Geopolitics and Democratic Conditionality in Georgia: Complementary or Competing Logics of EU Enlargement?

გეოპოლიტიკა და დემოკრატიული პირობითობა საქართველოში: ევროკავშირის გაფართოების ურთიერთშემავსებელი თუ ურთიერთკონკურენტული ლოგიკა?

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Abstract

Introduction. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the current wave of European Union (EU) enlargement, which its institutions have framed as a geostrategic investment. How far that impetus reaches into the accession process, and whether it still remains merit-based, is therefore an open question. This article asks: are geopolitics and democratic conditionality complementary or competing logics of enlargement? It answers through Georgia, one of the three eastern applicants offered a membership perspective in 2022 and the one in which the two collided: a state of strategic value to the EU, governed by a party in retreat from reform. **Methods.** Process tracing follows the EU's decisions and their public justifications from 2022 to September 2026 across three stages, from the membership perspective through conditional candidacy to the de facto halt, and tests them against two rival accounts, geopolitical override and democratic primacy. **Results.** The analysis establishes the reach and the limits of geopolitics in the EU's handling of Georgia, the arrangement that allowed recognition to precede compliance without relaxing the conditions, and the origins of the present deadlock. **Conclusion.** Three contributions follow. Empirically, the article provides a systematic account of how accession requirements were retained, revised and supplemented across successive EU decisions. Theoretically, it introduces the recipient of a reward into the external incentives model and distinguishes the credibility of conditionality from its effectiveness. For policy, it shows what recognition granted before compliance can and cannot achieve where a government's commitment to accession is weak.

Keywords: EU enlargement; democratic conditionality; security–democracy dilemma; Georgia; external incentives model.

აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი. 2022 წელს რუსეთის მიერ უკრაინის წინააღმდეგ დაწყებულმა სრულმასშტაბიანმა სამხედრო აგრესიამ ახალი იმპულსი შესძინა ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პროცესს, რომელიც ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუტების მიერ სულ უფრო მეტად განიხილება როგორც გეოსტრატეგიული მნიშვნელობის ინვესტიცია. აღნიშნულმა პროცესმა აქტუალური გახადა კითხვა, თუ რამდენად აისახება გეოპოლიტიკური ფაქტორი გაწევრიანების პოლიტიკაზე და რამდენად ინარჩუნებს ეს უკანასკნელი დამსახურებაზე დაფუძნებულ მიდგომას. წინამდებარე სტატია იკვლევს, წარმოადგენს თუ არა გეოპოლიტიკა და დემოკრატიული პირობითობა ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პროცესში ურთიერთშემავსებელ თუ ურთიერთკონკურენტულ ლოგიკას. აღნიშნული საკითხი გაანალიზებულია საქართველოს მაგალითზე. საქართველო აღმოსავლეთ პარტნიორობის იმ სამი ქვეყნიდან ერთ-ერთია, რომლებსაც 2022 წელს ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანების პერსპექტივა მიენიჭათ. ამასთანავე, იგი

