



# EMBRACE

## Policy Brief 07

**Georgia, EU, Russia and the Oligarch:  
Can the EU Untangle the Knot?**

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Executive summary

Georgia’s unexpected authoritarian drift poses a serious challenge to the European Union’s (EU) credibility, strategic posture, and normative influence in the Eastern Partnership/Black Sea region. Once a frontrunner in democratization and Europeanization, Georgia was granted EU candidate status in 2023. Since then, however, its ruling elite has stalled reform efforts, adopted illiberal legislation, and launched rhetorical and institutional attacks on pro-European actors—while simultaneously aligning more closely with authoritarian regimes, including Russia.

This policy brief highlights the broader context of geopolitical reshuffling in the region, triggered by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In parallel to the shifting security environment, it also examines the role of domestic oligarchic capture in Georgia’s foreign policy realignment—arguing that the country’s deviation from democratic norms is not merely structural, but deeply personalized and interest-driven.

The brief contends that Georgia’s democratic backsliding not only jeopardizes its own EU prospects, but also undermines neighbouring Armenia’s nascent westward orientation, threatens the EU’s access to critical Black Sea–Caspian transit corridors, and weakens the Union’s soft power in the region. A purely transactional approach on the part of the Union—focused on energy and connectivity while ignoring democratic values—risks alienating Georgia’s pro-European public, reinforcing authoritarian tendencies, and ultimately undermining the Union’s strategic interests.

Given these dynamics, the EU must recalibrate its engagement. The brief outlines potential scenarios for EU–Georgia relations and proposes following strategic actions: sustained but targeted pressure on the regime; enhanced and flexible support to civil society and independent media; clearer articulation of conditionality and credible roadmap toward integration; effective use of regional leverage; and long-term planning to safeguard democratic gains.

Georgia still matters. Losing it to authoritarian influence would represent a significant setback not only for Georgia itself, but for the EU’s strategic presence and normative ambitions in its eastern neighbourhood.

## 1 Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-2025) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings.

The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural

blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts.





## 2 Introduction to this Policy Brief

A few years ago, Georgia was widely regarded as a frontrunner in democratization and Europeanization among the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Both the public and the political elite strongly supported the country's EU membership aspirations. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, and since 2017, a constitutional amendment obliges the authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure the country's full integration into the EU (Constitution of Georgia, Article 78).

At the time, however, the EU was neither willing nor ready to expand further east. The Union was mired in enlargement fatigue and preoccupied with internal challenges. As a result, some observers described EU–Georgia relations as marked by a "reciprocity deficit" (Sabanadze, 2022), reflecting the gap between Georgia's ambitions and the EU's readiness to respond.

This dynamic began to shift after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In response, the EU launched a new wave of eastern enlargement, opening its doors to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, among others. Under pressure from civil society, the Georgian government formally submitted its membership application and was granted candidate status in December 2023.

However, the Georgian authorities have since stalled on fulfilling the necessary conditions for further progress - namely, the "12 Priorities" and "9 Steps" outlined by the EU (EU, 2022a, 2023). More troublingly, the government has increasingly accused the EU and key member states of interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and undermining its sovereignty. Simultaneously, it has accelerated the adoption of anti-democratic and illiberal legislation and launched rhetorical and institutional attacks against pro-EU actors within the country, including civil society organizations and independent media (Panchulidze and Youngs, 2024).

Georgia's unexpected U-turn raises serious concerns not only about its democratic and European trajectory, but also about the EU's ability to respond to crises in a candidate country - particularly in the broader context of heightened geopolitical contestation in Eastern Europe, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Recent assessments, such as the latest report from the European University Institute (EUI), even classify Georgia as falling within Russia's sphere of influence and identify it as a high-risk scenario for the EU (EUI 2025).

