



From The Hague to Tbilisi: Understanding Dutch Attitudes Towards EU Expansion in The Context of Georgia

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has faced the European Union (EU) and its member states with acute threats. To address these challenges, the EU must strengthen its unity and collective response. For the Netherlands, to be part of this unity, it has meant having to formulate a clearer narrative on East-Europe and the future of the EU. Meanwhile, for Georgia, being a part of the Associated Trio within the Eastern Partnership (EaP), together with Moldova and Ukraine, has created a momentum to gain further rapprochement with the EU resulting in getting the EU candidate status in December 2023.

Georgia's path to EU membership hinges on the support of EU member states. The Netherlands, being a founding EU member with a significant economy, can play a key role in this process. However, the Netherlands has been accused of punching above its weight when it comes to its role in the EU (Janning 2019). Alongside geopolitical changes Dutch foreign policy has been changing as well during the past decade, especially regarding EU expansion and Eastern-Europe. However, recent political shifts, including the victory of the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders in the 2023 Dutch election, have cast uncertainty on the future of Dutch foreign policy. This policy memo will dive into the

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development of Dutch foreign policy regarding EU expansion and how this has shaped – and will shape – Dutch-Georgian relations.

Dutch Foreign Policy Priorities (2010-Present)

Dutch foreign policy has traditionally focused – above all else – on serving Dutch economic interests. The policies of Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s party, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) exemplify this. Since PM Rutte’s tenure began in 2010, he has referred to the EU as “just a market,” and has been considered overly frugal when contributing to the EU budget (Baragazzi 2023). However, other political parties have different visions on what Dutch foreign policy should focus on.

In fact, if we were to think of their visions as constituting different “strands” we would find that, besides the previously outlined *trade* strand, there are at least two other major strands within the discourse surrounding Dutch foreign policy (Ter Haar 2017). *Withdrawal* is one such strand, supported mostly by parties on the far-right and the far-left. These parties tend to be Eurosceptic and against immigration, like Wilder’s PVV (Ross et al. 2023). The other strand, *engagement*, advocates for a value-based foreign policy and stresses the importance of international cooperation. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) pursues an engaging policy for East-Europe through the Dutch Fund for Regional Partnerships (NFRP)/Matra program which aims to help former communist countries with their rule of law and democracy (Ministry of General Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2024). The Dutch MFA has been able to follow its own course away from the thrills of daily politics because Dutch governments usually consist out of parties that adhere to different strands of foreign policy. Consequently, this results in the lack of a clear narrative on the EU and foreign policy in general.

When it comes to EU expansion, Rutte’s governments have over time changed their unofficial slogan from ‘strict but fair’ to being ‘strict, fair and engaged’ (Zweers 2024). The last Dutch governments have mainly focused on keeping the EU manageable causing them to be rather apprehensive and critical when new countries want to join. This attitude has not always been viewed as constructive as was the case when the Netherlands blocked EU accession negotiations with Albania in 2019 because the Dutch government believed Albania’s progress had not been sufficient (Zweers 2019). Furthermore, the Dutch view on the EU is often considered to be self-centered (Bosse 2023). Adding ‘engaged’ next to ‘strict’

and 'fair' was likely done to seem less critical and opposed to expansion. Furthermore, the *engagement* party Democrats '66 (D66) being a part of the last two Rutte governments has likely also had its effect on having a less EU-critical tone. Meanwhile, the tone might have changed but the Netherlands remains apprehensive when it comes to further EU expansion.

The Netherland's Eastern Policy: Russia and the Eastern Partnership

The Netherlands' *Ostpolitik* is hard to define since the Dutch lack historical and people-to-people ties with most East-European countries (Zweers 2024). Out of all countries in the region Russia has traditionally enjoyed the most extensive relation with the Netherlands but not without its ups and downs. The funding for the NFRP/Matra program in Russia got cut back drastically since the likelihood of progress in the country was deemed to be too low after Putin's reelection in 2007 (Ter Haar 2017). Moreover, the downing of passenger flight MH-17 – which carried mostly Dutch citizens – severely damaged economic and diplomatic ties (van der Togt 2015). However, over time things always went back to 'business as usual' because of the importance of the Russian market for Dutch companies and, more importantly, the Dutch dependence on Russian gas. This dynamic is a prime example of the dominance of *trade* in Dutch foreign policy.

