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Interplay of security & stability and democracy support

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Executive summary

Although supporting and promoting democracy has traditionally been a key theme of the EU's external action, its record in that domain has been mixed. This has been partly attributed to both the challenges of promoting democracy in general as well as the adequacy and efficiency of the EU's tools. At the same time, questions have been raised about how serious the EU actually is in promoting democracy, and to what extent its policies have been shaped by trade-offs between, on the one hand, norms and principles and, on the other, interests. In that context, a growing literature has been examining how EU external action and democracy promotion are shaped by concerns related to security and stability. Seeking to contribute to a better understanding of these dynamics in the EU's engagement with the South Caucasus, this working paper zooms in on the cases of Armenia and Georgia, two EU neighbours that have been undergoing substantial change over the past two decades – both in terms of their geostrategic trajectory as well as their domestic political dynamics.

The paper argues that the EU has generally been reluctant to criticise and counter autocratic tendencies in both countries over the past two decades, and that this was usually at least partly linked to four key security and stability considerations: Maintaining or not undermining domestic stability in the two countries, stable and constructive relations with both countries' governments, regional security as was as the EU's geopolitical interests. This is not to say that these considerations were the only or even the main causes for the lack of action or stronger rhetoric. The EU's reactions were also informed by a general lack of attention, bandwidth and capacity given various domestic and external challenges the Union faced over the past two decades. This notably affected its relations with Armenia, which never received quite as much attention as post-Rose revolution Georgia to begin with, and even less following its 2013 decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU and join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. At the same time, the most problematic developments in Armenia were at least partly overshadowed by other issues that incentivised the EU to adopt a less critical stance to the regime. In 2008, a fraudulent presidential election was followed by protests that were brutally cracked down, leaving ten people dead. If the EU's reaction was rather muted, this might have to be seen in the context of its strong support for and encouragement of the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement in 2008 and 2009. Similarly, the 2015 Armenian constitutional referendum, which was widely seen as a vehicle to allow President Serzh Sargsyan to stay in power beyond his term limit, occurred in the context of

increasing tensions and border clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Finally, the EU's reaction to developments that risk undermining the positive evolution that Armenia has taken since the 2018 Velvet revolution needs to be seen in the context of both the escalation of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict since 2020 as well as Armenia's subsequent gradual geopolitical reorientation from Russia towards Europe and the West.

While Georgia received more attention than Armenia, the EU's reaction to democratic backsliding within the country followed a similar pattern. Before 2024, the EU was reluctant to criticise Georgia's gradual, but increasing, autocratisation. This seems to have been informed by the perception that consecutive Georgian governments appeared keen on joining Euro-Atlantic structures and that EU influence was most efficiently pursued through constructive engagement. In that context, the 2004-2013 Saakashvili presidency was generally given the benefit of the doubt when it came to its democratic credentials because of its radically pro-Western orientation, the dramatic domestic challenge of fixing a failing state as well as the equally dramatic external challenge of Russia infringing on its territorial integrity. This EU tendency continued under successive Georgian Dream governments. Actual and perceived progress in functional cooperation between the EU and Georgia overshadowed democratic stagnation and backsliding, even when it became ever more obvious and egregious in the late 2010s and early 2020s. The EU's soft approach and its decision to grant Georgia candidate status in 2023 were also informed by the objective of keeping Russian influence in check. The EU only changed its approach in 2024, when the Georgian government's rhetoric became overtly hostile and its action more extreme all the while both rhetoric and action became harder to ignore given Georgia's status as a candidate for EU membership from December 2023 onwards.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
CEPA	European Union-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUMCAP	European Union Monitoring Capacity to Armenia
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EPF	European Peace Facility
GD	Georgian Dream
IAO	Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy
IRI	International Republican Institute
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
UNM	United National Movement

1 Introduction

Ever since the EU took its first tentative steps on the international stage, promoting democratic principles has been one of its key foreign policy tenets. Its record has been mixed though. The EU has had some success in supporting several central and eastern European countries transform to liberal democracies following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (Vachudova 2005). However, substantial and sustainable transformations did only occur in countries that eventually became member states. Some of these even saw democratic rollback after joining the EU, raising questions whether earlier enthusiasm over the transformative power of enlargement among scholars and policy makers may have been premature. In that context Grabbe (2014, 41) argued that the EU's approach was less about democracy and more about ensuring future member's ability to participate in the single market, and remarked that "the limits of EU influence on political culture are now becoming evident." Meanwhile, the enlarged EU's democracy promotion efforts had even less of an impact in what would become its new neighbourhood. The literatures on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and on democracy promotion point to two main reasons for this. First, the successful transition of some countries in the context of EU enlargement is attributed to its unique setting. Enlargement candidates had a major incentive to reform, given their perspective of eventually joining the EU and enjoying all its benefits. "Absent the offer of membership, however, EU incentives such as partnership and cooperation do not reliably promote democratic change," Schimmelfennig and Scholtz (2008, 187) argued based on a panel study of 36 countries of the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhood. Moreover, enlargement candidates' reforms were facilitated by very substantial technical and financial support. When explaining the comparably much less successful European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which drew upon a similar set of tools as enlargement, observers thus point to substantially lower financial support – especially in light of their often significantly lower starting point (Maass 2018; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020).

At the same time, questions have been raised about how serious the EU actually was in promoting democracy, and to what extent its policies have been shaped by trade-offs between, on the one hand, its norms and principles and, on the other hand, its interests. Even when the EU had substantial leverage, for example based on trade relations or its provision of development assistance, it often refrained from using this leverage to push for democratic change or punish democratic backsliding. In that context, a growing literature has been examining how EU external

action and democracy promotion is shaped by concerns related to security and stability (e.g. Cianciara 2017; Dandashly 2018; Góra 2021; Silander and Nilsson 2014). Providing valuable insights by examining and critiquing the EU's democracy promotion, this body of research has at least two shortcomings, though. To begin with, it tends to subsume several different considerations related to domestic political stability within neighbouring countries, maintenance of good relations to their governments, regional stability as well as geo-strategic interests under the notion of a "security-stability nexus" without sufficiently differentiating between these different dimensions. Second, and more importantly, studies tend to focus on the EU side and to take a helicopter perspective. Looking at the ENP as a whole, they often examine the broader implications of the EU's approach as well as its flaws and internal contradictions. This often serves the purpose of explaining the EU's overall lack of success in promoting democracy or the ENP as a policy framework. Moreover, this helps to challenge the EU's self-presentation and self-perception as a "force for good" (Solana 2007) as well as to contribute to debates over the EU's distinctiveness or the "civilian" (Bull 1982), "normative" (Manners 2002) or "ethical" (Aggestam 2008) nature of its power.

These efforts have helped to better understand and conceptualise the EU as an actor on the regional and global stage. However, less attention has been devoted to how the EU responds to very concrete "autocratic" events or developments in specific states, as well as to what extent and how its responses to such events or developments are informed by different security and stability considerations. In doing so, the literature does not always sufficiently appreciate the sometimes very country-specific considerations and context that inform the EU's approach. Meanwhile, studies that are zooming in a bit further often focus on the Western Balkans (e.g. Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac 2021) or the southern neighbourhood (e.g. Dandashly 2018), with less attention devoted to the EU's eastern neighbours. Against this backdrop and given the REDEMOS project's focus on eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, this paper zooms in on the evolution of the EU's relations with Georgia and Armenia. Both countries have populations that seek closer relations with the EU, although the degree of interest has been varying between the two. Both countries became part of the EU's ENP and Eastern Partnership frameworks but were not considered potential future members by the EU institutions and most EU member states before Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, both countries have been oscillating between democratisation processes and democratic backsliding. Among the six countries examined in the REDEMOS project, these two countries are chosen as they have, unlike Belarus and Azerbaijan, been open to some level of EU democracy promotion for significant parts of the past two decades. At the same time, they have not

moved quite as much toward the European Union and Euro-Atlantic institutions as Ukraine and Moldova did in recent years. More importantly, they represent very different cases on two levels. First, Georgia is a country that, until recently, persistently worked towards EU membership and ultimately obtained, albeit temporarily, candidate status in December 2023. In contrast, Armenia did not, until very recently, seek an EU membership perspective and its relations with the EU were characterised by less ambition. A second key difference between both countries is the direction of their respective political trajectories. Both countries have been undergoing substantial change over the past two decades – both in terms of their geostrategic orientation as well as their domestic political dynamics. However, the direction of that change has been diametrically opposed. While open to engagement with the EU, successive Armenian governments did not seek a membership perspective and prioritised relations with Russia prior to Azerbaijan retaking control of the regions around Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 and Nagorno Karabakh itself in 2023. Since then, Armenia's government has turned away from Russia and begun to orient itself toward the EU, an ambition that enjoys substantial support within its population. In fact, surveys suggest that in 2024 58% of Armenians would have voted in favour of EU membership in a potential referendum, and the percentage of Armenians who described their country's relationship with Russia as "good" dropped from 93% in 2019 to 35% in 2024 (IRI 2024). Moreover, Armenia's 2018 Velvet revolution toppled a corrupt authoritarian regime and provided an opening for a transition towards liberal democracy. In contrast, Georgia has been pursuing a pro-EU and pro-NATO path following its 2003 Rose revolution, which also launched a political transition from its authoritarian post-Soviet system to liberal democracy. This transition was neither linear nor without setbacks, but by and large the country made progress towards democracy well into the mid 2010s. Since then, however, it has been on a clear downward trend that went hand in hand with a slow political rapprochement with Russia. Democratic backsliding and geopolitical orientation away from the West and towards Russia intensified in 2024, but was and is contested by a population whose support for EU membership has increased from 42% in 2024 to 71% in 2024 (Khoshtaria 2024).

In other words, Georgia shifted from a pro-European, reform-oriented path to one marked by increasing authoritarianism and a growing anti-Western stance. Meanwhile, Armenia was aligned with Russia and mired in autocratic rule until the 2018 Velvet revolution set the country first on a pro-reform path, and later, in the context of the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, increasingly on a pro-Western path as well. Given these key differences, one might expect variation in the EU's approach to democracy promotion both across these two cases as well as over time. This paper thus identifies

and examines key episodes in Georgia and Armenia that were characterised by democratic backsliding and undemocratic actions. In doing so, it looks at the period from Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 – when the EU first recognized the South Caucasus as a region of interest – to the end of 2024. What the selected key episodes all share is that they repeatedly triggered public protests and other forms of domestic contestation as well as strong international reactions from, on the one hand, both watchdogs such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International and, on the other hand, states whose foreign policy priorities include a strong focus on democracy and human rights. Most of the episodes revolve around elections, the way these elections were conducted, and governmental repression of public contestation of these elections. In other words, the paper focuses on the type of episodes during which some form of response by a presumptive democracy supporter such as the EU could generally be expected.

With respect to the Armenian case, the paper first zooms in on the developments that occurred in the context of the fraudulent 2008 presidential elections, which marked the handover of power from the incumbent President Robert Kocharyan to his preferred successor Serzh Sargsyan, and which was followed by a crackdown of protests that left ten people dead. It then looks at the constitutional referendum of December 2015, which was widely seen as a vehicle to allow President Serzh Sargsyan to stay in power beyond his term limit. Finally, it explores democratic backsliding under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, especially in the aftermath of the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. As far as the Georgian case study is concerned, the paper first focuses on the late Saakashvili period, including the contested elections of 2007 and 2008 and the 2012 Gldani prison scandal. In a second step, it looks at the period 2019-2020, marked by, among other things, the so-called Gavrilo's night protests as well as the contested 2020 parliamentary elections and their respective aftermath. Finally, it sheds lights on Georgian Dream's increasingly overt turn to authoritarianism during the period of 2023/2024, which saw the introduction of the Russian-style "foreign agent law" and a highly contested parliamentary election in October 2024.

