

Bridging the Divide: **Georgia's** Alignment with the EU's Foreign Policy



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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS





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Executive Summary

The policy paper explores the complex dynamics of Georgia's alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It highlights the geopolitical challenges and strategic dilemmas faced by Georgia following its receipt of EU candidate status in 2023, a development accelerated by the geopolitical shifts resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The paper delves into the nuanced reasons behind Georgia's moderate alignment with the CFSP, emphasizing the influence of internal political factors, such as the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's policies, and external pressures, including the delicate balance Tbilisi maintains with Russia and other regional and global actors. Through statistical analysis, interviews with key officials, and expert opinions, the paper assesses the alignment trends and discusses the potential implications for Georgia's EU accession aspirations. It critically examines the EU's expectations for full alignment and the challenges posed by Georgia's geopolitical context, suggesting that Georgia needs to find a proper equilibrium between improving its alignment rate with the CFSP and addressing its geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Introduction

In 2023, Georgia finally received a European Perspective and, later on, Candidate Status—a wish of many generations in Georgia. This was only made possible as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's subsequent decision to revive and weaponize its enlargement policy toward the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, which was considered a grey zone between the EU and Russia. However, the Brussels-led enlargement process did not only result in a major breakthrough for Georgia's foreign and security policy but also introduced new significant challenges that the country is grappling with. One of them is a geopolitical alignment with the EU, which the EU regards as a major precondition for new candidate countries—with its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) alignment rates being a key formal indicator. Therefore, it is no surprise that Georgia's lower alignment rates, compared to other countries seeking EU membership, triggered frustration in Brussels as well as in Georgia (EU NeighboursEast 2024).

The EU previously struggled to establish itself as a significant factor in global geopolitics. However, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, EU member states stepped up coordination of their foreign policy actions, and the CFSP gained significance within the Union. Enshrined in the EU treaties, the CFSP aims to safeguard the common values, fundamental interests, and independence of the EU, while also strengthening international security, democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

In the current context, the EU seeks to increase its capacity to effectively address geopolitical challenges. Given increasing security threats, it is more important than ever for EU member states to be able to reach a consensus on foreign policy and security issues and effectively coordinate their actions. In this context, any countries aspiring to join the EU, including Georgia, will have to show up as a constructive partner and try to align with CFSP decisions taken by other EU members, especially those in the form of declarations and statements published by the High Representative (HR). Even more so, alignment with CFSP has become an increasingly important part of the enlargement criteria.

While acknowledging the complexities inherent in the Georgian context, particularly referencing the geopolitical situation and the issue of Russian-occupied territories, the EU still anticipates that Tbilisi will strive for a CFSP alignment rate as close to 100% as feasible. This was even included in the report by the European Commission on the nine steps that Georgia needs to meet to advance further on the path of EU accession (Civil Georgia 2023b). As EU Ambassador to Georgia, Pawel Herczyński stated, the EU is actively collaborating with Georgian authorities to facilitate an increase in the CFSP alignment rate and expects its gradual increase, noting that there has already been an upward trend “over the last several months” (Civil Georgia 2024). According to him, the EU anticipates that Georgia’s foreign policy will align “identically” with that of the EU upon its accession to the Union, suggesting that the current low alignment rate presents challenges. In particular, it was indicated that if Georgia were an EU member, approximately half of the CFSP statements by the EU would not have been adopted due to a lack of consensus. This is considered a critical concern for Brussels as no one wants to see another consensus breaker that could potentially paralyze EU decision-making.

Currently, two grand narratives surround Georgia’s moderate level of alignment with CFSP statements. One narrative places blame on Georgia’s ruling elite—the Georgian Dream (GD) party and its government—seemingly motivated by narrow party-political interests and foreign policy ideology, which manifests in a multi-vector foreign policy and a political desire to retain political power for as long as possible. The GD government has attracted criticism with its neutral stance toward the war in Ukraine and rising anti-Western rhetoric. According to critical voices, as the ruling party slides toward a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (Smeltzer and Karppi 2024), it is disseminating a message inside and outside of Georgia that the country is not ready to become a member of the EU (Politico 2024c). This occurs despite the backdrop of Georgia being granted Candidate Status last year, and 79% of Georgians express support for EU membership (NDI 2023). Because GD has emphasized maintaining balanced relations between the East and the West, critics argue that the primary motive behind avoiding a more Westward political trajectory is to prevent upsetting Moscow. However, there are some growing fears in Brussels that GD is not merely delaying crucial reforms but actively seeking to derail the entire process (Politico 2024b).

The second narrative goes beyond narrow party politics interests and reflects on Georgia’s broader strategic interests, vulnerabilities, and limitations. It is assumed that a high alignment rate with the CFSP will likely result in severe adverse effects related to Georgia’s non-recognition policy, trade and commercial policy, and security and stability. Georgia has held steadfast in upholding the principles of territorial integrity and non-recognition of illegal occupation or annexation regimes, even while Western partners are urging Tbilisi to align more with the EU’s CFSP.

It would make Tbilisi adopt a more value-based approach to foreign policy (EU NeighboursEast 2023), which, according to Georgian authorities, may compromise Georgia’s non-recognition policy. Moreover, without Western external protection (NATO and EU membership), Tbilisi believes it might come at a high economic and security cost for a country that remains vulnerable to Russian pressure and dependent on its market (MacFarlane and Jones 2023). As many critics argue, the GD’s transactional foreign policy overtly dismisses value-based policymaking and deems it detrimental to long-term national interests. While this approach may yield short-term economic gains, its fragility lies in its weak institutional foundation and disregard for long-term strategic vision (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2023). Therefore, balancing between physical survival against Russia, avoiding economic collapse in the short term, and ensuring continuity of the Euro-Atlantic integration in the long term are key challenges emanating from this geopolitical dilemma.

The EU calls for gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy (Akobia 2023) and shows limited flexibility even in periods of transition. Overall, it demands from Georgia a high degree of CFSP alignment even though the small Black Sea country may experience adverse effects. This delicate situation—and Georgia’s recent foreign policy strategy that has led it astray from its long-stated EU and Western alignment—may complicate bilateral relations and significantly influence Georgia’s EU integration process. Such a trend not only moves Georgia further from cooperating with the EU but also hinders its prospects of attaining full partnership or membership with the EU. In short, Tbilisi’s accommodating relations with Russia and its active opposition to European values and interests have been at odds with the EU’s fundamental principles (GIP 2022).

This policy paper delves into these issues. It examines the key contradictions that the EU and Georgia have regarding CFSP alignment and whether these gaps can be closed. To do so, the paper draws on a large toolbox of methods. First, the authors conducted a detailed statistical analysis of Georgia’s alignment with CFSP statements over the last years¹. In doing so, the paper identifies the most problematic areas or issues where Georgia’s alignment rate is the lowest. Second, high-ranking officials and decisionmakers on both sides of the political spectrum were interviewed, and their respective perceptions, explanations, as well as suggested solutions for these problematic issues areas were gathered. To further triangulate the results, policy experts specializing in EU enlargement and foreign policy both in and outside of Georgia were also interviewed.

