The Geopolitical Transformation of EU Enlargement Policy after 2022: The Peace and Security Dimension and the Case of Georgia

ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის გეოპოლიტიკური ტრანსფორმაცია 2022 წლის შემდეგ: მშვიდობისა და უსაფრთხოების განზომილება და საქართველოს შემთხვევა

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Guranda Tchelidze[1a]

გურანდა ჭელიძე[1]

[1] Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Chair "European Union for Peace, Prosperity and Security", Caucasus University, Georgia

[1] Erasmus+ ჟან მონეს კათედრა "ევროპის კავშირი მშვიდობის, კეთილდღეობისა და უსაფრთხოებისათვის", კავკასიის უნივერსიტეტი, საქართველო

* gchelidze@cu.edu.ge ORCID - 0000-0002-6233-8854

Abstract

Introduction: The new geopolitical environment that has emerged in Europe since 2022 has significantly altered the priorities and instruments of EU enlargement policy. Whereas enlargement was previously oriented mainly towards assessing candidate states' fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the related reforms, the dimensions of peace, security, democratic resilience and geopolitical stability are now becoming increasingly prominent. This article examines whether these changes point to a transformation of enlargement policy from a mechanism of technical assessment and reform incentives into a broader geopolitical instrument. **Methods:** The study is based on a qualitative and comparative documentary analysis of the European Commission's 2023-2025 enlargement packages. The theoretical framework is Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model (EIM). The analysis covers five areas: hybrid threats and democratic resilience, alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), cybersecurity, strategic communication and energy security. Georgia serves as an empirical case, from the granting of candidate status in 2023 up to and including 2025. **Results:** Security issues are integrated unevenly into the assessment of candidate countries. CFSP alignment has become a measurable indicator of geopolitical orientation, and hybrid threats are merging with the assessment of democratic resilience. Cybersecurity is evolving towards infrastructural resilience. Strategic communication and energy operate partly independently of conditionality. The strengthening of the geopolitical argument has not weakened conditionality: the 2025 Communication describes enlargement as "a key geopolitical tool" while maintaining that the process remains strict and merit-based. The 2025 Communication records serious democratic backsliding and a de facto halt to the accession process. Energy cooperation, meanwhile, continued. **Conclusion:** Since 2022, enlargement policy has not been replaced by security policy. Rather, its geopolitical and security dimension has been strengthened and integrated into the existing mechanism of conditionality. Geopoliticisation has increased the weight of intermediate rewards, particularly candidate status, but their effect still depends on the EIM variables, above all on domestic adoption costs.

Keywords: EU enlargement; enlargement policy; geopoliticisation; External Incentives Model; conditionality; democratic resilience; peace and security; Georgia