The paper examines and compares the EU's reactions to these developments and the context in which the EU's reactions occurred. It does so by drawing upon both primary and secondary sources as well as first-hand observations and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders in both Armenia and Georgia, conducted during fieldwork in both countries between April and October 2024. In exploring them, the paper pays particular attention to the EU's rhetorical reactions. While EU democracy promotion combines several tools, most research has been devoted to technical and

financial assistance (e.g. Corman 2024; Freyburg and Lavenex 2018) as well as the mechanism of conditionality, that is the provision of financial or other incentives to encourage reforms and discourage backsliding (e.g. Baracani 2009; Sasse 2008; Schimmelfennig 2015). What has received much less attention is the EU's declaratory diplomacy, that is what the EU actually says when it responds to authoritarian tendencies. Studies examining EU democracy promotion often touch upon the EU's declarations in passing (e.g. Kotzian, Knodt, and Urdze 2011), but usually do not engage with them in greater depth or situate them in their country-specific context. If studies do engage with declarations, they do so often in longitudinal quantitative studies that count the number of statements or specific key words to draw broader conclusions about the nature of EU democracy promotion (e.g. Warkotsch 2008). In contrast, this paper takes a qualitative approach, zooming in on EU declarations' substance and how they relate to the specific context in which they were issued. The paper shows that there has been rather little variation in the EU's reaction to episodes of democratic backsliding between the two cases, that is Armenia and Georgia, as well as over time. The EU has generally been reluctant to criticise and actively counter autocratic tendencies in both countries. Examining the context of the selected key episodes of democratic backsliding, the paper thus suggests that there might be a link between, on the one hand, this lack of variance in the EU's reaction to these episodes and, on the other hand, the EU's security considerations in both countries.

2 Conceptualising the link between EU responses to democratic backsliding and EU security-stability considerations

In October 2024, an unsuspecting foreign visitor of Georgia's capital might have assumed that the country's upcoming parliamentary elections were dominated by an enthusiastically pro-European political party. Tbilisi was covered in posters and billboards held in dark blue and displaying a graphic blend of a yellow, sun-shaped logo and the flag of the European Union. However, that logo and all the posters and billboards belonged to the Georgian Dream (GD) party, which had been governing since 2012 and drastically moved the country away from its path towards EU membership over the course of 2024. Having received candidate status in late 2023, Georgia's relations with the EU started to deteriorate in the aftermath of GD's reintroduction of a Russia-style foreign agent law that presumably aimed at cracking down on the country's vibrant and largely pro-EU civil society. In June 2024, Georgia's candidate status was frozen. By that time, it had become clear that the elections on 26 October 2024 would be key to whether Georgia still had a European future.

Despite surveys regularly showing that more than 80% of Georgian (International Republican Institute 2023a) voters support EU membership, Georgian Dream won the elections. While the election was marred by irregularities (OSCE/ODIHR 2024), the high number of people that did cast their votes for GD also suggests that quite a few of them fell into the same trap as the above-mentioned unsuspecting fictitious foreign visitor. Even when their actions began to irrevocably move Georgia away from its European path, GD politicians continued to pretend that they were on track towards EU membership by 2030. They did so by distorting the facts with remarkable audacity and continued to do so after the elections. When the European Commission adopted its 2024 Enlargement Package (European Commission 2024b) a few days after the elections, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Shalva Papuashvili wrongly claimed it had praised Georgia for "progressing on the path of EU integration" and being ahead of Ukraine and Moldova on "fundamental issues" – the opposite of what the report actually said. In the same briefing Papuashvili also falsely claimed that the election observation mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had offered a positive assessment of the parliamentary elections (Civil Georgia 2024e).

Both pro-democracy activists and Western-looking ordinary Georgians felt that a clearer and more substantial EU reaction could have influenced the election outcome (Observations and interviews with Georgian activists and think tankers, October 2024). Many scolded Brussels for having done

too little too late in response to Georgia's democratic backsliding, and for not having clearly and prominently communicated how GD's path undermines Georgia's European ambitions. At the same time, there was disagreement within civil society on what the EU should have done or should have refrained from doing. Notably, there were competing views on whether granting Georgia the candidate status for EU-membership was a wise choice. Some activists argued that it bolstered GD's ability to disingenuously frame itself as pro-EU while others claimed at the time that granting it locked in Georgia's trajectory towards Europe and prevented GD from changing the country's geopolitical orientation. There were similar differences among activists on whether the EU should threaten to suspend visa free travel or actually do it ahead of the elections (Interviews with Georgian activists and think tankers, October 2024).

The mismatch between public opinion and election results in Georgia highlights the importance of reflecting not only on what the EU does but also on how it communicates and how its communication can be and is used by different stakeholders in countries that are oscillating between democratisation processes and democratic backsliding. At the same time, the Georgian case illustrates the EU's challenges in responding to and navigating contradictory demands and expectations from different stakeholders when positioning itself on domestic issues in partner countries. This goes hand in hand with the broader challenge of balancing democracy promotion not only with the notion of non-interference in partner countries' domestic affairs but also with the geopolitical competition with Russia and other actors that encourage and embrace those regimes that face EU and Western consequences for autocratic and illiberal backsliding.

Remaining extremely cordial in public even when facing grave political differences is an elementary practice of international diplomacy. To protect economic and security interests and maintain open lines of communication, states and other international actors usually seek to maintain a working relationship even with states pursuing a path that they strongly oppose. This approach can also serve normative objectives, including the promotion of democracy and human rights in autocratic or autocratising countries. It is based on their assumption that a muted reaction to democratic backsliding can allow for more actual influence and leverage through "quiet diplomacy" (Kinzelbach 2014) behind closed doors.

The evolution of Georgia highlights the risk for the EU to let these assumptions guide its approach towards its eastern neighbourhood. In countries that seek closer engagement with the EU, the lack

of a public EU reaction to democratic backsliding and continued cooperation with autocratising regimes as if nothing had happened might encourage them to continue their path. Moreover, it can enable such political forces to portray themselves as pro-European to their voters and frame their policies so as to ensure they appear in line with EU principles. If democratic backsliding occurs, a neutral or cordial reaction and even the absence of any response can easily be framed as some sort of EU “stamp of approval” for the respective government’s course of action. At the same time, muted EU reactions to undemocratic developments can undermine domestic momentum to challenge them, as activists and citizens may feel left alone. This can be especially decisive in the context of fraudulent elections. While these might constitute a negative turning point for a country’s democratic development, challenging them requires major societal energy and optimism. Pro-democracy forces are more likely to have such energy and optimism if there is a sense of sympathy and support from external allies, even if it comes only in rhetoric form.

These challenges provide a strong rationale to have a closer look at public declarations in the context of EU external relations. While public declarations in various formats are a very prominent instrument of EU diplomacy, their study often focusses on the EU’s ability to “speak with a single voice.” As such, they tend to zoom in on the internal EU dynamics that shape the EU’s declarations and statements (Cardwell 2016; Voncina 2011) or how internal cohesion relates to the effectiveness of EU external action (Conceição and Meunier 2015). Meanwhile, EU declarations on specific issues in individual countries are easily overlooked. On one hand, such declarations are omnipresent, with EU institutions and delegations producing verbal or written reactions to almost all somewhat significant events and developments. This includes many relatively uncontroversial declarations, ranging from congratulatory messages for a country’s performance in sports competitions to solidarity when a country is, for example, facing a major accident or natural disaster. On matters of political importance, public declarations’ diplomatic language often makes them devoid of any real substance. Moreover, they can easily be perceived as antithesis to pursuing more meaningful action, and thus as irrelevant. Notably, states and other actors are regularly ridiculed when a declaration conveying their “concern” or “condemnation” is perceived to be their only reaction to a major negative event or development. The EU’s tendency to do so even inspired a mock Twitter/X

account titled “Is EU concerned?”, which has been crawling EU statements for corresponding formulations for the past decade.[1]

At the same time, both the literature on diplomatic practices as well as guidance for practitioners (Wesslau 2013, 79ff) point to the potential impact of declaratory diplomacy and acknowledge it as one of the tools of the democracy promotion toolkit (Hornat 2019, 7). An individual state or international actor’s public reaction to a crucial event or development often comes in parallel to – and is thus amplified by – those of many others. Generally, declarations can be and often are picked up by the news media. Even declarations that do come instead of more concrete action can thus generate or shape discourse about events and developments (Persson 2017), and thus generate pressure on the country’s regime. Moreover, on a more long-term basis, the practice of regularly issuing declarations that pertain to norms and values can also shape what is seen as “normal” in domestic and international affairs (Manners 2002, 253). As Johnston (2001, 489) points out, “the goal of diplomacy is often the socialization of others to accept in an axiomatic way novel understandings about world politics.”

As an actor lacking many traditional foreign policy capabilities and resources to exert influence abroad (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022, 116), declaratory diplomacy is a prominent tool of EU external action. EU declarations on high profile international issues on which it cannot or does not want to take more meaningful action might seem like mere virtue signalling. However, one might argue that the situation is different in countries in which the EU has either leverage over the respective governments or a good standing within the population and thus potential influence on public opinion. If the EU’s political declarations are openly questioning and criticising a partner country’s government’s course of action, this government might perceive such rhetoric as a first step towards the EU using its leverage, for example by withdrawing financial assistance or other tangible benefits such as the inclusion in EU programmes such as visa liberalization or education exchanges (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020). If the EU enjoys support and credibility within the public of a partner country, EU declarations can also have an indirect effect by means of their influence on public opinion (Bechav 2024). EU declarations can thus confer legitimacy to incumbent governments or revoke it from them, and thus bolster or undermine them in the eyes of the public. Moreover,

[1] Available here: https://twitter.com/ISEUConcerned.

EU declarations criticising autocratic backsliding can constitute a demonstration of solidarity with those who stand up for democracy, human rights and a pro-EU orientation. In doing so, they might encourage and motivate both activists and members of the public to stand up for democratic principles or a pro-EU geopolitical orientation. At the same time, EU declarations that are too cordial on governments who undermine democratic principles can demotivate activists and citizens as they feel left alone by those who they see as allies and role models in their struggle and engagement. Whether and how the EU reacts on the rhetorical level might thus affect the dynamics of civil society activism and citizens' action – especially when their countries are facing major turning points such as a rigged election.

And yet, the EU's public interactions with political regimes in its eastern neighbourhood remain understudied when compared to other elements of the EU's democracy support agenda. Debates on democracy promotion usually focus on democracy assistance or conditionality in its various forms, that is the provision of financial rewards for "good behaviour" or the withholding of rewards or instalment of sanctions in case of non-compliance with democratic principles (Blauberger and Van Hüllen 2021; Richter and Wunsch 2020). To some extent, the EU's rhetorical support – or lack of support – for political regimes in its eastern neighbourhood is captured by the concept of conditionality. Especially in the context of enlargement procedures or the negotiation and implementation of association agreements, progress or lack thereof is documented in different types of EU reports. Despite their often rather technical nature, they are at times taken up and reported quite prominently in parts of partner countries' news media.

This working paper aims to capture this more dynamic nature of the EU's relations with political regimes when it comes to democratisation. To better understand them, the paper examines both how the EU reacts to democratic backsliding and undemocratic actions in its eastern neighbourhood, and what motivates its reactions. It does so by exploring the EU's declaratory diplomacy towards Georgia and Armenia, two countries that have been undergoing substantial change over the past two decades – both in terms of their geostrategic trajectory as well as their domestic dynamics. The paper identifies and examines key events and periods that were characterised by democratic backsliding and undemocratic actions, explores the EU's reactions to these actions and examines what informed them. It argues that while the EU's overwhelmingly rather soft rhetoric on democratic backsliding in Armenia and Georgia has been informed by a

variety of reasons depending on country and period, these reasons were always at least partly linked to one or several of the following four security and stability considerations:

1) **Domestic political stability within partner countries:** Following the logic put forward by modernisation theory (Lipset 1959), EU democracy promotion in its neighbourhood focused primarily – and often exclusively – on economic and functional cooperation and reform, hoping that it might lead to political reform and democratic change in the long run. Concerned that the demise of problematic but stable governments could lead to political instability, the EU has favoured a very gradual approach and sought to avoid undermining existing regimes – especially if they were seen as a reliable partner.
2) **Stable and constructive relations between the EU and partner countries' governments:** Pushing too strongly for democratic principles was often seen as detrimental to constructive cooperation with partner governments on the political, security and economic level. EU policy seems guided by the perception that a more critical line could not only harm EU interests in these areas but also undermine channels through which the EU can exert some influence on its neighbours – including with regards to maintaining a minimum baseline of democratic principles and human rights.
3) **Regional security, that is conflicts or tensions between partner countries and their respective neighbours**: This is informed by the experience of regime collapse often leading to regional chaos and instability, negatively affecting not only the respective country's citizens, but potentially also their neighbours. The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by numerous conflicts and the emergence of weak states whose fledgling institutions allowed for unprecedented corruption and a substantial increase in transnational organized crime. Similarly, the 2011 Arab uprisings, for example, triggered brutal civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen that were not only disastrous for the three countries' citizens, but also affected their neighbours within the region and beyond. Given the volatile situation in eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the EU thus showed support for political regimes that seemed willing and able to work actively towards improved regional relations.
4) **Geostrategic interests, that is limiting Russian influence**: In the context of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and an a broader confrontation between the West and a new "authoritarian international" (Hall 2023), the EU is increasingly pushing back against Russian influence and interference in its eastern neighbourhood. This reduces the incentive to be

too critical towards governments that show an interest in moving away from Russia and closer to Euro-Atlantic political structures, especially if these government's face domestic political competition that oppose this course. It also reduces the incentive to be too critical towards governments that seem open to closer links with the EU but not fundamentally opposed to maintaining or even further fostering links with Russia either.