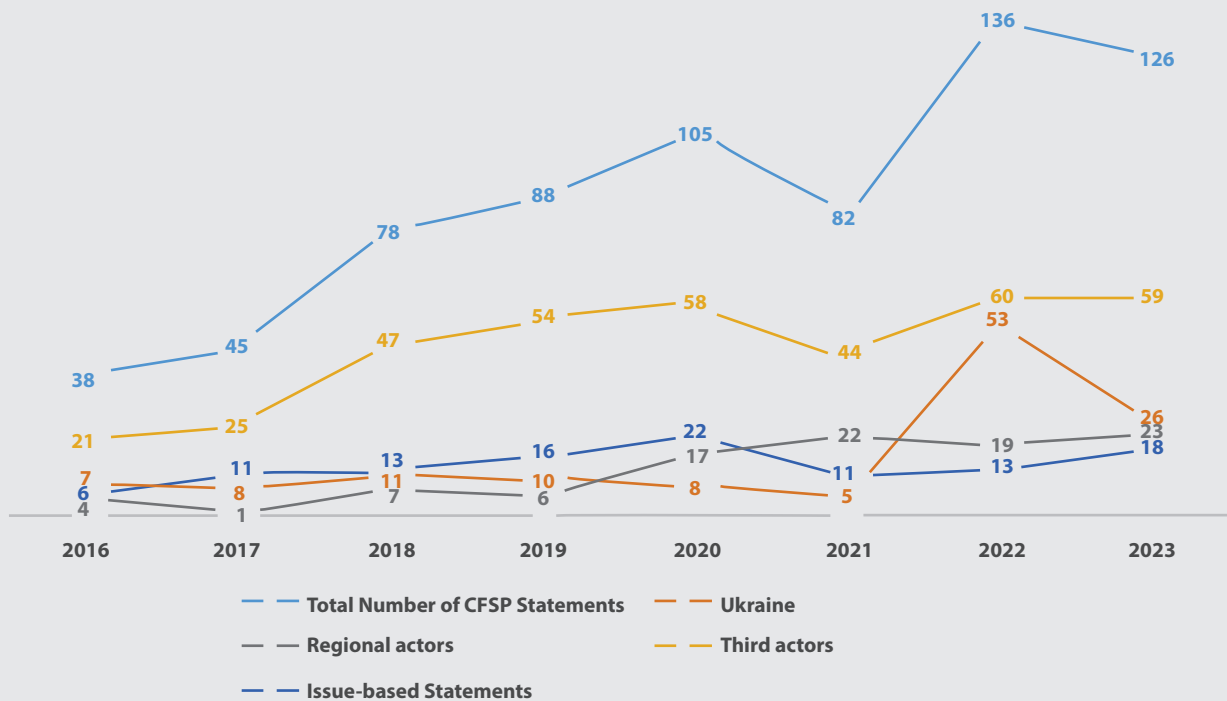


1. For methodology, see Appendix 3.

Georgia's CFSP Alignment Trends

This study presents a detailed analysis of Georgia's CFSP alignment statistics since 2016, uncovering some interesting trends. The first notable trend is the significant increase in the total number of statements issued by the EU High Representative over the past seven years, as depicted in Figure 1. The numbers started to increase at a fast pace since 2017, and the trend accelerated further following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Russia-Ukraine war compelled the EU to assume a larger role as a geopolitical actor, as illustrated in Figure 1. Consequently, the CFSP statements can be viewed as one of the key formal components of geopolitical actorness.

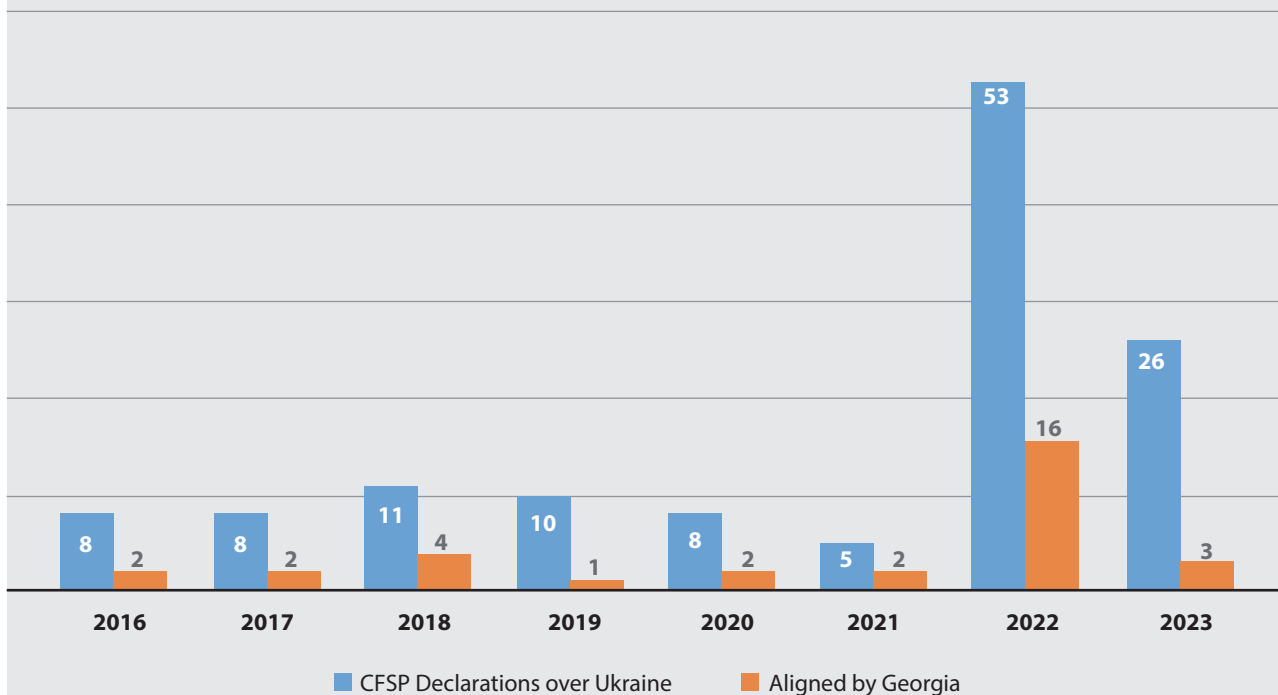
Figure 1:
Number and Thematic Breakdown of CFSPs Issued by the EU High Representative (2016-2023)



Notes: Regional actors include Belarus, Iran, Türkiye, and Russia; third actors include all other countries, territories, and non-territorial units. Source: authors' calculations (see Appendix 3 for methodology).