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აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი: 2022 წლის შემდეგ ევროპაში შექმნილმა ახალმა გეოპოლიტიკურმა გარემომ მნიშვნელოვნად შეცვალა ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის პრიორიტეტები და ინსტრუმენტები. წარსულში გაფართოება ძირითადად კანდიდატი სახელმწიფოების მიერ კოპენჰაგენის კრიტერიუმებისა და რეფორმების შესრულების შეფასებაზე იყო ორიენტირებული. დღეს მასში სულ უფრო მკაფიოდ იკვეთება მშვიდობის, უსაფრთხოების, დემოკრატიული მედეგობისა და გეოპოლიტიკური სტაბილურობის განზომილებები. ნაშრომი იკვლევს, რამდენად მიუთითებს ეს ცვლილებები გაფართოების პოლიტიკის ტრანსფორმაციაზე: ტექნიკური შეფასებისა და რეფორმების წახალისების მექანიზმიდან უფრო ფართო გეოპოლიტიკურ ინსტრუმენტამდე. **მეთოდები:** კვლევა ეფუძნება ევროკომისიის 2023-2025 წლების გაფართოების პაკეტების თვისებრივ და შედარებით დოკუმენტურ ანალიზს. თეორიულ ჩარჩოს წარმოადგენს შიმელფენიგისა და სედელმაიერის გარე წახალისების მოდელი (External Incentives Model, EIM). ანალიზი ხუთ მიმართულებას მოიცავს: ჰიბრიდულ საფრთხეებსა და დემოკრატიულ მედეგობას, საერთო საგარეო და უსაფრთხოების პოლიტიკასთან (CFSP) დაახლოებას, კიბერუსაფრთხოებას, სტრატეგიულ კომუნიკაციასა და ენერგეტიკულ უსაფრთხოებას. ემპირიულ ქეისად გამოყენებულია საქართველო, 2023 წელს კანდიდატის სტატუსის მინიჭებიდან 2025 წლის ჩათვლით. **შედეგები:** უსაფრთხოების საკითხები გაფართოების შეფასებაში არაერთგვაროვნად ინტეგრირდება. CFSP-თან დაახლოება გეოპოლიტიკური ორიენტაციის გაზომვად ინდიკატორად იქცა, ჰიბრიდული საფრთხეები კი დემოკრატიული მედეგობის შეფასებას ერწყმის. კიბერუსაფრთხოება ინფრასტრუქტურული მედეგობის მიმართულებით ვითარდება. სტრატეგიული კომუნიკაცია და ენერგეტიკა ნაწილობრივ პირობითობისგან დამოუკიდებლად მოქმედებს. გეოპოლიტიკური არგუმენტის გაძლიერებას პირობითობის შესუსტება არ მოჰყოლია: 2025 წლის კომუნიკაცია გაფართოებას „მთავარ გეოპოლიტიკურ ინსტრუმენტად“ მოიხსენიებს, თუმცა პროცესს კვლავ მკაცრად და დამსახურებაზე დაფუძნებულად წარმოადგენს. 2025 წლის კომუნიკაცია სერიოზულ დემოკრატიულ უკუსვლასა და გაწევრიანების პროცესის ფაქტობრივ შეჩერებას აფიქსირებს. ამასობაში ენერგეტიკული თანამშრომლობა გაგრძელდა. **დასკვნა:** 2022 წლის შემდეგ გაფართოების პოლიტიკა უსაფრთხოების პოლიტიკით არ ჩანაცვლებულა. მისი გეოპოლიტიკური და უსაფრთხოების განზომილება გაძლიერდა და არსებულ პირობითობის მექანიზმში ინტეგრირდა. გეოპოლიტიზაციამ შუალედური ჯილდოების წონა გაზარდა, განსაკუთრებით კანდიდატის სტატუსისა, მაგრამ მათი ეფექტი კვლავ გარე წახალისების მოდელის ცვლადებზეა დამოკიდებული, უპირველეს ყოვლისა საშინაო ადაპტაციის ხარჯებზე.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ევროკავშირის გაფართოება; გაფართოების პოლიტიკა; გეოპოლიტიზაცია; გარე სტიმულების მოდელი; პირობითობა; დემოკრატიული მდგრადობა; მშვიდობა და უსაფრთხოება; საქართველო

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem and Relevance

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally altered Europe's security environment and affected both the political significance of EU enlargement policy and its priorities. Whereas in previous decades enlargement was viewed primarily as a mechanism for assessing the extent to which candidate and potential candidate states met the criteria for EU membership and implemented the corresponding reforms, after 2022 the EU institutions linked enlargement more explicitly to peace, security, stability and the Union's geopolitical interests. In the 2023 Enlargement Package, the European Commission presented enlargement as an investment in Europe's peace, security and prosperity and as a geopolitical project of the Union (European Commission, 2023a). This vision was clearly reflected in the statement accompanying the 2023 package, in which Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called enlargement "a vital policy for the European Union" and added that "Completing our Union is the call of history", with enlargement resting on "a strong economic and geopolitical logic". Pointing to the significant benefits of

previous enlargements for both the acceding countries and the Union, she concluded: "Basically, we all win" (von der Leyen, 2023).

The significance of this change is not limited to a shift in the EU's political rhetoric. In the 2023-2025 enlargement packages, the assessment of candidate countries' progress in democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and alignment with the EU acquis continues to occupy a central place; at the same time, however, security and geopolitical dimensions are becoming more clearly visible alongside this assessment (European Commission, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a). Issues such as countering hybrid threats, democratic resilience, cybersecurity, strategic communication, energy security and alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) are acquiring growing importance in the assessment of candidate countries. Nevertheless, the core function of the enlargement packages remains the assessment of candidates' reform progress and the definition of the relevant conditions and recommendations (European Commission, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a).

The evolution of this vision is also evident in the documents of subsequent years. When the 2024 package was presented, the emphasis shifted from opportunity to necessity: "The tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law" (European Commission, 2024c). In the 2025 Communication, enlargement is defined directly in security terms: "In today's world, enlargement policy is a key geopolitical tool that contributes to our joint safety, prosperity and security" (European Commission, 2025a, p. 1). The same document stresses that "The enlargement process remains strict, fair and merit-based" (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 1-2). Thus, between 2023 and 2025 the enlargement discourse shifted from a historic opportunity towards a geopolitical necessity and an instrument of security. Values-based conditionality, however, has not weakened; on the contrary, it has been formulated more strictly.