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წარმოადგენს შემთხვევას, რომელშიც გეოპოლიტიკურ ინტერესებსა და დემოკრატიული პირობითობის მოთხოვნებს შორის არსებული დაძაბულობა განსაკუთრებით მკაფიოდ გამოვლინდა: ერთი მხრივ, საქართველო ევროკავშირისთვის სტრატეგიული მნიშვნელობის მქონე ქვეყანაა, ხოლო, მეორე მხრივ, მისი მმართველი პოლიტიკური ძალის პოლიტიკურმა კურსმა და დემოკრატიული რეფორმების მიმართულებით არსებულმა უკუსვლამ ევროკავშირთან ურთიერთობებში მნიშვნელოვანი წინააღმდეგობები წარმოშვა. **მეთოდოლოგია.** კვლევა ეფუძნება პროცესის მიკვლევის მეთოდს და მოიცავს ევროკავშირის მიერ საქართველოსთან მიმართებით მიღებული გადაწყვეტილებებისა და მათი საჯარო დასაბუთების ანალიზს 2022 წლიდან 2026 წლის სექტემბრამდე. ანალიზი სტრუქტურირებულია სამ თანმიმდევრულ ეტაპად: ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანების პერსპექტივის მინიჭება, კანდიდატის სტატუსის პირობითად მინიჭება და გაწევრიანების პროცესის დე ფაქტო შეჩერება. ევროკავშირის გადაწყვეტილებები და მათი დასაბუთება გაანალიზებულია ორი კონკურენტული განმარტებითი ჩარჩოს საფუძველზე: გეოპოლიტიკური პრიორიტეტისა და დემოკრატიული კრიტერიუმების უპირატესობის ჰიპოთეზების მიხედვით. **შედეგები.** კვლევის შედეგები წარმოაჩენს გეოპოლიტიკური ფაქტორის გავლენის მასშტაბსა და მის განმსაზღვრელ საზღვრებს ევროკავშირის მიერ საქართველოსთან ურთიერთობის წარმართვის პროცესში. ანალიზი ასევე ავლენს იმ პოლიტიკურ და ინსტიტუციურ მექანიზმს, რომლის მეშვეობითაც გაწევრიანების პერსპექტივის აღიარებამ წინ გაუსწრო დემოკრატიული კრიტერიუმების სრულად დაკმაყოფილებას ისე, რომ გაწევრიანებასთან დაკავშირებული ფორმალური პირობები არ შერბილებულა. ამასთანავე, კვლევა განსაზღვრავს იმ პოლიტიკურ და ინსტიტუციურ ფაქტორებს, რომლებმაც საქართველოსა და ევროკავშირს შორის ურთიერთობებში არსებული ჩიხის ჩამოყალიბებას შეუწყო ხელი. **დასკვნა.** სტატიას სამეცნიერო წვლილი შეაქვს სამ ძირითად მიმართულებაში. ემპირიული თვალსაზრისით, იგი სისტემურად აანალიზებს, თუ როგორ ხდებოდა ევროკავშირის თანმიმდევრულ გადაწყვეტილებებში გაწევრიანებასთან დაკავშირებული მოთხოვნების შენარჩუნება, გადახედვა და დამატებითი პირობებით შევსება. თეორიული თვალსაზრისით, კვლევას წვლილი შეაქვს გარე სტიმულების მოდელის (*External Incentives Model*) განვითარებაში, კერძოდ, ჯილდოს მიმღები აქტორის მახასიათებლების გათვალისწინებით, და ერთმანეთისგან მიჯნავს პირობითობის სანდოობასა და მის პრაქტიკულ ეფექტიანობას. პოლიტიკის ანალიზის თვალსაზრისით, სტატია აჩვენებს, რა შესაძლებლობები და შეზღუდვები აქვს დემოკრატიული და ინსტიტუციური შესაბამისობის სრულ მიღწევამდე პოლიტიკური აღიარების მინიჭებას იმ პირობებში, როდესაც მმართველი პოლიტიკური ძალის ერთგულება ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანების მიზნისადმი სუსტია.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ევროკავშირის გაფართოება, დემოკრატიული პირობითობა, უსაფრთხოებისა და დემოკრატიის დილემა, საქართველო, გარე სტიმულების მოდელი.

1. Introduction

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine ended a decade of stagnation in European Union (EU) enlargement policy (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Karjalainen, 2023). Within four months of the attack, the EU offered a membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the associated trio of the Eastern Partnership, whose European aspirations it had until then acknowledged without holding out a place in the Union. The Commission called the war “a harsh awakening to a new geopolitical reality” that had put enlargement back at the front of the European agenda (European Commission, 2022d, p. 1). Yet the policy was not presented as a departure from the accession criteria: the European Council has since termed enlargement a geostrategic investment but, at the same time, a merit-based process (European Council, 2023, para. 13).

Whether both descriptions can hold at once is the dilemma at the heart of the renewed enlargement, and scholarship has read it in two ways. One strand expects a trade-off: political decisions at key stages sit uneasily with merit-based assessment, the geopolitical logic undermines the threat of exclusion for reform laggards, and the EU plays a strategic and a normative card that are in tension (Casier, 2026; Dimitrova, 2024; Schimmelfennig, 2023, pp. 190–191). Another sees no such loss: geopolitical and values-based considerations have coexisted in enlargement before, wartime conditionality towards Ukraine has fitted the EU’s wider crisis response, and since 2022 each applicant has advanced only as far as its reforms allowed (Bosse, 2024; Popova, 2026; Rabinovych & Pintsch, 2024). Both strands argue from the outcomes of the process more than from the

terms of the EU's own decisions and the reasons given for them. That is the lacuna this article addresses, through the case that poses the dilemma most sharply.

That case is Georgia, a country of strategic importance to the EU whose government has withdrawn from democratic reform. Its strategic value has two sources. Two of its regions are under Russian military control, which makes its orientation a security matter for the Union's neighbourhood. It also lies on the Black Sea and on the Middle Corridor across the Caspian, which the Commission has promoted since the invasion in its search for routes that "do not transit Russia" (European Commission, 2024a, para. 1; European Commission & High Representative, 2025, p. 1). The retreat from reform, for its part, is documented in the Commission's reports, from limited progress on the judiciary and media freedom to legislation that the Union assessed as backsliding and rhetoric directed against it (European Commission, 2023b, 2024c).

Against this background, Georgia's recent European integration trajectory has passed through three stages. In June 2022, the EU offered it a membership perspective but withheld the candidate status that it gave to Ukraine and Moldova, pending twelve reform priorities. In December 2023, the EU granted the status although most of the priorities remained open and the government's foreign policy diverged from the Union's (Borrell, 2023; European Commission, 2023b). Six months later, the accession process was de facto halted over the authorities' course of action, and the Commission now describes Georgia as a candidate country in name only (European Commission, 2025b; European Council, 2024a).

