



# ENC ANALYSIS

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## “The Geopolitics of EU Enlargement: The case of Georgia”<sup>1</sup>

**March 2023**

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<sup>1</sup>“The Geopolitics of EU Enlargement: The case of Georgia” was first published by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) South Caucasus Office and Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) in December 2022. Permission for reprint has been obtained from the copyright holder.  
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## About the author



**Dr. Natalie Sabanadze** is a Cyrus Vance visiting professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College, USA. Prior to taking up this position in August 2021, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the European Union and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. In the period of 2005-2013, she worked at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, Netherlands, where she held several senior positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. Natalie Sabanadze earned her BA magna cum laude in International Relations

from Mount Holyoke College in 1997 before obtaining her Master's in International Relations with distinction at the London School of Economics in 1999. She then served as political officer at the US Embassy in Tbilisi. In 2005, she completed her doctorate in Politics and International Relations at Oxford University, where she was a Dulverton Scholar. She has held visiting research fellowships at the European Centre for Minority Issues in Flensburg, Germany and at the Universidad de Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. Dr. Sabanadze has written and lectured extensively on questions of European integration, nationalism and globalization, contemporary Russian politics and national minorities in international affairs. In 2009 she published *Globalization and Nationalism: The Cases of Georgia and Basque Country* and in 2010 co-edited a volume with Francesco Palermo titled *National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*. Her current research focuses on the EU in the world and diplomacy of small states.

## Summary

Russian aggression against Ukraine has been linked to the geopolitical awakening of the European Union. The decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, and Georgia European perspective, ranks probably as the most geopolitical of decisions that the EU has taken in response to Putin's war. In a rare congruence of interests Georgia's long standing wish to join the EU received a boost from the EU's need to deter the Russian threat to the neighborhood and to European security more broadly. This policy paper addresses the question of how both sides can make the best of this unique moment and provides an analysis of the current challenges to both the EU and Georgia and recommendations to address them. The paper argues that enlargement is a unique instrument which still gives the EU a comparative advantage amid intensified geopolitical competition over the EU's eastern neighborhood. History knows no other expanding polity which has states lining up and asking to be admitted. Using the example of Georgia, this paper addresses the principal policy challenge: how can the EU leverage enlargement for its own geopolitical gain without compromising its core principles and the transformative agenda for the candidate states? The proposed answer lies in the pursuit of normative geopolitics, which combines hard and soft power, interests with norms and values.

**Key words:** European Union, geopolitics, enlargement, Eastern Neighborhood, European Political Communi- ty, polarization, democratic backsliding.

## Introduction

“Putin’s war has given birth to geopolitical Europe”, wrote EU High Representative Josep Borrell on March 3 (Borrell, 2022). The EU responded to the Russian aggression against Ukraine with uncharacteristic swiftness, imposing sanctions, maintaining unity, reviving the transatlantic partnership, and taking steps to bolster its energy independence and defense capabilities. Offering Ukraine and Moldova a candidate status, and Georgia a chance at the same, ranks probably as the most geopolitical of decisions that the EU has taken in response to Putin’s war. This policy paper argues that enlargement is a unique instrument, which gives the EU a comparative advantage amid intensified geopolitical competition over the neighborhood. Using the example of Georgia, this paper addresses the principal policy challenge:

*How can the EU leverage enlargement to its geopolitical gain without compromising on its core principles and transformation agenda for candidate states?*

Georgia is relevant in this context for the following reasons. *First*, Russia’s 2008 war against Georgia was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia resorted to military aggression to achieve its political goals abroad. It was evident already that Russia had become a revisionist power, determined to push back against the West and to undermine the rules-based international order that had served as a source of stability since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the EU continued its policy of engagement, which was underpinned by the belief that European security could be achieved only with Russia, not against it (European Council 2016). The full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 triggered a shift in this policy, and the realization that European security required defense against Russia.

Thus, if one defines geopolitics as a competition over the geographical configuration of power, then Georgia, with its location and political affinity with the EU, acquires added value. Moreover, Georgia’s potential EU membership and successful transformation could have a strong demonstration effect on countries in the South Caucasus, and enhance the EU’s ability to project influence all the way to Central Asia. Given a growing Chinese presence in Central Asia, this may also impact relations with China.

*Second*, Georgia is a country where popular support for European integration remains consistently high; the latest polls show support rates in the 80% mark (IRI

2022). Thus, EU conditionality should be a relatively easy sell to the public, provided that the right communication strategy is in place. The ruling party seems to have turned away from the EU, however, adopting a populist discourse of national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic matters. It has been dismissing most criticism from European partners as unfounded and disrespectful (Kobakhidze 2022).

