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RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY
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The EU and Georgia: Between a rock and a hard place

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Introduction

For a moment on the evening of Georgia's parliamentary elections on October 26th, the atmosphere at the opposition parties' headquarters was jubilant. At 8pm local time, two out of three exit polls¹ suggested they had won, in line with previous polling that suggested the ruling Georgian Dream party would lose its majority. "European Georgia is winning with 52% despite attempts to rig the election and without votes from the diaspora", then-President Salome Zourabichvili wrote on X.² Although initially elected with Georgian Dream's support, the country's former president had emerged as its leading opponent.

Within an hour the euphoria had vanished. The preliminary results³ 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,⁴ Georgian Dream claimed its fourth victory in a row, with its best results ever – results that the independent international pollster HarrisX would later call "statistically impossible."⁵

In April 2023, an International Republican Institute poll showed that 89% of Georgians supported joining the EU.⁶ All government buildings fly EU flags, and buildings in Tbilisi are painted with murals promoting the EU, NATO, and Ukraine. Article 78 of the country's constitution mandates that "the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." In December 2023, Georgia received candidate status for membership of the EU – an achievement that seemed unlikely, if not impossible for so long.

And yet, the 2024 parliamentary elections kept a government in power that has been pulling Georgia further and further away from Euro-Atlantic institutions and aligning the country more closely with Russia. About a month after the elections, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would suspend starting EU accession talks until 2028 and refuse EU budgetary support. While the rigged election had only triggered relatively minor demonstrations, Georgian Dream's U-turn on EU membership was followed by a more substantial wave of protests that continues until today.

In that context, the EU finds itself in a position where it is only left with bad choices and little influence. To some extent, the EU has maneuvered itself into this position. Its past policies did not prevent Georgia's democratic backsliding and arguably helped Georgian Dream to maintain and even expand its grip on the state. Notably, the EU has failed to make it sufficiently clear to the Georgian electorate that a vote for Georgian Dream is a vote against the country's path to Europe. While the parliamentary elections were far from clean, too many Georgians who do seek EU membership did vote for Georgian Dream. However, while the EU could have acted and communicated differently, the case of Georgia's democratic backsliding also illustrates more general challenges that EU democracy promotion is facing – and the limits to what it can achieve.

¹ Civil.Ge. 2024. Exit Polls Show Conflicting Results as Polls Close. <https://civil.ge/archives/630381>.

² Twitter Account of Salome Zourabichvili. https://x.com/Zourabichvili_S/status/1850208321430589658.

³ Central Election Commission. 2024. October 26, 2024 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia. https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election_57/el/prop.

⁴ Civil.ge. 2024. International Election Observation Mission Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. <https://civil.ge/archives/631442>.

⁵ Reuters. 2024. Georgian opposition calls for more protests as exit pollster says official result 'impossible'. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-opposition-calls-street-protests-exit-pollster-says-official-result-2024-10-31>.

⁶ IRI. 2023. National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia. <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023>.

What the EU got wrong

Over the past decade, Brussels has accommodated the successive governments led by Georgian Dream and its de-facto leader, billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. It regularly praised Georgia's performance on technical cooperation but remained rather silent on its ever more blatant democratic backsliding. By awarding Georgia candidate status in December 2023, the EU allowed Georgian Dream to credibly present itself to voters as the party that will lead them into the Union. Brussels only started to change its approach with Georgian Dream's adoption of a Russian-style "foreign agent law" in May 2024.

The EU interpreted the foreign agent law and Georgian Dream's ever more aggressive and conspirative anti-Western rhetoric not only as a major democratic regression, but also as a shift in its geopolitical orientation. However, its reaction was too piecemeal to either pressure the Georgian government to change course or to sufficiently discredit it among the public. When the EU froze Georgia's candidate status in late June 2024, this was so poorly communicated that initially hardly anyone noticed. The European Council called 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."⁷ This message was cryptic for most Georgians, who were also consumed by Georgia's surprisingly good performance in its first ever participation in the European football championship at the time. Only two weeks later, EU ambassador to Georgia, Paweł Herczyński, explained, in comprehensible language, that it meant that "Georgia's EU accession has been put on hold."⁸

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Even after EU-Georgia relations had soured, Georgian Dream succeeded in selling itself as the party that would lead Georgia into the EU. Ahead of the elections, the country was covered in posters and billboards held in dark blue and displaying a graphic blend of Georgian Dream's yellow sun-shaped logo and the flag of the European Union. In complete contrast to all statements coming from Brussels and most member states' capitals, leading Georgian Dream officials brazenly continued to pretend that Georgia remained on track to becoming a member state by 2030. Thanks to Georgian Dream's significant access to campaign funding and control over mass media outlets, the party's audacious distortions of reality were relatively successful in swaying voters.