This article approaches the dilemma from inside those decisions and asks: how do geopolitics and democratic conditionality relate in the EU's renewed enlargement? Three subsidiary questions follow these three stages. What explains the EU's decision, in June 2022, to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova but to offer Georgia only a membership perspective? On what grounds did it confer that status eighteen months later, and what became of the reform conditions and of the strategic expectations it attached to candidacy? And what led it, in 2024, to find the process de facto halted while leaving the status in place?

Read at face value, the sequence suggests that each logic prevailed in turn: conditionality when the EU withheld candidacy in 2022, geopolitics when it granted the status in 2023, and merit once more when it found the process halted in 2024. Read with the reasons the EU gave for its decisions, it shows a less simple picture. The geopolitical turn brought forward the EU's offers to Georgia, first the perspective and then the status, and put strategic conduct among its requirements, but it left the democratic reforms it demanded untouched; the two logics acted together at each stage, as complements rather than rivals. In December 2023, the conditions stayed with the government and grew: the reforms left undone since 2022 were carried into the requirements for opening negotiations, and two of a geopolitical nature, alignment with the EU's foreign policy and action against disinformation aimed at it, were added. The concession lay in sequencing, recognition before compliance, and because what was brought forward bore society's name, granting it obliged the EU to relax nothing of what it asked of those in power. Nor did Georgia's strategic value shield its rulers, for the EU reads alignment as the clear sign of a state's choice (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 127). When the government turned its legislation against the civil society on which the EU had grounded its expectation of reform, both assessments reached the same verdict.

The argument joins a body of work that has established the turn described at the outset, the revival of enlargement for security reasons and the spread of a geopolitical rationale through a strategy that officially remains transformative (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Koval & Vachudova, 2024; Schimmelfennig, 2024; Schramm, 2025; Scicluna, 2025). On Georgia, research has concentrated on the applicant, on the ruling party's use of geopolitics as a resource of rule and its evasion of compliance, on civil society's claim to the candidacy, and on the EU's differentiation among the trio seen from Tbilisi (Ekman, 2026; Gozalishvili & Moga, 2026; Kardava & Chelidze, 2024; Nagy, 2025). Less examined is the EU's side of the case: how, in its own decisions, the Union combined geopolitical and democratic considerations when it faced a government that was neither reforming nor aligned. This article fills that gap by tracing them through the EU's own texts, read through the external incentives model. Its contribution is threefold. Empirically, it provides an account of the EU's treatment of Georgia that rests on the whole public record and traces the fate of each requirement across the three stages. Theoretically, it identifies a channel that the model's two mechanisms, bargaining with governments and empowering domestic actors, leave out: a reward given in society's name, with the consequences for leverage that the case exposes. For enlargement policy, it shows that geopolitical requirements can be written into conditionality without diluting its democratic core, and that recognition granted ahead of compliance reaches a society but not the government on which advancement depends, at the cost of a deadlock the Union cannot resolve by itself.

2. Materials & Methods

The EU's decisions on Georgia are followed in sequence, from June 2022 to September 2026, through the documents in which they were adopted and explained: the Commission's Opinion and reports, the

conclusions of the European Council and the Council, legal acts, and the statements of those who speak for the Union. The latter are the President of the Commission, the High Representative and the Commissioner for Enlargement. The set comprises the texts of those types that decided or justified the three stages. Process tracing of this kind treats each piece of evidence as a test of rival explanations and gives weight to the order of events (Collier, 2011). The outcomes to be explained are the three stages: the perspective alone, the candidacy and the halt. The Opinions on Ukraine and Moldova supply context rather than a control case, since the three applicants differ in how the war affected them and in what their governments delivered.

Process tracing needs expectations to test the evidence against, and the external incentives model supplies them; the four readings applied to the documents turn them into observable implications (Table 1). Conditionality is the instrument that makes progress towards membership depend on requirements the Union sets. Applied to accountable institutions, the rule of law and fundamental rights, it is democratic conditionality. The same tool can also carry geopolitical demands. Geopolitics refers here to the EU's security and strategic interests, as a reason for its choices or a source of what it asks. The accession process offers rewards of two kinds, which the analysis keeps apart: recognition, the membership perspective and candidate status, which commits the EU to little beyond acknowledging a country's European future; and advancement, the opening and progress of negotiations, which depends on what a government delivers. In the model, the EU withholds a reward until its conditions are met, and the effect turns on the size and speed of what is at stake, the determinacy of the demands, the credibility of threat and promise, and the costs of compliance for a target government, which may refuse to bear them when reform endangers its hold on power (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Its two channels are bargaining with rulers and empowering domestic actors who press them, and in both the counterpart is the same: it is the government that weighs the benefit against the internal price of reform and, once it has paid, receives it. Built on the enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007, the model applied less well afterwards, coexisting with state capture in the Western Balkans and with selective observance by hybrid regimes in an Eastern Partnership that held out no membership (Bieber, 2018; Bolkvadze, 2016; Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Richter & Wunsch, 2020).

