

Preventing Georgia from Sliding Away: Options for the European Union

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The Current Situation

In the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgia slipped into a period of deep political crisis. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) government has unilaterally decided to suspend EU accession talks until 2028 - despite the country having obtained EU candidate status in December 2023. This triggered mass unrest and raised serious concerns over Georgia's democratic trajectory.

Framed by GD as a move to protect national sovereignty from so-called undue external influence, the suspension is widely interpreted as a rejection of the EU's reform conditions and a pivot away from democratic commitments and sliding back into the Russian sphere of influence. The decision has intensified domestic polarisation, with large swaths of the population viewing it as a betrayal of Georgia's path to Europe. Protests have erupted nationwide, continuing for over 126 days. Demonstrators demand snap elections, increased accountability, and a recommitment to democratic norms. Over 500 individuals have been detained for participating in the protests. Among them, more than 50 have been charged with criminal offenses such as organising group violence, attacking police officers, and property damage. Several activists and journalists remain in custody under questionable charges.

In parallel with suspending EU accession talks, the GD government has adopted a package of legislative measures without due public consultations, to further undermine democratic governance. These include a Foreign Agents Registration Act targeting civil society, restrictions on foreign funding for media that threaten

independent journalism, and regressive amendments to gender equality laws. Further changes have politicised civil service appointments, weakened civil society's structured role in participating in and monitoring policymaking, and introduced a controversial bill to ban political parties linked to the opposition. Together, these moves represent a clear drift toward authoritarian consolidation and a sharp departure from European democratic values.

The European Union has taken a range of punitive measures in response to Georgia's democratic backsliding, including suspending financial aid, imposing targeted visa restrictions, and issuing public condemnations. However, there is an increasing dissatisfaction within Georgian society and among Europeans more broadly that EU actions remain fragmented and insufficiently attuned to the country's domestic realities.

The seemingly growing reliance on bilateral engagement between some EU Member States and the Georgian government poses the risk of a deeper fragmentation in the EU's approach. While bilateral diplomacy allows for continued dialogue, it also shows the limits of uncoordinated action by the EU in addressing democratic concerns. Without a clear and unified EU strategy, bilateral interactions risk sending mixed signals and reducing the overall effectiveness of the Union's conditionality as laid out in the Accession framework.

EU's Engagement with Georgia: Strategic Considerations

As Georgia drifts toward authoritarian consolidation and societal polarisation, the EU risks its normative leverage and strategic relevance in the whole region of the South Caucasus. The current deadlock calls for a more coordinated and impactful engagement. It must combine political pressure with inclusive societal outreach, recalibrated communication, and proactive mediation mechanisms. Without such a shift, the EU's enlargement policy risks becoming ineffective in stabilising its neighbourhood.

- The case of Georgia shows a core dilemma of the EU's enlargement process: how to balance political commitment to integration in case of democratic decline in a candidate country. Is the candidate status an end in itself or a means to incentivise reform? If the question is left unaddressed, this dynamic weakens the credibility of the EU's and create space for authoritarian drifts, even under the guise of European integration.

- Georgia's domestic political trajectory has broader implications for the EU's regional influence, particularly in the South Caucasus. As Armenia's only secure land corridor to Europe, Georgia plays a key role in maintaining the EU's engagement in the region. If Georgia continues backsliding, Armenia will be further isolated and the EU presence will be further fragmented, reducing the Union's strategic coherence and resilience vis-à-vis other actors, including Russia. Viewing Georgia's crisis through a regional lens may help to integrate enlargement and foreign policy approaches more effectively.

- Beyond its candidate status, Georgia plays a central role in the EU's ambitions for a secure and interconnected Black Sea region. As a transit corridor within the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), a partner in energy diversification, and a geopolitical counterweight to Russian influence, Georgia is a key country for several strands of EU external policy. Democratic instability or losing Georgia would not only weaken a common EU foreign and enlargement policy. It could also erode the EU's credibility, both internally and

externally. It further reduces public and political support for further enlargement, particularly if citizens perceive the EU as rewarding authoritarian tendencies, especially among Eastern member states that rely on Georgia as a strategic corridor.

Challenges and Practical Recommendations

1. Better understand the expectations and grievances of the Georgian population

The EU should deploy an independent Expert Group to Georgia to evaluate how different segments of Georgian society perceive the EU and what forms of engagement they expect. By conducting consultations and focus groups across regions and political divides, the group would generate a nuanced understanding of local expectations and grievances. Its findings would support the development of a more coherent and responsive EU strategy.

2. Elaborate the attitude of Georgian people towards Europe

While support for EU integration remains strong in Georgia, there is a lack of detailed, up-to-date data on what citizens expect from the EU. An independent nationwide survey, e.g., by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) should explore public attitudes toward EU institutions, democratic reforms, external influence (including Russia), and the EU's desired role in Georgian domestic affairs. These insights would help the EU calibrate its programming, funding, and communication strategies to better align with societal expectations and counter disinformation.