As expected, the issue of Ukraine and the Russia-Ukraine war has gained significant prominence in EU statements. The frequency of statements concerning Russia's continuous military aggression against Ukraine surged dramatically, increasing from a mere five in 2021 to 53 in 2022 and remaining high at 26 in 2023, as seen in Figure 2. Additionally, the CFSP statements frequently address the actions of illiberal actors across the globe, ranging from Iran to North Korea and from Syria to Belarus (see Table 1).

Figure 2:
Number of CFSP Statements about Ukraine and Georgia's Alignment



Source: authors' calculations.

Table 1: Themes Covered Most Frequently by CFSP Statements by Year (Excluding Ukraine)

2016	Syria (6), Belarus (2), Burundi (2)
2017	Syria (8), Venezuela (3)
2018	Venezuela (7), Syria (6), North Korea (5)
2019	Syria (4), Libya (6), Venezuela (14)
2020	Libya (9), Venezuela (7), Cyber-related (6), Belarus (6), Hong Kong (6)
2021	Belarus (11), Myanmar (9), Russia (7)
2022	Iran (6), North Korea (6), Syria (6), Belarus (5), Tunisia (5)
2023	Iran (17), Human rights (9), North Korea (8)

Source: authors' calculations.

As the quantity and diversity of CFSP statements significantly increased, Georgia’s alignment rate has decreased. The relative alignment rate stood at 47% in 2023, as compared to 58% in 2020 (see Figure 3). While, in fact, in absolute terms, the number of declarations with which Georgia aligned increased significantly over the years (see Table 2), considering the drastic increase in the absolute number of statements from the EU side, Georgia’s rate remains low in relative terms, as illustrated in Figure 3. This highlights the important gap in terms of Georgia’s compliance with the EU’s CFSP statements, which Tbilisi needs to close in order to meet one of the nine steps identified by Brussels. If we put Georgia’s alignment rate in context, we can see that Tbilisi’s record is far behind the rate of Ukraine and Moldova—the two other countries of the Associated Trio (see Figure 4). This was not always the case, but the gap between Georgia and the other two started to widen since 2020, and the trend accelerated after the start of the Russia-Ukraine War (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Georgia’s Alignment Rate with CFSP Statements (%)

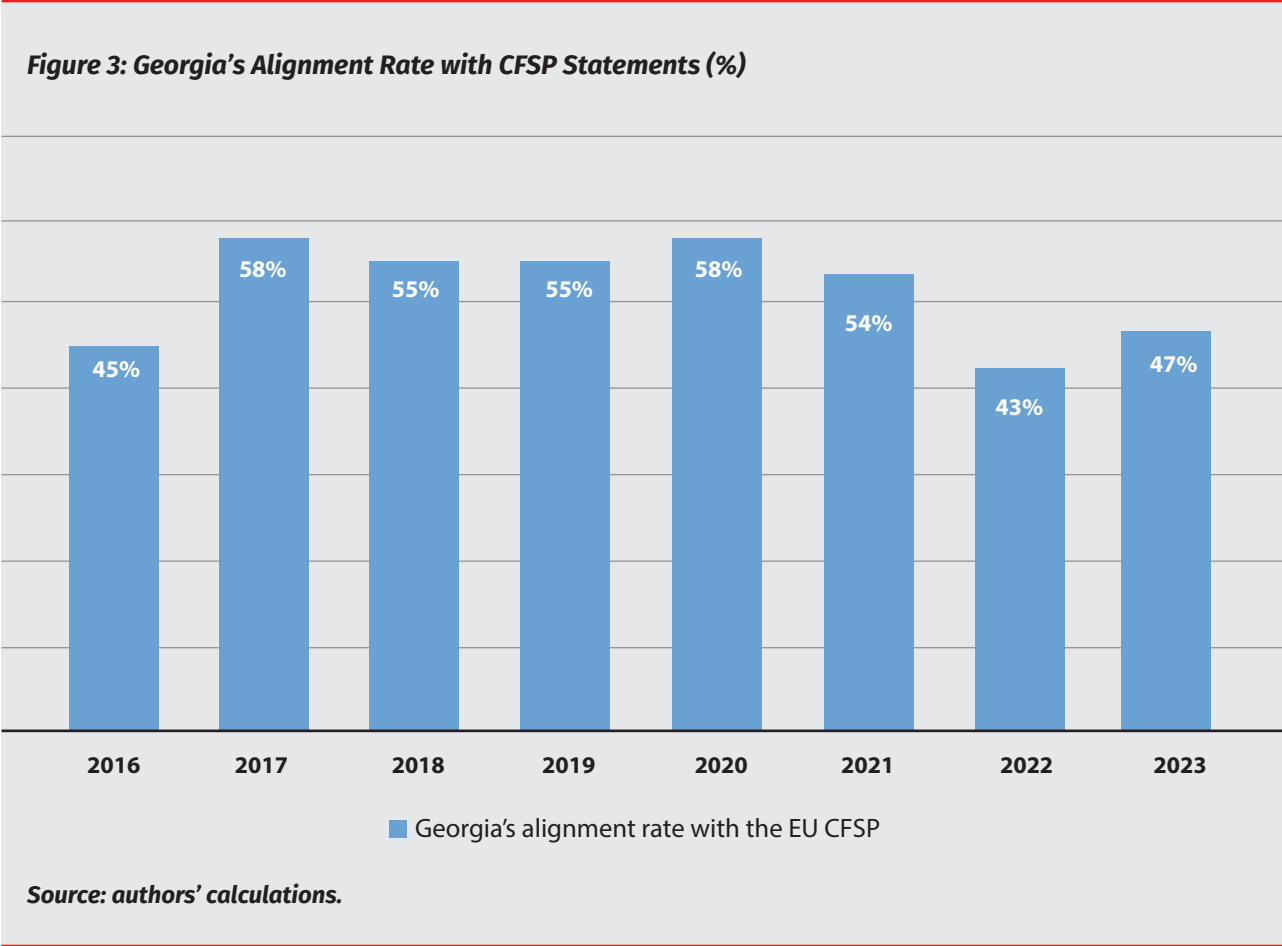
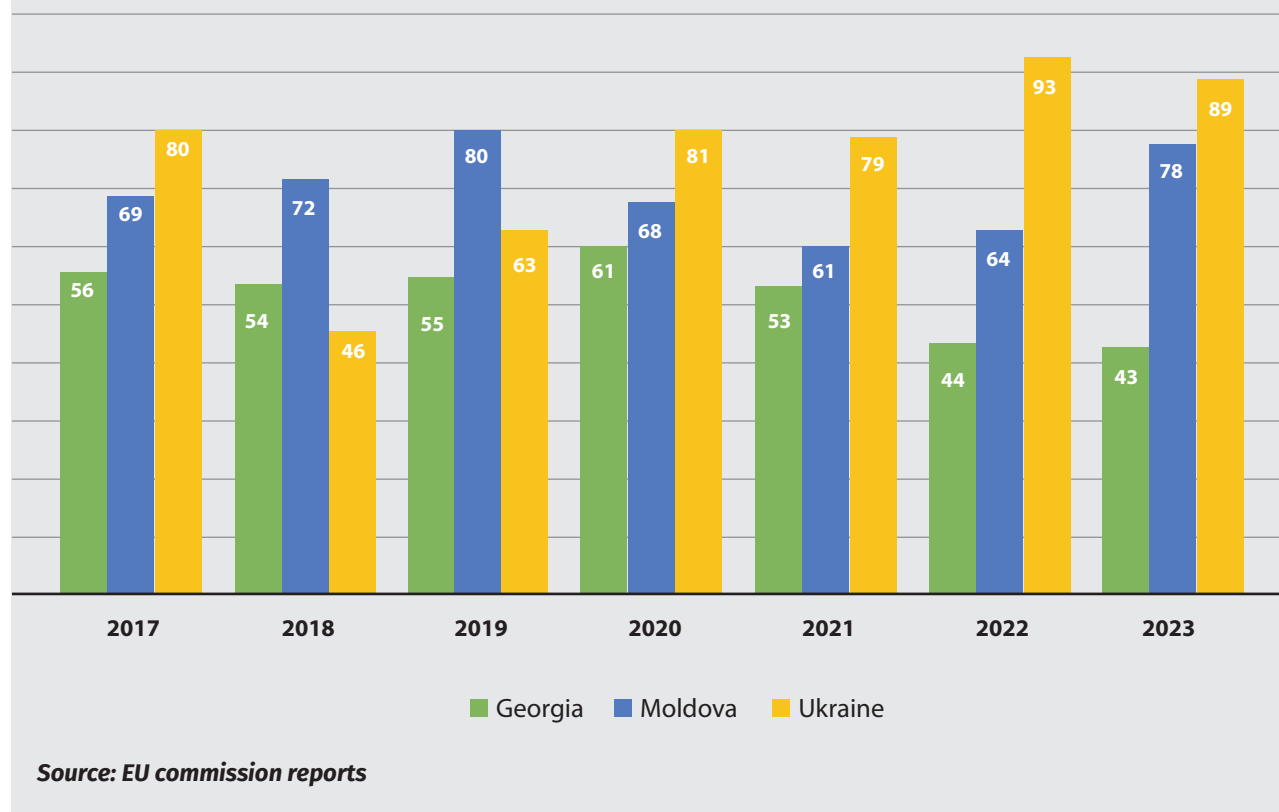