The model also says what geopolitics should do to this calculus. A Union that needs an applicant for its own security has reason to deliver early, and the strategic importance of such a country makes a reward harder to withhold, which weakens the threat on which conditionality rests (Schimmelfennig, 2023, 2024). Two accounts of the EU's decisions can accordingly be set against each other, an override account in which geopolitics prevails and a conditionality account in which democratic demands govern; Table 1 states what each implies for the four readings through which the documents are analysed. The weight of a piece of evidence depends on what it makes necessary or sufficient for an account (Collier, 2011): differentiation on merit at a moment of urgency is a hoop the first must pass, and a halt imposed despite strategic value would count heavily against it.

Table 1: *Observable implications of the two accounts*

Reading	**If geopolitics overrides democratic conditionality**	**If democratic conditionality governs**
Pace	Rewards arrive whatever the state of compliance; their timing follows strategic need	Rewards follow verified compliance; their timing follows the Commission's assessment
Terms	Requirements relaxed, dropped or left vague	Requirements kept, specified and carried forward
Limit of accommodation	Setbacks tolerated; advancement not withheld from a strategically important applicant	Setbacks followed by the withholding or reversal of advancement
Addressee	Justifications invoke strategy; the government is engaged as a partner	Justifications invoke merit, reform and society; conditions are laid on the government

Note. Note. Derived from the external incentives model (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020) and from its application to geopolitical enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2023, 2024).

Across the three stages, and in answer to the subsidiary questions, the documents are read for the four things in Table 1. The first is pace: whether a decision made candidate status depend on prior compliance or granted it on a stated understanding that steps would follow. The second is the terms: each of the twelve priorities of 2022 is set against the nine steps of 2023 and against the Commission's report and the Council's conclusions of the same weeks, thereby distinguishing a requirement's removal from the shortlist from its withdrawal from the EU's demands altogether. The third is the limit of accommodation, visible in what the EU withheld, suspended or insisted on once compliance failed. The fourth is the addressee, read from the grounds given and the targets of each measure. The record shows what the EU decided and how it justified

itself, not what was said behind closed doors, nor informal coalitions among member states except where their effect is visible.

3. Results

A perspective without candidacy: differentiation on merit

The record of the first stage consists of the Commission's three Opinions of 17 June 2022, the statement with which its President presented them, the European Council's conclusions of the following week, and the communiqué of the Association Council of September. The bid itself was precipitated by the war: the ruling party had announced that it would apply in 2024 and brought the application forward only after Ukraine had applied, on the same day as Moldova (European Commission, 2022a).

The Opinions differentiated on merit, and the distinction was written into their conclusions. Ukraine, the Commission judged, was well advanced in reaching the stability of institutions that the political criteria require, and Moldova had a solid foundation for it in place; for Georgia the same assessment came without the adjective and with a qualification that recent developments had undermined the country's progress (European Commission, 2022a, 2022b). The Opinion on Georgia therefore recommended a European perspective at once and candidate status after twelve priorities had been addressed (European Commission, 2022a). For Ukraine and Moldova the Commission proposed the status without delay, with steps to follow (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c; Table 2). Presenting the Opinions, its President located what Georgia lacked in politics: a clear path of reform that brought civil society on board and enjoyed broad support (von der Leyen, 2022). The European Council adopted the differentiation, declared itself ready to grant the status once the priorities had been met, and tied each applicant's progress to its own merit (European Council, 2022, paras. 12–14); in September the Association Council restated that the path was merit-based (EU–Georgia Association Council, 2022). Nothing in these texts weighed Georgia's strategic value against its shortcomings; the perspective went to all three on the same grounds, and the status was withheld from one on its own record.

At this first stage the two logics worked at different levels. Geopolitics accounts for the offer of a membership perspective, which reached all three applicants within four months of the invasion. Democratic conditionality explains the differentiation among them, a refusal that has been read as punishment applied before any benefit was granted (Rabinovych & Pintsch, 2024). Set against Table 1, the perspective fits the override account on timing; the status matches the conditionality account on pace, terms and addressee. Four months into the war, geopolitics had secured for Georgia's government nothing that its record did not warrant.

Table 2: *The order of status and conditions for the three eastern applicants*

Decision	Order	Grounds stated
Ukraine and Moldova, June 2022	Status at once, steps to follow	Ukraine well advanced; Moldova a solid foundation
Georgia, June 2022	Twelve priorities first, status after	A foundation undermined by recent developments; each country's own merit
Georgia, November–December 2023	Status at once, nine steps to follow	Results since June 2022; citizens' overwhelming support; a sound institutional and civic basis; progress in administration, procurement and the economy

Note. Sources: Council of the European Union (2023a); European Commission (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023a); European Council (2022, 2023).

Candidacy for a society, conditions for its government

Eighteen months later, the order was reversed. Candidate status was recommended and granted with most of the priorities open (Table 3). The Commission's report rated progress on the judiciary and on freedom of expression as limited and judged new electoral amendments inconsistent with one of the priorities (European Commission, 2023b, pp. 5–6, 13). Granting the status with reforms outstanding was not new, since Montenegro and Serbia had received it on similar terms a decade earlier (European Commission, 2010, 2011); what was new for Georgia was that the EU had first insisted on the opposite order.

