



Orbán's Eurosceptic Bloc: The Patriots for Europe and Their Impact on Georgia's EU Aspirations

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A new right-wing faction in the European Parliament (EP) has emerged, the Patriots for Europe, spearheaded by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and grounded in considerable Euroscepticism (DW 2024). Notably, the members' views on EU enlargement vary significantly due to the protest nature of the faction, which first and foremost targets domestic electoral dissonance within the EU and issues such as immigration and the Green Deal. Subsequently, the faction contains members openly supporting Eastern Partnership enlargement and those with more pro-Russian views criticising cooperation and aid to the EU's eastern partners.

While some members have supported Georgia's EU candidacy and condemned the ruling Georgian Dream party, others have refrained from criticising the party while opposing Georgia's EU membership. Hungary's deepening ties with Georgia are important for Georgia's EU ambitions because Orbán has positioned himself as Georgia's most prominent advocate. The Patriots and Hungary's platform within it could offer Georgia a way back into the graces of the EU without addressing its democratic backsliding. However, Hungary's authoritarianism and increasing isolation within the EU suggest that its advocacy is an Orbán strategy to construct an illiberal bloc within the EU.

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It is crucial to untangle the inconsistencies to see how the now-strongest right-wing faction in the EP will impact Georgia's enlargement prospects. At first glance, internal discord within the Patriots indicates lack of a united foreign policy stance. However, Hungary's key role within the faction, both as a founding member and a country with the second most EP members (MEPs) within the Patriots, makes this a potentially significant issue.

The Origins of the Patriots for Europe

To better understand the implications of the Patriots for Europe for Georgia's enlargement movement, it is necessary to examine the strategic motivations behind the faction's establishment. The group was born out of Orbán's vision to establish the strongest right-wing faction in the EP, an ambition stemming from the discrepancy between his political influence at home through Fidesz and more broadly within the EU. The Fidesz party has not been a part of an EP alliance since 2021 when it was suspended from the Belgium-based European People's Party (EPP 2019) due to concerns over attacks on the rule of law in Hungary. Subsequently, Orbán set out to create a new faction, uniting members from two major EP Eurosceptic groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists and the Identity and Democracy Group.

The Patriots are built on three pillars: protecting traditional Christian values against the 'liberal elites, curbing immigration into the EU, and safeguarding national sovereignty against the Brussels dictate' (AALEP 2024). Despite some initial uncertainties, the faction has met Orbán's goal of becoming the largest right-wing faction in the EP with 84 MEPs (The Brussels Times Newsroom 2024). The faction's Euroscepticism is a vital signal to their home bases because most members are domestically polling well precisely on Eurosceptic platforms (Daněk 2024; Murphy, 2024). However, this orientation complicates the Patriots' foreign policy platform because as domestic protest sentiments primarily drive the faction, there is no cohesive ideological vision that is not rooted in the appeal of protest votes, as the different Patriots members, while united on the issue of Euroscepticisms, diverge on the approach toward the Eastern Partnership.

Such tensions have already negatively impacted the faction, undermining the Patriots' appeal to other right-wing parties. The most prominent current foreign policy cleavage, the war in Ukraine, caused the Patriots to lose a lucrative member, the Polish PiS, which holds 20 MEPs (European Parliament 2024b) and decided to remain with the Belgium-based

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The reason PiS declined membership highlights a key issue: the Patriots consist of parties with divergent foreign policies, making it difficult for firmly positioned parties to align with them. PiS, for example, has been staunchly anti-Russian and a strong supporter of Ukraine, which led to tensions with Fidesz, a founding member of the Patriots. Notably, in 2022, when Orbán questioned whether the Bucha massacre took place, Polish President Lech Kaczyński responded by suggesting that Orbán needed an eye exam (Euronews 2022), thus throwing doubt onto the future of Hungarian-Polish cooperation.

Foreign policy fragmentations like these may prove too significant to influence Georgia's EU enlargement, particularly regarding Russia and Ukraine. Simultaneously, not all Eurosceptic parties reject European integration outright, instead advocating for an enlargement that does not align with liberal EU values. Therefore, it remains essential to consider their perspectives in this context.