This is not to say that these security and stability considerations were the only or even the main determinants of EU reactions to democratic backsliding in Georgia and Armenia. The EU's responses were often also informed by a lack of attention, bandwidth and capacity while it dealt with other domestic and external challenges. In the late 2000s, the EU was consumed first by the global financial crisis and then by the Eurozone sovereign dept crisis. Similarly, the mid-2010s were dominated by the so-called migration crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea, Donald Trump's first election as President of the United States and Brexit. In the early 2020s, the EU was consumed first by the Covid-19 pandemic and then by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And yet, as the following two sections show, one or several of these four security and stability considerations were always part of the equation when the EU reacted to key undemocratic events and developments in Armenia and Georgia.

3 Armenia

The EU and Armenia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1996, which came into force in 1999. Just like Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia was not initially foreseen to participate in the EU's new neighbourhood policy, with a footnote of the original framework stating that the countries fell "outside the geographical scope of this initiative" (European Commission 2003, 4). Even though Armenia was eventually covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and later the Eastern Partnership (EaP), it did not become part of the narrower "associated trio" of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine which had showcased greater ambitions for EU integration. Unlike them, Armenia neither expected nor sought a membership perspective when the ENP and the EaP emerged, a position that only very gradually started to change following the 2023 Azerbaijani conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1988-1994 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, Armenian foreign policy had been based on the premise that close relations with Russia guarantee the country's security. While Armenia was open to closer engagement with the EU and the West, its security needs thus required prioritising relations with Russia (Mkhoyan 2020). This created clear limits with regards to how close other partnerships could become, especially once relations between Russia and the West started to deteriorate. Most notably, Russian pressure led to Armenia's 2013 decision to drop out of advanced negotiations for an Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU and to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) instead. Although Armenia remained far more open to cooperation with the EU than Azerbaijan and Belarus, it became a less relevant interlocutor for Brussels after this U-turn.

As a result, EU-Armenia relations were shaped by seemingly contradictory principles. On the one hand, the U-turn was seen in Brussels as a choice against Europe and reduced the EU's interest in and attention devoted to Armenia. Following Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Armenia's close relationship with Moscow constrained EU-Armenia relations even further. At the same time, its relations with Brussels were informed by Armenia's expectations, which differed from those of the Association Trio. Unlike Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Armenia was not concerned that cooperation frameworks might become a permanent replacement for an accession perspective and thus a tool to keep it out of the EU. It thus saw and embraced the opportunities the ENP and Eastern

Partnership offered as a chance to upgrade its economic system and administrative structures and became an unexpectedly enthusiastic adopter of EU policy and institutional templates (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). The absence of an Armenian membership ambition also allowed the EU to pay less attention to its democratic track record than it did in some other ENP countries. Armenian elites thus saw closer engagement with the EU as an opportunity to modernise the country and thus reduce its vulnerability without incurring any costs for them or endangering their survival at the helm of the state (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). The country's desire for continued functional and technical cooperation therefore survived the 2013 U-turn and facilitated the negotiation of a Comprehensive And Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) once the EU opened up to a more differentiated approach in its engagement. CEPA was signed in 2017, provisionally applied from 2018 onwards and entered into force in 2021.

While the 2018 Velvet revolution resulted in an increase of EU support for Armenia, it did not fundamentally change EU-Armenia relations. Despite parallels to the coloured revolutions in other post-Soviet countries in terms of domestic discourse about democracy and transparency, it did not initially involve a strongly articulated geopolitical reorientation towards Europe and the West (Baev 2021). Careful steps towards such a reorientation only started to occur in the context of the escalation of its conflict with Azerbaijan from 2020 onwards. The lack of Russian support both during and after the 2020 44-day war strained Russia-Armenia relations and reduced trust in Russia among Armenians (Avetisyan 2024). This trend accelerated in the aftermath of the Azerbaijani conquest of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023 and the subsequent exodus of its Armenian population which was, according to various human rights organisations, the result of a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign (Freedom House et al. 2024). Armenia's membership of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) formally would have obliged Russia to come to its support in case of an attack on its territory. As such support was not forthcoming and in light of suspicions that Russia had approved of Azerbaijan's action, the Armenian government vowed to leave CSTO and expressed its ambitions to move closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions (Armenpress 2024; PM of Armenia 2024).

As the following section shows, this transformation of EU-Armenia relations did not fundamentally change the EU's approach to democracy promotion in Armenia. Looking at three key episodes of democratic backsliding, it shows that the EU remained constant in its reluctance to criticise and actively counter autocratic tendencies. It suggests that the most problematic developments in

Armenia were at least partly overshadowed by all four of the above-mentioned security considerations, which incentivised the EU not to be too critical on the country's successive governments' record.

3.1 Armenia's 2008 election and its aftermath

Serzh Sargsyan was elected to the Armenian presidency in 2008 to succeed President Robert Kocharyan, who had been in office since 1998 and was ineligible to run again due to a two-term limit. In Armenia's post-independence "imitated democracy" (Zolyan 2010), the ruling elite used state resources, control over the mass media as well as co-optation and coercion of alternative political forces to legitimize itself through elections whose outcomes did not surprise anyone. In that context, the presidential elections on 19 February 2008 were essentially a handover of power from the incumbent Kocharyan to his preferred successor Sargsyan. The EU's declaratory diplomacy at the time illustrated that it did not see this as a problem in and of itself, suggesting that it prioritised its constructive relationship with the Armenian elites with a view to the country's participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

In the run-up to the vote, EU representatives emphasized that a fair election would be a condition for Armenia's participation in the ENP. Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, whose country held the EU's rotating presidency, stated that "this presidential election will be an opportunity to further improve some standards even if previous elections have not been bad" (Meloyan 2008). However, while the US State Department described the elections as "significantly flawed" (Danielyan 2008), the EU presidency "congratulate[d] the Armenian people for the conduct of a competitive presidential election in Armenia", welcomed the "genuine efforts that were made to address the shortcomings noted in previous elections" and encouraged further improvements (Council of the EU 2008b). This language was echoed by EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner. Solana stated that he was pleased with the preliminary findings of election observers and expressed hope that "all political forces continue to act in a responsible way after the elections" (Council of the EU 2008d; Government of Armenia 2008).

The 2008 elections were followed by demonstrations, with supporters of opposition candidate and former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan taking to the streets. The protests were dispersed by police and armed forces on 1 March 2008 in a crackdown that left ten dead and up to two hundred wounded. Following these events, the Armenian government declared a state of emergency, enforced a media blackout and arrested opposition activists (Human Rights Watch 2009). The EU's reaction was marked by "concern" about the events of 1 March, calls for the release of detained citizens, and appeals to both sides to stand down, illustrating that it was mainly preoccupied with domestic stability than with the Armenian authorities' actions as such. A statement issued by the EU presidency stated that it called "on both the Armenian authorities and opposition leaders to take all necessary steps to reduce tensions, and to refrain from any action that could exacerbate the current situation. The Presidency reiterates its call to all political parties to engage faithfully in political dialogue based on mutual understanding and trust, which is the only way to arrive at a political solution to the present situation" (Council of the EU 2008c).

In June 2009, several political prisoners arrested in the context of the 2008 elections were released as part of a general amnesty that affected half of Armenia's prison population and thus people serving sentences for a variety of crimes. However, key opponents remained imprisoned and others stayed in hiding or in exile (Kalantarian 2009). Nikol Pashinyan, then editor-in-chief of the Haykakan Zhamanak opposition newspaper and one of the more prominent figures in the 2008 protests, turned himself in a month after this 2009 general amnesty and was initially sentenced to seven years in prison. He was released in May 2011, as part of s second general amnesty aimed at calming down another wave of protests that called for reforms, prosecution of those responsible for the 2008 deaths as well as the release of political prisoners (Bedevian and Stepanian 2011).

The European Union remained largely silent on these domestic developments. This suggests that Brussels' responses might have been at least partly informed by three of the above-mentioned security considerations. With its constant appeal to "all sides" acting responsibly, the EU continued to put major emphasis on domestic stability. Moreover, the EU seems to have valued its overall rather constructive relationship with the political regime that had just organised a handover of power from Kocharyan to Sargsyan. This must also be seen in the context of Armenia's participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership framework, which was inaugurated in May 2009. At the same time, the Armenian regime was seen as contributing to an improved regional security situation in the South Caucasus. On one hand, it managed to keep the relationship with Azerbaijan under both

Haydar and Ilham Aliyev relatively stable. On the other hand, Sargsyan won much praise by EU leaders for his engagement with Ankara, which led to the 2009 signing of the Zurich Protocols and a – albeit short-lived – Turkish-Armenian rapprochement (Danielyan 2009). The EU's hesitance in calling out the Armenian government for its autocratic practices might thus also be seen through the lens of its concerns about regional security.

The EU's functional cooperation with Armenia continued to grow with the launch of talks for an EU-Armenia Association Agreement (AA) in 2011. In that context, the EU's tendency to remain relatively quiet on the regime's authoritarian practices continued. The ENP implementation report for 2010 stated that "overall, Armenia made some progress in the area of political dialogue and reform. Positive steps were taken to overcome the political crisis, with the gradual release of a number of persons detained for charges related to the March 2008 events" (European Commission and High Representative 2011). With the negotiations on the AA progressing, the EU launched talks on the DCFTA in March 2012. Following a meeting with President Sargsyan in 2012, EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso stated that the EU "fully support[s] the President's reform and modernization agenda" and that he was "happy to say that because of this reformist drive our relations are moving forward and making good progress" (Barroso 2012). The Armenian regime had indeed released political prisoners, and the 2012 parliamentary election were largely deemed less problematic in that they were competitive and peaceful, albeit not exactly free and fair. However, the nature of the Armenian regime did not change and democratic indicators had not improved in a meaningful way (Freedom House 2011, 2012, 2013). Rather than being based on democratic change, the EU's praise thus reflected an appreciation that the Armenian regime had overcome the political crisis and restored stability.

Despite being in an advanced stage of negotiations for an AA and DCFTA with the EU, Armenia made a sudden and unexpected U-turn in November 2013, shortly before the Vilnius summit on the EU's Eastern Partnership. As a result of what is widely seen as significant pressure from Moscow (Giragosian 2014), Armenia announced it would join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) instead. Unlike Ukraine, where a similar move by President Viktor Yanukovych triggered the Maidan revolution, Armenians were more understanding of their government's decision. On one hand, even pro-EU Armenians understood the necessity of remaining in Moscow's good books given Armenia's economic and security dependence on Russia (Zolyan 2013; various interviews with Armenian civil society activists in April and May 2024). Russian companies control major parts of

the Armenian energy, transportation and communication industry and infrastructure. Russia is also Armenia’s biggest trade partner and remittances from Russia-based Armenian migrants are crucial to many Armenians’ ability to make ends meet. Most importantly, Armenia relied on Russian protection in its conflict with Azerbaijan, was a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and hosted a Russian military base in Gyumri. In that context, the Armenian government did not feel in a position to resist pressure from Moscow. On the other hand, and in stark contrast to Georgia, Ukraine or Moldova, Russia was still very popular across Armenia, with 83% of Armenian respondents to the Caucasus Barometer identifying Russia as Armenia “main friend” at the time (CRRC 2013).

Following the U-turn, the EU rejected Armenia’s suggestion to sign the AA without the DCFTA, arguing that both were inextricably linked (Poghosyan 2018). Following a “strategic pause”, negotiations for an alternative agreement were officially launched on 7 December 2015. This led to the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which was signed in November 2017 and came into force in March 2021. By adapting to the specific constraints and conditions of Armenia, CEPA was a first example of a new differentiated approach to the region. Given Armenia’s commitments under the EAEU, the agreement did not include provisions for trade liberalization. At the same time, it did allow Armenia to pick and choose some cooperation and integration that allowed it to further reform and modernize.

