

BUILDING SECURITY FOUNDATIONS FOR AN ENLARGED AND DEMOCRATIC EU: INSIGHTS FROM GEORGIA

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EDITORIAL



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The European Union (EU) is more open to enlargement today than it has ever been in the last 15 years. Its approach to enlargement has significantly evolved since Russia attempted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022:

- The EU is starting accession talks with several new candidates;
- it has given Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status;
- it is launching *pre-enlargement policy reviews* in order to see how longstanding EU policies need to be adapted for an enlarged Union; and
- it is reflecting on necessary changes in EU decision-making rules, to tackle the absorption capacity issue.

Yet, as the EU is deliberating policy reviews and differentiated integration models and putting forward priorities and recommendations for the candidate countries, one dimension is being fatally overlooked in the relaunched enlargement process: the **security of the candidates**. In Georgia, for example, the Russian factor is paramount in order to understand the (lack of) progress on the EU accession path. True, Georgia now has a unique opportunity and responsibility to act on the priorities identified by the EU. Overcoming domestic vested interests and completing necessary institutional reforms is the right objective for all supporters of Georgia's European path. But the accession process will most likely not achieve the intended results as long as the EU and the candidate countries do not manage jointly to neutralise the Russian threat.

The simple yet crucial question for the next stage of EU enlargement is: can the EU realistically expect democratic institutions to flourish in the neighbourhood while Russia is working relentlessly to thwart any such ambitions? Is it possible for a country like Georgia, where Russian tanks are deployed

40 km from the capital and where Russia is waging an intense hybrid war – or for a country like Ukraine which is suffering full-fledged war – to be building a perfect democracy, according to the EU's guidelines? There is a risk that this question will remain overlooked by the EU, getting lost in its procedures, rather than developing the necessary vision for an enlarged and secure Union.

Ukrainians, Georgians, and Moldovans live in a contested neighbourhood, where Russia is interfering by military force, disinformation, fuelling anti-Western and pseudo-religious propaganda, funding extremist groups, undertaking cyber-attacks on state departments, and openly supporting friendly oligarchs. In Georgia, a specific [hybrid regime](#) has established itself, thriving on an accommodative stance towards Russia and on illiberal nationalistic narratives. For democracy to be rebuilt - and sustained - a **favourable external context** will be needed. The three countries' democratic future will depend largely on the overall **security conditions** that the free world will succeed or fail to establish in the region. The future of *all* EU Member States' democracies will depend on it too, as Russia has been consistently working to destabilise EU democracies and feed the rise of the far right.

Only one year ago, Georgia's ruling party tried to pass the 'foreign agents' law, in a clear move to undercut and marginalise Georgia's pro-European civil society. After massive protests, the ruling party dropped the draft law, but in the process, official Russian accounts were [menacing](#) Georgian protestors by recalling "a similar situation in Ukraine in 2014 and what it finally led to!", i.e., essentially threatening with another round of invasion and war.

In the meantime, the EU has been formulating [democratic priorities](#) for Georgia,

which are hard to question. They represent a **useful to-do list**, in a perfect world.

Progress on many of the nine priorities identified in the Commission's November 2023 report is clearly being hampered by domestic vested interests. But it is equally clear that **Russian interference in Georgian politics is at the origin of how the Georgian state functions today**, and Russia has a clear interest in blocking any meaningful progress:

- Priority 1 is for Georgia to fight disinformation and foreign interference against the EU and its values. It is obvious where the strongest interference comes from.
- Priority 2 is to improve Georgia's alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. The Georgian government has been treading very carefully, also because Russia has easy ways of retaliating, e.g., if Georgia joined EU sanctions. As a frontline state with a population of around 3.5 million, much more vulnerable than EU/NATO members, Georgia has unfortunately learned over the last decades that the more courageously it resists Russian interference, the more forceful is Russia's response. In the context where the West is struggling to muster enough support for Ukraine to defend itself (and Europe) against Russia, it would be perhaps exaggerated to expect Georgia to make explicit anti-Russian statements and actions.
- Priority 3 is to reduce political polarisation: This is a longstanding domestic problem, but Russia has an interest in fuelling polarisation and knows how to do it.
- Priority 4 is to ensure a fair and competitive electoral process: Georgia's governing party clearly wants to stay in power and has a well-tested repertoire of exerting pressure on public sector employees and buying votes in rural areas. But electoral irregularities and

manipulations will also be in Russia's favour.

- Priorities 5-8 concern parliamentary oversight of security services and other institutions, effective judicial reform, institutional independence of the anti-corruption bureau and the special investigative service, and de-oligarchisation. On all of these, domestic vested interests clearly exist, but challenging them also means going against the Russian interest.
- Priority 9 is the protection of human rights and engagement of civil society, completely contrasting with the Russian model.

Therefore, progress on the accession path will not depend just on the candidates' will, determination, technical competence, and the volume of EU pre-accession funding. The EU's repertoire of soft power, which worked in the 1990s and early 2000s, will not be sufficient. Georgia's vibrant civil society, democratic societal fabric and courage will not be sufficient either. The accession process will be actively – and persistently – counteracted by an adversary that is serious about not allowing any meaningful progress.

EU institutions and Member States should therefore not approach enlargement from the standpoint of a teacher, giving reform assignments to a student. Enlargement is a **common project of the 30+ participating countries**, who need to work together on building a secure enlarged Union of the future. The candidate countries are in fact taking a security risk by choosing to be democratic.

This is not to suggest that the EU should abandon or water down its merit-based approach to enlargement. Likewise, recognising the Russian threat does not imply that Georgia received candidate status prematurely. On the contrary, this step was essential for any further progress, and also for dealing jointly with the common threat of a rogue and violent Russia. One cannot start too early to join forces. The EU has made the right decisions, but the security

dimension needs to be considered in the next stages of the accession process.

The EU needs to invest more in its own security and defence, step up military supplies to Ukraine, and work with candidate countries on tackling foreign interference jointly. It should also seriously prepare for the

elections in Georgia and in Moldova this year, expose and help prevent vote-buying and other pre-election manipulations. The EU and candidate countries must start working already now on equipping the EU 30+ with the security foundations necessary for democracy and for enlargement.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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