## 3 Strategic Outlook: Why Democratic Georgia Matters

Georgia, formally an EU candidate country, is today further from its European path than ever before. Amid the ongoing erosion of political and civic space, the country is increasingly aligning itself with authoritarian post-Soviet regimes such as Azerbaijan and Belarus—and, despite the continued Russian occupation of two of its regions, even with Russia itself.

It was Georgia that once aspired to EU membership. Although the country's leadership continues to insist that Georgia has not deviated from its European course (see, for example,

the statement by the Prime Minister, 1tv.ge, 2025), their actions suggest otherwise. Under the current circumstances, one could argue that the EU should revert to its pre-Ukraine-war approach to Georgia: putting membership prospects on hold and instead focusing on pragmatic, transactional cooperation—particularly in areas such as connectivity and the transit of energy resources from the Caspian basin; much in the spirit of the new Black Sea Strategy, which focuses on security, growth and the environment (European Commission, 2025).

Nonetheless, and this is our main argument, there are persuasive reasons to reject a solely transactional approach, as only redirecting Georgia on a democratic trajectory can provide a viable solution for the EU.

### **3.1 The Strategic Costs of Georgia's Authoritarian Turn**

Georgia occupies a strategically vital position at the crossroads of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, forming a key segment of the transit corridor that links Europe to Central Asia and China. This geographic role endows Georgia with significant strategic value for the EU, particularly in the domains of connectivity, energy security, and regional development (Claessen, 2025). In light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its prior use of energy supplies as leverage to exert political pressure on European countries, the EU has become acutely aware of the risks associated with energy dependence on Russia (Smith, 2023). Although the EU has made progress in reducing this dependence, secure and diversified access to energy resources remains essential to its strategic autonomy (European Commission, 2022).

Should Georgia persist in its autocratic drift and further alienate itself from the EU, the resulting vacuum is likely to be filled by regional and global authoritarian powers—most notably Russia, and to a lesser extent China. The latter has expressed a growing interest in expanding its economic footprint in Georgia and the broader South Caucasus region through investments aligned with its Belt and Road Initiative (Popkhadze, 2025).

Such a shift would not only diminish the EU's economic and strategic leverage in the region but also jeopardize its broader security and economic interests. The consolidation of Russian influence in Georgia would restrict the EU's access to the South Caucasus as a critical energy and transit hub, while simultaneously bolstering Russia's regional posture. This could indirectly enhance Moscow's economic and military capacity—assets that may ultimately be used to threaten EU member states in Eastern Europe (Adler, 2025). In short, a transactional relationship of the EU with an authoritarian Georgia would be possible only on Russia's terms.

### **3.2 Georgia's Authoritarian Turn: A Strategic and Normative Loss for Armenia**

Moreover, Georgia's democratic backsliding would have specific regional implications, particularly for Armenia. Since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has sought to reduce Armenia's dependence on Russia and pursue closer ties

with Western partners. This strategic pivot intensified after Armenia's defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, in which Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, reclaimed territory lost in the early 1990s. Russia's passive stance during the conflict raised serious doubts in Yerevan regarding Moscow's reliability as a security guarantor—a perception that further motivated Armenia's westward orientation (Giragosian, 2021).

This shift has been reflected in the deepening of Armenia's partnerships with both the United States and the EU, including the signing of the U.S.-Armenia Strategic Partnership Agreement and the Armenian Parliament's formal appeal for EU membership in 2024 (Körömi, 2025). However, Armenia's geographic predicament—as a landlocked state bordered by mostly authoritarian regimes—makes its access to the EU highly dependent on Georgia. Should Georgia fall under the growing influence of authoritarian Russia, Armenia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration and further democratization would be severely diminished. Conversely, maintaining Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory would ensure the EU retains access to other states in the South Caucasus, thus significantly enhancing its strategic influence in the region. Armenia and Georgia possess the societal capacity to form a democratic axis in the Caucasus region. A stronger EU normative power posture would significantly enhance its influence across the South Caucasus, Black Sea and Eastern Europe, fostering value-based connectivity among these regions.