At the same time, the EU and many other Western observers overestimated the role of geopolitics in the elections. Policymakers and pundits saw and framed the elections as a grand choice between a democratic Western-oriented Georgia and an autocratic one that increasingly moves into the Russian sphere of influence. This echoed how Georgian opposition parties framed them, hoping that such a simple narrative would not only galvanise the electorate but also obscure that they had little to say on how tackle the various socio-economic challenges ordinary Georgians are facing.

⁷ European Council. 2024. European Council meeting (27 June 2024) – Conclusions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/qa3lblga/euco-conclusions-27062024-en.pdf>.

⁸ Civil.ge. 2024. EU Accession Process Halted, Aid to MoD Frozen, Relations at a Low Point, Ambassador Herczyński Regrets. <https://civil.ge/archives/615670>.

Just as the EU failed in communicating sufficiently clearly what a Georgian Dream victory would mean for Georgia's European ambitions, it thus also failed to make clear what Georgians were set to lose if their government turns away from Europe.

However, these socio-economic challenges did have a strong impact on voting decisions. This helped Georgian Dream, which managed to buy votes through last-minute electoral gifts but also benefited from its track record. Unemployment in Georgia peaked at 20.7% in 2009 and stood at 19.7% when Georgian Dream took power in 2012. By 2023, it had dropped to 11.5%.⁹ And while Georgian Dream's extraordinary results in the countryside were aided by clientelism and outright fraud, the party also benefited from genuine support in the regions. Rural areas did feel neglected by former President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement party, which preceded Georgian Dream at the helm of the state and remains the biggest opposition party. And there were real improvements in terms of employment, welfare and infrastructure during Georgian Dream's time in office.

Many of these improvements were at least partly the result of EU support. However, the EU failed to communicate what it did and does for ordinary Georgians. It provided substantial financial assistance to the Georgian budget and to NGOs that guarantee basic welfare provisions. Moreover, the EU partly or fully funded major infrastructure projects that were crucial for the country's development. Often Georgian Dream managed to get the credit for projects that have been funded or enabled by the EU. In some cases, that credit even went to other countries. A notable example is Georgia's new East-West Highway. A third of the funding comes from the European Investment Bank¹⁰, but it is built by Chinese contractors. With the construction site draped in Chinese banners, this crucial and very visible infrastructure project is widely seen as a Chinese one.

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Where we might cut the EU some slack

The EU's inability to communicate what it does for ordinary people is a well-established problem even within its own borders. Beyond this, the benefit of hindsight might tempt us to overlook the various challenges that EU democracy promotion faces in a country like Georgia. The EU may not have done a "great job". However, it needs to be acknowledged that doing a "great job" was not exactly easy.

In retrospect, it may have been a mistake to grant Georgia candidate status. Georgian Dream could portray it as its success and exploit it not only to foster the narrative that it was leading Georgia into the EU but also to counter the opposition's and civil society's criticism on its autocratic turn. If the EU deemed Georgia fit for a membership perspective, who were they to question the country's democratic credentials.

At the same time, significant parts of both the opposition and civil society did support and even push for the EU's positive decision at the time. Partly, because they saw the EU's willingness to grant Georgia candidate status as a window of opportunity that could close again at some point and might not open again. However, their support was also based on the same assumptions that had informed the EU's decision to begin with: First, that candidate status would lock in Georgia's trajectory towards Europe and make it harder for Georgian

⁹ World Bank. 2025. Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) – Georgia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=GE>.

¹⁰ EIB. 2011. Georgia East-West Highway. <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/all/20100571>.

Dream to change the country's geopolitical orientation. And second, that Georgian Dream could have misconstrued an EU decision against candidate status as a snub against the Georgian people, and that this could have helped the party to move the country away from its Euro-Atlantic path.

Some domestic Georgian observers argue that Georgian Dream's first attempt to introduce the foreign agent law in 2023 may have been a deliberate attempt to ensure a negative EU position on Georgia's candidate status. The underlying assumption is that Georgian Dream had already decided against pursuing EU candidate status, as the stricter democratic and rule-of-law conditions tied to EU enlargement could have threatened its grip on power. Given the strong public support for EU membership and the party's official stance that they would apply by 2024, Georgian Dream saw an outright reversal as politically risky at the time. Instead, according to this logic, it may have hoped for a negative reaction from Brussels that could be presented as an EU or Western rejection of Georgia. We do not know whether this was the case, but it illustrates how challenging it was for the EU to decide whether or not to offer candidate status.

More generally, it may have been a mistake to accommodate Georgian Dream so long and not to react earlier and stronger to its democratic backsliding. Many Georgian observers point to the EU's role following Georgia's contested elections of 2020, when the opposition boycotted parliament over allegations of election fraud. At that point, European Council President Charles Michel brokered a compromise that committed the opposition to take up their seats in exchange for Georgian Dream accepting a power-sharing agreement in parliament and agreeing to several reforms. Georgian Dream ultimately did not respect the deal without facing any consequences from the EU.