Paradoxically, one of the most Euro-enthusiastic countries in the EU's vicinity has a Eurosceptic party in power. Pro-EU public opinion in neighboring countries is the EU's soft power asset. The EU should invest in maintaining high levels of popular support and use it to pressure governments into adherence to its criteria and respect for its values. Key, then, is to formulate an appealing policy of conditionality in ways which promote the EU's transformative agenda and serve clear, strategic communication with the populace.

Finally, Georgia brings to the fore the EU's Hungary problem, which is damaging both the EU's domestic cohesion and its foreign standing. Georgia seems to be adopting a Hungarian-style hybrid authoritarianism, characterized by a single party's monopolization of power, by the politicization of the judiciary, and by the abuse of a parliamentary majority to restrict fundamental freedoms. The Georgian government's position on the war in Ukraine bears a striking resemblance to Hungary's. Since Hungary is a member state, any criticism of Georgia by the EU as a whole, rings hollow and invites questions of credibility. It also raises doubts about the efficacy and long-term sustainability of EU efforts at transforming candidates for membership. In past cases, EU accession conditionality helped candidate states transition from a command or planned economy to a market one, and from authoritarianism to democratic governance. Today it must refocus on the new challenge of democratic backsliding.

Georgia's growing ambivalence about Europe notwithstanding, the government is constitutionally obliged to treat European and Euro-Atlantic integration as a priority, and remains committed to it at the declaratory level. The EU has accepted the challenge of geopolitical competition with Russia. And its possible response could include further enlargement. The interests of Georgia and of the European Union appear to have been jolted into rare congruence. *What can both sides do to make the best out of this unique moment?*

## The Russia Challenge and the Return of Geopolitics

Moscow's geopolitical challenge to the EU has two major elements. First, Russia seeks uncontested dominance of its neighbors and asserts a monopoly on escalation. Second, it seeks systemic change, the replacement of a rules-based liberal international order with one based on a balance of power and exclusive spheres of influence. Both pose a fundamental question:

*how might the EU respond to the challenge forcefully enough to stop it, yet cautiously enough to avoid a collapse of European security and even greater escalation?*

Russia has a strong sense of entitlement vis-à-vis its neighbors, which it justifies with a history and perceived security threats. In doing so, Russia conveniently ignores or aggressively denies its colonialist past and other wrongdoings. For some time now, it has maintained a monopoly on violence in neighboring regions and has resorted to escalation through direct or indirect military action. In some neighboring states, such as Armenia, Moscow has granted a degree of 'limited sovereignty,' provided that they subordinate their foreign policy and economy to Russia's. But in cases such as Ukraine and Belarus, Russia understands the very existence of Slavic nation-states to be a historical error. To correct that error, it seeks to incorporate them into a greater Russia, which Putin terms a "civilization-state" (Putin 2021).

Russia threatens its neighboring states, challenging such fundamental principles of international law as sovereign equality, political independence, and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders. It openly contests the dominant, Western interpretation and application of these principles, contending that the West has no monopoly on 'right' and 'wrong' when it comes to international relations (Putin 2007). Russia proselytizes a different vision, of a multipolar world in which greater states curtail the sovereignty of lesser ones, and populist conservatism arms its moral superiority to the liberal internationalist ideology of the decadent West.

In the world according to Russia, the EU figures as an anomaly. It is neither a federal state nor an international organization. At best, it is a weak entity dominated by big member states—which means that Moscow should minimize its dealings with Brussels and concentrate on Berlin, Paris, and a few other capitals. At worst, it is an

American zone of influence with limited agency. The EU defines itself, however, as a normative power—which sets it apart from traditional actors of the international system and generates gravitational attraction. Russia poses a threat not only to the EU’s security but also to its political identity. In order to defend itself and to maintain a competitive edge, the EU must rethink its relationship with hard power, stay united on risk assessment, and treat Russia not as a strategic partner but as a strategic threat. That means shifting EU’s Russia policy from engagement to isolation and containment as well as revising its “Russia First” approach and prioritizing partners and allies (Meister 2022).

## Normative Geopolitics

In describing the effects of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, High Representative Josep Borrell noted that “We face a world of power politics with the weaponization of interdependence and more examples of countries using force, intimidation and blackmail to get their way...” “We must take this trend seriously,” he argued, adding that “we should not retreat behind the false security of walls and isolation.” (Borrell 2022)

*How, though, is the EU to become an effective geopolitical actor, given that European integration rests on the “rejection of power politics” [ibid] and on the embrace instead of rules and legality in international relations?*

Underpinning the EU is an ambition to transcend zero-sum politics based on purely power political calculations and on clear distinctions between winners and losers. To quote Luuk van Middelaar, “we the Europeans do not play to win but to minimize losses” (Middelaar 2019).

