



# TWO SCENARIOS

FOR THE DECISION ON  
GEORGIA'S EU CANDIDATE STATUS:  
IMPLICATIONS AND  
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS





საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



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## SCENARIO REPORT

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**The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)** is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building and developing democratic processes. The organization aims to become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation for the country of Georgia and the wider Black sea region. To that end, GIP is working to distinguish itself through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a bold spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation.

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## Executive summary

### What are the most probable consequences if Georgia is granted EU candidate status in October 2023? What can be expected if it is not?

This report explores both scenarios. This analysis is based on desk research, insights from a focus group and personal interviews conducted with Georgian experts working on EU issues. The focus group offered general insights and outlined the two scenarios. The results were supplemented by extensive desk-research to fill the remaining gaps. Analysis of both scenarios reveals significant risks and opportunities for Georgia. Under the positive/optimistic scenario, Georgia will have an opportunity to mend its strained relationship with the EU. But this depends on the extent to which the Georgian government fulfills its own obligations, and agrees to a power sharing arrangement such as that envisaged in the Charles Michel agreement between it and opposition parties in 2021<sup>1</sup>. While this would not eradicate polarization within Georgia, granting candidate status would be the best way to advance a reform agenda that would strengthen Georgian democratic institutions, and mitigate further radicalization in Georgian politics. Concurrently, the EU would likely enhance its geopolitical influence in the region and encourage Georgia to align more closely with it. However, there is a risk of further political deadlock if the incumbent government monopolizes the credit for these developments without making tangible progress on essential reforms.

In the case of the negative scenario, the EU's (geo)political influence in Georgia and the volatile South Caucasus region is likely to weaken. Its soft power may decline, leading to a concomitant strengthening of Russian malign influence. The consequences for Georgia could be even more severe, potentially plunging the country into a cycle of intensified polarization, political instability, and authoritarianism. Georgia may become detached from Europe and the Associated Trio, both geopolitically and normatively. Its vulnerability to Russian hybrid warfare tactics, propaganda, domestic interference, and corruption will increase, potentially derailing Georgia from its democratic development and Western integration.

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<sup>1</sup> EU Neighbours East, "'A Way Ahead for Georgia'. Proposal by President of the European Council Charles Michel to the Representatives of Georgian Political Parties," April 23, 2021, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/a-way-ahead-for-georgia-proposal-by-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-to-the-representatives-of-georgian-political-parties/>.

# Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine and subsequent confrontation between Moscow and the West exposed Georgia to increasing risks and uneasy choices but also opened up unique opportunities such as an EU membership perspective. EU decided to accelerate the integration process of the Associated Trio countries and grant all three an EU membership perspective. However, Brussels granted membership candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova but required Georgia to fulfill a number of political conditions before it could qualify. Many pro-European Georgians perceived the European Council's decision as a missed opportunity. This perception is rooted in the fact that Georgia used to be a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership project, and it is now one step behind the rest of the Associated Trio. Global geopolitical uncertainty was accompanied by traditional domestic problems such as polarization, radicalization, informal governance, as well as various socio-economic issues. As a result, the country experienced a continuous political and economic crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Georgia's democratic decline<sup>3</sup> is occurring at a critical juncture, as the European Commission is set to release its annual enlargement report in beginning of November. This report will include recommendations for future engagement with Georgia. By December, a vote by the 27 EU member states will determine the acceptance or rejection of these recommendations. This pivotal moment places Georgia in a precarious situation, challenging its dedication to democratic principles and influencing its foreign policy direction, thereby amplifying uncertainties regarding the country's political and institutional future. This report presents probable short-term consequences of two scenarios in EU-Georgia relations: Georgia receiving EU membership candidate status or being denied it. The report outlines the major risks and opportunities associated with both scenarios.

Methodologically, the report draws on desk-research, foresight analysis and a focus group with experts. The focus group involved renowned local policy experts and was the primary inspiration for the two scenarios, providing the determining factors behind each. The experts were assigned the task of identifying key negative and positive implications of each scenario. These factors were then categorized into significant risks and opportunities for both Georgia and the EU in each scenario and were augmented by intensive desk research.