But the question is what the EU could and should have done instead. While there were irregularities in the 2020 parliamentary elections, these were not comparable to those of 2024. Polls had consistently given Georgian Dream significant leads ahead of the elections. The opposition was weak, highly divided and lacked popular support. The EU had a relatively good working relationship with Georgian Dream, which had not yet evolved into the autocratic and anti-Western party that it is today – even though this transformation had already begun. At the same time the EU had other and arguably more pressing issues to deal with as it was consumed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it triggered.

Over the following years, Georgia's democratic backsliding became more evident. But in parallel, the geopolitical changes following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine gave Georgian Dream several advantages in dealing both with domestic challengers and external actors promoting democracy.

To begin with, Russia's war on Ukraine provided Georgian Dream with a narrative that proved to be very effective domestically: That a return of the opposition and the radically pro-Western policies it would allegedly pursue would inevitably lead to war. Ahead of the 2024 elections, Georgia was covered in Georgian Dream campaign posters contrasting destroyed monuments in Ukraine with Georgian ones in all their glory. This may have been cynical and immoral, but it was effective in a country that experienced a Russian invasion in living memory and remains partly occupied.

While Ivanishvili's ramblings of a "global war party" of powerful Western figures seeking to engineer the opening of a second front against Russia in Georgia were delusional, the idea that pro-Western policies might trigger another Russian aggression was not entirely outlandish. Georgia's pro-Western course did contribute to Russia's 2008 invasion, just as Ukraine's pro-Western course did contribute to Russia's aggressions in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022 (which, of course, is not to say that it justified them in any way).

Western support to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 had been lukewarm. Western support to Ukraine from 2022 onwards has been substantial, but insufficient to enable Ukraine to fend off Russia. The EU and Georgia's pro-Western opposition had thus very little to offer to those Georgians whose electoral choices were driven by the fear of war. It did not help that the Georgian opposition avoided to even engage in that debate. Meanwhile, the constant framing of the election as a binary choice between a pro-Russian or a pro-Western Georgia might even have helped Georgian Dream's narrative that an exclusively pro-Western Georgia will lead to military conflict with Russia. All this is likely to have swayed many voters who would, in

principle, be in favour of EU membership and a Western orientation – but do not deem this worth risking a Russian attack.

More generally, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reduced the EU's leverage towards the Georgian Dream government. The changed geopolitical situation enabled Georgian Dream to play off the EU against other actors. Georgia is the gateway to the "Middle Corridor" trade route that links Europe with Central Asia and China while circumventing Russia and Iran. With the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict blocking alternative trade routes across the Caucasus, the Middle Corridor hinges on Georgia. More generally, in the context of increasing competition over influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, actively countering Georgian Dream's autocratic conduct would have risked undermining the channels and influence that the EU still had – or still assumed to have.

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Even based on the assumption that there was and is no point in trying to maintain some kind of relationship with Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream elites, the levers at the EU's disposal were either limited in what they could achieve or entailed major downsides and risks.

Many pro-European Georgians would have liked to see individual sanctions against the ruling party's elites and their families. It would certainly have been gratifying if those who stole their European future could no longer shop in Milan, watch football matches in Germany, or send their children to schools in France.

But such measures likely would not have made a difference either

as the EU is dealing with a regime that cannot afford to cede power and whose elites are effectively controlled by one man who seems to have decided to bet on Russia prevailing. Especially given that the extent of Georgian Dream's embrace of corruption and political repression since 2020¹¹ left both Bidzina Ivanishvili and the party's elites with increasingly limited opportunities to retract. At this stage, losing power might involve losing their assets and potentially their freedom.

Against that backdrop, the question is whether such a rather symbolic act would have been worth further reducing the chances of some level of continued engagement with Georgian Dream. Meanwhile, the main sources of EU leverage, such as further cutting financial assistance or suspending visa-free travel for Georgian citizens, would have primarily hit the country's largely pro-European population. Doing so could have backfired in a context where Georgian Dream had already begun to discredit the EU and was hoping to reduce its appeal among Georgian voters. If the EU had used its main sources of leverage, it would thus have risked giving Georgian Dream exactly what it wanted – ammunition to discredit the EU among the Georgian population and to facilitate even more anti-European propaganda and disinformation. And while a stronger and, more importantly, very well-communicated measures ahead of Georgia's 2024 elections could have affected their outcome, it is hard to see what impact they could have now that the election is over.