The EU should not let itself be trapped in a false dichotomy of geopolitical vs. normative action. Interests and norms are often contrasted, but not always with justification. The EU came into existence because founding European states sought to minimize their vulnerability amid great power competition and resolved to recast their economic interdependence to mutual advantage. The promotion of multilateralism and rules-based international relations was for them a strategic national security interest, not political selflessness. The defense of international law is a fundamental interest of smaller states, because it offers a degree of protection from the predatory instincts of great powers. Moreover, since international law is made by states, any deviation from settled law by a great power carries great potential for disruption. As Roy Allison has noted, “Russian actions potentially dilute

the inhibition on changing boundaries by internationally unlawful means and destabilize the wider international system” (Allison 2017).

At the policy level, confronting ideological and political rivals would require the EU to make the most of its soft power and to use enlargement strategically. Enlargement is an instrument unique to the EU. History knows no other expanding polity which has states lining up and asking to be let in. In the current context of power political competition, leveraging this advantage could be decisive. One way the West could contribute to Putin’s political and moral defeat is by admitting Ukraine and Georgia to the EU and NATO.

A decisive move in that direction was the recent granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and of the prospect of such status to Georgia. Attached conditions reflect the need to respect established criteria.

If the EU is to sustain a balance between the geopolitical and the normative, credibility and maneuverability are essential. Both can be jeopardized through further enlargement, as well as through democratic backsliding by EU member states. The greater the number of member states, the more difficult it will be to retain flexibility and take decisions quickly if full consensus is required.

The EU should consider reform which would streamline its decision-making processes by limiting the unanimity rule and safeguard its standards and values by introducing post-accession monitoring. Recent experience with Hungary and to some extent Poland demonstrates that transformation may prove incomplete or reversible after accession. Thus the EU would do well to develop mechanisms for continuous monitoring after accession, and to establish a clear reversibility criteria in the period of accession. It should also consider intermediate steps for anchoring candidate states in the European political and economic space before the lengthy process of accession is complete.

## The European Political Community

French President Emanuel Macron launched the idea of a European Political Community (EPC) during his May 9, Strasbourg speech without specifying its content, intent, or character (Macron 2022). Reactions in wider Europe have varied from enthusiastic to highly skeptical, with many commentators in the latter category suspecting a French ploy to derail enlargement. For the moment, however, the EPC is a work in progress—and that is precisely its appeal. As long as

the structure and purpose of the newly proposed community remains undefined, all stakeholders can work to shape it as they see best.

For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EPC could offer an immediate way out of the grey zone in Russia's vicinity, as well as a stepping stone to eventual membership in the EU. Given the nature of the criteria for accession, the process is likely to be protracted. Yet it is urgent to anchor actual and potential candidates in the European political and economic space, and to assist them with transformative reforms. The EPC could play a role as a platform for phased accession in select areas.

The EPC could also serve to unite a wider Europe (EU member states, EEA/EFTA countries, the UK, and candidates, for example) by means of a flexible framework of structured cooperation. The main added value of the EPC, however, is its potential to become an important geopolitical instrument beyond enlargement. While enlargement is essential, its value is finite. At some point in the future, the enlargement process would be complete; plus, not all European states wish to join the EU.

It is, therefore, worthwhile to start investing in new mechanisms of multilateral cooperation that could serve as instruments of influence beyond enlargement and unburdened by EU protocols and rules. If the EPC could offer a framework for renewed and substantive EU-UK cooperation for instance, or Franco-British military cooperation to the benefit of European security, it would be proof of its worth.

## Georgia: Orbanisation, or the Challenge of Backsliding

The Georgian authorities have shown remarkable ingenuity in outsourcing responsibility for their failure to secure candidate status for Georgia and in diverting popular discontent toward Brussels and domestic opponents. They have described the decision by the European Council to differentiate among the three applicants as unfair and punitive, and have accused the EU Ambassador at the time, Carle Harzel, of not doing enough to promote Georgia. Opposition parties, they have claimed, sabotaged Georgia's case in Brussels (Kobakhidze 2022; Garibashvili 2022).