Accordingly, the starting assumption of this study is not that EU enlargement policy has been replaced by security policy since 2022. A more accurate interpretation is that the geopolitical and security dimension of enlargement policy has been strengthened and more intensively integrated into the existing mechanism of enlargement conditionality.

The main research question is therefore: how has the security and geopolitical dimension of EU enlargement policy been transformed since 2022, and how has its relationship with the traditional mechanism of enlargement conditionality changed? Answering this question is important for understanding how the function of EU enlargement policy is changing in the new geopolitical reality and to what extent enlargement can be regarded not only as an instrument for promoting integration and reform, but also as one of the instruments of the EU's peace and security policy.

To examine this broader transformation empirically, the article draws on the case of Georgia. Georgia is a particularly instructive case: in December 2023 it was granted EU candidate status on the understanding that it would take the nine steps set out by the European Commission (European Commission, 2023a). The Georgian case therefore makes it possible to observe both the influence of the geopolitical environment on enlargement-related decisions and the practical operation of conditionality at the subsequent stage.

Throughout 2024, the assessments of the EU institutions highlighted ever more clearly the problems of democratic backsliding and of the European integration process in Georgia. According to the Commission's 2024 report, the course chosen by the Georgian authorities had a negative impact on the country's European integration process, and the Commission relied on the European Council's conclusion that the accession process had de facto come to a halt (European Commission, 2024a, p. 7; 2024b; European Council, 2024a). At the end of 2024, the Georgian government decided to suspend the country's EU accession process until 2028, a decision the European Council regretted (European Commission, 2025a, p. 6).

Thus, the Georgian case makes it possible, on the one hand, to assess how the strengthening of the geopolitical and security dimension of enlargement policy has been reflected in the assessment of a specific candidate state and, on the other, to identify the conditions and limits within which this policy operates.

1.2. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative and comparative documentary analysis. Its aim is to examine how the security and geopolitical dimension of EU enlargement policy has been strengthened since 2022. The main sources are the European Commission's 2023-2025 enlargement packages, namely the Communications on EU enlargement policy and the country reports (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a,

2025b). Supplementary sources include the official statements accompanying the packages and the conclusions of the European Council (von der Leyen, 2023; European Commission, 2024c; European Council, 2024a, 2024b).

The analysis is based on five categories: countering hybrid threats, CFSP alignment, cybersecurity, strategic communication and energy security. The study distinguishes between the mere mention of an issue and its institutional significance. To this end, it assesses whether a given issue is linked to recommendations, progress assessments or conditions for integration. A comparison of the 2023-2025 documents reveals the evolution of these issues. The time frame is determined by the fact that, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, enlargement clearly acquired geopolitical significance. Documents from the preceding period (European Commission, 2021) and the scholarly literature, in turn, make it possible to distinguish already existing mechanisms from the areas that were strengthened after 2022.

The theoretical framework of the study is Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model (EIM) (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Its variables are used to interpret the Georgian case: the determinacy of conditions, the size and speed of rewards, the credibility of conditional promises and threats, and domestic adoption costs.

Georgia is not treated as a fully representative case of the transformation of enlargement policy; rather, it serves as an empirical case through which the mechanisms and limits of the broader ongoing change in EU enlargement policy can be studied. The study combines two levels: the institutional change in EU enlargement policy and the operation of this change in Georgia. This makes it possible to distinguish the functional expansion of instruments from their actual behavioural effect.

1.3. Structure of the Article

The article follows a consistent analytical logic and combines the theoretical, institutional and empirical dimensions of EU enlargement policy.

The first section reviews the existing scholarly literature on EU enlargement, Europeanisation and conditionality. Attention is paid to recent debates on the geopoliticisation of enlargement policy and to studies analysing the growing security significance of EU enlargement policy since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine. On this basis, the main research gap is identified: comparatively little attention has been paid to how geopolitical change is reflected in the everyday institutional practice of assessing candidate countries.

The next section presents the theoretical framework, whose central analytical tool is the External Incentives Model. It discusses the model's four main variables and the possibilities for applying them under conditions in which the security and geopolitical significance of EU enlargement policy is growing.

The following section is based on a qualitative and comparative analysis of the European Commission's 2023-2025 enlargement packages. It focuses on five areas: hybrid threats, CFSP alignment, cybersecurity, strategic communication and energy security. Through these areas, it examines how the place and function of security-related issues are changing within the assessment architecture of enlargement policy.

The findings of the documentary analysis are then discussed through the lens of the Georgian case. Using the example of Georgia, the article examines how the change in enlargement policy is reflected in the assessment of a specific candidate country, in EU conditions and incentives, and in the dynamics of the integration process. The Georgian case is interpreted through the main variables of the External Incentives Model.