Armenia was thus able to maintain Russia as its primary partner on security, at a time when Russia evolved from a difficult partner of the West into an adversary following its 2014 annexation of Crimea, invasion of eastern Ukraine and its increasing meddling in Western elections and referenda. Despite CEPA, a medium-term impact of the U-turn and continued proximity to Russia was thus a reduced EU interest in Armenia. There was a sense in Brussels that Yerevan “had made its choice” (Interview with an EU official, 30.06.2024). Moreover, the EU faced various domestic and external crises and challenges over the course of the 2010s that required significant EU bandwidth and resources. At the same time, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine warranted more attention than Armenia given that they had signed Association Agreements and were more committed to cooperation with the EU.

3.2 Armenia's 2015 referendum

With a two-term presidential limit still in place, the 2018 presidential election would have seen the end of President Sargsyan's time at the helm of the state. Against that backdrop, the constitutional reforms proposed by the ruling party to transform Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary republic were largely seen as an effort to allow Sargsyan to transition into the role of Prime Minister and remain in power. The changes were put to a referendum in December 2015, which was marred by irregularities. Once again, the EU did not show any substantial reactions to these developments. While the press release of the ensuing EU-Armenia Cooperation Council in January 2016 included general language on the need "for reform of the electoral system", it mainly focused on the CEPA negotiations and the possibilities of deepening cooperation "in all areas possible and compatible with Armenia's new international obligations deriving from its accession to the Eurasian Economic Union" (Council of the EU 2016). The following progress report on EU-Armenia relations only mentioned that the constitutional referendum had changed the political system from a presidential to a parliamentary one, without commenting on what had motivated the referendum and how it had been conducted (European Commission and High Representative 2018).

Less EU interest and bandwidth aside, the absence of EU criticism on the motivation for and execution of Armenia's 2015 constitutional change might once again be understood through the lens of the EU's ambition not to undermine a government that "vigorously adopted EU policy and institutional templates" (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, 491). Moreover, it must be seen in the context of an increasingly challenging regional security situation. Against the backdrop of increasing tensions and violent clashes at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the EU devoted more attention to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in that period. April 2016 saw four days of fighting between the Azerbaijani Armed Forces on the one side and the Artsakh Defence Army, backed by the Armenian Armed Forces, on the other. These clashes were the worst once since the 1994 ceasefire agreement signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia and Artsakh – the breakaway-state that Armenians had established in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1991. In May 2018, these clashes were followed by further ones along the border between Armenia and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, Azerbaijan's landlocked exclave bordering Armenia, Turkey and Iran. While the EU was not and did subsequently become a more relevant actor in the conflict in the context of these two developments, senior EU officials' discourse did regularly emphasise their potential challenges for the EU. Emphasising the region's crucial location between Europe and Asia, High Representative Federica Mogherini noted that the

situation "continues to pose a threat to regional security in our neighbourhood" (European Parliament 2016) and that the "status quo is unsustainable to us. The conflict does not have a military solution and needs a political settlement in accordance with international law" (EEAS 2016). With Azerbaijan's military expenditure increasingly dwarfing that of Armenia over the course of the 2010s, the EU's lack of criticism of the 2015 referendum also seems to have been informed by the ambition not to undermine the Armenian government in the context of this volatile regional security situation.

3.3 The Velvet revolution and Pashinyan's reorientation towards the West

If the EU had lost some of its interest in Armenia following its 2013 U-turn on the Association Agreement, the Velvet revolution started to bring the country back on the EU's radar. In April 2018, a series of peaceful protests across Armenia led by the #RejectSerzh civil society coalition as well as opposition personality Nikol Pashinyan and his My Step movement led to Sargsyan's resignation. Evolving as the most prominent figure during the protests, Pashinyan was elected prime minister by parliament in May. In snap elections in December that year, Pashinyan and his My Step Alliance won a landslide victory in an election that was "markedly freer and fairer than elections in previous years" (Freedom House 2019). In response to these developments, the EU significantly increased its engagement, with annual financial support almost doubling from 2017 to 2019 (European Commission 2021). Armenia's new pro-Western government also inherited the CEPA, which came into force in early 2021 and created additional structures for political cooperation such as the EU-Armenia Partnership Council, the Parliamentary Partnership Committee and the Civil Society Platform.

And yet, given the significance of the political change that had occurred in 2018 and the increase in support, the EU remained somewhat distant and detached. The 44-day war with Azerbaijan in 2020 did not garner as much European attention, let alone support, as Armenian citizens and government officials would have hoped. Neither were they content with the EU's reaction to the exodus of Karabakh Armenians in late 2023, which Armenians largely saw as Azerbaijani ethnic cleansing within Armenia – a notion supported by international human rights organisations (Freedom House et al. 2024). Azerbaijan's further evolution from autocracy to full-blown dictatorship and its aggressive conduct towards Armenia – including alleged war crimes – did not prevent the EU from signing a strategic energy partnership deal with Baku in 2022. Faced with energy shortages as a

result of Russia's decision to halt gas supplies, Azerbaijan emerged as what von der Leyen (2022) called one of the EU's "reliable, trustworthy partners" when coming to Baku for the joint signing of the Memorandum of Understanding. Meanwhile, the blockade of the Lachin corridor from November 2022 onwards did not generate an EU response beyond expressions of "serious concern" (EEAS 2022). More substantial support for a democratising Armenia facing aggressions from its autocratic Azerbaijani neighbour thus fell, to some extent, victim to the EU's geostrategic concerns.

While this disappointed many Armenians, it did not undermine the EU's reputation too much. Given the nature of EU-Armenian relations, expectations towards Europe were far lower than expectations towards Russia had been. Despite having obligations towards Armenia under CSTO, Russia did not provide Armenia with support when it was faced with an incursion by Azerbaijani forces onto its territory. This caused a major decline in approval of Russia within Armenian society, which became even more pronounced in the context of an increasing perception that Moscow had condoned, and potentially even actively supported Azerbaijan. In a December 2023 opinion poll by the International Republican institute (IRI), 87% of Armenians rated their country's relationship with the European Union as "good" or "very good", and 89% expressed the same sentiment about the United States. In contrast, only 31% had a positive view of relations with Moscow, and 66% described the relationship with Russia as "bad." This represents a dramatic change compared to a poll taken in October 2019. At that point, before the 44-day-war, 93% of respondents viewed relations with Russia positively, and just 6% saw them as negative (International Republican Institute 2023b).

While the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed the EU's relations with several of its eastern neighbours, it did not in and of itself fundamentally transform EU-Armenia relations. However, in conjunction with the Azerbaijan-Armenia wars and Russia's lack of support for the Armenian side, the new situation provided an opening for the establishment of much closer ties. The return and increase of the EU's interest in and support for Armenia in that period might thus be at least partly seen through a geopolitical lens, with Armenian disenchantment with Russia providing an opening to help the country to reduce its dependence on Moscow and move closer to Europe and the West. In October 2022, the EU launched the temporary European Union Monitoring Capacity to Armenia (EUMCAP**)**, which created the basis for the establishment of the more permanent European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMM) in February 2023. Following Azerbaijan's operation against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 that led to

the recapture of the region and the de-facto expulsion of its entire Armenian population, the European Commission and the EEAS sent a fact-finding mission to Armenia in November 2023 to “explore possibilities to deepen and strengthen EU-Armenia relations in all dimensions” (EEAS 2023). This period also saw Armenia signing defence agreements with France and Greece (Ekathimerini 2023; Vincent and Vincent 2023), followed by the first ever EU military assistance measure in support of the Armenian Armed Forces of 10 million Euro under the European Peace Facility (Tatikyan 2024). In that context, the EU’s language towards Armenia started to change, with High Representative Borrell stating that “security is an increasingly important element of our bilateral relations with Armenia” (Council of the EU 2024a). In parallel, the Armenian government decided to freeze its membership of the CSTO and requested Russian border guards to leave Yerevan’s Zvartnots Airport, where they had been stationed since the 1990s.

In May 2024, the EU proposed a €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia for the period until 2027 to support the country’s overall resilience, economic development and rapprochement to the European Union (European Commission 2024a). These commitments came along with increasing rhetoric about Armenia’s possible European future in both Europe and Armenia. In March 2024, Armenian foreign minister Ararat Mirzoyan talked about a potential future application for EU membership (Volpicelli 2024) and the European Parliament (2024) adopted a resolution that noted Armenia’s right, in principle, to apply for membership and stated that “should Armenia be interested in applying for candidate status and continuing on its path of sustained reforms consolidating its democracy, this could set the stage for a transformative phase in EU-Armenia relations.” A first very symbolic step towards closer cooperation and inclusion of Armenians into the European space came in September 2024, when the EU and Armenia launched a Visa Liberalization Dialogue.

In the context of this new wave of EU’s support for Armenia’s reorientation towards Europe and the West as well as the increasing rhetoric commitment to its security, the EU largely refrained from criticising the Armenian government when it arguably deviated from the democratic path. Faced with an increasingly divided society and highly polarised domestic politics since the loss of Nagorno Karabakh, Prime Minister Pashinyan and his allies were criticised for resorting to authoritarian and nepotistic practices. In its 2024 Nations in Transit report, Freedom House noted a “multiyear trend of central authorities overreaching and impeaching opposition mayors, and the lack of transparency in ruling party finances” (Freedom House 2024). What aggravated Armenian civil society activists in

particular was the perception that Pashinyan installed close personal acquaintances into key positions. Notably, in the context of the country's reform of the police apparatus, the prime minister appointed his childhood friend Vahe Ghazaryan as interior minister, a former police chief who NGOs held responsible both for systematic police violence and for blocking the reform process of the police apparatus (Union of Informed Citizens 2023).

Moreover, there have been increasing signs of crackdowns against independent and opposition media as well as political opponents. As one senior European diplomat quipped, it is notable how much whether politicians linked to the pre-2018 governments are prosecuted for corruption depends on whether they still play an active role in Armenian politics and on what side (Interview, 30.06.2024). The lack of an EU response is criticized by Armenian civil society activists, several of whom mentioned that the EU had encouraged them to go softer on their government, given that it is – comparably – more democratic than potential alternatives (Interviews with Armenian activists, May 2024). This is increasingly seen as problematic within those parts of Armenian civil society that have become very critical of the Pashinyan government. According to one activist, "the West is repeating their mistakes from Russia in the 90s. They helped Boris Yeltsin, because they thought he was their guy. But Boris Yeltsin lead to Vladmir Putin" (Interview, 28.05.2024).

The EU's hesitance to be more critical of the Pashinyan government's authoritarian tendencies can be understood in the context of all four of the security and stability considerations outlined above. To begin with, interviews with EU diplomats and Armenian civil society actors suggest that the EU feels that being overly critical of Pashinyan might empower actors in Armenian politics who are even less likely to commit to democratic change. In light of the increasing polarisation in Armenia following the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU is concerned about the country's domestic stability as well as its, if imperfect and non-linear, path towards liberal democracy (Interviews with EU diplomats and Armenian civil society actors, May and June 2024).

The EU's concern for regional security seems to further disincentivize criticising the government's occasional authoritarian tendencies. The EU appreciates and supports Pashinyan's efforts to find a resolution of the conflict with Azerbaijan and acknowledges that this involves concessions that are hard to swallow for a substantial part of the Armenian population (Interview with a European diplomat, 30.06.2024). The EU's hope for a permanent resolution to the conflict thus provides a strong incentive for the EU's desire not to undermine him in the eyes of the Armenian population.

Even more so given that the opposition and its support is strongly driven by fundamental objection to many of the concessions that Pashinyan is willing to make, and that are widely deemed without alternative given the geographic and military realities on the ground. In that context, a weakening or demise of Pashinyan's government is seen as a risk to the on-going process (Interview with an Armenian academic, 23.04.2024).

Finally, Pashinyan is seen as genuinely committed to closer cooperation with the EU and a reduction of Russian influence in Armenia. While this is now a sentiment shared by most of the Armenian society, it is not one that potential alternatives to Pashinyan emanating from the opposition are likely to embrace with quite the same enthusiasm. The incumbent Armenian government is thus seen as both a guarantor of stable EU-Armenian relations between the EU as well as the best bet for reducing Russian influence in the region and integrating Armenia into Euro-Atlantic structures – an objective that the EU and most of the Armenian population share (Interview with an Armenian think tanker, 05.07.2024).