Table 2: Number of CFSP Statements According to Alignment and Non-Alignment

Year	Total number	Aligned by Georgia	Not aligned by Georgia
2016	38	17	21
2017	45	26	19
2018	78	43	35
2019	88	48	40
2020	105	61	44
2021	82	44	38
2022	136	59	77
2023	126	59	67

Source: authors' calculations.

Figure 4: Alignment with CFSP Statements for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine²



² Percentages are given according to the EU Commission report (by their publishing dates).

Unraveling Georgia's Moderate Alignment

As statistical data indicates, Georgia's alignment rate with the CFSP remains, at best, moderate, which may become a serious hindering factor in terms of Georgia's EU accession and, more broadly, in the bilateral relations between the two sides. But how is the alignment gap assessed in Tbilisi and Brussels, and to what extent can the differences be resolved? To answer these questions, anonymous interviews were conducted with representatives of the Georgian government and high-level EU officials who deal with Georgia. The paper also includes the insights of several scholars and policy experts to ensure a more diverse range of opinions.

Georgia's Non-recognition Policy

One of the key issues of Tbilisi's low alignment rate with the CFSP concerning the countries of the Global South is Georgia's non-recognition policy. The EU regularly reacts to situations in countries globally, sanctioning groups, institutions, or people in response to different violations. In total, Restrictive Measures (RMs) have been adopted in relation to alarming situations in 49 different countries beyond Georgia's immediate regional interest during 2016-2023 (see Appendix 2). Part of them are aligned by Georgia: Tbilisi regularly aligns with EU RMs against Syria, Venezuela, and Nicaragua—states that have recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia along with Russia, as shown in Table 3. However, there is no consolidated principle according to which Tbilisi decides on aligning with particular RMs against other countries (see Table 4). For instance, Georgia joined declarations against Tunisia or Congo but not against Zimbabwe or Myanmar. There are also cases when Georgia decided differently regarding aligning with RMs against one and the same country, as revealed in Table 4.

Table 3. Statements (and Aligned Number) by Syria, Nicaragua, and Venezuela Recognizing the Independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Year	Syria	Nicaragua	Venezuela
2016	6(3)	0	0
2017	8(4)	0	3(2)
2018	6(5)	1(1)	7(7)
2019	5(5)	2(1)	14(14)
2020	5(5)	3(3)	6(6)
2021	2(2)	4(4)	3(3)
2022	6(6)	1(1)	1(1)
2023	(1)	1(1)	1(1)

Notes: Syria, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are targets of the EU CFSP. Shown above: number of statements (aligned number).
Source: authors' calculations.

Table 4: Targeted Third Countries and Georgia's Alignment Dynamics

Always Aligned	Never Aligned	Different Decisions about One Target Country	
Sudan	Iran	DPRK/North Korea	Democratic Republic of the Congo
UAE	Türkiye	Zimbabwe	Belarus
Niger	Kazakhstan	Syria	Afghanistan
Iraq	South Sudan	Ukraine	Libya
Guinea-Bissau	Hong Kong	Israel	Tanzania
Guatemala	Honduras	Guinea	Sudan
CAR	Cyprus	Moldova	Lebanon
Sri Lanka	Armenia/Azerbaijan	Burundi	Bolivia
Venezuela	Rwanda	Mali	Nicaragua
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Djibouti	Tunisia	Haiti
Egypt	Saudi Arabia	Russia	Uganda
Republic of Maldives		Myanmar/Burma	
Yemen		Cuba	
		Ethiopia	

Source: authors' calculations.

The interviews unanimously identified Georgia's non-recognition policy toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia as one of the key factors limiting official Tbilisi from aligning with EU statements. According to the respondents, Tbilisi exercises caution in its dealings with countries of the Global South within international forums and in both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations to avoid alienation. On the other hand, aligning with CFSP statements that criticize countries from the Global South is perceived as detrimental to Georgia's national interests and tantamount to abandoning the country's own Hallstein Doctrine.³

3. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) used the Hallstein Doctrine from 1955-1970 to prevent the worldwide recognition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). By denying the existence of a separate German state and thus the de facto division of Germany, the FRG sought to perpetuate the idea of one German nation and to ease reunification. For more, see: Laura Wood, "The Hallstein Doctrine: its Effect as a Sanction," UNT Digital Library, August 1989, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc501041>.