The concluding section brings together the institutional and empirical findings and evaluates the central expectation of the study: since 2022, EU enlargement policy has not been replaced by security policy; rather, its geopolitical and security dimension has been strengthened and more intensively integrated into the existing mechanism of enlargement conditionality.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on EU enlargement policy has traditionally been grounded in the paradigm of Europeanisation and EU conditionality. One of the central theoretical frameworks in this field remains Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model (EIM) (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). According to this model, the transformative effect of the membership perspective offered by the EU and the related incentives depends on several key conditions: the determinacy of requirements, the size and speed of the rewards offered, the credibility of the EU's promises and threats, and the domestic political costs that implementing reforms entails for the candidate state. The model provides an important basis for

explaining why EU conditionality produces significant institutional change in some cases, while in others its influence remains limited.

Subsequent research has paid more attention to the divergent outcomes of conditionality and to the importance of the credibility of the incentives offered by the EU. In their further development of the model, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) particularly emphasise that the existence of EU requirements is not in itself sufficient to ensure reforms. What also matters is how consistently specific requirements are linked to the ultimate political reward and how credible the candidate state perceives this link to be. Buscaneanu and Li (2024) extend this logic to the context of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and highlight the role of domestic political interests and elite strategies in shaping the outcomes of conditionality. This approach is particularly relevant for interpreting the Georgian case, as it allows EU incentives to be considered not in isolation but in light of the candidate state's domestic political context.

At the same time, recent literature suggests that the classical logic of conditionality may not be sufficient to fully explain contemporary enlargement processes. Since the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, EU enlargement has clearly acquired additional geopolitical significance. Scicluna (2025) analyses the shift in EU political narratives following Russia's war against Ukraine and points to the strengthening of geopolitical arguments relative to procedural and technocratic logics. Ognjanoska Stavrovska (2024) links this shift to the emergence of differentiated approaches in the enlargement process and draws attention to the divergent dynamics of conditionality between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. Staelens (2025) highlights that the war changed the EU's sceptical attitude towards enlargement and turned enlargement into a strategic imperative. Drawing on an analysis of the EU's differing approaches towards the Association Trio (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), Kardava and Chelidze (2024) show that, in Georgia's case, the complexity of enlargement goes beyond the fulfilment of formal conditions and also involves historical, geopolitical and mutual-trust factors.

The main contribution of this literature is that it gives security and geopolitics a more central place in the analysis of enlargement policy. However, studies of geopolitical transformation often focus on the EU's political decisions, the positions of member states and the general dynamics of the enlargement process. Comparatively less attention is paid to how this change is reflected in the specific instruments and documentary practices through which the European Commission assesses candidate countries.

Although the existing literature is highly relevant to the issue under study, certain gaps can be identified. First, existing studies of conditionality mainly explain the mechanisms through which EU incentives and requirements exert influence, but pay comparatively less attention to how the content of enlargement policy itself changes in response to a shifting geopolitical environment. Second, the literature on the geopoliticisation of enlargement describes the change in the EU's political agenda, but how this change is reflected in the institutional practice of assessing candidate countries remains comparatively understudied. Third, studies of individual security-related areas point to the emergence of new themes, yet an integrated and comparative analysis of these themes across the enlargement packages is still rare.

The present article brings these three strands together. It treats the change in EU enlargement policy as a process in which the classical mechanism of conditionality continues to operate, while new geopolitical and security dimensions are added to it and become ever more closely linked to it. To this end, the study analyses the Commission's 2023-2025 enlargement packages along already mentioned five main dimensions.

As noted above, within this broader analysis the Georgian case serves as an empirical case. Its function is to show how the institutional and geopolitical change in enlargement policy manifests itself in a specific candidate state and under what conditions the influence of EU conditionality and incentives may be constrained. The study thus combines two interrelated levels: an analysis of the institutional transformation of EU enlargement policy and an examination of how this transformation operates in practice in the case of Georgia.

3. Theoretical Framework: The External Incentives Model under Conditions of Geopoliticisation

The theoretical framework of the article is Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model (EIM) (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). The model explains how the EU promotes changes in the behaviour and institutions of candidate states through the prospect of membership and other incentives. According to the EIM, the effectiveness of conditionality depends on four factors. The study examines these factors in light of the geopolitical context that has changed since 2022.

Determinacy of conditions. The clearer the requirements, the more easily a candidate understands what it must do to obtain the reward. In the 2023-2025 packages, security issues are added to the traditional criteria: hybrid threats, cybersecurity, strategic communication, CFSP alignment and energy resilience. The study assesses how clearly these issues are linked to progress assessments and how uniformly they are formalised.