4 Georgia

In his speech before the Council of Europe in 1999, then chairman of the Georgian parliament and later prime minister Zurab Zhvania declared that “I am Georgian, and therefore I am European.” While his statement was met with applause and has been repeated by many Georgians since, the European Union was hesitant to reciprocate with comparable enthusiasm. Despite Georgia’s Western ambitions, illustrated by an omnipresence of EU and NATO flags in Georgia at government buildings and by endless graffiti murals, the country’s movement toward the EU had clear limits until Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In 1996, Georgia and the EU signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in 1999. While this agreement laid the groundwork for political dialogue, economic cooperation and trade relations as well as EU support for democratic reforms and the rule of law in Georgia, the EU’s overall interest remained modest. Like Armenia, Georgia was not initially foreseen for participation in the EU’s new neighbourhood policy. This started to change in late 2003, when twenty days of public protest over allegations of systematic electoral fraud in parliamentary elections culminated in the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze. This “Rose revolution” elevated Mikheil Saakashvili, one of its leaders, into the presidency in early 2004, accelerating Georgia’s movement towards Western institutions and substantially raising the EU’s interest in and engagement with the country (Lynch 2006, 5). As stated in the European Commission’s 2005 Country Report for Georgia, “the changes brought about by Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ in November 2003, including the subsequent holding of relatively free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, were strongly welcomed by the EU. The strong commitment of the Georgian authorities to implement their reform plans, notably in the field of good governance, has also been warmly welcomed by the EU” (European Commission 2005). As a result, there was a substantial increase in high-level meetings between Georgian and EU politicians and officials in both Brussels and Tbilisi. The EU also launched a Rule of Law Mission to Georgia (EUJUST THEMIS), the first of its kind in a former Soviet state. On 14 June 2004, the EU agreed to include Georgia (together with Armenia and Azerbaijan) in the ENP.

EU objectives in post-2003 Georgia revolved around supporting the country’s nascent democracy as well as its quest for closer ties with Europe and the West. However, despite Georgia’s very vocally expressed ambition to become a member, EU officials regularly made it very clear that any engagement should not be understood as a first step towards enlargement. Notably, Georgian diplomats regularly failed in getting even the most modest language that might suggest any, if very

distant, “European perspective” into joint communications (Interview with a former senior Georgian official, 03.07. 2024). Meanwhile, the EU’s rhetorical commitment to support Georgia’s democracy was not always matched by its responses to problematic domestic developments within the country. Tracing how the EU reacted to key undemocratic actions by sitting governments as well as how the nature of its reactions changed over time, the following section showcases an EU reluctance to press successive Georgian governments too much on democratic principles and argues that this behaviour can be explained by an overarching EU concern with the internal stability of the country. Rather, it shows that EU rhetoric and action were marked by a tendency of pointing to problems without attributing responsibility and that undemocratic conduct did not entail consequences. Moreover, when Georgian governments’ undemocratic tendencies were met with domestic criticism and protest, the EU regularly appealed to “both sides” to overcome crises and avoid instability. This approach did not change following the victory of billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party in 2012 Georgian parliamentary election. Although ever more obvious undemocratic conduct on behalf of successive Georgian Dream governments in the late 2010s and early 2020s did lead to slightly more critical rhetoric, it took until Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion for it to change in a more substantial manner. A fundamental shift occurred only in the context of Georgian Dream’s re-introduction of a foreign agent law in April 2024, which it had tried to pass a year earlier and abandoned in light of major public protests and international pressure.

As will be discussed in the following sections, the EU’s reactions to undemocratic conduct in Georgia suggests that concerns over stability and the maintenance of cordial working relations with successive Georgian governments regularly trumped concerns over democracy. If the EU did eventually change its stance over the course of 2024, this seemed to reflect a changed understanding of priorities and objectives of the Georgian Dream government and Bidzina Ivanishvili as its de-facto leader. In the preceding years, Georgian Dream was perceived as a an increasingly difficult partner, but still as a partner with whom productive EU-Georgian cooperation on various sectors was possible. Over the course of 2024, it began to be perceived as an entirely disingenuous (and somewhat unhinged) interlocutor that seemed willing to pay any price to remain in power, including, if necessary, a complete abandonment of the most basic democratic principles, an alignment with Russia and – despite continued pro-EU rhetoric – a departure from Georgia’s constitutionally enshrined Euro-Atlantic ambition.

4.1 The late Saakashvili period

While the 2003 Rose revolution led to a change of guard, authoritarian practices remained a recurring theme. Having inherited a failed state and seeking to rapidly push through fundamental (and arguably necessary) economic and administrative reforms, Saakashvili's presidency was marked by a concentration of power in a small circle of like-minded elites. Over his time in office, the Georgian government reduced checks and balances and became increasingly intolerant of dissent (International Crisis Group 2007). Seeing him as the driver of a pro-Western democratic transition with tough but necessary reforms, the European Union remained rather quiet until his government made use of disproportionate force against peaceful demonstrators in 2007. Starting in September that year, the protests were triggered by the arrest of former defence minister and Saakashvili ally turned nemesis Irakli Okruashvili, who had created a new opposition party and started to make several serious allegations against the president. In response, authorities arrested him on charges of extortion, money laundering and abuse of office during his tenure as defence minister. The anti-government demonstrations were ultimately dispersed by riot police with what Human Rights Watch (2007) condemned as "violent and excessive force", leaving hundreds of people injured. The authorities also moved against opposition media channels, with Imedi TV being raided while on air. Amid claims that Russia was behind these protests, Saakashvili also declared a state of emergency. Both the US and the EU also expressed doubts regarding the president's claims of Russian meddling. The state of emergency was lifted in response to US pressure (Blua 2007), with EU special representative to the South Caucasus Peter Semneby echoing American concerns (Deutsche Welle 2007).

However, the EU's overall reaction was primarily marked by expressions of "deep concern" and an emphasis on urging "all parties involved to immediately engage in a constructive dialogue" and to "exercise the necessary restraint" (Council of the EU 2007). This tendency to avoid directly criticising the government and "bothsiding" the responsibility for the country's political deterioration was also reflected in the EU presidency's rhetoric ahead of the 2008 elections. "All political parties in Georgia, government and opposition alike, must do their utmost to improve the polarised climate in Georgia and to establish a truly democratic political culture," State Secretary Janez Lenarčič (2008) stated on behalf of the Council. As Human Rights Watch (2007) pointed out at the time, "the United States and the European Union have been reluctant to openly criticize the president they hailed as a reformer and democrat. In response to criticism of the government's human rights violations and

reform policies, the US and EU very readily sought to give the Georgian authorities the benefit of the doubt, frequently citing the authorities' promises and good intentions to establish the rule of law and ensure human rights protection in the country." Concerns related to Georgia's domestic political stability and the maintenance of its close relations with the Georgian government thus seemed to be a driving force behind the EU's reluctance to openly call it out.

Statistical analysis and exit polling from the ensuing presidential elections in January 2008 suggest that Saakashvili's first round victory with 53.4% would not have been possible without fraud, even though his victory in the second round would have been very likely (Fairbanks 2010, 146). Yet, the EU's reaction was once again marked by a lack of criticism and calls for "both sides" of Georgia's political spectrum to move forward constructively. High Representative Javier Solana congratulated the Georgian people on the "peaceful conduct of truly competitive presidential elections" and stated that "all political forces should maintain a dialogue in order to deal with the challenges ahead, including those identified by international observers, before the parliamentary elections in the spring. The European Union is ready to assist Georgia in moving forward towards the next elections" (Civil Georgia 2008).

The EU's response to the less fraudulent May 2008 parliamentary elections followed the same narrative. In its Conclusions on Georgia, the Council congratulated Georgians "on the peaceful conduct of the elections" (Council of the EU 2008a). Once again, it "stressed the need for constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition to agree on the way forward" and urged "all parties concerned to respect the rule of law and to use only democratic and peaceful means in seeking to resolve political differences." It also "emphasized the importance of stability in Georgia and in the region." While irregularities were thus acknowledged, they were framed once again as something both the president's camp and the opposition should jointly deal with and improve, once again illustrating the EU's concern for domestic stability. With tensions between Georgia and Russia rising in parallel, ultimately culminating in the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the deficits of Georgian democracy faded further into the background and were overshadowed by concerns over regional security. At the same time, however, the EU's reaction to the Russian invasion of Georgian territory did remain rather mute as well. With France holding the rotating EU presidency at the time, President Nicolas Sarkozy was tasked to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. While he succeeded in obtaining a deal that stopped hostilities, it essentially froze the conflict and left key issues unresolved. The EU's main priority seemed to be restoring stability and maintaining

cordial relations with Russia rather than addressing the deeper causes of the war. At the same time, however, the EU did become a rather modest security actor as it established the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia) to monitor the ceasefire agreement. While it never obtained access to the occupied territories, the mission was seen as a "tripwire" that would deter further Russian aggression and showed both the Georgian and the Russian side a certain level of EU commitment to Georgian security (Haukkala 2013, 167–68).

The EU's commitment to Georgian democracy remained lukewarm during the remainder of Saakashvili's time in office. The period saw a further proliferation of autocratic practices and more and more former allies were leaving Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) in protest, but this did not lead to major EU reactions. Neither did constitutional changes in 2010, which began transforming Georgia into a parliamentary system, allowing Saakashvili to potentially continue governing as prime minister after his second and last presidential term should UNM keep its majority. An event that generated a slightly stronger EU response was the Gldani prison scandal that broke out two weeks before the October 2012 Georgian parliamentary election. In September 2012, leaked video footage of torture and rape in Georgia's Gldani prison pointed to Georgia's penal system being marked by violent abuse. Saakashvili had previously introduced a "zero tolerance" approach to crime with the aim of "cleaning our streets of this rubbish", which led to an increase in the country's prison population by 300%, making it the third biggest per capita imprisonment in the world after the US and Rwanda (Slade 2012). Saakashvili was thus widely seen as responsible for the inhuman treatment of Georgian inmates. The EU Delegation in Georgia and High Representative Cathrine Ashton expressed shock when confronted with the footage (Civil Georgia 2012). The EU was vocal in denouncing the facts, and the EU Delegation demanded "that the Georgian Authorities make every effort to address such human rights violations effectively." However, the EU also abstained from attributing responsibility and High Representative Cathrine Ashton welcomed "that the Government has taken the initial steps to address this matter and stresses that it is of vital importance that these and other incidents are thoroughly and transparently investigated and that those responsible are held to account" (Civil Georgia 2012).

The EU's relatively uncritical position on undemocratic tendencies during Saakashvili's time in office can thus be understood against the backdrop of the security-stability considerations outlined above. To begin with, Saakashvili was seen as an anchor of stability after Georgia's tumultuous 1990s and generally given the benefit of the doubt given the challenges he and his companions had inherited:

A collapsed state lacking functional institutions with public infrastructure in ruins and an economy in shambles that struggled with two – and at some point even three – breakaway regions and faced a former imperial power exploiting these regions to maintain influence (Paul and Shiriyev 2012). The post-Rose revolution effort in state-building required drastic and harsh changes, and thus arguably stronger executive leadership. In that context, the EU and other Western partners tolerated that Georgia's modernisation was not matched by its democratisation, especially given that the strong support Saakashvili did enjoy among Georgians for most of his time in office gave him a high level of popular legitimacy (Interview with former senior Georgian official, 12.07.2024). At the same time, the EU's tolerance has informed Saakashvili's radically pro-Western orientation which was, among the post-Soviet countries, only matched by the Baltics (Toal 2017, 105ff). His government's ambition for EU membership set Georgia on the path towards close functional cooperation which set the stage for the Association Agreement, the DCFTA and Visa Liberalisation that the succeeding Georgian Dream governments would inherit.

4.2 The 2020–2021 crisis and its context

The Gldani prison scandal contributed to a further decline in the popularity of Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) party. They were defeated in the 2012 Georgian parliamentary election, which occurred in the context of the country's transition to a parliamentary republic envisioned by the 2010 constitutional changes. Billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili and a coalition around his Georgian Dream (GD) party won 55% against UNM's 40.3% (Central Election Commission 2013). Saakashvili conceded defeat and Ivanishvili became the country's prime minister for little more than a year, while continuing to control party and country from behind the scenes since. Saakashvili was constitutionally barred from running for a third consecutive term in the 2013 presidential elections, which were won by GD candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili.

While GD's win was widely seen as a victory over an increasingly arrogant and authoritarian Saakashvili/UNM government, post-election prosecution of the previous leadership did raise concerns. In 2013, former PM and UNM secretary general Vano Merabishvili as well as former health minister and Zurab Tchiaberashvili were detained in what UNM called politically motivated arrests. The EU declared to "closely follow the legal proceedings against them, which it expects to be fair, transparent and independent, in full accordance with international standards" (Civil Georgia 2013).

