



Essay
**The Challenges of the European Union's Expansion Prospects –
The Case of Georgia's Fast Track**

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Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus are part of the EU's Policy towards the neighborhood, emphasized in point 1 of Art. 8 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU, Art. 8):

“The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighboring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighborliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.”

Through this policy area, referred to as the ENP (European Neighborhood Policy), the EU offers its neighbors deeper political, economic, and security relations, however, without any prospects or plans of EU accession (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 279). The underlying goals of the ENP are value sharing and the establishment of a secure ring around the EU border. As these neighboring countries showed high aspirations toward accession, and in par with it, development and democratization, especially during the revolutions in 2004 in Ukraine and 2003 in Georgia (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 287), the EU possessed one of its strongest tools of democracy and good governance promotion to support this continuation, pre-accession conditionality (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 339). The barrage of agreements by the EU towards its eastern neighboring countries, such as the ENP, the EaP (Eastern Partnership), bilateral AAs (Association Agreements), and the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area) hinted at an expansion of geopolitical influence towards the former Soviet republics, which simultaneously aggravated Russia's sphere of influence (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 288). The usage of agreements towards third countries is outlined in point 2 of Art. 8 (TEU, Art. 8):

“(...) the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may contain reciprocal rights and obligations as well as the possibility of undertaking activities jointly. Their implementation shall be the subject of periodic consultation.”

Russia also responded to this expansion of influence in the form of the creation of the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the support of secession in regions of Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 312), as well as the invasion of Ukraine launched in 2022. Following the aggression which began by Russia on Ukraine in 2022, Georgia has publically declared its alignment with the EU in support of Ukraine while also receiving a *sui generis* fast track towards an EU candidate status, however, it did not apply any restrictive trade and travel measures against Russia (DG-NEAR, 2023, p. 3). While its orientation is clearly pointed towards EU accession, its geographic position conditions it to make more elaborate considerations in the policies it implements.

The EU's 2004 enlargement meant it would have to interact with a whole new set of diverse neighbors, and the EU's usual campaign of promotion of democracy in Georgia began by supporting the “Rose Revolution” in 2004, the development of a bilateral Association Agreement in 2014, and the support of the constitutional enshrinement of EU and NATO aspirations in 2017 (Makhashvili, 2023, p.5). The Rose Revolution in 2004 raised Georgian's EU aspirations and prospects for the worthiness of Georgia as a European country as “they had Done it without bloodshed” (Tucker, 2007, p. 539). Georgia has been able to make an association between the attributes of Europeanization and Democratization as complementary

to one another, fostering reform in human rights dialogue and institutional settings (Makhashvili, 2023, p. 8). The EU's contemporary normative approach to promoting democracy consists of informal and procedural norms diffusion, good governance spillovers from economic cooperation, and coordination with international and global bodies (Neuman & Holzhaecker, 2019, p. 24). The grand strategy of the EU in Georgia has been an attempt of influencing and alluring towards the benefits of democratization by initially providing the benefits that follow with affiliation with the EU in the ENP.

The accession progress reports conducted by the commission in 2023 show astonishing results in the development of the rule of democracy in Georgia with judicial system developments and achievements such as the highest global rank in budget transparency, and great initiatives for institutional development (DG-NEAR, 2023, p.18). While a number of these progress achievements happened under the ENP, the EU Enlargement prospects in Georgia served as an even stronger motivator for Europeanization. Nonetheless, the population and parties of Georgia still exhibit high levels of governmental and policy orientation polarization, an unconsolidated anti-corruption body, reluctance in the ratification of key ILO (International Liberal Order) conventions, a lack of legal frameworks which support minorities, and a significant lack of a strategy for the protection of CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) and LGBTQI persons (DG-NEAR, 2023, p. 4, 26, 28, 40).