### 3.3 Georgia's Authoritarian Turn: A Normative Erosion

Last but not least, it is important to recall that Georgian society has undergone a complex transformation—from the civil wars of the 1990s to the rapid modernization of the 2000s—while consistently demonstrating strong pro-Western aspirations. Many Georgians still remember the statement made by Parliamentary Chairperson Zurab Zhvania in 1999, during Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe, first delivered in Georgian and then repeated in English: “I am Georgian; therefore, I am European.” Remarkably, this sentiment echoed a declaration made at the beginning of the 20th century by Noe Jordania, President of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia: “Our life today and our life in the future is indissolubly tied to the West, and no force can break this bond” (Jones, 2013: 251).

This European identity is strongly connected to the EU in perception of the Georgian society today, despite ongoing efforts by the current authorities to undermine the credibility of, and public trust in, the EU. Public support for EU integration remains strong. According to the 2024 Caucasus Barometer survey, 71 percent of Georgians support Georgia's EU integration, and 58 percent express trust in the EU (CRRC, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We intentionally chose not to rely on the 2025 Eurobarometer data for Georgia, which indicates a notable decline in public trust toward the EU compared to the previous year: only 49% of Georgians express trust in the EU, while 51% say they trust the national government (Eurobarometer, 2025). The last is a surprising result given the scale of recent public protests. Notably, the fieldwork for the Spring 2025 edition was conducted by the Tbilisi-based company GORBI, which has previously carried out election surveys for the pro-government TV channel Imedi

To conclude, reducing Georgia to a merely transactional partner risks alienating its most pro-European constituencies—particularly civil society and youth—thereby undermining the EU’s normative influence in the region.

## 4 EU limitations and Strategic Challenges

It is evident that the EU as an external actor faces several limitations, which must be taken into account. While acknowledging the significant role of institutional and internal dynamics within the EU, and external factors such as the trajectory of the war in Ukraine and the strategic posture of the United States toward the Eurasian region, the following discussion focuses on specific aspects of external dimensions—namely, geopolitical competition in the Black Sea region and the nature of Georgia’s incumbent regime.

### 4.1 Geopolitical Competition and Security Considerations

The current round of EU enlargement unfolds within a broader context of intensifying geopolitical competition both globally and in the wider Black Sea region. This evolving geopolitical landscape introduces new challenges to the EU’s influence, particularly in the South Caucasus. Russia remains the dominant regional power due to its geographic proximity and capacity for hard power projection. However, other actors—namely China and Turkey—are increasingly seeking to assert their presence and influence in the region.

China’s engagement in the South Caucasus appears primarily economically motivated, with an implicit acceptance of Russia’s preeminent role as the regional security actor. Beijing’s focus lies in infrastructure development, trade, and access to strategic corridors as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (Popkhadze, 2025). China’s growing economic presence already reduces the EU’s leverage and attractiveness as a partner by providing an alternative source of investment and financial support—free of the democratic conditionality typically associated with EU aid.

Furthermore, Turkey’s influence has become increasingly security-oriented, as evidenced by its decisive military support to Azerbaijan during the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. This intervention demonstrated Ankara’s growing assertiveness and ambitions in the South Caucasus, positioning it as a key regional actor not just economically or culturally, but militarily as well (Cornell, 2020; Stronski & Sokolsky, 2021).

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, security has taken on heightened salience across the region. This not only introduces tangible security risks but also profoundly shapes

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(Civil.ge, 2025). The involvement of a company with credibility issues raises questions about the reliability of the findings and should prompt the EU to reconsider its practices in general.

decision-makers' perceptions of the strategic environment. These perceptions, in turn, influence the foreign policy choices of states such as Georgia, especially regarding the trade-off between autonomy and survival in a contested regional order (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2022). This intensification of regional security competition poses significant strategic challenges for the EU. While the EU has traditionally been perceived as a soft power actor, offering economic and institutional incentives, it has limited capacity to project hard power in the region. Consequently, regional states may view the EU as an "inadequate partner" for addressing acute security threats. In such a context, states like Georgia may be incentivized to pursue foreign policy strategies that accommodate Russian interests, in hopes of reducing the risk of coercion or military confrontation.