While Ivanishvili formally resigned both as Prime Minister and Chairman of Georgian Dream in the aftermath of Margvelashvili's election as president, the following years were marked by his de facto capture of the political executive, the parliament, the courts and the media (Kapanadze 2024a). While the Georgian Dream party itself had initially featured a diverse set of independently minded parliamentarians, they were purged or left the party at different stages during the 2010s. Moreover, the Georgian Dream government subdued Georgian public broadcasting and exerted major pressure on private media. Successive justice reforms led to the rise of a narrow group of influential judges, the so-called "clan", that strongly influenced the judicial system in line with GD interests. In parallel, more and more people who had been working in companies associated with Ivanishvili were appointed or elected to senior posts in government and administration (TI Georgia 2015, 2018).

EU reports did occasionally mention these developments as challenges to Georgia's democracy and called for further reforms. However, as Cenuşa (2018) points out, "the EU avoi[ded] to make allusions to the presence of the oligarchic factor in Georgia." In doing so, it ignored the elephant in the room – that the country was de facto increasingly captured and run by an unelected billionaire whose network of businesses also dominated substantial parts of the Georgian economy (TI Georgia 2020). This unwillingness to pressure the Georgian government for a change of course came in the context of the country's path towards closer cooperation with the European Union. In Brussels, Georgia was considered a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership (EPRS 2021). In 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement (AA) including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement which established extensive reciprocal commitments. In 2017, Georgia completed the visa liberalization process with the EU, which allowed Georgian citizens visa-free short-term travel to Schengen countries and thus welcomed those able to afford foreign travel into Europe's borderless space. In the context of these developments and progress on a number of more technical economic and administrative reforms until the late 2010s, the EU praised Georgia as "a stable representative democracy with fair, free, transparent and accountable elections" (European Commission 2018).

The EU's reluctance to openly criticise Georgia's state capture did not substantially change even as a growing number of Georgian Dream's parliamentarians started to become disillusioned with their party's course and its internal workings. A substantial wave of resignations occurred after the 2019

Gavrilo's night protests. At that point, Russian Communist parliamentarian Sergei Gavrilov aggravated the Georgians by sitting in the chair of the Head of the Georgian Parliament while opening the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) that was held in Tbilisi. Given Georgians' perception of Russia as an occupying power and the fact that Gavrilo had voted in favour of recognising Abkhazian independence in the Russian parliament, this touched a nerve and led opposition parties to call for protests. These protests ended up becoming rather substantial and were met with an equally substantial violent crackdown ordered by the Georgian Dream government, even though Ivanishvili – who had become the party's leader again in 2018 – had stated that he "fully shares the sincere outrage of the Georgian citizens" (France 24 2019). The violence further bolstered the protests, with protesters starting to call for resignations, snap parliamentary elections with a proportional electoral system and a release of detainees.

An EU's response came only when GD itself announced to implement some of the protesters' demands related to resignations and electoral reform. EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell welcomed GD's move, stating that it "presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to come together to agree a way forward that strengthens parliamentary democracy and pluralism in Georgia. We expect a broad and consultative process and call on all sides to engage in good faith." He welcomed GD's commitment to investigate the police violence, called on "all sides to act in the country's best interest" and emphasized that "events of recent days have shown the need for dialogue, consultation and compromise" (EEAS 2019). The protests were followed by some resignations, including that of Parliament chairman Irakli Kobakhidze. However, the promised reform of the electoral system, which was seen as favouring the ruling party, failed, leading to further protests in November 2019.

Echoing election observers' assessments, the EU stated that the following 2020 parliamentary elections were "competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected" but also noted "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state throughout the campaign and on election day" (EEAS 2020). In the context of allegations of electoral fraud following the elections, the Georgian opposition refused to accept the result and boycotted parliament. In February 2021, the crisis was further aggravated when Nika Melia, the leader of the main opposition party United National Movement (UNM) was detained over allegations related to his role in the 2019 Gavrilo's night protests and after refusing to pay his bail. GD Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned over his government's plans to detain Melia (Civil

Georgia 2021), further illustrating that the real decision-making power lay not with the Georgian government but with Georgian Dream leader Ivanishvili.

In that context, EU Council President Charles Michel got involved as mediator. Following a negotiation process spread over eight weeks in early 2021, Michel managed to mediate an agreement to overcome the stalemate (A way ahead for Georgia 2021). Widely known as the April 19 agreement, the deal committed Georgian Dream to pursue several reforms as well as to agree to a power-sharing agreement in parliament. While Michel had celebrated the deal as “a truly European way of resolving the crisis” (European Council 2021), UNM did not initially sign and GD withdrew in July 2021. In May, the EU posted Melia’s bail which enabled his release. The UNM did eventually join the agreement in September, took its seats in parliament and called upon GD to return to the agreement. However, GD refused to do so and broke the deal both in letter and spirit by refraining from reforms and continuing to exclude the opposition, while assuring the EU to implement the promised reforms in any case.

The Georgian Dream government’s breach of an agreement brokered by what is formally the highest representative of the European Union did not have any consequences. The tense relationship between European Council President Michel and Commission President Von der Leyen may have contributed to the lack of a follow-up from other EU actors. While Georgia faced further democratic regression in the years that followed, Georgian Dream and its de-facto leader Ivanishvili remained welcome partners, and the EU continued to expand its cooperation with the Georgian government. In response to a request sent to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European Council adopted an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility (EPF) in support of Georgia in December 2021. Despite the Georgian government’s increasing democratic regression, the EU committed €12.75 million over a period of 36 months, with a focus on non-lethal medical and engineering equipment as well as civilian-type mobility assets to strengthen the capacities of the Georgian Defence Forces in their ability to deal with crises or emergency situations (Council of the EU 2021).

The EU’s approach to the Georgian Dream government remained consistent with its previous approach to Saakashvili and the United National Movement. The EU valued its constructive cooperation on technical issues and Georgia’s good performance in the context of the implementation of ENP Action plans, and thus did not see an incentive to push too hard when it

came to the government’s democratic record. In that context, the EU opted against a stronger reaction to GD’s increasingly authoritarian governance as well as its internal transformation from a party with a certain level of internal plurality and democracy to one that was governed top-down by billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili. This is most notably exemplified by the post-election crisis of 2019/2020. The EU’s main concern seems to have been to ensure domestic political stability, prompting European Council President Michel to negotiate a deal (A way ahead for Georgia 2021) that would allow for things to continue as they were, pushing the opposition to accept a contested election result in exchange for very minor concessions (Interview with former senior Georgian official, 18.09.2024). The fact that GD ultimately did not respect the deal and did not face any EU consequence further supports the assumption that the EU rated considerations revolving around domestic stability and a continued stable relationship with the Georgian Dream government over democratic principles.

4.3 Georgian Dream’s overt turn to authoritarianism

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally transformed the EU’s thinking about its eastern neighbours. While the EU’s absorption capacity had always influenced internal debates on further Eastern enlargements, an “unwillingness to confront Russian objections” (Kuzio 2017, 105) was, if not always openly, underpinning the thinking of several Western European member states. Coming to terms with the fact that denying them a credible membership perspective had not prevented Russian aggressions changed this geostrategic calculus (Youngs 2022). Enlargement returned to the EU’s agenda, with senior EU officials and leaders discussing a scope and timeline that would have seemed outlandish just months earlier. In that context, Georgia constituted a particular challenge. With regards to the fulfilment of its Association Agreement, Georgia was long seen as the best performer of the “Association Trio” of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. However, its good record on the technical side contrasted with the deteriorating state of its democracy – an equally, if not more important accession criterion (De Waal 2022).

Focusing on technical cooperation while avoiding to openly criticise the government was easier with an associated partner than with a prospective accession candidate that would have to fulfil the EU’s rather strict Copenhagen criteria with regards to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities. In that context, the EU thus began to use slightly more critical language. As

EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell stated in 2022, Georgia could have been “better prepared” for its membership application “as it comes at a time when the EU is increasingly concerned about the country’s current trajectory.” At the same time, he maintained a familiar conciliatory narrative towards the government in noting that the “effective slow-down of the reform pace over recent years” was “partly due to consecutive political crises for which all sides bear their part of the responsibility” (Civil Georgia 2022).

Georgia submitted its EU membership application, which was originally planned for 2024, ahead of schedule on 3 March 2022. In June 2022, the European Commission confirmed Georgia's eligibility but deferred official candidate status until twelve specific conditions were met. The European Council later indicated its readiness to grant this status upon completion of several recommended reforms. In April 2023, an International Republican Institute (International Republican Institute 2023a) poll showed 89% of Georgians supported joining the EU, the highest in years. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission recommended granting Georgia candidate status, which was officially given on 14 December 2023.

The EU’s acceptance of the Georgian application came in the context of the Georgian government’s increasingly apparent illiberal turn and geostrategic reorientation away from the West and towards Russia (Genté 2022). This played out not only in terms of continued democratic backsliding, including a first attempt at introducing a Russian-style foreign agent law, but also an increasingly anti-Western rhetoric and illiberal domestic policies on LGBT rights and gender equality. The domestic turn towards “illiberal democracy” had become quite clear since the late 2010s, with GD increasingly aligning with Victor Orbán’s Hungary and framing it as model for Georgia’s EU future (Vinklerova 2004, 5ff). However, the openness with which the government embraced Russian talking points, such as the notion of “gayropa”, “sovereign democracy” and foreign interference seeking to undermine peace in Georgia (Kapanadze 2024b), was new. In that context, the EU’s eventual acceptance of Georgia’s application in November 2023 followed its previous approach of accommodating Georgian Dream and framing its window-dressing exercises as sufficiently significant progress. For example, the EU had made efforts towards de-oligarchisation one of its twelve conditions for Georgia to obtain EU candidate status. However, it awarded candidate status even though there had not been any progress made in this field, with Ivanishvili de-facto controlling the Georgian Dream party and the Georgian government despite – at the time – not holding any formal role in either. The progress on the other conditions was cosmetic as well.

This suggests, once again, that security and stability considerations trumped the EU's democracy agenda. The decision to grant Georgia candidate status seems to have been based on the EU's assumption that not doing so might reduce EU influence and facilitate Georgia further moving into the Russian sphere of influence. In fact, former Georgian official Sergi Kapanadze (2023) noted that Georgian Dream's 2023 attempt at introducing the foreign agent law "makes even the ardent supporters of Georgia wonder whether this is done to deliberately invoke the EU's negative position on the candidate's status," a notion echoed by other observers and activists. This assumes that Georgian Dream had, by that time, decided not to pursue candidate status as the path towards EU membership would have endangered their efforts to stay in power at all costs given the much stricter conditions for democracy and the rule of law that enlargement involves. At the same time, given the vast public support as well as GD's official position that they would apply by 2024, the party perceived a U-turn as dangerous at the time but hoped that a negative reaction from Brussels that could be (mis-)construed as a rejection from the EU and the West. Against that backdrop, the EU's offer may have aimed both at avoiding that latter scenario, as well as at using the enlargement process as well as the Georgian population's major support for it to prevent the Georgian government's reorientation away from Europe towards Russia (Interviews with Georgian civil society actors, July, August and October 2024).

In recommending candidate status for Georgia, the European Commission maintained that it was contingent on the understanding that nine further steps that largely mirrored the initial twelve recommendations were taken (European Commission 2023, 25). In light of major public support for the EU and the Georgian population's European orientation, the EU also emphasised that the candidate status was primarily a reward for the people of Georgia. However, these nuances got largely lost and the candidate status allowed GD to maintain and enhance its narrative of being a pro-EU party. Moreover, it allowed GD to dismiss domestic criticism over its autocratic backsliding as baseless given that it had just received the EU's approval. Ensuing EU rhetoric and EU-Georgian interaction helped this GD narrative. Following the EU-Georgia Associating Council in February 2024, "the EU recognized that Georgia carried out significant reforms in a number of areas and successfully approximated its legislation with the EU acquis in many sectors as noted in the European Commission report on Georgia of 8 November 2023" (Council of the EU 2024c). Meanwhile, High Representative Borell stated that "Georgia has chosen the European path very seriously" (Interpressnews 2024b). Towards Georgian media, Georgian Defence Minister Irakli

Chikovani later claimed that “Joseph Borrell noted that it was the most effective, positive and productive session of the Association Council in the relationship between our country and the European Union, which has been held so far” (Interpressnews 2024a).