The issue of occupied territories was deemed most critical by an anonymous, high-ranking Georgian official interviewed for this study. According to the government narrative, Georgia only commits to each CFSP statement after a thorough consideration of its potential impact on Georgia's territorial integrity and non-recognition policy.⁴ Concurrently, the number of countries targeted by EU statements that pose a threat to Georgia in terms of the recognition of the independence of its occupied territories has risen markedly.⁵ This is cited as the "main reason why Georgia had only a 50% alignment rate in 2023."⁶

However, EU officials seem to hold differing views regarding the impact of sanctions on Georgia's non-recognition policy. A high-ranking EU official stated in an anonymous interview that such a claim is "naïve," asserting, "no one would recognize the occupied territories even if Georgia were to align with the declaration."⁷ Differing perceptions suggest a significant disparity in how Brussels and Tbilisi view this process, posing challenges in establishing a shared vision.

Conversely, Georgian scholars and experts interviewed provided an alternative viewpoint on the issue. According to Kakha Gogolashvili, Georgia's leading expert on EU integration issues, Georgia should not be concerned by the potential recognition of its occupied territories by political regimes around the world that lack international legitimacy and credibility and are implicated in serious human rights violations from Belarus to dictatorial regimes in Africa.⁸ For instance, Gogolashvili cited the Syrian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which, he argues, failed to have a significant negative impact or domino effect on Georgia's non-recognition policy.⁹

Sanctions Against Russia

A close adherence to the CFSP appears to clash with GD's policy of accommodating Russia, a stance that originated in 2012 when GD assumed power and has since intensified following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the EU considers Russia as its main geopolitical rival and sees the geopoliticization of the enlargement process as an effective soft instrument against Moscow (Leonard 2023), Brussels' demand for geopolitical loyalty from new candidate states is understandable. Moreover, GD's Russia-accommodating policy is anything but unproblematic regarding its sustainability, effectiveness, and output. Nevertheless, according to the Georgian government and some observers, the current status quo has allowed Georgia to avoid direct political and military tensions with an assertive Russia, as well as economic and social crises, which could have further destabilized the political situation in the country. While Georgia, in the end, will need to distance more politically from Moscow and show political loyalty to Brussels, it remains a matter of discussion whether the current status quo does not make more sense in this provisional period when Georgia remains militarily indefensible toward Russia and lacks any credible security guarantees from NATO, the US, or the EU. Interestingly, on several occasions, this approach was subtly suggested by Georgia's partners in the West (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kandelaki 2024).

4. Interview with high-ranking Georgian government official (Tbilisi, March 21, 2024).

5. *ibid.*

6. *ibid.*

7. Interview with high-ranking official from the EU Delegation to Georgia (Tbilisi, March 10, 2024).

8. Interview with Kakha Gogolashvili (Tbilisi, March 27, 2024).

9. *ibid.*

Table 5. Number of Statements (and Aligned Number) on Russia and Ukraine

Year	Statements on Russia (aligned)	Statements on Ukraine (aligned)
2016	0	8(2)
2017	0	8(2)
2018	0	11(4)
2019	0	10(1)
2020	2(2)	8(2)
2021	7(5)	5(2)
2022	2(1)	53(16)
2023	1(0)	26(3)

Shown above: number of statements (aligned number).

An interviewed high-ranking Georgian official argued that Georgia does not align with statements on Russia primarily because they pertain to sanctions against Russia, which Georgia is not involved in. They reasoned that since Georgia does not impose bilateral sanctions on Russia, it would be “illogical to align with statements that encompass various sanctions packages that Georgia cannot implement.”¹⁰ The respondents also highlighted the diplomatic vulnerability of Georgia on a global scale. According to them, Georgia has only three embassies on the African continent, while Russia maintains a presence in almost every country.¹¹ Due to this asymmetry, it is important for Georgia to exercise caution with these nations, as any of them could recognize Georgia’s occupied territories if Tbilisi begins criticizing them.¹²

High-ranking officials also expressed disappointment that, unlike the US, the EU has been ambiguous and less supportive of Georgia’s non-recognition policy.¹³ They suggested that Georgia would greatly benefit if the EU adopted the US approach and linked its developmental aid to the observance of international law principles regarding the territorial integrity of other countries, including Georgia. Specifically, the Consolidated Appropriations Act sets the parameters for spending by US federal agencies and “prohibits American aid to the governments that have recognized the independence of Georgia’s Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia” (Congress.gov 2018). Such a policy, if also adopted by the EU, could address many of Georgia’s diplomatic challenges, including Georgia’s non-recognition policy, and lead to significantly higher alignment rates with the CFSP.¹⁴