While democratization in Georgia and other ENP countries (Ukraine and Moldova) is analyzed under the new prospects of potential accession, it shows a positive move towards EU democracy. However, the usual top-down and elite approach of the EU has proven to be ineffective in changing both political-elite and societal attitudes and behaviors, in both accession candidates and ENP countries, exemplified through LGBTQI rights (Shevtsova, 2020, p. 502; Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 278). Yet a rise of democratic backsliding in countries that are already member states of the EU, such as the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, and the Czech Republic, raises questions about the real role of democracy for the EU and the real importance of democracy within the EU (Vachudova, 2021, 489). This backsliding effect is taking place in EU governments that were once hailed as champions of liberal democracy in post-communist regimes and before accession, while now they are often referred to as a premature decision of accession (Vachudova, 2020, p. 31). After accession the EU loses its most powerful tool for influence in third countries, the conditionality grips on a candidate country, and there is no promise of a continuation of democracy and good governance in these countries once they become member states (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 339). This leaves an open argument of whether the relative progress of Georgia will actually continue when it becomes a fully-fledged member state of the European Union. The EU's inability to efficiently and effectively sanction its member states as well as individual actors within those states through its financial and material tools (Sedelmeier, 2017, p.9) raises further concerns for the continuation of the EU's internal democratic stability.

With the Consideration of Georgia as a geopolitical proxy battlefield for confrontation between the West and Russia, implications of conduct by the West as forces that partake in state-building give Russia further capabilities and justifications (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 332). The West's recognition of Kosovo gave a path to a Russian interpretation of "the Kosovo Precedent" through which it justified conferring state recognition to Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine in 2022, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008 (Ingimundarson, 2022, p. 5). Georgia faces further issues which the EU usually prefers to be

solved before accession, such as questions of territorial integrity and land disputes with its neighbors.

Considering Russia's wariness from the tendencies of greater EU expansion in the east, its readiness to employ various methods – up to invasion – and the EU's hypocrisy in accession promises with intense conditionality as the *acquis* is not fully respected even internally, there is a plethora of challenges in the path of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova towards successful accession. Democracy, good governance, human rights, and security are crucial factors for EU accession, but its own wavering intensity in such attributes makes it questionable as criteria for the functioning of the EU (Dimitrova, 2017, p.340), while in 2022 Joseph Borrell declared that the war with Russia had “given birth to a geopolitical Europe” (EEAS, 03.03.2022). Development and democracy often become an impediment to a hypocritical EU, while the concerns of Georgia's accession may be purely geopolitical, considering the Russian threat.

In order to pose a more reliable partner and to be seen as a future accession opportunity, the EU must make further adjustments and take further considerations in its relations with neighboring third countries. Foremost, the EU must focus on solving its internal issues of democratic backsliding and authoritarian-like or ethnopopulist regimes. Given the inefficiency of material EU democracy-promoting instruments in such member states, an alternative approach to the usual sanctioning tools is social pressure employed through shadows of material pressure, shaming of specific actors, or reporting initiatives in the European Parliament (Sedelmeier, 2017, p. 8). Such behavior-regulating approaches have proven successful in cases of EU legitimacy within the ruling bodies of member states as it did with SDL (the Social Democratic Party) in Romania in 2012 during their democratic breaches (Sedelmeier, 2017, p.9), as it does today in Poland or as it has had with the population during Euromaidan or the Rose Revolution. Unless it performs internal adjustments, development and democracy will only be an impediment to a hypocritical EU, otherwise, the concerns of Georgian accession will have been purely geopolitics. The EU has also only become a more reactive external actor and coherent towards issues following times of crisis, such as the Western Balkans wars, the Arab Spring refugee crisis, Brexit, the election of President Trump, and the war in Ukraine. These crises would often reflect concerns for the EU itself, be it risks of waves of migrants or nearby escalating conflict. This leads to an understanding that the EU is in need of reinforcing its values internally, in order to be able to diffuse them into third countries.

The EU must also make further external considerations of third countries' and regions' relational foreign policies before providing structural support. The EU has already made such considerations, to some extent, in the neighboring candidate countries of the Western Balkans. The EU has achieved significant success in reducing inter-group divisions and commending the respect for the rule of law by engaging with political and economic elites whom often utilize group conflict politically and are often accused of corruption (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 278). This however, leads to the empowerment of groups which don't represent the values of the EU and the rise of a negative type of stability (Beha & Hajrullahu, 2020, p. 8). The EU has proven to be weak in indicating the groups which best represent the interests of the receiving end of structural foreign policy and often overlooks the actors with whom they could positively interact with in promoting and transmitting their values (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 284). This may happen because the EU tends to look at the world through a Western lens, rather than try to understand the cultural societal functioning of countries, often overshadowed by EU interests.

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