3. Prioritise a visit by the Enlargement Commissioner

The EU should prioritise a visit by Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos to Georgia as a visible demonstration of political engagement and solidarity and to counter growing disillusionment among Georgian citizens. The visit should include meetings with civil society organisations, youth groups, regional actors, and reform-minded voices across the country – including the rural areas. Such outreach would reinforce the EU's commitment to listening directly to Georgian citizens, reflect its people-centred approach to enlargement, and counter perceptions that Brussels is distant or indifferent to grassroots concerns.

4. Sustain structured pressure via the Eastern Partnership

Rather than substituting or overshadowing bilateral engagement, the multilateral formats, such as the Eastern Partnership, should be maintained as a complementary multilateral instrument to uphold structured political pressure on Georgia. In the face of democratic backsliding and contested reform commitments, the EaP offers a comparative framework that reinforces conditionality. This multilateral lens helps prevent premature normalisation of relations with a government that deviates from EU values, while anchoring Georgia within a broader regional context of reform and accountability.

5. Clarify institutional limits on imposing elections

In light of widespread expectations from Georgian opposition and civil society for new elections under international supervision, the EU must clearly communicate its institutional boundaries. While it can reject illegitimate electoral outcomes, apply diplomatic pressure, and support electoral reforms, it does not have the mandate to organise or impose elections within sovereign states. Failure to address this misconception risks fuelling disillusionment and unrealistic expectations.

6. Demonstrate readiness to escalate pressure through targeted sanctions

To uphold its credibility as a defender of democratic norms, the EU must make clear that its support is not unconditional. While internal divisions may block a unified sanctions regime, the EU should signal its readiness to act if red lines are crossed. This includes stepped-up scrutiny of illicit financial flows and support for targeted sanctions by coalitions of willing Member States. Coordinated action with partners like the US and UK would amplify the pressure, for example by establishing a G7 Enforcement Coordination Mechanism with the aim of harmonising sanctions enforcement across allied countries, including the EU, US, and UK.

7. Pursue a dual-track approach

The EU must combine bottom-up citizen engagement with top-down political mediation. A group of Member

States - backed by the Commission - should lead structured talks aimed at restoring electoral credibility and creating space for opposition participation in 2025. Lessons from past, badly coordinated mediation failures must inform this renewed process.

8. Expand the mandate of the EU Special Representative (EUSR)

The mandate of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSR) should be expanded to include democratic crisis prevention and response. A strengthened EUSR role would offer a flexible diplomatic channel to engage with domestic actors, mediate disputes, and support electoral and institutional reforms. This enhanced mandate would also facilitate closer coordination with the European Commission and the EEAS, ensuring that political dialogue is aligned with EU conditionality mechanisms but also closer to the reality of the country. Drawing on successful EUSR-led mediation efforts in other regions, a more proactive EUSR presence in Georgia could help defuse tensions.

9. Rebuild the EU's communication strategy with "emotional intelligence"

The EU must rethink its communication towards Georgian society. For years, Georgia framed its identity and foreign policy around its "return to Europe", defending EU values in the region. However, the lack of recognition from the EU, such as withholding membership perspectives for many years, created feelings of frustration and disappointment among Georgians. This sense of being undervalued led to negative emotions and an unstable self-perception within Georgian society. To restore self-esteem, GD has instrumentalised these emotions by shifting blame onto the EU, contesting its values, and portraying itself as the true embodiment of European ideals while the EU is denounced as distant and too "progressive". To counter this, the EU should craft a narrative that speaks to identity, dignity, and shared purpose.

10. Establish a Brussels Hub for a European Georgia

To sustain meaningful engagement amid Georgia's deepening political crisis, the EU should support the establishment of a Brussels Hub for a European Georgia. This platform would serve as a critical space for Georgia's pro-democracy actors - civil society

leaders, reformist politicians, and independent media - to remain visible, vocal, and connected to EU institutions. As Georgia's domestic space for democratic participation narrows, the centre would provide a structured forum for policy input, diaspora mobilisation, and strategic communication. By offering direct access to European stakeholders and fostering transnational solidarity, the hub would reinforce the EU's credibility as an ally to the Georgian people and help anchor Georgia within the European political sphere - even when official dialogue falters.

11. Strengthen The Role of Political Parties

European political parties have significant potential to influence domestic political developments in countries like Georgia positively. However, their limited visibility in non-EU countries often constrains their ability to shape public opinion and foster support for the European project. To address this, Europarties should strengthen their transnational engagement by building closer cooperation with ideologically aligned Georgian parties. Acting as informal foreign policy actors, they can play a significant role in advancing EU integration by expanding political partnerships, enhancing public diplomacy beyond the realm of political elites, and coordinating efforts with EU institutions to ensure coherent and credible messaging.

** The following recommendations had been developed and discussed during a workshop organised by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in 2025 with Georgian and European experts. They address options for both domestic actions in Georgia and wider changes in Europe's outreach to the Southern Caucasus.*

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