Compliance cannot explain the change on its own, because it had moved only a little. The positive steps the Commission President acknowledged, closer parliamentary scrutiny by the opposition, a de-oligarchisation action plan and the new Anti-Corruption Bureau, fulfilled no priority (von der Leyen, 2023). The grounds the EU gave point elsewhere. The European Council built its decision on the Commission's package and the Council's conclusions, whose stated reasons concern results achieved, Georgian society and the prospects of reform (European Council, 2023, para. 14; Table 2). The distinction between the society and its rulers was explicit from the start: the College fully supported the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Georgia's citizens, which "need to be better mirrored by the authorities" (von der Leyen, 2023, para. 6). The Council welcomed the country's legislative framework, institutions and vibrant civil society as a sound basis for democratic and rule-of-law reform (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 119).

Geopolitical reasoning was present in the same texts, at another level, and it concerned the process as a whole rather than Georgia: the European Council called enlargement a "geo-strategic investment", the Council stated that Russia's war showed it to be a strategic priority, and the Commission President spoke of what the policy contributes to security (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 4; European Council, 2023, para. 13; von der Leyen, 2023). Member states asserted the merit principle then, seventeen recording that the decisions rested on the Commission's report and nine that the same standards must apply to all candidates (Council of the European Union, 2023b, 2023c). None of the passages on Georgia connected the geopolitical arguments to its upgrade. The silence does not prove that strategy played no part, and the timing suggests it did, since Georgia's status came in the conclusions that opened negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (European Council, 2023, paras. 15–16). What the record establishes is narrower and firmer: where the EU explained this concession, it spoke of a society and of reform, and not of the country's strategic value to the Union.

The grant of candidate status therefore combined the two logics in one act. Its declared grounds were democratic: society's aspirations and the institutions and civic actors on which reform could rest. Its occasion was geopolitical: the war had made the neighbourhood a security question, and the decision came in the package that advanced Ukraine and Moldova. The addressee explains how a reward justified in democratic terms could go to a country whose government had not complied: the status was recognition of a society, received by its rulers on the people's behalf, and directing it there allowed the EU to act at the geopolitical moment without paying those in power for reforms they had not made.

If the status went to society, the conditions could not travel with it, since only the government can deliver them. Table 3 sets the twelve priorities of 2022 against the nine steps attached to candidacy in 2023 and against the wider texts of the same weeks. No open priority disappears as a subject. The nine that the Commission had not judged complete return in seven steps, and what had been a bar to candidacy became a bar to the opening of negotiations.

Two steps were added, both geopolitical in nature: action against disinformation directed at the EU and its values, and closer alignment with the common foreign and security policy. Neither was new as an expectation: the 2022 Opinion had asked for the same convergence, and both demands run through the Council's horizontal paragraphs and its requirements of Serbia (Council of the European Union, 2023a, paras. 9–10, 27, 32; European Commission, 2022a, 2023b, p. 3). What is particular to Georgia is their place among the conditions of candidacy, since neither appears on the lists given to Ukraine and Moldova (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c; Kardava & Chelidze, 2024). Both concern Georgia's orientation between the Union and Russia. Geopolitics thus entered its accession as an obligation laid on the government.

Within the priorities carried over, the shortlist changed character. Named outcomes and benchmarks of 2022 receded, and procedures, external standards and the institutions under pressure in 2023 came forward (Table 3, priorities 3 to 6); the Venice Commission became the yardstick in three steps, and an inclusive process was required in four. Where a result gave way to a plan, as for de-oligarchisation, the demand lost specificity but was not withdrawn, since the report still asked that large-scale vested interests be addressed (priority 5).

Omission from the shortlist was not abandonment: most elements that left it remained in the Commission's report or in the Council's conclusions (Table 3). Nor was retention equivalence: on corruption, the Commission kept the harder demand and the Council's paragraph on Georgia adopted the lighter one, while the same text asked Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Moldova for high-level convictions (Council of the European Union, 2023a, paras. 71, 100, 109, 123). The documents established the difference in wording, not its reason, and attached the steps within a decision that endorsed the wider agenda (European Council, 2023, paras. 14, 16).

Georgia was not singled out in this. Ukraine and Moldova had become candidates with steps to follow, and the European Council made the frameworks for their negotiations wait until the remaining measures had been taken (European Council, 2023, para. 15), a further layer of conditionality applied after the reward (Emerson & Blockmans, 2023; Panchulidze, 2023).

The conditions attached to candidacy therefore show a qualified continuity. The democratic agenda returned condensed and reoriented, its wording less specific in places, and it was extended by two geopolitical requirements. All of it was addressed, as conditions are, to the government; what set the status apart was its recipient, society. The conditions thus stood between those in power and the next reward. Set against Table 1, this stage fits the override account on pace and the conditionality account on terms and addressee, with two geopolitical additions that neither predicts.