#### **4.2 Oligarchic Capture of Georgia and Privatization of National Interests**

The securitization of the regional environment is often politically instrumentalized by domestic actors. In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party appears to be using the security context to justify their foreign policy behaviour (Kipiani, 2024). It is portrayed not as a reflection of democratic backsliding or authoritarian consolidation and departure from the European path, but as a pragmatic response to a more hostile and less permissive geopolitical environment.

This narrative, however, obscures the domestic political motivations underlying Georgia's recent foreign policy reorientation (Caryl, 2024). Hence, we should understand the logic of domestic governance in Georgia: it is neither hybrid nor authoritarian per se, but rather oligarchic in nature. The institutions and key decision-makers have long been captured by one person, the richest Georgian, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who onehandedly steers the country over the decade (Parulava, Hartog and Gavin, 2025). Political scientists and decision-makers alike tend to pay more attention to structures and institutions than individuals. However, often individuals matter - and specific individuals matter a lot - those, who "command and control massive concentrations of material resources that can be deployed to defend or enhance their personal wealth and exclusive social position" (Winters, 2011: 6).

In the oligarchy, the ultimate goal is defence of own interest, wealth and security alike, and façade of statehood or rule of law only covers authoritarian reality, in which state institutions are weaponized against political challenges, political and civil space is gradually diminished, and foreign and security policy cease serving national interests.

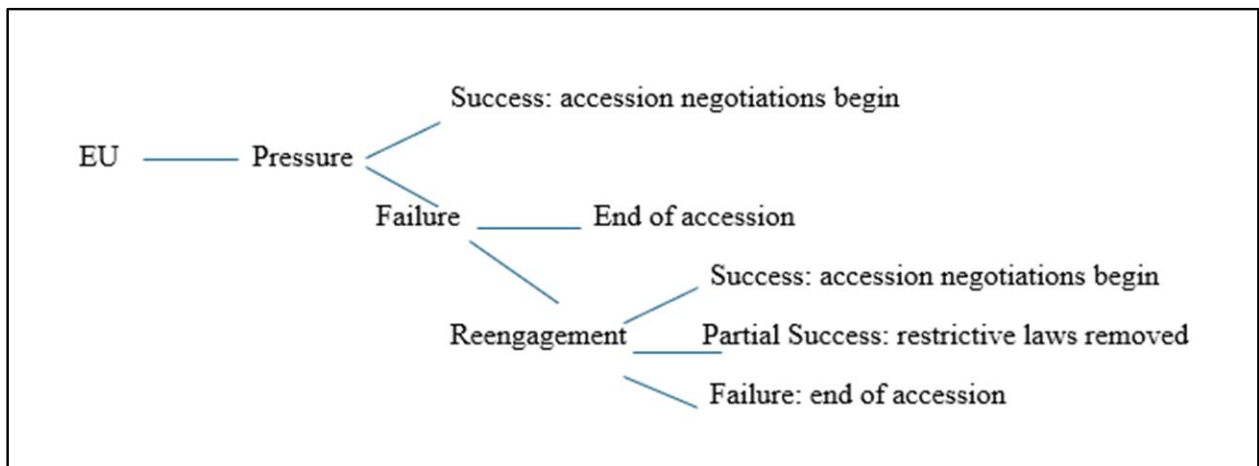
In sum, the EU faces serious structural constraints in its efforts to retain Georgia on the European track. The assertiveness of competing regional and global actors is combined with the oligarchic nature of the governance in Georgia, which artificially promotes growing scepticism about the EU's capacity to respond to current crisis. These dynamics underscore the urgency of recalibrating EU engagement tools.