The time horizon of the two scenarios presented in the report spans up to twelve months after the decision by the EU. This period stretches from the time of the EU decision on whether to grant Georgia candidate status until the Georgian election scheduled for October 2024.

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Governance Index 2022. Georgian Institute of Politics, <https://gip.ge/publication-post/the-georgia-governance-index-ggi-2022/>

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2023. Georgia.," 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/nations-transit/2023>.



# The „YES“ Scenario:

Georgia Obtains Candidate Status



## „YES” Scenario Description

In this scenario, the EU decides to grant Georgia candidate status. The European Commission (EC) acknowledges some progress on the 12 recommendations,<sup>4</sup> leading the EU to impose further preconditions that the Georgian government must satisfy to advance to the negotiation phase. As the EU aims to anchor Georgia within its newly defined geopolitical sphere, one key condition for Georgia could be to ensure closer alignment of its foreign policy with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).<sup>5</sup> As suggested by some EU policymakers, the EU could use the so called “Bosnian scenario” as well, where EU member states granted candidate status to Sarajevo, underlying that decision was taken for the “people of Bosnia and Herzegovina”<sup>6</sup>, hoping that political leaders can turn this ambition into reality through decisive reforms. Another, less likely approach could be to grant candidate status but also warn of the potential withdrawal if Georgia fails to fully implement the 12 recommendations and additional conditions imposed by the EC.<sup>7</sup>

## Opportunities

Being granted candidate status in October 2023 could present several opportunities for both Georgia and the EU. In Georgia, in the best-case scenario, achieving the status could stabilize the political landscape, empower pro-reform actors, reduce polarization and party-led radicalization, enhance the country’s international reputation, attract increased investments, and render the Europeanization process and reform agenda more difficult to reverse. For the EU, this development would augment its influence over Georgia’s reform initiatives, boost its transformative power and counter anti-EU disinformation, and enhance its geopolitical standing in the strategically pivotal South Caucasus and Black Sea regions.

## Empowerment of pro-reform actors

In the best-case scenario granting EU candidate status to Georgia could empower pro-reform stakeholders including civil society, grassroots movements, independent media, human rights activists, and increase pressure on reform-resistant actors including the incumbent government. This could accelerate the reform process as the government will feel double pressure both from local actors and the international community.

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<sup>4</sup> Open Society Georgia Foundation. “EU Candidacy Check 6.0 - How Is Georgia Progressing towards Fulfilling 12 Priorities Defined by the EU Candidacy Check – CSOs’ Final Assessments,” September 15, 2023. <https://osgf.ge/en/eu-candidacy-check-6-0-how-is-georgia-progressing-towards-fulfilling-12-priorities-defined-by-the-eu-eu-candidacy-check-csos-final-assessments/>

<sup>5</sup> Akobia, Eka. “Georgia’s (Mis)Alignment with the EU Foreign Policy.” Civil Georgia, May 18, 2023. <https://civil.ge/archives/542831>

<sup>6</sup> EEAS. “EU Candidate Status for Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Message to the People and a Tasking for Politicians,” December 19, 2022. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-candidate-status-bosnia-and-herzegovina-message-people-and-tasking-politicians-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-candidate-status-bosnia-and-herzegovina-message-people-and-tasking-politicians-0_en).

<sup>7</sup> GPB First Channel, “MEP von Cramon Believes Georgia Might Get EU Candidate Status with Revoke Clause Compromise,” September 7, 2023, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/mep-von-cramon-believes-georgia-might-get-eu-candidate-status-with-revoke-clause-compromise/>

Granting candidate status to Georgia could also partly mitigate societal polarization and party-led radicalization. However, given Georgia's tumultuous recent history, highly adversarial political culture,<sup>8</sup> and high degree of political radicalization, such a positive outcome may well remain wishful thinking even if Georgia gets the status. For this to be realized, the EU and other external actors might need to play a more significant role, by assisting both government and opposition forces in Georgia to agree on new rules that transcend the zero-sum mentality currently afflicting Georgia's political system. As Georgian democracy faces increasing challenges, the only way to stabilize the country is to support a multi-party political system and institutionalisation of consensus-based democratic processes. In this regard, if Georgia gets candidate status, the next step to challenge Georgia's polarized politics could be the involvement of Georgian political parties in the EU's Jean Monnet Dialogue.