Table 3: *The twelve priorities in the nine steps and in the wider texts of November–December 2023*

Priority, June 2022	**Step**	**Change in the shortlist**	**Wider texts**
1 Polarisation	3	Recast as inclusive law-making; 19 April agreement not named	Report: agreement still a yardstick (pp. 13–14)
2 Institutions, electoral framework	4, 5	2024 vote, security services and three institutions named; Venice Commission not named on elections	Council: all state institutions; both bodies on elections (paras. 123–124)
3 Judiciary	6	High Council of Justice and prosecution kept; Supreme Court and nominations not named	Report: Supreme Court appeals, Prosecutor-General's appointment, integrity checks (pp. 20–21)
4 Anti-corruption bodies	7	Independence kept; high-level cases and resources not named	Report: final convictions notably at high level; no body for such cases; resources of the Special Investigative Service (pp. 5, 27, 31). Council: a record of investigating (para. 123)
5 De-oligarchisation	8	Outcome replaced by a systemic action plan	Report: large-scale vested interests to be addressed (pp. 5, 25)
6 Organised crime	7	Reduced to a record of investigations	Report: investigations, prosecutions, final convictions; analytical capacity and oversight (p. 42). Council, all partners: final convictions, confiscation (para. 7)
7 Media	5, 9	Regulator, free expression, journalists' safety; pluralism and owners' trials not named	Council: media freedom and pluralism (para. 125). Report: proceedings against opposition owners frequent (p. 6)
8 Vulnerable groups	9	Kept; freedom of assembly added	Report: prosecute organisers of Pride violence (p. 28)
9 Gender equality	—	Completed	—
10 Civil society	9	Kept; freedom to operate added; all levels not named	Report: engagement at all levels (p. 12). Council: operate freely (para. 121)
11 Strasbourg judgments	—	Completed	—
12 Public Defender	—	Completed	—
—	1	Disinformation against the EU: raised into the shortlist	Report, under priority 1 (p. 9); Council (paras. 10, 122)
—	2	Foreign-policy alignment: raised into the shortlist	Opinion 2022; report (p. 9); Council (paras. 9, 127)

Note. Priorities, verdicts and page numbers follow European Commission (2023b); steps follow European Commission (2023a); paragraph numbers refer to Council of the European Union (2023a); the Opinion is European Commission (2022a).

A breach of the conditions, a status retained

Two months after the decision, the EU still treated the government as a partner. At the Association Council of February 2024 it took note of the action plan for the nine steps, recorded that membership was a goal supported by Georgia's people, government and political spectrum, and welcomed cooperation against sanctions circumvention and contributions to CSDP missions, while insisting on reform and alignment (EU–Georgia Association Council, 2024).

What was new in 2024 was that the government no longer merely left the conditions unmet but legislated against them. In the spring, the law on transparency of foreign influence was reintroduced, adopted and enacted over a presidential veto (von der Leyen, 2024). The contrast with 2023 made the law decisive: withdrawn that year after mass protests, it was passed now in spite of them and against the EU's explicit warnings, and it was aimed at the civic actors that the EU had counted among the grounds for expecting reform. The High Representative and the Commission measured it against the conditions of candidacy, backsliding on at least three of the nine steps, on disinformation, polarisation and fundamental rights and civil society, and affirmed that the EU stood with the Georgian people (High Representative & European Commission, 2024). The same statement invoked the Venice Commission's urgent opinion, which had found the law's defects to go to its core and recommended repeal (Venice Commission, 2024). Legal analysis has held the law contrary to Article 78 of Georgia's Constitution, which obliges public bodies to pursue integration into the EU and NATO, and closer in design and effect to Russia's foreign-agent legislation than to the American statute its sponsors cited (Gegenava et al., 2025; Lapa & Frosini, 2024). By the EU's own count, one law had set back a geopolitical requirement and two democratic ones. Anti-EU rhetoric intensified at the same time; the Commission recorded recurrent harsh messages against the EU from high-level officials of the ruling party (Borrell, 2024a; European Commission, 2024c).

The European Council drew the consequence in June. It read the law as backsliding on the steps set out for candidate status and called on the authorities to reverse a course that was "de facto leading to a halt of the accession process", while insisting on an end to the intimidation of civil society representatives, politicians, activists and journalists and reiterating its solidarity with the Georgian people (European Council, 2024a, paras. 36–39); in October it repeated the finding (European Council, 2024b). The Commission's assessment of that month kept insufficient commitment to the nine steps apart from the new laws and the anti-EU narratives of officials, derived the halt from the latter, and demanded both a return to the shortlist and the repeal of the legislation (European Commission, 2024b). The Council followed the same pattern, as did the Presidency conclusions of December 2025, supported by 26 delegations (Council of the European Union, 2024, paras. 134–138; Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2025, para. 128). No document defines in general where tolerated backward steps end and a reversed course begins; on this article's reading, the line fell at legislation and intimidation directed against the civic actors on which the EU had rested its expectation of reform. In November 2024 the government removed the remaining ambiguity by renouncing the opening of negotiations until 2028 (European Commission, 2025a, 2025c; European Council, 2024c), and the EU's reply again attributed the halt to the authorities' conduct and once more addressed itself to the Georgian people, from whose aspirations the announcement was said to depart (Kallas & Kos, 2024).