## 5 EU-Georgia: Strategic Scenarios

Following the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the EU has hesitated to recognize the legitimacy of the de facto Georgian government. High-level official contacts with the authorities have been suspended, and the EU has ceased direct assistance to the government (IPN, 2025). Several member states, particularly the Baltic countries, have imposed targeted sanctions against regime representatives (Civil.ge, 2025a). However, this pressure has yet to result in meaningful behavioural change from the Georgian authorities.

The EU now faces the following main strategic options vis-à-vis the Georgian authorities.



### **Option 1: Sustained Pressure**





This approach would involve maintaining strong pressure on the regime, using tools such as:

- ✂️ Sanctions against key regime associates;
- ✂️ Suspension of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA);
- ✂️ Suspension of the visa-free travel regime.

#### ✓ **Pros:**

This approach might be effective in the long term and incentivize behavioural change of the Georgian authorities.




**✓ Cons:**

-  Requires EU unity which may be undermined by dissenting states like Hungary or Slovakia;
-  Demands coordination with key partners, e.g., the US and UK;
-  Georgian authorities may turn to alternative partners (e.g., China, Turkey, Gulf countries);
-  Measures such as suspending visa-free travel may disproportionately affect ordinary citizens rather than regime elites—many of whom hold dual citizenship and can evade sanctions; Authorities may exploit these measures to further discredit the EU domestically.




**Option 2: Conditional Engagement**

If Option 1 does not produce the desired outcome, the EU must choose between disengagement—effectively ending the accession process (and transferring to the transactional mode with all the risks discussed above)—or conditional re-engagement with the Georgian authorities. Even within Option 1, keeping communication channels open is advisable to encourage behavioural change.

Re-engagement should be conditioned on:

-  Repeal of all restrictive legislation adopted since early 2024;
-  Release of political prisoners detained since the 2023 protests;
-  Return to reform benchmarks outlined by the EU (e.g., the “9 steps”).





Possible outcomes:

-  Success: Georgia returns to the EU path, and accession negotiations begin.
-  Partial success: Restrictive measures are rolled back, and sanctions lifted—but further reforms stall.
-  Failure: EU integration process ends, shifting to a purely transactional relationship.



As the EU navigates this path, it should prepare for long-term strategic engagement and develop a contingency plan focused on the following priority areas

## 6 Recommendations to the EU



### 1. Maintain Strategic Pressure with Differentiated Tools – Smart not Hard

-  Coordinate messaging and pressure with partners (US, UK) to enhance impact.
-  Consider the alternative partnerships available to Georgian authorities.
-  Keep communication channels open, mindful of the oligarchic governance structure, targeting key individuals and encouraging behavioral change.
-  Avoid measures that disproportionately affect pro-EU citizens (e.g., visa-free suspension).




### 2. Strengthen Support to Civil Society and Independent Media – Hard but Essential

-  Provide flexible funding, as well as networking and exchange programs to youth groups, media, and other democracy actors, taking into account the current legislative restrictions (see Rec. 4).
-  Establish protective mechanisms (emergency funds, legal aid) for civil society under pressure.

### 3. Communicate the Benefits of Integration – Map the Road

-  Clearly reaffirm that EU integration is still possible—but contingent on reforms.
-  Ensure communication reaches the public directly, countering disinformation, particularly in the regions of Georgia, which are most affected by anti-Western propaganda.

### 4. Use Regional Leverage – Unite for Europe

-  Invest in infrastructure and transit routes to strengthen Georgia's role in the Black Sea–Caspian corridor (combined with Recommendation 3).
-  Work with Armenia and promote its links to Georgia, to maintain the Western trajectory of both countries.
-  Foster cooperation between Georgian and Armenian pro-EU actors (combined with Recommendation 2).

Georgia's authoritarian drift is a test case for the EU's credibility as a political and normative actor in its immediate neighbourhood. A passive or purely transactional response would not only risk losing a key strategic partner but also embolden authoritarian forces across the region. The EU must act with clarity, resolve, and consistency: upholding its values, supporting democratic actors, and using its political and economic leverage wisely.

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