The EU’s cordial relationship with the Georgian government only started to change with the surprising reintroduction of the Russian-style “foreign agent law” in spring 2024. As indicated, the law had been introduced the previous year but was ultimately withdrawn over major domestic protests and Western criticism. And yet, even at that point the EU was, at least initially, perceived as rather weak in its communication. On one hand, European Council President Charles Michael stated that the foreign agent law was “not consistent with Georgia’s EU aspiration and its accession trajectory” (Michel 2024a). On the other hand, he also referred to “legitimate concerns of all sides” (Michel 2024b). Similarly, Commission President von der Leyen’ statement on 1 May “condemn[ed] the violence in the streets of Tbilisi” (European Commission 2024c), prompting pro-government media to interpret it as a condemnation of the protesters rather than the government’s violent crackdown against them (Khotenashvili 2024).

It took until June for the EU to take more substantial action, and when it did, nobody in Georgia noticed. The Council Declarations of 27 June 2024 expressed further “serious concern” and called “for an end to the increasing acts of intimidation, threats and physical assaults against civil society representatives, political leaders, civil activists and journalists in Georgia.” Moreover, they stated that “the European Council calls on Georgia’s authorities to clarify their intentions by reversing the current course of action which jeopardises Georgia’s EU path, de facto leading to a halt of the accession process” (European Council 2024). Only two weeks later, EU ambassador to Georgia Paweł Herczyński reiterated in comprehensible language that this was supposed to mean that “Georgia’s EU accession has been put on hold.” Moreover, he announced that the EU was freezing €30 million from the European Peace Facility (EPF) that had been earmarked for the Georgian Ministry of Defense, and stated that “other measures are being considered if the situation further deteriorates.” He also expressed hopes that a new government formed after the October 2024 elections would “restart serious work” (Civil Georgia 2024a).

This marked a significant shift in the EU’s rhetoric and action. The initially rather limited EU criticism on democratic backsliding and the award of candidate status seems to have been informed by the EU’s ambition to maintain cordial relations with the Georgian Dream government and thus avoid

legitimising Georgian Dream's Eurosceptic discourse and to discourage a Georgian rapprochement with Russia (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2023). Such a rapprochement seemed to have become more likely in light of Georgian officials echoing Kremlin narratives over the causes of the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Gavin 2023) and the Georgian government's policy choices, such as agreeing to the resumption of flights between Russia and Georgia in 2023 despite domestic opposition, including from President Salome Zourabichvili (Associated Press 2023). The EU's changing approach over the course of 2024 was informed by the realisation of policymakers in Brussels and various EU capitals, that only a change of government could serve that objective. Through its regular references to the forthcoming elections in October, the EU thus implicitly said that regaining an accession perspective would require Georgian voters to ensure that GD would not lead the next government. In September, a spokesperson for the European Commission stated that "all options are on the table" if the government continued its authoritarian trajectory, "including the potential temporary suspension of the visa liberalization scheme" (Gavin 2024). On 8 October 2024, the EU announced it was cancelling €121.3 million in EU aid (Civil Georgia 2024c). Moreover, the EU reacted more clearly to anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric. On October 21, against the backdrop of concerns over Russian meddling in the forthcoming Georgian elections, lead spokesperson for EU external affairs Peter Stano noted that "there is no dedicated EU mission helping Georgia to increase its resilience to fight foreign interference and disinformation, because unfortunately in this case the disinformation comes also from the official side, from the governing authorities" (Civil Georgia 2024f).

However, this was arguably not enough to influence the outcome of the Georgian parliamentary elections on 26 October. With the EU having avoided substantial criticism for so long and having changed course so recently, Georgian Dream succeeded in continuing to sell itself to voters as the party that would lead Georgia to EU membership. On the evening of the elections, it briefly looked as if Georgian Dream may have failed, with two out of three exit polls suggesting an opposition victory – in line with previous polling that suggested the ruling party would lose their majority (Civil Georgia 2024b). "European Georgia is winning with 52% despite attempts to rig the election and without votes from the diaspora", Salome Zourabichvili wrote on X (Zourabichvili 2024). However, the preliminary results seemed to confirm the third exit poll, which had been commissioned by the pro-government TV channel "Imedi". After an election day and a campaign period marred by serious irregularities (Civil Georgia 2024d), Georgian Dream claimed its fourth victory in a row. According to the official results, the party won with 54% of the vote, which would have been its best results ever.

Independent international pollster HarrisX later called the result “statistically impossible” (Light and Papachristou 2024).

The EU’s initial reaction was, once again, cautious in that it limited itself to quoting the OSCE/ODIHR election observers’ preliminary findings which noted “irregularities” but did not categorically question the results. A few days later, outgoing EU High Representative Josep Borrell asked for a transparent inquiry into the elections and noted that international observers “have also not declared the elections to be free and fair” (EEAS 2024). EU Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas said in a debate on the Georgian elections in the European Parliament that “these elections were marked by serious irregularities, with violations reported both during the election campaign and the election day itself. These elections fall short of the standards expected of a country holding EU candidate status” (cited in Jozwiak 2024a). At the same time, the US elections and the comeback of Donald Trump seemed to take EU attention away from developments in Georgia. The country was not mentioned at all during the hearing of incoming EU High Representative Kaja Kallas in the European Parliament and little attention was devoted to it during the deliberations of the European Political Community (EPC) meeting in Budapest shortly thereafter did (Jozwiak 2024b). This only changed once Georgian Dream made the surprising decision to openly declare that it would suspend its membership bid, which triggered a massive series of protests reminiscent of those against the foreign agent law in May 2024 and still on-going at the time of writing. Only in the context of this U-turn and the mass protests it triggered in Georgia did the EU’s rhetoric become harsher as well. Kallas and Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos reminded the Georgian government that its “course of actions and democratic backsliding led to the *de facto* halt of the accession process already in June this year” (European Commission 2024d) and the General Affairs Council “strongly condemn[ing] the violence against peaceful protesters, media” and “call[ing] on the Georgian authorities to urgently revert to the EU path” (Council of the EU 2024b). Kallas first proposal after taking office was to impose sanctions on Georgian officials involved in the repression of the pro-EU protests, a move that was vetoed by Hungary and Slovakia (Liboreiro 2024).

The evolution of the EU’s rhetoric in the post-election period thus mirrors the evolution of its position over the course of 2024. If the EU was, once again, soft in its initial reaction to the conduct of the Georgian parliamentary election and only gradually sharpened its rhetoric, this may have been based on its assumption that it would have to engage with this new government sooner or later, and that it had few options to exert influence. With the Georgian government’s U-turn on EU

membership, this calculation changed. Substantial EU engagement with the GD government became even less likely all the while pro-EU protests in Georgia increased, at least in principle, the likelihood of political change in Georgia and thus for a Georgian realignment with the EU.

5 Conclusions

Over the past two decades, the EU has generally been reluctant to criticise and counter autocratic tendencies in both Armenia and Georgia. That its approach was similar across both country cases and remained relatively constant over time is remarkable in at least two regards. First, the EU has itself evolved significantly as a global actor over the course of that period. Institutionally, its foreign policy capacities were significantly upgraded, notably with the establishment and evolution of the European External Action Service. Its ENP framework underwent several revisions in response to events such as the Arab uprisings and Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Its 2016 Global Strategy has "downscaled the transformative ambition of EU foreign policy" (Barbé and Morillas 2019, 253) and initiated a process whereby the EU were to become a more "normal international actor" (Tereszkiewicz 2020). However, what makes the consistency in the EU's approach across both country cases and over time even more remarkable are the differences between Georgia and Armenia as well as their respective trajectories with regards to their relations with the EU and their individual geostrategic orientation. Until late 2024, Georgia actively pursued EU membership, temporarily achieving candidate status in December 2023. In contrast, Armenia only very recently sought closer ties with the EU, having showed less ambition before. Meanwhile both countries have experienced significant but diametrically opposed shifts in their geostrategic orientation and domestic political dynamics, with Armenia moving away from Russia and domestically towards liberal democracy whereas Georgia is experiencing major democratic backsliding and is tilting towards greater rapprochement with Russia in recent years.

While the relative consistency in the EU's reluctance to criticise and actively work against autocratic tendencies in both countries is informed by different reasons depending on country and period, this paper suggests that these reasons can always be at least partly linked to EU considerations related to security and stability. This is not to say that such considerations were the only or even the main causes for its lack of action or stronger rhetoric. The EU's limited reactions were also informed by a lack of attention, bandwidth and capacity while it faced other domestic and external challenges. This notably affected its relations with Armenia, which never received quite as much attention as post-Rose revolution Georgia to begin with, and even less following its 2013 decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU and to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. Nonetheless this paper suggests that the EU's reaction to autocratic tendencies and democratic backsliding in both countries was always at least partly informed by the following four main security

and stability considerations: Domestic stability in the two countries, stable and constructive relations with both countries' governments, regional security as was as geopolitical interests.

The first consideration that seems to have informed the EU's reaction to autocratic tendencies and democratic backsliding was the EU's objective not to undermine domestic stability within both countries. In Georgia, the EU gave President Saakashvili the benefit of the doubt despite clear authoritarian tendencies during his tenure and especially towards the end of his presidency. This must be seen against the backdrop of Saakashvili facing the challenges of fixing a failing state, dealing with two separatist territories and having Russia infringe on Georgia's territorial integrity. The EU and other Western actors were interested in seeing Saakashvili succeed in his overhaul of the Georgian state, a momentous challenge that more inclusive forms of government may not have achieved similarly quickly. In that context, ensuring democratic principles became a secondary objective, and remained so even when Saakashvili's autocratic approach began to seriously undermine Georgia's democratic transition. This EU tendency to prioritise domestic stability continued following the rise of Georgian Dream. It was notably illustrated by the EU's reaction to the 2019/2020 post-election crisis in Georgia, when European Council President Michel brokered a deal that pressured the opposition to accept a disputed election result in exchange for minor concessions. Georgian Dream's failure to honour this deal without facing repercussions further underscores the EU's preference for stability.

For much of the period examined in this paper, the EU's soft approach on Georgian backsliding was thus informed by the EU's underlying assumption that the country was generally moving in the right direction, and that ensuring domestic stability was crucial to ensure it continued this path. In contrast, the EU's prioritisation of stability over democracy in Armenia seems motivated by a more general preference to avoid instability in its neighbourhood. If undemocratic events and developments led to protests in Armenia, the EU regularly appealed to "both sides" to act responsibly rather than clearly naming infringements of democratic principles or more clearly calling out Armenia's authorities for violence used against protesters. During the presidency of Sargsyan, neither the events surrounding the 2008 elections nor the 2015 constitutional change entailed a significant EU reaction beyond some expression of "concern". However, compared to Georgia, the EU's stance on such developments in pre-2018 Armenia seems to have been motivated more prominently by its ambition to maintain stable and constructive relations with Armenian governments as well by concerns for regional security. This changed once the 2018 Velvet

Revolution and the rise of Nikol Pashinyan to the prime ministership opened the door for a sustainable democratic transition. Against the backdrop of the 2020 war with Azerbaijan, the loss of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023 and the increasing societal polarisation that followed, Pashinyan increasingly resorted to more autocratic practices as well. These tendencies were not met with substantial EU criticism either. This was partly informed by the nature of Pashinyan's rise to power through a peaceful revolution against an autocratic regime, a democratic election that allowed him to become prime minister shortly thereafter and a confirmation in office through another snap election called in the aftermath of the 2020 44-day war. Similar to the case of Georgia under Saakashvili, the EU also operates under the assumption that Pashinyan remains a much more likely actor to push forward the country's democratic transition than potential alternatives who would likely be influenced, if not dominated by the pre-2018 political elites. The EU's soft position was also informed by the ambition to support a, by and large, stable and well-functioning government at a time when Armenia is facing major external challenges, which constitutes a further parallel to Georgia in the 2000s.

A second consideration that seems to have informed the EU's reaction to authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in Georgia and Armenia was its ambition to maintain stable relations with their respective governments. Until the latest and most fundamental episode of democratic backsliding over the course of 2023 and 2024, Georgia was regularly seen as the frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership. While Saakashvili was extremely vocal in expressing his pro-Western orientation, Georgian Dream governments also appeared keen on joining Euro-Atlantic structures and continued the country's path towards the EU. In that context, actual and perceived progress in functional cooperation between the EU and Georgia overshadowed democratic stagnation and backsliding, even when it became ever more obvious and egregious in the late 2000s as well as the late 2010s and early 2020s. To the extent to which democratic stagnation and backsliding was noted, the EU's policy seems to have been informed by the assumption that EU influence was most efficiently pursued through constructive engagement with the respective Georgian government.