The Netherlands' relationships with other non-EU Eastern European countries – like Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – have mostly been shaped by the EaP. The Dutch governments appreciate the EaP as a tool for political rapprochement and bolstering economic ties, but has made sure to emphasize that it is not as a gateway to EU accession – again displaying the Dutch reluctance towards further EU expansion (Deen et al. 2021). However, recent attempts by countries like Iran, China and Russia to maintain – or even expand – their spheres of influence have led the Dutch government to the realization that countries, when not under EU/Western influence, can easily be lost to illiberalism. That is why the years leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine showed a trend of the Dutch government being less critical and, since 2017, also highlighting the geopolitical importance of deepening ties with the EaP countries (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2011-2021).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to drastic changes in the Netherlands' relations with both Russia and the EaP countries. While relations with Russia deteriorated, relations with Ukraine have flourished. The Netherlands is currently the fifth-largest provider of bilateral aid to Ukraine, with 1.5% of its GDP committed to providing aid from itself and the EU

(IFW-Kiel z.d.). The Dutch government has, moreover, recently signed a ten-year security agreement with Ukraine to support it on multiple fronts—including militarily, financially, with its cybersecurity, and with its Euro-Atlantic integration (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2024). This agreement was supported by a parliamentary majority, with the only parties voting against being those on the far-right and far-left (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2024). These are the same *withdrawalist* parties that campaigned against the EU-Ukraine association agreement in 2016, as can be seen in Table 1, by playing into existing anti-EU sentiment in Dutch society (Abts et al. 2016). The referendum had a low turnout of 32.2%, and 61.1% of people voted against the association agreement. Consequently, some parties voted against the agreement to respect the result of the referendum. Others were against it from the beginning. However, President Zelensky's pro-Western stance and Russia's clear responsibility for the war—combined with the Netherlands' prior negative experiences with Russia—contributed to the Dutch government's current strong support for Ukraine and tough stance on Russia. EU-wide sanctions further strained Dutch ties with Russia by disrupting trade—removing a key component of Russian-Dutch relations—and paved the way for a more hard-line approach.

Table 1. Voting results per party on Ukraine related issues.

	Should the EU-Ukraine association agreement be ratified? (2017)	Should the Netherlands sign a 10-year security agreement with Ukraine? (2024)
PVV	x	x
VVD	✓	✓
CDA	x	✓
D66	x	x
PvdA	✓	✓
SP	x	x
FvD	-	x
GL	✓	✓
PvdD	x	✓
CU	x	✓
SGP	x	✓

Source: Parliament of the Netherlands

(<https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/wetsvoorstellen/detail?cfg=wetsvoorsteldetails&qry=wetsvoorstel%3A34669#wetgevingsproces> & <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2024Z04334&did=2024D10045>)

Dutch-Georgian Relations: Bridging the Gap?

Russia's war in Ukraine did not only bring the Netherlands closer to Ukraine but also shifted the Dutch perspective more towards East-Europe, highlighting the geopolitical importance of the EU. In 2022, when Georgia applied for the EU candidacy alongside Ukraine and Moldova, the Dutch government was still rather critical towards Georgia's progress but did set conditions for Georgia's EU candidacy instead of ruling it out like it had been doing for the past decade (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2022). For example, the Dutch government has expressed Georgia's limited alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to be "a point of concern" (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2023). Although the Dutch government was hesitant to endorse Georgia's EU candidate status in December 2023, it ultimately chose to do so, considering the geopolitical context and the relatively low impact of granting candidate status. Georgia, for its part, leveraged the momentum from the war in Ukraine to join Ukraine and Moldova in pursuing EU candidacy (Zweers 2024). Yet, with this momentum now diminishing and the Dutch government remaining apprehensive towards expansion, the Netherlands is unlikely to support Georgia's EU membership if the Georgian government fails to make significant progress.

The Netherlands is currently the second investor in Georgia after the UK (Geostat z.d.-b). Furthermore, Georgian import and export with the Netherlands varies per year but the general trend for both is upwards as can be seen in Figure 1 (Geostat z.d.-a & c). In 2022 Georgian imports from the Netherlands mostly consisted of electronics, medical devices, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products. Georgian exports to the Netherlands consisted primarily of chemicals, minerals and metals (Observatory of Economic Complexity z.d.). Moreover, as a country renowned for its seafaring prowess, the Netherlands plays a significant role in Georgia's maritime trade sector. This is perhaps best illustrated by Dutch-Danish company AMP's majority stake in Georgia's Poti Sea Port. Moreover, Dutch dredging companies are likely contenders for constructing the planned port of Anaklia (Civil.ge 2024). Overall, economic ties between the two countries have strengthened over the years, with room for further growth, especially from the Georgian side. The Netherlands' involvement in key economic sectors underscores its significance to Georgia. Yet, the Georgian government rarely acknowledges this fact.