10. Interview with high-ranking official.

11. *ibid.*

12. *ibid.*

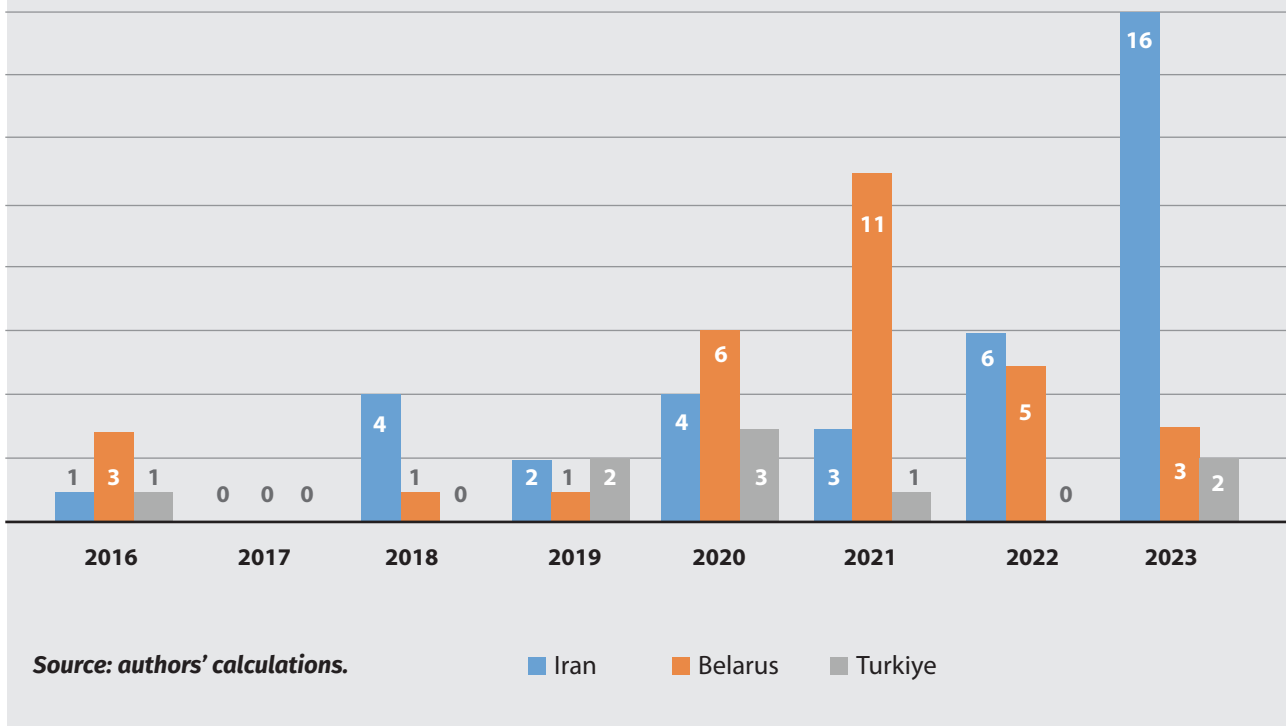
13. *ibid.*

14. *ibid.*

Relations with Neighbors and Trade Partners

A significant challenge for Georgia when (not) aligning with the EU CFSP statements arises when it comes to RMs (Restrictive Measures) against Georgia’s neighboring countries or regional players. Türkiye, Iran, and Belarus are among the major troublemakers for the EU. The RMs enshrined in the statements against Türkiye are usually imposed due to “unauthorized drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Council of the EU n.d.): from 2016 to 2023, eight statements have been adopted on this issue in total. Iran and Belarus are addressed due to the serious concerns regarding the domestic situation within those countries; 18 statements addressing Belarus and 31 statements addressing Iran in total were issued over 2016-2023 (see Figure 5). While the EU regularly addresses the concerns regarding domestic situations or unfriendly foreign activities of those countries, Georgia never joins statements related to them, as shown in Table 4. None of the High Representative statements related to the three regional states have been joined by the government (see Table 4).

Figure 5: Number of CFSP Statements Addressing Belarus, Iran, and Türkiye (2016-2023)



Considering the fact that Türkiye is one of the most important strategic and trading partners for Georgia, joining RMs against Ankara is particularly challenging for Tbilisi. Türkiye is the only adjacent country of Georgia with close diplomatic relations against which the EU imposes RMs from time to time. However, a portion of those measures is not so high within the entire picture of the High Representative declarations (see Appendix 2). On the other hand, addressing situations in Iran and Belarus is an important part of the EU CFSP, which also defines Georgia's misalignment. Tbilisi keeps abstaining from joining RMs against Iran, one of the largest regional partner countries with close strategic ties with Moscow. High-ranking officials from the Georgian government confirmed this trend. According to them, Georgia nurtures strategic ties with its neighbors and countries in close regional proximity, such as Iran.¹⁵ It should be noted, though, that regarding Iran, Georgia already has been part of a Western sanctions regime at the detriment of its own strategic and national interests.¹⁶ Tbilisi cannot fully alienate Iran, which is a significant regional player.¹⁷

The memorandum of strategic partnership signed between Georgia and China in August 2023 (Civil Georgia 2023a) does not intervene with the CFSP, but potential closer alignment challenges remain. As Georgia navigates between the West and the East, the EU is increasingly demanding and expects Georgia to adhere strictly to geopolitical alignment. A high-ranking EU official interviewed for this study criticized Georgia's strategic rapprochement with China:

What is important, we also watch what the country is doing with the third parties: You cannot be a strategic partner with China and fight for EU integration. The EU considers China as a strategic competitor, so using sanctions against China is a last resort. We all secure our interests and priorities, but we need to make sure that Georgia's obligations towards China (or other third countries) do not damage the EU interests.¹⁸

15. *ibid.*

16. *ibid.*

17. *ibid.*

18. Interview with high-ranking official from the EU Delegation to Georgia (Tbilisi, March 10, 2024).

Moderate Alignment as a European Point of Contention

It seems that moderate alignment rates with the CFSP are poised to remain an apple of discord between the EU and Georgia for the foreseeable future. For the EU, it seems to be a key formal indicator of geopolitical loyalty by new candidate countries, and Brussels does not seem to be keen to compromise on this or adopt a more nuanced approach.

Conversely, the Georgian Government has been questioning Brussels' insistence on arithmetic counting of CFSP alignment rates as "unreasonable." Interviewed high-ranking officials from the Georgian government argued that Georgia is performing well in areas other than CFSP alignment.¹⁹ For instance, Georgia was the only non-EU country to participate in the EU's military mission in South Africa.²⁰ Also, according to them, Georgia has a very high alignment rate at over 80% with statements initiated by the EU in international organizations, such as the UN or the OSCE.²¹ But, according to a high-ranking EU official, "at the end, what counts, is the EU's own statements," which the EU prioritizes over statements²² in other international organizations and fora.

Hence, Georgia's low alignment rate with the CFSP is a serious issue on its own, but it should also be considered within the broader context of EU-Georgia relations. Arguably, the EU's main concern seems to be ensuring geopolitical loyalty from its future member states and avoiding the inclusion of Russian-influenced Trojan horses, which would further complicate decision-making within the European Council and beyond. In this regard, the confrontational rhetoric from the Georgian government is far from reassuring. Moreover, the slow pace of reforms and the lack of tangible progress in key areas, such as the judiciary, place even bigger question marks over Georgia's accession process. This negative context may further amplify the EU's negative perceptions stemming from Georgia's low CFSP alignment rate. While there is no guarantee that the EU would accommodate Georgia's precarious security and geopolitical situation, Tbilisi's lack of cooperative impulses further undermines trust—and this erosion of trust narrows the opportunity for potential compromise solutions.

Furthermore, the slow pace of reforms and low alignment with the CFSP can also be associated with the GD's domestic political considerations. It seems that the present emerging authoritarian consolidation of the ruling party prioritizes its stay in power over democratic reforms. As critics argue, instead of prioritizing the implementation of EU recommendations to align more closely with the pro-European sentiments of the majority, the Georgian government seems to be reverting to employing manipulative pre-election tactics once again (Khodeli, Jgharkava, and Pitalskaya 2024). From this perspective, GD's recent attempt to reinstate a Russian-style draft law on the "transparency of foreign influence" only further distances Georgia from the EU and damages Tbilisi's EU accession process, as noted by EU officials several times (Politico 2024a). Hence, as always, domestic politics matters, and GD's attempts to keep Western influences at arm's length while building strategic alliances with illiberal powers such as China seem to be motivated by a desire to insulate itself from the democratizing pressure of the West (Avdaliani 2023). As critics argue, the emergence of a multi-vector Georgian foreign policy strategy and GD's denunciation of "value-based" foreign policy signals a deliberate attempt to leverage and balance alignment with the West (von Essen 2024). This shift, if continued, could have significant repercussions for Georgia, the EU, and the broader Black Sea region.