Certain MPs affiliated with the ruling party even went so far as to claim that the EU was punishing Georgia for staying out of the war and for refusing to join in the sanctions regime against Russia. The rhetoric and policies of the Georgian government bear a striking resemblance to those of Mr. Orbán. Hungary's democratic backsliding and position on Ukraine are open demonstrations of disloyalty to fellow EU members, which undermines the unity of the EU and damages its credibility. It also raises doubts about the sustainability of the EU's transformative power and begs the question: *how is the EU going to prevent democratic backsliding, both at home and abroad?*

Coping effectively with hybrid authoritarianism is difficult; its gradual and incremental character complicates early detection and response. Moreover, restrictive laws and policies are often enacted by leaders with strong democratic mandates.

As Nancy Bermeo has noted, new forms of democratic backsliding are carried out and legitimized by institutions prioritized by promoters of democratization: national elections, parliamentary majorities, courts, and the "rule of law" (Bermeo 2016).

Georgia's recent democratic backsliding fits a trend. It remains ambiguously democratic, because regular and competitive elections take place. Multiple opposition parties exist, as do several media outlets affiliated with the opposition. The electoral playing field is so tilted, however, that elections legitimize incumbents, rather than rendering the contest for power democratic. The line between the ruling party and the state blurs (OSCE/ODIHR 2021); the party enjoys full access to state resources and a near monopoly over information. Opponents and their supporters, instead of being repressed, are coaxed and pressured by means of appointments to public positions and bureaucratic reorganization.

Because Georgia's hybrid regime maintains a facade of democracy, it has a semblance of legitimacy and can even seem an improvement on the past. By exploiting fear that matters could get worse, the ruling party remains in power. It demonizes the opposition as subversive bent on undermining public order and sabotaging the national interest. And the opposition (with some exceptions), for its part, does its best to delegitimize the authorities, accusing them of treason and refusing to engage with government-led processes. The recasting of politics in stark 'us vs. them' terms which is typical of populism and of majoritarian conceptions of democratic rule deepens polarization and undermines democracy all the more.

The Georgian case demonstrates a clear correlation among populism, high levels of political polarization, and democratic backsliding. Populism serves to shore up popular support and to convert criticism from abroad into affronts to national sovereignty. Political polarization helps to radicalize mainstream political parties and to break down civil discourse. The scholarly literature backs these findings and demonstrates that almost every case of backsliding features a significant history of polarization (Haggard and Kauman 2021).

## How Might the EU Respond?

Signaling how much it prioritized depolarization in Georgia, the European Council put depolarization at the top of 12 recommendations to Georgia adopted in June 2022 (European Council 2022). But it did not specify how to contend with the structural conditions of hybrid authoritarianism, which sustains itself by promoting polarization. It is Georgia's political elites, of course, who must come up with a solution, with or without a recipe from the EU. Yet specifics about what the EU expected by way of process and content would have been welcome. In a context of polarization, ambiguity tends to be misconstrued, and to become another point of contention between 'warring' parties.

The evidence shows that polarization, which is not unique to Georgia, tends to be exacerbated by illiberal majoritarian rule. Not all types of democracy were made equal when it comes to coping with political polarization. Consensus democracies, based on power-sharing and guaranteed representation, fare better than majoritarian democracies that are adversarial in nature. The EU is not in a position to impose or to privilege any particular type of democratic governance; all types exist among member states, and it is not the EU's style to impose models which lack local buy-in. The closest that Georgia got to a limited institutionalization of power-sharing was through the EU-mediated agreement of April 19, 2021 (EEAS 2021). The ruling party no sooner signed the agreement than it withdrew, while the major opposition party never signed in the first place. The cause of Georgia's European integration suffered; the EU itself is operating in the 'style' of consensus democracy, and has a reasonable expectation that potential members would work to fit in.

Democratic backsliding poses a new challenge to the EU's democracy-promoting, transformative agenda. It shows that democracy-subverting regimes have become more subtle, learning how to 'dodge' democracy-promoting pressures

and developing new methods. They have learned how to manipulate international scrutiny in ways which allow them to maintain their hold on both power and access to financial aid. Failing to keep pace, the international response has conceded much to hybrid regimes.

Election observation, for example, tends to focus on election-day monitoring; long-term observation capacity remains limited. Yet cheating has become longer-term and more subtle. Blatant manipulation by such means as ballot stang, repeated voting, and count falsification on election day has given way to 'strategic manipulation'. The term denotes a range of actions aimed at tilting the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents. Nancy Bermeo has written of restricting media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, pushing opposition candidates on the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commissions, changing rules in favor of incumbents, harassing opponents and their supporters, and adopting popular measures on the eve of elections (raising pensions, canceling debt). Set in motion weeks or months in advance, strategic manipulation differs from blatant election-day fraud also in that it rarely involves obvious violations of the law. It is 'strategic' in that international observers (often domestic ones as well) are less likely to "catch and criticize it." (Bermeo 2016)