The measures that followed, from June 2024 to March 2026, were aimed at those in power. Political contacts were downgraded, defence assistance and direct funding for the government were put on hold, and the visa facilitation agreement was suspended for officials and diplomatic passport holders. The exemption from visas for the same categories followed in 2026, while support was redirected to civil society and independent media. Targeted sanctions against those responsible were discussed and not adopted, for want of unanimity (Borrell, 2024b; Chkhikvadze, 2025; Council of the European Union, 2025; European Commission, 2025a, 2026; European Parliament, 2025). Each measure is a suspension, not a termination, and the accompanying texts distinguish government from population throughout.

Candidate status itself was retained. Reversibility is a declared principle of the process (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 2; European Commission, 2022a), yet no candidate has ever had the status withdrawn, so its retention is the rule rather than a decision taken on Georgia; revocation would in any case require a unanimity that was unavailable even for targeted sanctions. The Commission speaks of a candidate country in name only (European Commission, 2025b, 2025c), and in the EU's discourse the designation has two uses: the standard against which the authorities fall short, and the link to a society whose aspirations the EU continues to endorse (Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2025, paras. 124–125).

What the EU reacted to was not the shortfalls it had already known. Unfinished reform had been compatible with candidacy, and so had backward steps: the 2023 report recorded them within an overall judgment of progress, alongside a government that declared membership its goal (European Commission, 2023b, pp. 3, 4, 13, 16). Low alignment and anti-EU rhetoric were not new either; the Commission had noted both before candidacy, and the government's claim that the EU sought a second front in Georgia had already been put to the High Representative in Tbilisi (Borrell, 2023; European Commission, 2023a, 2023b, p. 9). Alignment stood at 44 per cent in 2022, at 43 in August 2023 and at 49 a year later, and it fell, to 40, only in 2025, after the halt (European Commission, 2023b, p. 9, 2024c, 2025c); a fall in it cannot explain what followed.

The halt is thus explained by the government's breach of the conditions, and the geopolitical considerations that had brought candidacy forward did not prevent it. The two judgments converged because the same conduct offended both: the law set back steps of each kind, and the rhetoric that accompanied it was directed at the Union with whose foreign policy Georgia had been asked to align. The limit of accommodation lay where the government broke the terms of its own candidacy and acted against the society in whose name that status had been given. The response followed the line drawn in December 2023: advancement, which depended on the government, was withheld; recognition stayed. Set against Table 1, the third stage matches the conditionality account on limit and addressee and contradicts the override account on both.

Discussion

Geopolitics and democratic conditionality did not compete in the EU's decisions at any of the three stages. Set against Table 1, the override account holds in one respect, the timing of the two offers, and fails on terms, limit and addressee throughout; the conditionality account is borne out everywhere else. The two logics could coexist because they bore on different things: geopolitics on the sequence of rewards and on the strategic requirements, democratic conditionality on the reforms demanded and on the point at which accommodation ended. The concession was confined to recognition, addressed to society, so bringing it forward did not loosen the conditions on the government; once the process stopped, the same distinction decided whom the EU's restrictions reached. The trade-off that one strand of the literature expects (Dimitrova, 2024; Schimmelfennig, 2023) did not occur. The case bounds that view rather than refuting it. Its mechanism, a Union sparing a government it needs, presupposes rulers who still deliver strategic value; in the EU's assessment, which reads alignment as the sign of a country's choice, Georgia's no longer did, and by 2026 the High Representative said so (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 127; European Commission, 2024c; Kallas, 2026). What failed was the expectation that recognition would move the government.

That failure follows from the arrangement itself, and the model shows why. In its own terms, the Georgian case satisfies three of its four conditions. The reward was large and, after December 2023, came fast; the determinacy of the demands declined but did not vanish (Table 3); and the threat was credible, since the EU withheld advancement and downgraded relations once the conditions were breached. The condition not met was the balance of adoption costs. For a ruling party whose use of geopolitical narratives as a resource of rule has been documented (Ekman, 2026), reforms of the judiciary, of electoral administration and of oligarchic influence came at a high domestic price, and its renunciation of negotiations in November 2024 shows how it weighed them against the next reward. Conditionality was therefore credible in Georgia without being effective, which the model accommodates (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004).

What the model does not accommodate is the reward that had already been given. In its account a reward changes a government's conduct because it comes at the price of compliance (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Inducement and demands alike are directed at those in power; society enters through the second channel as a lever, not as a recipient. Recognition, however, could go to a society whose wish to join was not in doubt, since only advancement depends on its rulers. A status granted on account of society was not a price paid for compliance, so it rewarded no reform, and the EU, having conferred it on the people, could not withdraw it as a penalty without penalising the population itself. The model's conditions concern the reward's size, speed, determinacy and credibility and the government's costs; the Georgian case adds its addressee, a channel through which a benefit can reach a society without passing through the bargain with its rulers.

