests in the region. At a time when the future of the liberal international order is at stake, the EU should consolidate Georgia's Western and European orientation by signalling its political commitment to membership, without compromising its political values.

Recommendations for EU-Georgia relations

- The Georgian government and parliament should immediately start implementing the 12 recommendations of the European Commission and take criticism seriously.
- The government should join forces with the dominant opposition parties in parliament and, through cross-party cooperation, implement the EU's recommendations. Since the EU is ready to offer candidate status in the light of the implementation of the recommendations, this favourable momentum should not be wasted.
- The government should firmly set its international and domestic political compass towards the EU, so that the pro-European course set on paper will not be questioned.
- Opposition parties, like the government, are responsible for eliminating political polarization. They should set aside their own interests, demonstrate political culture, and make room for dialogue as urged by the EU. Together, the ruling GD and opposition political parties must signal to the EU that the Georgian political elite is truly intent on implementing the bloc's recommendations.
- The history of enlargement indicates that securing EU membership for a single country is more difficult. Consequently, the Georgian authorities should restore ties with Ukraine and establish intergovernmental proximity with Moldova to catch up with Chisinau and Kyiv, and jointly boost their EU membership prospects.
- The Georgian authorities should take advantage of the current strategic situation to foster EU integration processes. In doing so, they should step up communication with all EU institutions and certain member states.
- It is critically important that public expectations regarding EU membership are properly managed. The Georgian population should not have excessive and unrealistic hopes of EU membership in the near future. In the context of ongoing political developments, the CSOs that have already contributed to Georgia's European integration should intensify their campaigns, organizing public debates and information campaigns in both big cities and rural areas.
- Russian soft power remains present and highly influential in Georgia. The EU should make every effort to counterbalance Russia's undermining of EU-Georgia relations.
- Given the EU's large financial commitments, the EU should join forces with the Georgian state bodies and CSOs and step up efforts to solidify its image through activities designed to raise visibility and awareness of the benefits that EU membership would bring to Georgia, and particularly to rural areas, as there is a dire need for this.