The promotion of democracy requires a paradigm shift, which will take time. But significant enhancements of the existing paradigm are possible almost immediately. Election observers could move away from the majoritarian model and introduce more power-sharing requirements. They could emphasize the political urgency of coalition governance and the value of consensus-building, pay more attention to safeguarding independent institutions and systems of checks and balances, and extend the length and scope of their missions. The latter should include phased assessments which contain early warning elements and do not mince words when highlighting consequences. Otherwise, international observation risks inversion; it could come to serve to legitimize and sustain non-democratic regimes. Urgently needed is development of a system of indicators and alerts that would facilitate early detection of democratic backsliding. These should be reported regularly and widely, and trigger adequate and proportional responses.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The war in Ukraine forced the EU to recognize the intensity of political competition in the region and the threat Russia poses to the security and political identity of the European Union. In accepting Russia's geopolitical challenge, the EU opened

membership perspectives to countries in the Eastern neighborhood, including Georgia. Enlargement is a unique, albeit not an exclusive, instrument for the EU to pursue its brand of normative geopolitics. In this context, the EU's credibility coupled with the popularity of the European project among candidates is its power resource. The Georgian case demonstrates that the EU should address democratic backsliding as a major challenge both at home and abroad and update its normative toolkit to achieve geopolitical objectives.

### **Recommendations to the European Union in relation to Georgia:**

- Be more specific in communicating expectations and formulating conditionality. Reducing ambiguity and limiting scope of interpretation would also limit the potential for manipulation, especially with regard to such 'hard-to-measure' issues as depolarization.
- Develop early warning indicators for the timely detection and prevention of democratic backsliding. Incorporate them in progress reports and follow up with proportional responses. These may range from a diplomatic cold shoulder to withdrawal of assistance.
- While being tough on the government, court public opinion and counter propaganda. Invest in maintaining popular support through, inter alia, strategic communication and contacts with civil society and other opinion-makers.
- Leverage Georgia's EU-enthusiasm to pressure political elites to deliver on reforms and seek compromise.
- Consider revising election observation methodology by extending its length and scope and adapting to the new challenge of more subtle, strategic manipulation.
- Use EPC to anchor Georgia (and other countries in the neighborhood) in the European political and economic space; offer a possibility of partial or phased accession as early as feasible in order to limit potential damage stemming from a protracted process that does not deliver fast enough to match public expectations.

- Introduce reversibility criteria and post-accession monitoring to prevent democratic backsliding. Credibility is the EU's power asset, especially in the context of normative geopolitics.

#### **To the Georgian authorities:**

- Implement the 12 conditions swiftly and in good faith, taking into account recommendations of international expert bodies such as the OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission.
- The first victim of polarization is language. Start by depolarizing the language of politics, which prevents compromise. Lead by example.
- Another aspect of depolarization is shifting from identity-based attacks to issue-based disagreements. Channel political conflicts into substantive debates and reasoned argumentation. Trade visions, not insults.
- Seek out issues around which agreements can be found and alliances built, no matter how temporary. European integration is one such issue that has a high uniting potential, which is being wasted.
- Stop outsourcing responsibility, accept criticism and double down on reforms in the spirit of the April 19 agreement.
- To further the cause of European integration, make friends not enemies. Invest in improving relations with individual EU member states and create champions amongst them for the cause of Georgia's European future.
- Normalize relations with Ukraine and deepen ties with Moldova. Partnership and solidarity within the Associated Trio are in mutual interest of all but it is particularly important for Georgia.
- Distance yourself clearly from Eurosceptical, populist forces and start combating anti-European propaganda.
- Regain the lost position of a frontrunner of the Associated Trio by being the fastest reformer and the best alliance-builder.

#### **To the opposition and other stakeholders:**

- Offer solutions. Think of structural changes needed to improve the quality of Georgian democracy and prevent backsliding. These may include power-sharing arrangements, improved representation, better citizen participation by formal or informal mechanisms, etc.
- Be credible as an alternative; pay attention to the needs of different segments of Georgian society, including ethnic minorities; invest in human resources and in partnerships.
- Democratize parties internally, and ensure strong links with constituents.
- Defend media freedom at all costs. Without media freedom, there will be no possibility to voice alternative opinions and hence no hope for change.
- Work with international partners as much as feasible to ensure that Georgia does not lose European perspective.
- Prepare for coalition governance and be ready to compromise for a good cause. Use every avenue available, including engaging in government-led processes to push for institutional changes and reform.
- Use street protests sparingly but effectively to create public pressure not public disorder.

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