Georgia's strategic importance, for its part, did not protect those in power. Cooperation short of membership was acknowledged (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 120; EU–Georgia Association Council, 2024). Membership asks something else, whether a state can take part in the Union's own decisions,

which is what alignment tests and only a government can deliver. That is why the Council calls alignment a strong expression of a partner's strategic choice (Council of the European Union, 2023a, para. 9), and why the High Representative told his hosts in Tbilisi that a Union deciding by consensus must know that a future member can join a common position (Borrell, 2023). The strategic return on accession is thus something a government's course can secure or waste, not a fixed asset of the state. The expectation that geopolitics would weaken the threat of exclusion was not met, because a government that turns away from the EU removes the reason for sparing it (Schimmelfennig, 2023).

The arrangement also explains where the EU now stands. The deadlock is in the accession process, not in the relationship. The EU cannot advance the country without rewarding the government, nor revoke the status without taking it from the society to which it was given; what remains is a title without a process. Proposals for staged accession, or for Georgia's sectoral integration in energy and transport (Bazhunaishvili & Gorgiladze, 2025; Emerson & Blockmans, 2023), still pass through the government that has renounced the process.

Accounts of geopolitical enlargement locate the shift in the decisions on status and negotiations while the declared strategy keeps its merit-based principles (Schimmelfennig, 2024); the Georgian case shows that they were also kept in practice. In Ukraine and Moldova the same pressure met governments that took the steps asked of them, and talks began with both (European Council, 2023, para. 15; Kintsurashvili & Pleșca, 2026; Popova, 2026). The contrast suggests that what decides the relation between the two logics is less the EU's interest than the applicant government's ownership of the European course (Mesarovich & Schumacher, 2025). One configuration marks the case's limit: rulers who fail the democratic test while still delivering the strategic cooperation the EU seeks, the stability–democratisation dilemma documented for the Western Balkans and, before 2022, for the eastern neighbourhood (Bieber, 2018; Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Richter & Wunsch, 2020), which Georgia, falling short on both reform and alignment, cannot show.

Conclusion

Geopolitics and democratic conditionality operated as complementary logics in the EU's documented decisions on Georgia, but their combination did not secure the government's commitment to reform. In 2022 the EU held out membership to all three eastern applicants but withheld candidacy from Georgia on merit; in 2023 it advanced recognition while retaining democratic reform as a condition of progress. This continuity was qualified, since some benchmarks lost specificity, but outstanding requirements were carried forward and supplemented by demands on foreign-policy alignment and anti-EU disinformation. Nor was candidacy unique in coming before compliance, since Ukraine and Moldova also received it with steps to follow. Unfinished reform and low alignment were accommodated; legislation against the civic actors on whom the EU had counted was not, and at that point the two assessments converged in the European Council's conclusion that the process had de facto stopped, which the government confirmed by renouncing negotiations. What geopolitics altered was the sequence of rewards; it did not amount to abandoning the democratic agenda.

The way recognition was justified helps explain this combination. Candidate status was presented as an answer to society's European aspirations and the prospect of future reform, while the government remained responsible for compliance. This separation enabled the EU to affirm its commitment to Georgia without treating its rulers' record as sufficient for advancement. The article's theoretical contribution is to add the addressee of a reward to the dimensions the external incentives model considers: recognition offered in society's name need not perform the same function as a benefit earned through government compliance, and its role in sustaining a country's European course deserves attention alongside its capacity to induce reform.

The outcome also exposes the limits of this arrangement. Opening negotiations and eventual membership remained conditional rewards, but withholding advancement did not persuade the government to accept the political price of reform, which is consistent with the model's emphasis on domestic adoption costs. What the case makes clear is the distance between credible and effective conditionality. Nor did strategic importance shield those in power, since the return the EU sought lay in alignment, which fell further only after the halt; the trade-off that part of the literature expects presupposes rulers who still deliver such value, and Georgia's had ceased to. The restrictions that followed were aimed at the authorities, not at society. Retaining the status preserved a commitment to the country while leaving the EU with a candidacy it can neither advance nor revoke, and an accession process without a government prepared to fulfil its conditions.

For enlargement policy, the Georgian experience shows that strategic expectations can be incorporated into accession conditionality alongside democratic requirements. It also suggests that offering recognition

earlier cannot by itself overcome a divergence between society's European aspirations and the government's political priorities. Supporting society and inducing government reform are distinct tasks.

These conclusions concern the EU's decisions and public justifications, not the balance of motives in confidential bargaining. Georgia's government fell short on both reform and the strategic orientation the EU expected, so the case cannot show how the Union responds when democratic shortcomings coexist with cooperation it values. Whether Serbia, held to the same two requirements while its negotiations continue, presents that configuration remains to be examined, and Moldova and Ukraine would allow closer study of how government commitment to accession shapes the EU's handling of reform demands. Together, these comparisons would help settle when geopolitical urgency strengthens conditionality and when it facilitates the accommodation of non-compliance.

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