19. Interview with high-ranking Georgian government official (Tbilisi, March 21, 2024).

20. *ibid.*

22. Interview with high-ranking official from the EU Delegation to Georgia (Tbilisi, March 10, 2024).

Conclusion & Recommendations

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought to light existential questions and insecurities for Georgia, a comparatively vulnerable state in the region. Georgia found itself entangled in its own frozen conflict with Russia while nurturing aspirations of joining the EU and NATO, both yet to be realized (Tsintsadze-Maass 2024). While the EU accelerated the integration process for the Associated Trio last year, the ruling party's controversial moves and lack of political enthusiasm raise doubts about its EU intentions. Consequently, Georgia's Western partners have voiced growing criticism toward the Georgian government for its retreat from democratic principles (Politico 2024a; US Department of State 2024). Indeed, Georgia's recent foreign policy strategy has displayed significant departures from its longstanding aspiration for EU membership and alignment with Western values. At this pivotal moment, the country seems to be changing its strategic compass and the foundation of its foreign policy. The government's lukewarm support to Ukraine in its war against Russia, the resumption of direct flights with Russia, and the policy decisions strengthening Georgia's links with Russia and China have called into question Georgia's alignment with the EU's CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy). Furthermore, Georgia's growing economic dependence on Russia increases its vulnerability to Moscow and offers the Kremlin additional leverage to limit Georgia's sovereignty. While Tbilisi has used pragmatic explanations to back the controversial policy, the key puzzle is, however, whether by aligning with EU policies, Georgia could really sleepwalk into a more conflictual relationship with Russia or whether the Georgian leadership is overblowing these security risks to justify their transactional equidistance between Russia and the West (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2023).

Nevertheless, regardless of the current actions, perceptions, or interests of the current Georgian government, it also remains undisputable that Georgia, unlike other EU candidate countries such as those in the Western Balkan, faces more severe geopolitical and security challenges that require a more nuanced approach with the EU. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrated that Russia is willing to use direct military aggression against its neighbors to restore its hegemony in the region. Trepidation can exist in a time of massive geopolitical unraveling and uncertainty; however, the EU appears to be fixated on rather formal CFSP alignment rate criteria rather than finding a more sensible approach. The insistence on strict CFSP alignment from frontline candidate states such as Georgia or Moldova seems unconvincing and potentially counterproductive, particularly during a transitional period. Imposing alignment could risk compromising these nations' strategic and security interests, potentially leading to superficial compliance that lacks substantive commitment to the underlying principles of the CFSP. Such a scenario could undermine the very goals of cohesive foreign policy and security cooperation that the CFSP aims to achieve.

This is not to say that the EU's concerns are not justified, as the Union has a legitimate concern about not having a "second Hungary" at the table in Brussels. Ultimately, it comes down to the Georgian authorities, regardless of which political side is in power, to resolve the issue of trust with the EU. They must persuade Brussels that while Tbilisi faces some objective hurdles in aligning with all CFSP statements, Georgia joining the EU will not bring Orbán-like behavior to decision-making processes. This should be a top task for Tbilisi in the coming years. So far, the Georgian government has done very little to persuade the EU of its good intentions, as its communication strategy has been rather underwhelming, to say the least.

Both the EU and Georgia need to take the necessary steps and close the gap regarding Georgia's missing trust bonds with the EU. Tbilisi needs to demonstrate that it remains committed to its declared objective of EU accession, most importantly in areas of so-called fundamentals, and is ready to accelerate the reform process to implement all EU recommendations. It needs to prove to Brussels it will not be another Trojan horse once it joins the Union and that it is sincere about its security, political, and economic limitations in the transitional period. Still, the EU cannot substitute for Georgia's potential economic losses in case of a downgrading in its relations with Türkiye, China, or other (illiberal) actors. At this time, Brussels (and the West) is unlikely to prevent Georgia's non-recognition policy from unraveling (if Tbilisi decides to alienate the Global South), and it cannot ensure Georgia's security in case of a major escalation with Russia (if Georgia remains outside the EU and NATO). All this needs to be properly communicated with the EU. And any government in Tbilisi needs to compensate for these gaps with other issues, such as reforms in areas of fundamentals.

The EU, for its part, needs to find ways to support Georgia's geopolitical alignment with itself without damaging Georgia's vital national interests by resorting to formalistic thinking. The EU has long been criticized for its one-size-fits-all approach in its external and regional governance (Börzel and Lebanidze 2015). Applying the same mode to geopolitical criteria for new candidate countries may not always yield productive outputs. All candidate countries are in different geopolitical and security environments that impact their ability to align with the CFSP while being outside the EU. Therefore, while the EU needs to continue pressure against illiberal regimes in the candidate countries that are unwilling to implement reforms or show geopolitical loyalty to the EU, it also needs to take into account the candidate country's objective security and geopolitical vulnerabilities while enforcing formal alignment with its foreign policy in the transitional period. Consequently, it poses a significant challenge for the EU to minimize the risks of Russian military and hybrid intervention while simultaneously fostering progress for candidate states on their journey toward European integration. In this delicate context, Brussels needs to find innovative methods to accommodate its geopolitical interests without exacerbating security vulnerabilities or bolstering authoritarian tendencies in Georgia.

Recommendations to the Government of Georgia:

1 Address the concerns raised by the EU regarding implementing reforms and ensure that Georgia's actions align with the recommendations provided by the EU. To do so, duly implement the EU's recommendations, fulfill nine steps, and abstain from anti-Western and anti-democratic discourses.

Reflect on how to substantially bring Georgia's foreign policy closer to the EU's. It is important to address Georgia's vulnerabilities in the current context while maintaining a strategic foreign policy course of EU and Euro-Atlantic integration.

2

3 Substitute the inability to align with certain CFSP categories by other means that show a strong commitment to democratic reforms (as necessary for EU accession).

Conduct hyperactive diplomacy vis-à-vis EU member states and EU institutions to ensure Georgia's commitment to European integration and readiness to follow EU foreign and security policy decisions even if it cannot formally align with all CFSP statements.

4

5 Avoid confrontational and derogatory rhetoric toward strategic partners and EU institutions, including members of the EU parliament.

Establish a task force that includes civil society, the expert community, and representatives of academia to explore alternative avenues for contributing to EU security and foreign policy objectives, such as participating in EU-led missions or initiatives that do not conflict with Georgia's national interests.

6

Recommendations to the EU and its Member States:

1 Instead of an EU-centric one-size-fits-all approach, develop a more sophisticated and differentiated toolbox of geopolitical alignment for candidate countries that reflects on sensibilities and vulnerabilities of individual candidate countries.

Assist Georgia with its non-recognition policy by aligning with the US approach of linking developmental aid with respecting the principles of international law.

2

3 Provide targeted assistance to Georgia to strengthen its diplomatic presence and capabilities, particularly in regions where it is underrepresented, such as Africa. This would enable Georgia to engage more effectively with countries that are critical to its non-recognition policy and broader foreign policy objectives.