While formally a lot of progress was made on jointly agreed technical reforms during the 2010s, the EU regularly let Georgian Dream governments get away with window-dressing exercises when it came to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In the context of Georgian Dream's self-portrayal as a pro-EU political force, its increasing subordination to billionaire founder Bidzina Ivanishvili and the capture of most state institutions did not prompt significant EU reactions or

changes to EU-Georgian relations. Throughout both periods, the EU avoided directly criticising the respective Georgian governments. If it did address democratic backsliding, this often happened without clearly calling out those responsible or reacting with actual consequences. At the same time, and just like in the Armenian case, the EU regularly appealed to "both sides" to overcome crises and avoid instability rather than clearly addressing the Georgian government.

Although ever more obvious undemocratic conduct on behalf of successive Georgian Dream governments in the late 2010s and early 2020s led to some changes in EU rhetoric, it took until Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion for it to change in a more substantial manner. With enlargement becoming a real possibility, the EU had to adapt its approach and became a bit more critical. However, the EU only changed its approach in a more substantial way in 2024, when the Georgian government's rhetoric became overtly hostile and its action more extreme all the while both rhetoric and action became harder to ignore given Georgia's status as a candidate for EU membership from December 2023 onwards. A fundamental shift occurred in the context of Georgian Dream's re-introduction of a foreign agent law in April 2024, which it had tried to pass a year earlier and abandoned in light of major public protests and international pressure. While the EU's initial reactions followed its previous, relatively soft approach, it drastically changed course upon understanding that Georgian Dream would not back down and withdraw the law this time. This seems to have come hand in hand with a broader change in the understanding of the priorities and objectives of the Georgian Dream government and Bidzina Ivanishvili as its de-facto leader. Previously viewed as a problematic but workable government, it was now seen as a completely insincere (and somewhat unstable) interlocutor, seemingly willing to pay any price to maintain power. This included a complete disregard for fundamental democratic principles and, if need be, alignment with Russia and a departure from Georgia's constitutionally guaranteed Euro-Atlantic aspirations, despite ongoing pro-EU rhetoric.

Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, Armenia did not experience a "coloured revolution" in the 2000s and neither the country's elites nor its population sought a drastic reorientation towards Euro-Atlantic structures. While Armenia was open to cooperation with Brussels, it did not seek EU membership. This meant that there was neither a clear opening for the EU nor sufficient leverage to encourage more substantial domestic reforms. Armenia's 2013 U-turn on the Association Agreement further highlighted the lack of a role for the EU, while at the same time reducing the EU's interest in and attention devoted to the country. At the same time, the Armenian's government surprisingly

enthusiastically did embrace some EU-prescribed reforms for the sake of improving the efficiency of its institutions and economy. With the rise of Pashinyan, Armenia became more openly pro-European. His government openly distanced itself from Russia and expressed its ambition to join Euro-Atlantic institutions following the 2023 loss of Nagorno Karabakh. This context further limited the EU's incentive to criticize undemocratic practices, especially given that alternatives to his leadership are perceived as less pro-European. Overall, the EU's ambition to maintain stable and constructive relations with Armenia was less of a driver of the EU's muted reaction than in Georgia, though. To begin with, EU-Armenian relations were not quite as close as those with Georgia for much of the period examined. Once relations did grow closer, however, this was driven more by Armenia's desire to find new allies rather than by the EU's interest in the country, leaving the EU with less of a need to placate the Armenian government for the sake of cordial relations. The situation in Georgia was different, as the EU was guided by its interest in maintaining good relations to preserve some degree of influence over Georgian Dream-led governments that grew increasingly hostile toward the EU and its emphasis on democratic principles. In post-2018 Armenia, the EU's approach is thus better explained by the EU's geopolitical interests as well as its desire not to undermine a government that is challenged by domestic actors that are less friendly to the EU and the democratic principles it seeks to promote. Moreover, throughout the period examined, the EU's muted reactions on democratic backsliding in Armenia have been motivated by concerns related to its conflict with Azerbaijan, and to a lesser extent by its relations with Turkey.

A third consideration that seems to have informed the EU's reaction to authoritarianisation and democratic backsliding in the South Caucasus was thus its ambition to maintain and foster regional stability. This applies mainly to Armenia, which saw some of the most problematic domestic developments in the late 2000s and early 2010s, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 elections. These developments overlapped with a period of attempted reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. As this reconciliation was seen very favourable by the EU, there seems to have been limited appetite to criticise the Armenian government too much at that point. More generally, the EU saw Armenia through the lens of its conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. This focus became even more pronounced in the mid-2010s, when the frozen conflict saw several violent escalations. These escalations also overshadowed the 2015 constitutional changes that were domestically seen as an effort for Sargsyan to remodel the state to allow for his continued rule but were not met with a meaningful EU response. More generally, the EU's reluctance to question Armenia's democratic credentials too much prior to the 2018 Velvet

Revolution also seems to have been informed by the fact that Armenia's political elite around Serzh Sargsyan and his predecessor Robert Kocharyan had succeeded in avoiding a bigger confrontation with Azerbaijan for two decades. When Pashinyan would later resort to more authoritarian practices, the EU's relatively limited reactions were informed by a similar logic. The EU appreciated and supported Pashinyan's efforts to find a resolution of the conflict with Azerbaijan. In that context, it acknowledged that peace with Azerbaijan involves Armenian concessions that are hard to swallow for a substantial part of the Armenian population. This gave the EU yet another motivation not to undermine him in the eyes of the Armenian public. At the same time, its lack of criticism may have been motivated by the concern that being overly critical of Pashinyan might empower those actors in Armenian politics who are unlikely come to an arrangement with Azerbaijan and could cause more instability at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

The fourth and final consideration that seems to have informed the EU's reaction to authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in Georgia and Armenia are its geostrategic interests and its ambition to reduce Russian influence in these two countries as well as to anchor them in or help them to move towards the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. In the case of Armenia, this only became a serious consideration for the EU when Armenians developed this ambition themselves. The 2018 Velvet revolution was not per-se pro-Western, let alone anti-Russian. However, both in its rejection of autocracy and its embrace of liberalism as well as with the decline of a political class that had close links to the Russian political establishment, the Velvet revolution did lay the groundwork for closer relations with Europe and the West. Following the 44-day war with Azerbaijan in 2020 and the exodus of Karabakh Armenians in late 2023, public opinion and the Pashinyan government's position on Russia changed dramatically due to the perception that the erstwhile ally had let them down. With Pashinyan seen as genuinely committed to closer cooperation with the EU and seeking to reduce Armenia's dependence on Russia, the EU thus has an incentive to not to criticize him too much domestically. Even more so given that potential political alternatives emanating from the opposition are unlikely to embrace such a reorientation with quite the same enthusiasm. These considerations seem to have contributed the EU's limited reactions to democratic backsliding under the Pashinyan.

In Georgia, consecutive governments appeared keen on joining Euro-Atlantic structures. In the context of its radically pro-Western orientation, the 2004-2013 Saakashvili presidency was generally given the benefit of the doubt when it came to its democratic credentials. Georgian Dream's real

intentions became increasingly unclear over the second half of the party's time in office. However, that lack of clarity also left the EU in a position where a stronger stance on GD's authoritarian tendencies entailed risks as it could have pushed the country further away and potentially into a rapprochement with Russia. Notably, this informed the EU's eventual decision to grant Georgia candidate status despite its increasingly obvious democratic backsliding. While acknowledging it as one among several bad options, the EU hoped that granting Georgia candidate status would ensure EU influence and help anchor its Western orientation. At the same time, the EU feared that not granting candidate status might leave the country and its citizens in a geopolitical limbo and vulnerable to further Russian as well as Chinese influence. The EU's preference for maintaining its relatively cordial working relationship a GD government that had, by that time, begun to consistently denigrate it to domestic Georgian audiences may also have been informed by Georgia's crucial role in the expanding “middle corridor” that connects Asia to Europe while bypassing Russia.

The EU only changed course in the context of Georgian Dream's 2024 re-introduction and passing of the Russian-style foreign agent law that aimed at cracking down on pro-Western and pro-democracy civil society organisations as well as its ever more hostile rhetoric towards the West in that context. It seems that the EU concluded that its previous approach had failed and that a change in government was now the only way to avoid further democratic backsliding and an increase in Russian influence. This may have gone hand in hand with a realisation that the EU's previous approach had allowed GD to present itself as pro-EU and campaign with the narrative that it was leading Georgia into the EU. The EU changed its approach accordingly. However, the results of the parliamentary election of 26 October 2024 suggest that the EU's change may have come too late, and that its new line did not reach enough Georgians. While the election was far from clean, a significant number of voters that seek EU membership did vote for the Georgian Dream.

All four different security and stability considerations informed EU policy in Armenia and Georgia, but they did so in different ways and to different degrees. While individual EU security and stability considerations' impact varied over time, they collectively seem to have contributed to the EU's muted reaction to various undemocratic events and developments in both countries. This paints the picture of an EU that – by and large – prioritises security and stability over democracy even when its overall foreign policy narrative suggests otherwise. This has several implications for Armenia and Georgia as well as for EU democracy promotion in these two countries.

To begin with, the EU's prioritisation of stability and security risks undermining its credibility and legitimacy among both the wider population within these two countries, and in particular among the most active and mobilised parts of their respective civil societies. This can play out through different pathways. In both countries, pro-European and pro-democracy activists occasionally express frustration at the lack of moral support from the EU when criticising their respective governments for infringing upon democratic principles and norms that the EU claims to embody and promote. Activists do appreciate the EU's need to balance democratic principles and values against other considerations, as well as the general limitations to the EU's influence in the region. In fact, perceived and actual EU double standards do not seem to seriously undermine the EU's popularity among Armenian and Georgian civil society activists. However, too little of an EU reaction to key episodes of democratic backsliding can undermine activists' motivation to stand up for democratic principles themselves. This also applies to the wider population. For example, even though the EU had become far more critical of Georgian Dream in the run-up to the October 2024 elections, it did not initially express a strong view on its flawed results as it waited for the final reports of international election observers. This lack of a quick and clear reaction from the EU and other Western actors contributed to the relative lack of domestic contestation of the election in its intermediate aftermath. While significant protests broke out later, they were triggered by something else – Georgian Dream's U-turn on EU membership.

However, the absence of a stronger EU rhetoric is not only seen as a missed opportunity to help domestic civil society to defend and promote democracy. It also allows governments to actively undermine civil society and its advocacy by arguing that the EU does not share their criticism. This is particularly damaging if they can point to positive EU evaluations and progress in relations with the EU. In this context it is worth noting that genuine public trust in civil society is already limited in both countries. The major protests against Georgian Dream's "foreign agent law" may have suggested otherwise, but only 22% of Georgian respondents to the 2024 Caucasus Barometer said they "fully trust" or "rather trust" NGOs (CRRC 2024). In the 2021 Caucasus barometer (CRRC 2022) – the latest available for Armenia – 25% of respondents said the same. These numbers illustrate the vulnerability of those domestic actors that the EU deems a crucial ally in its democracy promotion efforts. They also showcase the potential for antidemocratic actors to delegitimise them, and by extension to delegitimise what they stand and advocate for.

Moreover, both domestic and external actors that seek to undermine the EU and its efforts to promote democracy in Georgia and Armenia can utilise its past and present lack of criticism to instances of democratic backsliding to delegitimise it. In Armenia, opposition actors linked to the pre-2018 regime point to EU double standards when violations of human rights and democratic principles of the Pashinyan governments do not entail consequences. In doing so, they can paint a picture of a hypocritical EU that only uses democracy and human rights discourse when it suits its interests. This is not a winning strategy for the time being, as current Armenian sympathies for the EU are not primarily driven by the EU's principles and values, but rather by the hope and desire to find new allies and to realize socio-economic improvements. However, attitudes might change if Armenian's high – and possibly unrealistic – expectations on what a more pro-European and pro-Western orientation can yield are disappointed.

In the Georgian case, the EU's rather rapid shift from largely ignoring the country's backsliding to suddenly becoming very harsh on the Georgian Dream government can be, and to some extent already is, misrepresented as well. The EU regularly praised Georgia's performance on technical cooperation and ultimately awarded the country candidate status at a time when its backsliding had already become quite blatant. In doing so, the EU not only allowed Georgian Dream to counter criticism over its democratic credentials, but also to credibly present itself to the population at large as the party that will lead them into the EU. Georgian Dream governments concluded the Association Agreement, gained visa liberation with the EU and ultimately received candidate status for EU membership. In the absence of a much clearer EU communication and criticism, it thus was and will remain difficult for the opposition to convince voters of the damage that Georgian Dream does to the country's European aspirations.

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