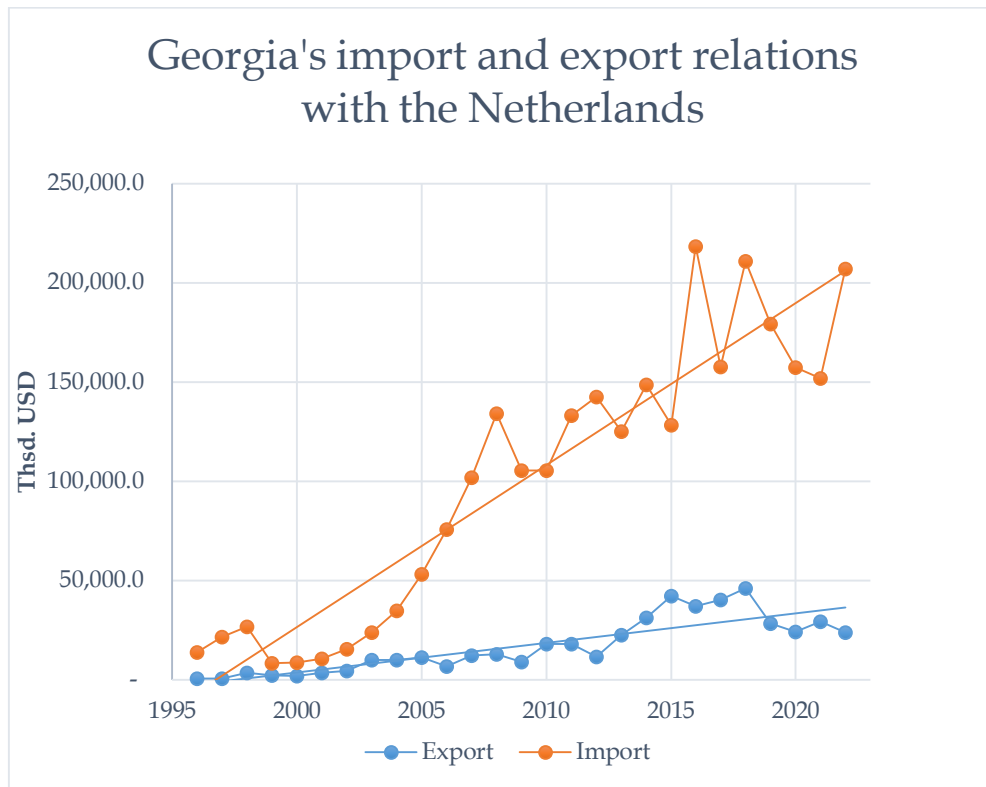


Figure 1. Georgian import from and export to the Netherlands from 1996 to 2022. Source: Geostat (<https://www.geostat.ge/en>)

Of course, collaboration between the Netherlands and Georgia extends beyond trade. Both countries share a constituency at the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The constituency program aims to help countries with their public financing (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2020). Moreover, the Netherlands has contributed to Georgia's digital security and provided civil experts to the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM). The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs even visited the EUMM in 2020, affirming the Netherlands' support for Georgia's territorial integrity (MFA of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2021). Moreover, through the Matra program, the Netherlands supports various aspects of Georgian society, including government and civil society initiatives. These collaborations demonstrate the Netherlands' engagement with Georgia. Even so, intergovernmental contacts remain limited. For the same reason that Dutch Ostpolitik is hard to define, this is likely due to the fact that the Netherlands lacks historical and people-to-people ties with Georgia. Another factor contributing to Dutch-Georgian relations being underdeveloped is the Georgian government's consistent flirting with illiberalism. For a small example, one could look to former Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili's comments on Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, who he described as his "dear friend" (Government of Georgia 2023). The choice for Viktor

Orbán as an ally and the Georgian government's recent adoption of the so-called 'law on foreign agents' followed by anti-Western rhetoric (Vincent 2024) raises questions about whether further rapprochement with the Netherlands and the current Georgian government is possible. A statement made by the Dutch MFA expressing their discontent about the anti-Western statements and the adoption of the law reflects this (Embassy of the Netherlands in Georgia 2024).

Moreover, the most recent Dutch elections have left the future of Dutch politics and foreign policy shrouded in uncertainty. Wilders' far-right PVV won a landslide victory, shifting the parliamentary balance to the right. As a *withdrawalist* party, the PVV has consistently opposed EU expansion and many initiatives supporting Ukraine. In one of the first parliamentary sessions after the elections the PVV voted against starting EU accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine, as well as against granting Georgia EU candidate status. Between the Georgian government's current trajectory and the rise of the PVV in the Netherlands, the relationship between the Netherlands and Georgia could face serious setbacks.

Conclusion

The change in Dutch foreign policy towards a more outward-looking approach, combined with the war in Ukraine, has given Georgia the chance to attract more support from the Netherlands for its bid to join the EU. The Netherlands remains critical of Georgia's readiness to join the EU, but its vote in favor of granting Georgia EU candidate status illustrates that it wishes to eventually see the country join the bloc. And indeed, with an engaged Dutch embassy in Tbilisi and economic ties between the two countries being stronger than ever, there is a solid base upon which bilateral relations can be deepened, and Georgia's integration into the EU advanced. Recent developments in both countries, however, threaten to—at best—stall the accession process, and—at worst—halt it. Indeed, the rise of the inward-looking PVV in the Netherlands and the Georgian government's decision to set out on a path that will move Georgia away from not just the Netherlands, but from further Euro-Atlantic integration all together, jeopardizes the relationship between the two countries, and the traditional foreign policy objectives of both.

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