Facilitate a dialogue platform that allows for candid discussions between the EU and Georgia on the challenges of CFSP alignment to foster mutual understanding and explore flexible solutions that respect Georgia's geopolitical constraints while maintaining the integrity of the EU's foreign policy framework.

4

5 Adjust the methodology for measuring CFSP alignment so that it is comprehensive, comparable, and easy to access. Mid-year reports covering different time periods may vary greatly in their results, making it difficult to assess, compare, and explain them to wider audiences.

The EU should emphasize to Georgia that its progress toward European integration is contingent upon its adherence to democratic principles. This approach underscores the inseparability of democratization and European integration, highlighting that the former is essential for the latter.

6

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Interviews Conducted (Respondents)

Akubardia, Teona. Opposition member of parliament. In-person interview, March 26, 2024.

Samadashvili, Salome. Opposition member of parliament. Online Interview. March 20, 2024.

Gogolashvili, Kakha. Georgian Think Tank analyst. In-person interview. March 27, 2024.

High-ranking official from the EU Delegation to Georgia. In-person interview. March 10, 2024.*

High-ranking Georgian government official. In-person interview, March 21, 2024.*

European Think Tank analyst. Online Interview. March 28, 2024.*

Balkan Think Tank analyst. Online Interview. April 2, 2024.*

**All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.*

Appendix 2: CFSP Statements - Thematic Stratification (2016-2023)

2016	2017	2018
<p>Tunisia Ukraine Egypt Libya Syria Congo Moldova Türkiye Burundi Belarus South China Sea Lebanon North Korea Middle East Human Rights Iran ICJ Malaysian Airlines Indigenous People South Sudan Death Penalty Zimbabwe World Press China Indigenous People South Sudan Guinea</p>	<p>Tunisia Racial Discrimination Ukraine Bosnia and Herzegovina Homophobia Ukraine Egypt Libya Myanmar / Burma Syria Congo ISIL Moldova Guinea Venezuela Ethiopia Torture Death Penalty Journalism Russia Chad Human Rights</p>	<p>Congo North Korea Ukraine Venezuela South Sudan Tunisia ISIL Zimbabwe Ukraine Belarus Syria Egypt Libya Bosnia and Herzegovina Iran Myanmar/Burma Maldives Terrorism Moldova Chemical Weapons ISIL Zimbabwe Racial Discrimination Bosnia and Herzegovina World Press Burundi Homophobia Djibouti/Uganda ICJ Indigenous People Russia Saudi Maldives Burundi Nicaragua</p>

2019	2020	2021
<p>Venezuela Guatemala Myanmar Congo Sudan Cameroon Tunisia Terrorism Chemical Weapons Syria North Korea Zimbabwe Belarus Rwanda Libya Cyber Egypt Bosnia and Herzegovina World Press Homophobia Iran Torture Human Rights Honduras Guinea ISIL Burundi Malaysian Airlines ICJ Indigenous People Maldives Violence Hong Kong Türkiye Death Penalty Ecuador Lebanon Iraq Haiti Bolivia Nicaragua Moldova</p>	<p>Venezuela South Sudan Honduras Congo ISIL Türkiye Cyber Terrorism Guinea Afghanistan Malaysian Airlines Guinea Bissau Somalia Racial Discrimination Tunisia Libya Russia Belarus Zimbabwe Syria Chemical Weapons World Press Nicaragua Moldova Tanzania Bolivia Cyprus Nagorno Karabakh Death Penalty Côte d'Ivoire Israel Human Rights Egypt Homophobia Myanmar Iran Hong Kong ICJ UAE Violence North Korea ISIL</p>	<p>Guinea Guinea Bissau Cyber Attacks Türkiye Venezuela Hong Kong Ukraine ISIL Nicaragua Iran Terrorism Myanmar Belarus Human Rights violations Syria Burundi Congo Russia Uganda New Start Libya Zimbabwe South Sudan Racial Discrimination ISIL Mali Tunisia Cuba Afghanistan Lebanon Ethiopia Africa Democracy Death Penalty</p>

2022	2023	
Kazakhstan Syria Belarus Guinea Human Rights Burundi Mali Libya Myanmar Zimbabwe Tunisia Nicaragua Terrorism ISIL Racial Discrimination Russia North Korea Afghanistan Cuba Iran Chemical Weapons Hong Kong Sri Lanka Honduras South Sudan Cyber Belarus Lebanon Violence Nord Stream Ethiopia Poland Venezuela Congo	Iran Guinea Türkiye Human Rights North Korea Mali Congo Myanmar Tunisia Zimbabwe Israel Terrorism Belarus Syria Afghanistan Sudan Humanitarian Exemption ISIL Kosovo Moldova Libya Niger Iraq Russia Violence Haiti Lebanon Guinea Bissau Guatemala Chemical Weapons Burundi Nicaragua CAR Venezuela	

Appendix 3: Detailed Methodological Note

For the purposes of this paper, the following types of documents are counted in order to craft the statistics about the EU CFSP and Georgia's alignment (within the time period of 2016-2023):

-
- statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries;

 - declarations by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries; and

 - statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU (without “on the alignment of certain third countries”).²³
-

The public documents usually referred to as Restrictive Measures (RMs) are enshrined in the declarations or statements issued by the High Representative of the European Union. In the present paper, “CFSP statement” is used to refer to all types of documents published under the CFSP in the recent tradition of using the term by the Council of the European Union. General texts are published on the website of the Council of the European Union; appendixes with detailed lists of targets of RMs are published in the Official Journal of the European Union. Working on the data was conducted as follows: 1) mathematical (nominal) number of issued documents and alignments of Georgia were counted; 2) issued documents were codified according to the target units, states, or topics in order to identify content-related trends of EU priorities.

It is important to note that for this paper, numbers are counted on a yearly basis (calendar year, from January 1 to December 31, 2016-2023). This approach might make the calculated percentages different from the ones given in the official EU Commission reports, which frequently lack yearly calculations and suggest rates within narrower time periods. Additionally, an enlargement country like Georgia can align or not with a particular declaration at different times (e.g., several months after its publication), which can change some of the alignment numbers from time to time. Usually, such changes are not drastic.

For the purposes of the present analysis, all the published CFSP statements are divided into four categories: 1) statements related to Ukraine; 2) statements related to regionally important countries for Georgia (Belarus, Iran, Türkiye, Russia); 3) statements related to third actors (including the countries recognized by most of the EU countries but not by Georgia; and 4) issue-based statements (see the full list in Appendix 2).

23. The following are samples of each type of CFSP-related document:

Statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/02/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-third-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-directed-against-certain-persons-and-entities-in-view-of-the-situation-in-iran/>.

Declarations by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/04/hr-alignment-restrictive-measures-russia/>.

Statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU (without “on the alignment of certain third countries”): <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/23/dprk-north-korea-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-launch-of-an-intercontinental-ballistic-missile-and-short-range-ballistic-missiles/>.

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