Size and speed of rewards. The ultimate reward is membership, while candidate status and the opening of negotiations are intermediate incentives. Geopoliticisation has increased the weight of these intermediate decisions. If status is granted quickly while membership remains a lengthy and conditional process, the motivational environment in which a candidate country's government operates may change.

Credibility. A candidate is more motivated when it believes that the EU will keep its promises and apply its conditions consistently. The EU's security interests may affect both the speed of decisions and the consistency with which conditions are applied. In the Georgian case, the candidate's perception of EU promises is treated as an extended analytical dimension; it is not identical to the model's original variable. The deficit of mutual trust between Georgia and the EU and its relationship to the logic of conditionality have also been discussed in earlier research (Kardava & Chelidze, 2024).

Domestic adoption costs. A reward is effective when the cost of reform is manageable. In the Georgian case, the rule of law, judicial reform, de-oligarchisation and CFSP alignment may carry a high political cost. The study therefore assesses whether EU incentives are sufficient when the domestic cost of change is high for the government.

These four variables structure the analysis at two levels. The first level examines how security issues are integrated into the enlargement packages; the second examines how EU conditions interact with Georgia's domestic political dynamics. The study does not assume that geopolitical change automatically alters the variables; it tests this empirically. The central theoretical expectation is that geopoliticisation does not replace the classical logic of conditionality. Instead, it creates a new environment in which the membership perspective, reform requirements and security priorities are more closely interlinked.

4. The Transformation of the Security Dimension of Enlargement Policy

A comparison of the 2023-2025 enlargement packages shows that the clearest change in enlargement policy is the broadening of the range of security issues and their gradual integration into the assessment process (European Commission, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a). This does not mean that the security agenda has replaced the Copenhagen criteria. More precisely, a dimension has been added to the assessment that more closely links candidate countries' democratic resilience, foreign policy orientation and protection of critical infrastructure to the EU's security environment.

This trend is particularly evident in the 2025 Communication. The document describes enlargement as "a key geopolitical tool" while at the same time raising the requirements for candidate countries: reforms must be "underpinned by compliance with the rule of law and fundamental rights and clear adherence to the EU's geopolitical orientation" (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 1-2). The benefits of gradual integration, including the growth plans and pre-accession participation in selected EU policies and programmes, depend on the pace of reforms and on CFSP alignment (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 2-3). According to the Commission, this is the first Commission mandate since 2010-2014 in which enlargement is "a realistic possibility": Montenegro and Albania aim to close accession negotiations by 2026 and 2027 respectively, while Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine have also announced target dates. In addition, in its proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, the Commission "confirms enlargement as a political and geostrategic imperative" (European Commission, 2025a, p. 2). This indicates that the strengthening of the geopolitical argument is accompanied not by a weakening of conditionality but by its tightening and its closer linkage to security issues.

Hybrid threats. The 2023 package links hybrid threats, disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and cyberattacks to the challenges facing candidate countries (European Commission, 2023a; Devuyst, 2025). The formulations are still general and have not been developed into standardised indicators. Nevertheless, countering FIMI already appears among the tasks facing specific countries, including Georgia. In 2024, hybrid threats are directly linked to electoral processes and to the resilience of democratic institutions (European Commission, 2024a). "Resilience" thereby acquires a dual meaning: it denotes both the capacity to withstand external interference and the robustness of institutions under domestic pressure. A comparison of Georgia and Moldova illustrates this well. In 2025, Moldova's resilience is assessed against the backdrop of intensive Russian interference, whereas in Georgia's case the

focus shifts to the internal state of democratic institutions (European Commission, 2025a, 2025b). According to the 2025 report, the Georgian authorities actively spread disinformation narratives, and dialogue and cooperation with the authorities on FIMI are limited (European Commission, 2025b, p. 81). Thus, the same category carries different political content in different countries.

CFSP alignment. CFSP alignment is not a new requirement, as it has long been part of the acquis. Since 2022, however, its political weight has increased, and it has become a quantitative indicator of foreign policy orientation (European Commission, 2024a, 2025a). In 2023, Georgia's alignment rate was low (43% according to the 2023 report and 50% for the whole of 2023 according to the 2024 report; European Commission, 2023b, pp. 110-112; 2024b, p. 94). According to the 2025 report, it stood at 53% in 2024 and fell to 40% as of 24 October 2025 (European Commission, 2025b, p. 81). At the same time, "The overall alignment rate of Ukraine and Moldova remained very high" (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 6-7). The 2025 Communication directly links CFSP alignment to the benefits of gradual integration (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 2-3). This example shows how a component of technical compliance can acquire the function of assessing geopolitical orientation.