Following the elections, there has been a lot of criticism that the EU has not positioned itself earlier and more clearly on their conduct. But it is not clear what the EU could have done, and what it could have achieved by acting differently. Reacting to elections that are marred by irregularities is difficult. The EU can raise its concerns and largely leave it at that. That is what it usually does in response to fraudulent elections in countries whose cooperation on trade, energy supply, migration management or other key interests it does not want to undermine. In fact, that is what the EU did in response to far more problematic recent presidential elections in Egypt (2023), Azerbaijan (2024) and Tunisia (2024). Alternatively, the EU can choose not to acknowledge the outcome and not recognise and engage with the government. That is what it did

¹¹ TI Georgia. 2024. Alleged Cases of the High-Level Corruption — A Periodically Updated List. <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/alleged-cases-high-level-corruption-periodically-updated-list>; Civil.ge. 2025. Chronicle of Repression. <https://civil.ge/archives/611538>.

following the 2020 Belarusian elections, when it scaled down its relations with the Belarusian authorities and imposed sanctions on those it deemed responsible for the fraudulent elections as well as the ensuing crackdown. The EU's decision was taken in solidarity with the Belarusian opposition and the major protests that challenged the regime at the time. While well-intended, this did not have any effects on the Lukashenko regime though and helped Russia to further enhance its control over Belarus.

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In Georgia, the EU opted for the first option. Although its rhetoric became harsher over time, many democratic and pro-European Georgians perceived its initial reaction as too soft. At this stage, it seems like the EU's reaction has been strong enough to lose all remaining potential influence on Georgian Dream, but by far not strong enough to exert sufficient pressure.

But even if the EU did have more serious tools to exert pressure on Georgian Dream, it might not be able to use them given the internal dissent from Slovakia and Hungary. In December 2024, both countries already used their vetoes to block a proposal to

sanction Georgian officials in response to their crackdown of the protests against the government's U-turn on EU-membership.¹² The intergovernmental nature of decision-making on foreign and security policy puts limits to what the EU can do, and it cannot be blamed for that. If anyone is to blame, then it is those EU member states that jealously guarded their national vetoes and blocked the expansion of qualitative majority voting in EU external action in recent decades.

Conclusion

Over the past year and especially since the October 2024 parliamentary elections, numerous opinion pieces and think tank analyses have emphasised that Georgia constitutes a strategic test for an EU that needs to take more responsibility and adapt its approach. However, a lot of these writings contain very little concrete and actionable advice on what the EU could actually do. If they do contain concrete proposals, then it is often relatively obvious options that come, however, with the risks or disadvantages discussed above. There are options that would not have any effect at all beyond the "nice" feeling of having done something. There are options that entail major disadvantages and risks. And there are options that are simply not possible in a European Union whose foreign policy architecture allows individual member states such as Hungary to block decisions.

In recent years and especially ahead of the elections, the EU could have been much clearer in its communication on how EU-Georgian cooperation benefits ordinary Georgians and what they were set to lose if those relations deteriorated. The EU could also have been clearer in showing the link between such a deterioration and voters' decisions at the ballot box. The election was rigged, but that it could be rigged without immediately causing much more substantial domestic and international contestation was also possible because it did not need to be rigged by that much.

Now that the parliamentary election is over, there may not be that much the EU can do. Ultimately, it lies in the hands of the Georgian people to exert pressure on their government through protests. It lies in the hands of the Georgian opposition to put itself at the forefront of public discontent with Georgian Dream by providing political options and alternatives that go beyond the narrative of a struggle between a pro-Western democratic Georgia and a pro-Russian autocratic Georgia. With municipal elections coming up in 2025, the

¹² Euronews. 2024. Hungary and Slovakia veto EU sanctions on Georgian officials as protests continue. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/16/hungary-and-slovakia-veto-eu-sanctions-on-georgian-officials-as-protests-continue>.

opposition has the opportunity to prove that it can offer solutions that also address citizens' more practical challenges and concerns.

There may not be all that much the EU can do right now. However, for many democratic and pro-European Georgians, it currently appears as though the EU is not even trying. They feel left alone, just as they did when Europe seemed reluctant to react more forcefully in the past. The Georgian Dream regime might ignore the EU, but what the EU does or does not say may influence what Georgian citizens will do in the weeks and months to come.

After the 2024 elections, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, whose country held the presidency of the Council of the European Union at the time, congratulated Georgian Dream on their “overwhelming victory”¹³ even before the preliminary results had been published. Two days later he visited Tbilisi in support of Georgian Dream. Orbán was met with loud boos¹⁴ when he left the Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, just 200 meters away from the Georgian Parliament where tens of thousands had gathered in protest. Pro-European Georgians were aware that he does not represent the EU. But they also noticed that he remains the only EU leader who came.

¹³ Twitter Account of Formula NEWS. <https://x.com/FormulaGe/status/1850929800720101797>.

¹⁴ Twitter Account of Victor Orbán. https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1850208375960670271.



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Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

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