### **Georgia's Potential Return to Reform path**

Addressing the candidate status issue could allow Georgia to catch up with Ukraine and Moldova, and revive the country's recent stagnation on the reform agenda. Although Georgia continues to partly outperform other Associated Trio countries in the approximation of the EU acquis under the AA and DCFTA, democratic rollback and geopolitical missteps by the current government have tarnished its standing. Achieving candidate status could rehabilitate Georgia's international reputation, attract international investors, and rejuvenate the strained EU-Georgia relationship. It may also facilitate the transformation of EU-Georgia bilateral relations, leading to increased political stability and opening the door for enhanced collaboration on mutual interests and regional challenges.

### **Enhanced EU Influence in the Region**

The EU stands to gain several significant benefits by granting candidate status to Georgia. Firstly, it would bolster the EU's geopolitical role not only in Georgia but across the entire region. It would alleviate a major point of contention for the Georgian government in its dealings with the EU. With less pressure to account for its failure to secure EU candidate status to its domestic audience, the Georgian Dream (GD) government might pivot from Eurosceptic rhetoric to a less antagonistic stance.

Furthermore, there might be an enhanced effort from the GD government to increase alignment with EU policy. However, while solving the question of candidate status would remove a major political irritant and ease tension, it might not be sufficient to prevent GD from sliding into authoritarianism and increasing Russian influence. This stance is intricately tied to Georgia's precarious geopolitical position, a vulnerability exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, resolving the candidate status issue could still amplify the EU's geopolitical influence in the region. Especially, in the context of the EU's strategic absence during the Nagorno Karabakh crisis, maintaining a strong presence in Georgia could be a key pillar of EU geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus region. Granting candidate status to Georgia is also likely to send a clear signal to Russia about the irreversible nature of Europeanization in Georgia. It can also potentially strengthen Georgia's resilience against the malign influences of not just Russia, but also China. Additionally, this move can help foster

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<sup>8</sup> Archil Gegeshidze and Thomas De Waal, "Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization," *Carnegie Europe*, December 8, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/12/08/divided-georgia-hostage-to-polarization-pub-85937>.



stability in the region and promote the democratization process.

Despite the GD government's Eurosceptic transgressions, the idea of European integration remains one of the few common denominators uniting Georgian society.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, granting candidate status may bolster Georgia's national unity and societal cohesion, and strengthen the country's societal resilience amid the increasing hybrid and military threats emanating from Russia.

### **Enhanced Impact on Georgia's Europeanization Process**

A positive decision regarding Georgia's EU candidate status is likely to amplify the EU's influence over Georgia's reform process. The effectiveness of democratic conditionality arguably increases when incentives are perceived as more attainable, particularly for the general public, which keeps pushing the government every time it derails from the EU integration path. With candidate status, Georgia may be more motivated to implement the necessary reforms to progress to the subsequent phase. The EU can apply democratic conditionality more effectively when it adheres to a strict timetable and the subsequent steps are imminent. Conversely, without candidate status, the prospect of European integration may appear more abstract and unattainable in the short term.

## **Risks**

While the positive scenario of Georgia obtaining candidate status holds potential benefits for both the EU and Georgia, it is not without risks. These include the GD government's continued progression towards authoritarian consolidation.<sup>10</sup> Candidate status might also prove insufficient motivation for the GD government to abandon its anti-reform agenda and anti-Western rhetoric.

### **EU Candidacy Could Strengthen the Incumbent Government**

Awarding candidate status to Georgia without the country fully satisfying the EC recommendations might bolster the GD government's legitimacy and reinforce its stance against domestic pro-reform entities such as civil society actors. Even though the EU seems motivated to grant Georgia candidate status despite insufficient performance from the government, there is no guarantee that the GD government would react by expediting democratic reforms and progressing to the negotiation stage. The GD's lack of political will to deliver on reforms could still be considered a stumbling block to candidate status. Conversely, it might exploit this development to enhance its public standing, undermine the opposition, and secure a landslide victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections. If the government chooses this path, it is likely to exacerbate polarization and radicalization, entrench authoritarianism, divert Georgia from its path towards European integration, and increase susceptibility to Russian malign influence. The EU will have given away its primary incentive – candidate status – to no avail.