Cybersecurity. Here the change is more limited. In 2023 the emphasis is on institutional cooperation, whereas in 2024-2025 it shifts to the resilience of critical infrastructure and digital systems (European Commission, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a). However, the degree of institutionalisation does not yet match that of the CFSP. In Georgia's country reports, the recommendation to develop a cybersecurity strategy aligned with the NIS 2 Directive is repeated in 2023 and 2024, and in 2025 it is complemented by a requirement to align with the 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox (European Commission, 2023b, pp. 82-84; 2024b, p. 73; 2025b, p. 66), while during the same period certain national security and strategic communication mechanisms were altered (Kirkitadze, 2024). From the perspective of the EIM, this confirms that when domestic costs are high, EU incentives do not automatically produce change.

Strategic communication. Strategic communication is not established as a separate assessment criterion in the packages. A significant part of it is carried out within the European External Action Service, including through the East StratCom Task Force (European External Action Service, n.d.). Consequently, it remains primarily an instrument of the EU's own foreign policy.

Energy security. Energy is linked to reducing dependence on Russian resources and to developing regional infrastructure. The Georgian case shows that the EU's strategic infrastructure interests can be maintained regardless of a country's political trajectory (Nikoleishvili, 2026). This points to a functionalist and geostrategic logic that does not always coincide with democratic conditionality. The Commission's reports also confirm this: in 2025, against the backdrop of democratic backsliding, Georgia took steps towards alignment with the gas security of supply regulation and submitted a natural gas risk assessment (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 72-73).

Table 1 below summarises how Georgia was assessed in four of these categories in the European Commission's 2023-2025 country reports (European Commission, 2023b, 2024b, 2025b). Strategic communication is not included in the table because, as noted above, it is not established as a separate assessment criterion. The table shows that Georgia's CFSP alignment rate fell sharply by 2025 and that the situation regarding hybrid threats deteriorated, whereas in the energy sector progress, albeit limited, continued.

Thus, the analysis does not confirm the formation of a unified security "bloc". Instead, it reveals the uneven integration of different instruments. The CFSP is directly linked to the assessment; hybrid threats are gradually merging with the assessment of democratic resilience; cybersecurity is developing in the direction of infrastructural resilience; strategic communication remains an external instrument of the EU; and energy is developing partly independently of conditionality. Consequently, the change is better described not as a replacement of the assessment mechanism but as its functional expansion and the strengthening of its geopolitical dimension.

Table 1. Georgia in the European Commission's 2023-2025 Enlargement Packages: Four Security-Related Categories

Category	2023	2024	2025
Hybrid threats / FIMI	Countering disinformation and FIMI is the first of the nine steps (European Commission, 2023a). Georgia continued to cooperate with the EU to address its vulnerabilities to hybrid threats (identified through the hybrid risk survey); recommendation: increase resilience to hybrid and cyber threats through a whole-of-society approach (pp. 110-112).	Cooperation with the EU on hybrid threats is limited; dialogue and cooperation on FIMI are limited, as is evidence of political will to curb manipulative narratives directed against the EU and European integration (p. 94).	Cooperation on hybrid threats is limited; dialogue with the authorities on FIMI is limited, while cooperation with civil society continues; the authorities actively spread disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories, often directed against the EU (p. 81).
CFSP alignment	44% (2022) → 43% (2023), essentially unchanged (pp. 110-112).	50% (2023) → 49% (as of 30 September 2024) (p. 94).	53% (2024) → 40% (as of 24 October 2025); Chapter 31: the alignment rate "decreased during the reporting period and remains low" (p. 81).
Cybersecurity / digital transformation (Chapter 10)	Some level of preparation; "some progress"; recommendation: develop a cybersecurity strategy in line with the NIS 2 Directive (pp. 82-84).	No progress appears to have been made on alignment with the DSA and DMA; recommendation: closer alignment of the cybersecurity strategy with the NIS 2 Directive (p. 73).	Amendments to the Law on Broadcasting adopted in April 2025 banned foreign funding, empowered ComCom to impose fines and suspend licences, and de facto abolished self-regulatory bodies; recommendation: alignment with the 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox (p. 66).
Energy security (Chapter 15)	Some level of preparation; "limited progress"; no emergency oil stocks or gas storage; gas security of supply rules not adopted; no direct electricity interconnection with the EU, with the grid synchronised with the Russian and Azerbaijani grids (pp. 96-98).	"Some progress" on key strategic documents: the State Energy Policy and the NECP approved in June 2024; most provisions of the Risk-Preparedness Regulation reflected in the electricity security of supply rules; no alignment with Regulation (EU) 2017/1938 on gas security of supply and no progress on oil stocks; transmission system operators not unbundled (pp. 83-85).	Steps taken towards alignment with the gas security of supply regulation: a gas risk assessment and a security of supply report (October 2024) submitted; amendments required for TSO unbundling entered into force in December 2024, but their implementation is incomplete; no further progress on alignment with the Electricity Integration Package (pp. 72-73).

