

WHY IS THE EU ALWAYS LATE IN TAKING RESPONSIBILITY?

MARIAM KHOTENASHVILI
TEPSA

EDITORIAL
11.12.2024



TEPSA

trans-
european
policy
studies
association



Co-funded by
the European Union

COVER IMAGE: © GURAM MURADOV/CIVIL.GE

"How much you truly 'believe' in something can be manifested only through what you are willing to risk for it"

N. N. Taleb, *Skin in the Game*

European leaders are discussing setting up a [defence fund](#) of around EUR 500 billion, with borrowing capacity based on national guarantees (outside of the EU budget), voluntary participation and the involvement of the UK and Norway.

Once agreed and launched, this can be a game-changer for European defence, finally leading to long-term contracts for jointly procured weapons and ammunition, at a meaningful scale.

One only has to wonder why this initiative is only happening now, more than 1000 days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Russia is [gaining significant military momentum](#), and after the re-election of Donald Trump, who had already threatened in 2016 not to protect Europe unless it increased its defence spending.

Lack of institutional responsibility...

Meanwhile in Georgia, the EU institutions reached a new record in 2024 in terms of being surprised, unprepared and non-responsive vis-à-vis well-planned and well-predicted moves by the ruling party to consolidate its hold on power, including by [rigging](#) October's parliamentary elections.

In mid-May, over 120 experts from the TEPSA network and beyond addressed an [open letter](#) to the leaders of the EU institutions, pleading for timely (geo)political action, including a large-scale pre-election monitoring mission.

Our letter warned that 'Georgian Dream' (GD) was in the process of "establishing a Belarus-style regime that would enable Russia to regain control over the South Caucasus".

Regrettably, only a routine electoral mission took place, under the OSCE aegis, and the EU's [ex post technical mission](#) has not yet arrived. The ruling party has meanwhile confronted post-election civil protests with riot police, water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. It has also deployed [thugs](#) who target activists, journalists, and opposition leaders. Over 400 people have been detained over the past two weeks, most of them beaten. Still, Georgians courageously continue to protest across the country.

Despite the turmoil, until now, nobody at the political level from the EU institutions has found the time to visit Tbilisi and meet civil society representatives, opposition leaders, or President Zourabichvili, who has become the focal point of the efforts to salvage Georgia's democracy.

According to two, independent [exit polls](#) by companies with a long record of accuracy, Georgia's four main opposition parties obtained about 50% of votes in the 26 October parliamentary elections, while Georgian Dream received about 40%. However, official results gave GD 54% and the combined opposition only 38%. With election administration and courts under its control, the ruling party smoothly turned an electoral defeat into self-proclaimed victory and tried to carry on.

Behind closed doors in Brussels, EEAS representatives acknowledge that Georgian Dream rigged the parliamentary elections through intimidation, vote-buying, violations of vote secrecy, and carousel voting. The illegitimacy of the election outcome has been well described in a [strong resolution](#) adopted

by the European Parliament with a majority of 444 votes in favour versus 72 against.

At the same time, **EEAS staff still appears to consider the GD as the only force to be reckoned with** and suggests that the halting of Georgia's accession process is a commensurate response by the EU. (In a curious twist, GD has meanwhile declared that it is not interested in pursuing accession talks with the EU, nor in any related financial incentives in the next years).

Commission President von der Leyen has repeatedly stated that the EU stands with the Georgian people, before contradicting herself by stating that Georgia's return to a European path is "[in the hands of the Georgian leadership](#)". The latter remark is either naïve in **pinning hopes on a regime that has clearly shown that it prioritises staying in power at all cost**, or it is an admission of weakness and the EU's inability to act geopolitically.

Although Georgians' civil protests of 2023-24 have been largely about joining the EU, and the situation falls into the realm of EU enlargement and foreign policies, **nobody in the EU institutions seems to have the task of achieving an outcome that would be in the EU's and Georgia's mutual interest, namely to defend Georgians' democratic pro-European choice**. Instead, EU institutions display indifference to the country's slide into Russia and China's embrace. Beyond statements of solidarity, the EU executives revealed their preference for inaction.

This is striking, given the geopolitical loss that Georgia's Belarusisation would mean for Europe. From ceding influence around the Black Sea area and losing the remains of democracy in the region, to risking connectivity through the Southern Caucasus –

GD's victory brings no gain to the EU. If Georgia falls, it will become very difficult to uphold pro-European democracy anywhere in the region, including in neighbouring Armenia, which has been taking on considerable risk by decoupling from Russia.

The gravity of the situation in Georgia is better understood by Baltic, Nordic and Central European Member States as well as by [Ukraine](#). Some of these countries have recently enacted national sanctions against Georgian Dream protagonists. Good statements have also been issued by [French, German and Polish Foreign Ministers](#), but they have not been followed by any measures so far.

Through its inaction, the EU is depleting the 'soft power' it still had: power based on reputation and on democratic values that people in the neighbourhood tended to associate with the Union.

... but a strong sense of entitlement

It remains to be seen whether and when a more active attitude to Georgia and other candidate countries percolates through the EU institutions and finds a reflection in the EU's enlargement policy.

The prevailing EU preoccupation is still whether the candidate countries are perfect enough to proceed towards accession. The Union reduces its geopolitical role to the role of a humble door-keeper, willing (maybe) to accept only advanced democracies that have sorted out 'their' security challenges, prevailed over Russia's hybrid warfare, and completed their full homework in adopting the EU acquis.

This attitude ignores the geopolitical reality of the candidate countries. It also reflects a

certain feeling of entitlement. **Many Europeans feel entitled to a US security umbrella** (while they denied a NATO Membership Action Plan to Ukraine and Georgia in 2008); **entitled to think that Ukraine should serve as a buffer and Ukrainians alone should defend Europe against Russia's aggression; and entitled to assurance that only impeccable candidates join the EU.**

Meanwhile, European political discourse can focus on the cost-of-living crisis and on future budgetary costs of supporting new members' convergence.