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<sup>9</sup> Civil Georgia, "IRI Poll Shows Strong Support of Georgian Citizens for EU Membership," April 25, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/538790>.

<sup>10</sup> Liana Fix and Caroline Kapp, "The Dangers of Democratic Backsliding in Georgia," June 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/dangers-democratic-backsliding-georgia>.

## Reputational damage for the EU

The EU may also suffer reputational damage if it grants Georgia candidate status despite a lack of progress on reforms and Eurosceptic rhetoric from the GD government (Interview 1, 4). The EU already faces difficulties with geopolitically disloyal actors such as Hungary's Viktor Orban (Ibid). Granting status to Georgia, which behaves similarly, may decrease trust in the enlargement process within the EU (Interview 2).

## Georgia Might Remain in Russia's Geopolitical Orbit Despite Candidate Status

Another risk accompanying the potential granting of candidate status to Georgia lies in the country's current foreign policy trajectory that ostensibly seeks to balance relations with the EU and its policy of balancing with Russia.<sup>11</sup> There's no guarantee that this status would motivate the Georgian government to pull away from Russia and reorient itself towards the EU. In the worst-case scenario, the GD government might exploit candidate status to secure victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections without altering its foreign policy trajectory, currently characterized by the facilitation of increasing Russian influence in Georgia and anti-Western rhetoric.<sup>12</sup>

The GD might persist in diversifying its foreign policy, veering towards more illiberal actors beyond Russia.<sup>13</sup> An intensification of its strategic partnership with China, established in a recently signed agreement, could be a potential outcome<sup>14</sup>.

Should Georgia maintain its Russia-accommodating policy and advance further towards EU membership, the EU will risk having another Russian "Trojan Horse" among its ranks, similar to countries like Hungary and potentially Serbia (Interview 5).

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Georgia's Diplomatic Balancing Act Is Getting Harder To Pull Off," RFE/RL, May 22, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-diplomatic-balancing-act-russia/32422820.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Kornely Kakachia, "Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times," Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst Feature Article (September 5, 2022), [https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/220905\\_FT-Georgia.pdf](https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/220905_FT-Georgia.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Irina Arabidze, "Georgia Plays Footsie With the Authoritarian Bloc," CEPA, August 23, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/georgia-plays-footsie-with-the-authoritarian-bloc/>.

<sup>14</sup> Saba Gujabidze, "Georgia's Strategic Relationship With China Worries Partners in the West. Voice of America," VOA News, August 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/georgia-s-strategic-relationship-with-china-worries-partners-in-west-/7227496.html>.

**Table 1: Risks and opportunities of the “YES” Scenario**



**Opportunities**

Boost to EU geopolitical influence in Georgia and the Black Sea region.

A clear message will be sent to Russia.

The EU will gain more influence over Georgia’s reform process and internal political dynamics.

The EU’s engagement in the region will expand.

Enable potential empowerment of pro-reform actors.

Europeanization will become more institutionalized.

Institutional dialogue with the EU will intensify.

Georgia will be included in pan-European strategic talks about the future of Europe.

Georgia’s international reputation will rise.

**Risks**

Decreased leverage on Georgia’s reform process by giving away the “golden carrot”.

EU may suffer reputational damage.

Georgia may turn into a “Trojan Horse” of Russian influence in the EU.

The GD government may exploit the candidate status for its own political benefit.

Far-right forces may intensify their activities in Georgia.

# The „NO“ Scenario:

Georgia Fails to Obtain Candidate Status



## „NO“ Scenario Description

In this scenario, the EU decides not to grant Georgia candidate status due to lack of progress on reforms. Instead, it demands more progress in the implementation of the 12 recommendations issued by the European Commission (EC) before a positive decision is taken. The EU further criticizes Georgia's foreign policy ambiguity and its failure to align with the EU's foreign policy, demanding more clarity from Tbilisi on its geopolitical orientation.