Note: The 2024 CFSP alignment rate differs between the two reports: the 2024 report gives 49% as of 30 September 2024 (European Commission, 2024b, p. 94), while the 2025 report gives 53% for the whole of 2024 (European Commission, 2025b, p. 81). Similarly, the 2023 rate is 43% in the 2023 report (European Commission, 2023b, pp. 110-112) and 50% for the whole of 2023 in the 2024 report (European Commission, 2024b, p. 94). In the relevant chapters of the 2024-2025 reports, the level of preparation and the overall assessment of progress are not always stated separately; the table therefore includes them only where the report text states them explicitly. Source: compiled by the authors based on European Commission (2023a, 2023b, 2024b, 2025b).

5. The Case of Georgia: The Transformation of Enlargement Policy in Practice

Whereas the previous section described institutional change at the EU level, this section addresses the second analytical level of the study: how this change operates in a specific candidate country. In the Georgian case, the granting of candidate status, the growing importance of security issues and the subsequent stalling of integration are unfolding simultaneously.

In June 2022, the European Commission's opinion set out twelve priorities for Georgia (European Commission, 2022). Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, which were granted candidate status in June 2022, Georgia was recognised as having a European perspective, while candidate status was made conditional on the fulfilment of the twelve priorities (Kardava & Chelidze, 2024). Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023, even though the priorities had not been fully met. For further integration, the EU set out nine steps (European Commission, 2023a). In EIM terms, this represents the use of an intermediate reward in conditions where membership remains a lengthy and conditional process. The decision also confirms that enlargement has acquired geopolitical weight since 2022.

The granting of status was not followed by improved fulfilment of the conditions. In 2024, Georgia's domestic political developments came to the centre of bilateral relations. The Law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" and the legislative amendments "On Family Values and the Protection of Minors" brought issues of democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights to the fore. According to the Commission's 2024 assessment, these developments caused serious concern and had a negative impact on the dynamics of integration (European Commission, 2024a, p. 7; 2024b). During the same period, as shown above, CFSP alignment declined (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 66).

The 2025 Enlargement Package records a further deepening of this trend. The Commission recalls that in June and October 2024 the European Council concluded that the Georgian authorities' course of action "jeopardised the country's European path" and "de facto halted the accession process", and that in December 2024 it "regretted the Georgian government's decision to suspend the country's EU accession process until 2028" (European Council, 2024a, 2024b; European Commission, 2025a, p. 6). In the Commission's assessment, "the situation has significantly further deteriorated" since then: Georgia "has experienced serious democratic backsliding, with a rapid erosion of the rule of law", while fundamental rights are being severely restricted (European Commission, 2025a, p. 6). The document notes "a significant backsliding across the nine steps" and states that "Institutions designed to uphold the rule of law have been instrumentalised for partisan objectives" (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 6-7). Thus, in the 2025 document Georgia appears to run counter to the general trend: while membership has become a realistic prospect for several candidates, in Georgia's case the process has de facto come to a halt, and precisely those criteria emphasised in the general part of the Communication are being violated, namely democratic values, the rule of law and adherence to the EU's geopolitical orientation.

Hence, the Georgian case reveals a gap between the existence of a reward and its behavioural effect. Candidate status increased the political weight of the incentive, but some of the subsequent requirements entailed high domestic political costs. According to the EIM, it is precisely under such conditions that the influence of external incentives weakens. At the same time, there is insufficient evidence to argue that the granting of status directly caused the stalling of reforms. A more cautious interpretation is that the geopolitical environment complicated the relationship between the intermediate reward and subsequent conditionality. The outcome depended both on the nature and credibility of EU requirements and on Georgia's domestic political context.

This case supports the conclusion that the security function is not uniform. Despite the deterioration of political relations, strategic and infrastructural cooperation, including in the energy sector, continued (Nikoleishvili, 2026). This means that some EU security interests operate relatively independently of democratic conditionality.

Accordingly, the Georgian case confirms neither the success nor the failure of enlargement policy. It shows that the functional expansion of EU instruments and their behavioural effect must be distinguished from each other. Geopoliticisation increases the importance of enlargement and the weight of incentives, but their effect still depends on the four EIM variables: the clarity of conditions, the timeliness of rewards, credibility and domestic adoption costs.