Politicians' preoccupation with the prosperity of their nations is understandable. However, this challenge will not be fixed by a lukewarm attitude on EU enlargement. On the contrary: non-enlargement would mean wasted economic potential.

Stalled economic growth in the EU is not the fault of Ukraine nor Georgia. It results from the EU's short-sighted economic model of the past decades that relied on cheap Russian energy and prioritised regulation over technological innovation. The way forward is through investment: in productivity, in security, within the framework of a larger market.

The need for increased European spending on defence may now be finally acknowledged by a critical mass of policy-makers. However, it can predictably run into budgetary trade-offs that will trigger opposition not only from pro-Russian far-right parties, but also from the centre-left. Significant soul-searching will be needed in order for Europeans to reassess their priorities.

At present, while Ukrainians and Georgians are actively fighting for freedom and democracy in Europe, many in the EU tend to

consider EU enlargement and military support to Ukraine as occasional charity. Some perhaps even feel certain disdain for the stubborn Eastern European efforts to join the EU and build strong protection against Russian aggression. Those who hold these preoccupations tend to overestimate the resilience of EU democracies.

Russia threatens the whole of Europe

Ultimately, the European feeling of entitlement is unfounded, and it is dangerous for the whole of Europe. Complacency about Russia's expansion into Ukraine and Georgia is based on an assumption that Russia would not advance in the 21st century farther than it did during the Cold War. To caricature: Tbilisi, Kyiv, Prague and Warsaw could be taken, but Milan, Vienna, Frankfurt and Brussels will not. This assumption ignores that **Russia's imperial expansion was always based on using subjugated nations' economic capacity and manpower.** After all, having crushed Chechen separatism in the 1990s, Putin has been using Chechen fighters in Ukraine and now some are helping Georgian Dream. Men from Ukraine's occupied regions are being [forced to fight against Ukraine](#). **If Russia expands, who and where will stop its next round of onslaught in Europe, in a couple of years?**

"Europe, your edges are melting and nightmares are creeping over your walls," writes [Nino Haratischwili](#) in a recent appeal.

After the Draghi and Niinistö reports, the EU will truly need to turn words into deeds, significantly stepping up investment in productivity and defence. This will require overcoming what Fabian Zuleeg has called the '[European progress illusion](#)'.

In particular, a considerable change of mindset will be needed in the European institutions. It is time to realise, at last, that **Russia has been waging a slow and patient war against Europe since 2008**. The invasion of Georgia was the first test, followed by Crimea, Donbas, the reinforcement of control over Belarus in 2020, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Europe's preparedness and institutional responsiveness have not significantly improved during this time.

Democracy in Europe cannot be taken for granted, as illustrated most recently by Russian-sponsored interference in Romanian presidential elections via TikTok, and more generally by the steady rise of a pro-Russian nationalist far-right across Europe.

Besides playing the referee on democracy and the rule of law via progress reports, EU institutions will therefore need to **engage much more actively in defending democracy**, before it is too late.

It is high time that Europeans finally stick together, respond to Russia's war by arming Ukraine (and the whole of Europe) properly, and uphold democracy in the South Caucasus by stepping up support for civil society and engaging with President Zourabichvili as the sole legitimate representative of Georgia, until new parliamentary elections are held in free and fair conditions, with strong European supervision.

P.S.: On 9 December, after 12 days of violent repression against civil protests, EU Ambassador Herczyński [condemned](#) the regime's brutality and called for perpetrators to be brought to justice. On the same day, he visited the Foreign Minister of GD's self-proclaimed government, which promptly publicised a [photo of their handshake](#).

Through the meeting, the EU Ambassador lent himself to be used in the ruling party's narrative of normalcy and in its self-portrayal as a legitimate force, with the upper hand. (Georgians were reminded how the Ambassador smiled and cut a ribbon together with GD figureheads during Europe Day celebrations in May, while the regime was in the process of passing the 'foreign influence' law.) The Ambassador has not yet attended the civil protests in Tbilisi or elsewhere, nor is there any photo of him meeting injured journalists.

External observers might wonder which of the EU's conflicting pronouncements and appearances represents the EU's true position. But perhaps there is a pattern in the EU's approach after all: perhaps the EU simply plays on both sides. It voices support to Georgia's courageous citizens in their fight for democracy, and it shakes hands with the dictatorship that beats them up. No wonder the EU is not ready to take responsibility, if it cannot firmly take a side.

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.

Cover Image: © Guram Muradov/Civil.ge

Editing & Formatting: Hugh Evans, Romain Le Quiniou, Barbara Vanotti (TEPSA).

Mariam Khotenashvili is TEPSA's Executive Director. She is responsible for the daily management of the association. Mariam is in close contact with the TEPSA Board and member institutes regarding TEPSA's strategic and annual planning and oversees the implementation of TEPSA's projects. She liaises with TEPSA's member institutes, promoting visibility of their research findings and helping to bridge academic research with policy-making. Mariam also contributes to the coordination of the biannual TEPSA Pre-Presidency Conferences and hosts TEPSA's video-series, EuropeChats. Her background combines research coordination, policy advocacy, project management and academic work. Her fields of expertise include EU foreign and development policies and in particular the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement policy. Mariam holds Master's degrees in EU International Relations and Diplomacy (College of Europe) and in Conflict Studies and Human Rights (Utrecht University). Prior to joining TEPSA Mariam worked for Transparency International Georgia and ALDA – The European Association for Local Democracy and undertook traineeships at the European Commission's DG DEVCO and at the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