### Opportunities

While the experts generally view the “No” scenario as riskier than the “Yes” scenario, it could still yield positive outcomes for both the EU and Georgia. For Georgia, this outcome could spur new political dynamics, fostering an environment more conducive to the democratization and Europeanization of the country. Meanwhile, withholding candidate status and exerting negative conditionality on the incumbent government and other political entities in Georgia would allow the EU to maintain leverage and more effectively exert pressure against democratic backsliding.

### New Political Dynamics in Georgia

Should Georgia fail to secure candidate status, the country might plunge into another political crisis. This could weaken the GD government, as popular opinion turns against it for its inability to achieve candidate status. Consequently, civil society and even the largely fragmented opposition could witness a boost in popular support since there is high public support for EU membership. Such a shift might culminate in a change of government in the 2024 elections or steer the government towards a more reform-friendly approach to limit the damage to its electoral support.

However, this scenario is not assured. Georgia's electoral politics remain heavily influenced by domestic dynamics.<sup>15</sup> Like most hybrid regimes, GD possesses overwhelming administrative and oligarchic resources, co-opted businesses, and a largely supine judiciary.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the political playing field between government and opposition remains uneven.<sup>17</sup> There is no certainty that the opposition can regain substantial support from disenchanted voters. On the other hand, it is also not guaranteed that the GD government will become more reform-oriented or open to cooperation since pre-election periods are often dominated by negative campaigns and increased polarization. However, if the opposition, against all odds, succeeds in defeating the GD government in the elections and forms a multi-party coalition, this could usher in a new era of EU-Georgia relations, with Georgia potentially advancing much faster on the path to EU membership.

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<sup>15</sup> Régis Genté, “Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe,” December 21, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/>.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Jones and Natalie Sabanadze, “Elections Are Not Enough: Georgia Needs a New Model of Democracy,” Eurasianet, May 10, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-elections-are-not-enough-georgia-needs-a-new-model-of-democracy>.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Jones and Natalie Sabanadze, “Elections Are Not Enough: Georgia Needs a New Model of Democracy,” Eurasianet, May 10, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-elections-are-not-enough-georgia-needs-a-new-model-of-democracy>.



## Protecting the EU's normative integrity

From the EU's perspective, declining to grant candidate status to Georgia in 2023 could indicate a shift towards negative conditionality in dealings with the Georgian government. This approach might be effective in situations where pro-democratic factions are robust and the ruling regime is frail and unpopular. From this perspective, Georgia's political landscape is likely to remain fluid and unpredictable. If a new political forces or events emerge, they could quickly change the political dynamics in the country.

Declining candidate status to Georgia in the absence of progress may underline the EU's moral integrity and its consistent approach to enlargement as a merit-based process (Interview 3). The EU and its member states will also find it easier to justify any future similar decisions on countries underperforming on their reform agendas in a similar way. By withholding candidate status, the EU may temporarily avoid getting overly entangled in Georgia, which has proven to be a problematic country, and focus more on the Moldova-Ukraine duo (Interview 4).

## Risks

Postponing Georgia's candidate status entails several risks for both the EU and Georgia. For Georgia, such a delay could lead to further erosion of democratic institutions, increased authoritarian consolidation, additional political destabilization, and an accelerated drift away from the EU, potentially resulting in Georgia becoming a satellite state of Russia.

The EU also faces substantial risks in this scenario. Its soft power and reputation in the region could suffer, and its geopolitical influence in Georgia is likely to diminish, potentially elevating Russia to a hegemonic position in the region.

## Deepening Polarization and Authoritarian Consolidation

The denial of candidate status could spur the GD government to hasten authoritarian consolidation. The regime might deduce that democratic momentum has waned and, for its domestic survival, needs to suppress the opposition and civil society while fortifying the authoritarian apparatus of oppression. Here, it is important to differentiate between authoritarian consolidation and democratic stagnation. So far, the GD government has mostly failed to implement the necessary reforms, resulting in democratic stagnation or a slight rollback of democratic institutions. However, the denial of candidate status may give the GD carte blanche and the motivation to fully demolish existing democratic structures and establish a more overtly authoritarian regime (Interview 3). Authoritarian consolidation may be accompanied by further political rapprochement with Russia, as the GD government will require support from large authoritarian states in order to establish a stable authoritarian regime in Georgia (Interview 3).