6. Discussion

The empirical analysis shows that the security and geopolitical dimension of EU enlargement policy has been significantly strengthened since 2022. The change is not limited to rhetoric, as in the 2023-2025 documents security issues are integrated into various components of enlargement (European Commission, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a). However, the study has shown that this integration is uneven. The CFSP has become a formalised indicator and hybrid threats are merging with the assessment of democratic resilience, while strategic communication and energy operate according to a different institutional logic. The findings therefore point to differentiated integration rather than to the replacement of enlargement policy by security policy.

This confirms the theoretical expectation of the study: geopoliticisation does not abolish the logic of the EIM but changes the environment in which its variables operate. The political weight of enlargement has increased. At the same time, security issues have broadened the substantive scope of conditions and, in some cases, made their clear formalisation more difficult. This relates directly to the variable of the determinacy of conditions.

The same trend is visible at the level of discourse. In 2023, enlargement was presented as "the call of history" and as a process in which all sides win (von der Leyen, 2023); in 2024, as a necessity dictated by the tense geopolitical context (European Commission, 2024c); and in 2025, as "a key geopolitical tool" resting on a strict and merit-based process (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 1-2). The stronger the geopolitical argument becomes, the more clearly value-based and foreign policy requirements are formulated. In EIM terms, this means that the growing political weight of the reward is accompanied by a substantive broadening of conditions and an attempt to strengthen the credibility of conditionality.

The Georgian case illustrates the practical limits of this change. The granting of candidate status confirmed the increased geopolitical significance of enlargement, but subsequent developments made it clear that status alone cannot secure reforms. The effect of the incentive proved to depend, above all, on domestic political costs. This conclusion is supported by the 2025 Communication, which records serious democratic backsliding in Georgia and backsliding in the implementation of the nine steps (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 6-7).

7. Conclusion

The study examined how the function of EU enlargement policy has changed since 2022 and how this change has been reflected in the assessment of candidate countries. The analysis of the 2023-2025 enlargement packages and of the Georgian case shows that, following Russia's full-scale aggression, the importance of security and geopolitics in enlargement has clearly increased.

The main conclusion of the study is that enlargement policy has not been replaced by security policy. It retains its classical function of promoting reforms and alignment with EU rules. A dimension of resilience and geostrategic orientation has been added to this function. This integration is differentiated. CFSP alignment has become a measurable indicator and hybrid threats are merging with the assessment of democratic resilience, while strategic communication and energy operate according to a partly independent logic. We are therefore dealing not with the formation of a unified "security bloc", but with the gradual incorporation of different instruments into a broader geopolitical framework.

From the perspective of the EIM, geopoliticisation has not abolished the model's four variables but has changed the environment in which they operate. The political weight of intermediate rewards, especially candidate status, has increased. At the same time, the substantive scope of conditions has broadened, while the degree of their formalisation has remained uneven.

The Georgian case demonstrates the limits of this change. Candidate status was not translated into reforms, as some requirements entailed high domestic costs. By 2025, this had already resulted in a de facto halt to the accession process. (European Commission, 2025a, pp. 6-7). The study does not claim that the rapid granting of status directly weakened reforms. A more accurate conclusion is that the geopolitical environment complicated the relationship between reward and conditionality. At the same time, the continuation of energy cooperation indicates that some EU security interests operate independently of democratic conditionality. Thus, the institutional and empirical findings complement each other: EU instruments have expanded functionally, but this does not automatically increase their effectiveness.

The study has temporal and case-related limitations. It is based mainly on official documents from 2023-2025, while the in-depth analysis focuses on Georgia. Consequently, its conclusions cannot be automatically generalised to all candidate countries. Moreover, the issues discussed here do not belong to a

closed chapter of the past, and Georgia's role and significance in the enlargement process remain to be determined, since the transformation of EU enlargement policy is an ongoing process that is unfolding alongside broader global changes: Europe and the world face the challenge of an emerging new international order whose contours remain blurred. This is a historical process unfolding in parallel with our own lives, and it has not yet settled. The present article therefore does not offer a final verdict; rather, on the basis of an analysis of the available sources, it puts forward certain considerations and assumptions. As early as the eighteenth century, the well-known publicist Jacques Mallet du Pan pointed to this difficulty, aptly comparing the writing of contemporary history to painting a landscape in foggy weather. This is indeed so; yet it is precisely for this reason that it is important to observe and reflect on the process as it unfolds. Future research would benefit from a systematic comparison of Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans and from an analysis of developments after 2025. This would allow researchers to determine whether the strengthening of the security dimension represents a lasting institutional transformation or a temporary adaptation tailored to a specific crisis.

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