Conversely, the opposition might seize upon the GD's failure, calling for the government's resignation. This clash could exacerbate polarization and deepen the chasm between the opposition and the government in the lead-up to the pivotal 2024 elections.

## **Deepening of political instability**

This stalemate could plunge the nation into a prolonged political crisis, characterized by protests and civil disobedience from the opposition and by forceful responses from the government. Moreover, should GD secure a victory in the 2024 elections, it could lead to a further deterioration of relations with the EU. Frustrated by the EU's refusal to grant candidate status to Georgia, the GD government may persist and even intensify its efforts to cozy up to Russia, China, and other illiberal actors, to the detriment of the EU's interests in the region. In the long run, estrangement from the EU (and the West) is likely to lead to demographic and socio-economic decline. The rate of irregular migration and brain drain may increase as a significant portion of the population becomes disillusioned with the government and the country's political situation. Economic and regulatory reforms, especially those aimed at harmonizing with the EU's *acquis*, may lose momentum, leading to less competitive economic structures within the country.

## **Loss of EU's geopolitical influence and termination of the Associated Trio**

This development could erode the EU's geopolitical influence in Georgia and the broader South Caucasus region. With Azerbaijan already a consolidated authoritarian petrostate and Armenia in disarray, Georgia, with its strongly pro-EU public sentiments, retains the medium and long-term potential to remain the EU's key partner in the region, even with the current government's ambiguous and inconsistent foreign policy. However, denying candidate status could hasten Georgia's geopolitical and normative drift towards a more transactional, distant relationship with the EU that is rooted in pragmatism rather than shared values.

In the event of a "no-status" scenario, another potential casualty could be the Associated Trio format, which has been in crisis since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It might finally fall apart if the disparity in European integration between Georgia and the two other countries widens further. This would be a significant loss not only for Georgia as a country and society, but also for the EU since the Associated Trio has acted as a lynchpin of EU geopolitical influence in an otherwise authoritarian region.

## **Decline in EU's Soft Power**

Another considerable risk of a denial of candidate status, is the widespread public disillusionment that would ensue, regarding Georgia's European integration prospects. Vulnerable segments of society, already beset by myriad challenges, would be especially vulnerable to this disenchantment. It could foster a sense of apathy and hopelessness regarding the country's future trajectory and the attainability of European standards of living and governance.

Moreover, this disappointment may be exacerbated by the potent influence of disinformation and antiEU propaganda. These malicious campaigns, already operational, could gain traction, feeding off the prevailing despondency and effectively magnifying it.<sup>18</sup> It could paint the EU as an unreliable partner, fomenting skepticism and eroding trust in the Union's commitments and intentions.

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<sup>18</sup> Euronews, "Anti-EU Protests in Georgia: Are They Staged or Real?," March 16, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/16/anti-eu-protests-in-georgia-are-they-staged-or-real>.

**Table 2: Risks and opportunities of the “No” Scenario**



**The European Union**



**Georgia**

**Opportunities**

Empowerment of pro-reform actors by using negative conditionality.

Showcasing normative integrity and importance of enlargement as a merit-based process.

Potential increase in popular support in civil society sector.

Potential increase in the competitiveness of the opposition in the next election.

**Risks**

Decline of the EU’s reputation and fall in popular support for Georgia’s EU integration.

Decline of EU’s soft power in the region.

Emboldening of pro-Russian (far-right) forces.

Further democratic decline.

Political estrangement from Europe.

Political destabilization

Breakup of the Associated Trio.

Georgia becomes the reform laggard of the region.

Increase in emigration & brain drain.

Societal frustration.

Stalled reforms.

Stalled EU integration process.

## Conclusion

This report has outlined the probable consequences of two distinct scenarios – the granting of EU candidate status to Georgia and the potential repercussions of a denial. The EU's core dilemma appears to center around engaging with Georgia's erratic and increasingly authoritarian government, which has only partially met the conditions laid out by the EC and has taken a conciliatory approach to relations with Russia.<sup>19</sup> A comprehensive examination of both scenarios reveals opportunities and significant risks inherent in each. However, on consideration of the broader political and regional context, **granting candidate status to Georgia in 2023 emerges as the relatively safer option for the EU.**

There are three reasons for this conclusion. Firstly, although Georgia's democratic reforms have stalled and the GD government has failed to capitalize on the political momentum for EU expansion following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Georgia still aligns itself with the (semi-) democratic image of other candidate countries in the EaP and Western Balkans. Georgia's democratic record does not clearly fall short of those of these countries. Similarly, while Georgia's geopolitical cozying up to Russia may be disconcerting for the EU, other candidate countries exhibit similar behavior. Moldova maintains its neutral status,<sup>20</sup> and Serbia has cultivated close ties with Russia for years.<sup>21</sup>

Second, there is a geopolitical consideration. Situated at the intersection of Asia and Europe, Georgia serves a crucial economic and security role within the broader Black Sea area and the European vicinity. It acts as a significant transit corridor between Asia and Europe, offering a route that circumvents Russia.<sup>22</sup> It is true that Tbilisi has recently shown a tendency to lean towards Russia and other illiberal actors while distancing itself from the EU. In an era of intensified geopolitical competition, allowing a hitherto pro-EU state such as Georgia to slip into the Russian orbit is not in the interests of the EU. As the Union is at a crossroads on how to address this issue, granting candidate status to Georgia could potentially eliminate a significant point of contention between the EU and the GD government, prompting the latter to adopt a more EU-friendly foreign policy stance. On the other hand, withholding candidate status and applying negative conditionality could lead to a range of outcomes, from a change in power to further authoritarian consolidation by the current government. Given the upcoming elections and the unpredictable nature of Georgian politics, forecasting specific developments is a challenging endeavor. Nevertheless, the EU should be prepared for any eventuality.

Lastly, the conferral of candidate status is largely symbolic. It neither assures any privileges to Georgia nor mandates any obligations upon the EU. The EU retains the discretion to halt Georgia's EU accession indefinitely should Tbilisi fail to demonstrate substantial commitment or progress. On the other hand, granting candidate status to Georgia may give the EU more ownership of Georgia's domestic reform drive.

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<sup>19</sup> Bidzina Lebanidze and Kornely Kakachia, "Bandwagoning by Stealth? Explaining Georgia's Appeasement Policy on Russia," *European Security*, 2023, 1–20.

<sup>20</sup> Euronews. "Staying Neutral: Moldova's PM Natalia Gavrilița Says Yes to Joining the EU but No to NATO," August 3, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/08/staying-neutral-moldova-s-pm-natalia-gavrilita-says-yes-to-joining-eu-but-no-to-nato>.

<sup>21</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU," *Carnegie Europe*, January 19, 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819>.

<sup>22</sup> Emil Avdaliani, "What's Behind China's Strategic Partnership With Georgia?," *Carnegie Politika*, August 17, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90394>.

The "golden carrot" of EU membership would appear more credible, and the pressure on the government to implement necessary reforms would intensify significantly.

In short Brussels needs to find creative ways of accommodating its geopolitical interest without emboldening emerging authoritarianism in Georgia. Regardless of the EU's decision, it is crucial to uphold the Copenhagen criteria and enforce strict democratic requirements on Tbilisi. Particular attention should be given to monitoring the Georgian government's adherence to the recommendations outlined by the EU. The stakes are high, impacting not only Georgia but the entire region.



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## Interviews

- Interview 1; 16 October 2023, Georgian Political Expert and Former Diplomat; Tbilisi, Georgia.
- Interview 2; 16 October 2023, Georgian Political Expert; EU Expert; Tbilisi, Georgia.
- Interview 3; 16 October 2023, Georgian Political Expert; Tbilisi, Georgia.
- Interview 4; 17 October 2023, Georgian Political Expert; Tbilisi, Georgia.
- Interview 5; 17 October 2023, Georgian Political Expert; EU Expert; Tbilisi, Georgia.