Divergent Stances: Analysing the Patriots for Europe's Voting Patterns on Georgian Issues

To understand the relevance of these divisions for Georgia, the voting patterns of Patriots members on EP motions pertaining to Georgia since 2022 were analysed. The voting results, shown below, reveal a notable lack of consensus among the parties on Georgia-related issues. Of note, some Patriots members were only voted into the EP during the June 2024 elections.

The most significant was the **'MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on attempts to reintroduce a foreign agent law in Georgia and its restrictions on civil society'**, which Tbilisi had tabled the year before but passed into law in the early summer of 2024 (European Parliament 2024a) (see Table 1).

Table 1.

| Voting Status | Patriots Members |
|--------------------------|--|
| Voted for the motion | Lega (Italy), VOX (Spain), ANO (Czechia) |
| Voted against the motion | Fidesz (Hungary), PVV (Netherlands) |
| Abstained from voting | VB (Belgium), FPÖ (Austria), RN (France) |
| Did not participate | DF (Denmark), KDNP (Hungary) |

Another was the **'JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the candidate status of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia'** (European Parliament 2022b) (see Table 2).

Table 2.

| Voting Status | Patriots Members |
|--------------------------|--|
| Voted for the motion | Lega (Italy), VOX (Spain), ANO (Czechia), KDNP (Hungary), Fidesz (Hungary) |
| Voted against the motion | VB (Belgium), FPÖ (Austria), RN (France), DF (Denmark), PVV (Netherlands) |

We also examined the **'Annual implementing report on the EU association agreement with Georgia'** (European Parliament 2022a) (see Table 3).

Table 3.

| Voting Status | Patriots Members |
|--------------------------|---|
| Voted for the motion | Lega (Italy), VOX (Spain), ANO (Czechia) |
| Voted against the motion | FPÖ (Austria), RN (France), PVV (Netherlands) |
| Abstained from voting | VB (Belgium), Fidesz (Hungary) |

The voting patterns reveal a lack of clear consensus on Georgian issues. While some members supported Georgia's EU candidacy and condemned Georgian Dream, others opposed Georgia's EU membership or refrained from criticising the party. The voting patterns illustrate three distinct attitudes:

1. Excluding Georgia from the EU entirely (opting for minimal engagement) – evidenced by opposition to its EU candidacy and abstention from votes condemning Georgian Dream.
2. Supporting Georgia's membership and alignment with EU values – endorsing the country's candidacy and criticism of Georgian Dream.
3. Advocating for Georgia's membership on Georgian Dream's terms – favouring EU entry but refusing to condemn Georgian Dream (membership without EU values).

Given the disjointed nature of the Patriots' orientation toward Georgia, it is worth exploring the relationship through a bilateral lens. Due to their recent diplomatic rapprochement (Tabatadze 2024), the exploration of the Georgia-Hungary relationship is the most relevant. A focus on Hungary's relations with Georgia, rather than any other Patriots member, is due to the exceptionally close relationship between the two, which has evolved into a notable friendship not observed with other EU members. Moreover, given Orbán's wish for Hungary to emerge as a leading EU nation, combined with the fact that different parties within the faction have shown limited interest in Georgia, it is likely that Hungary will take the lead in shaping the Patriots' stance on Georgia-related issues.

Strategic Partnership and Illiberal Influence: The Georgia-Hungary Relationship

The relationship between Georgia and Hungary has deepened in recent years, with both parties referring to it as strategically special (Government of Georgia 2021). This was solidified through mutual visits by their respective leaders, who have voiced admiration for each other's character and leadership skills on several occasions (Orbán 2024; Government of Georgia 2024). The increasing diplomatic closeness between the two states was formalised in 2022 through the Declaration on Strategic Partnership (Civil.ge 2023).

Hungary's deepening ties with Georgia are seemingly crucial for Georgia's EU ambitions because Orbán has positioned himself as Georgia's most prominent advocate, criticising the

EU for delaying Georgia's candidate status (Government of Georgia 2023). However, Orbán's attacks on the EU's hesitancy regarding Georgia conveniently overlook Georgian Dream's failure to address the European Council recommendations, which led to the accession delay in the first place (EU Delegation Georgia 2024). Orbán justifies Hungary's support for Georgia's EU integration by arguing that the EU needs new partners, like Georgia, to restore its waning international influence (Hungarian Presidency 2024).

Ideologically, the countries share a socially conservative stance (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2024; Government of Georgia 2024), advocating for a European identity rooted in Christian values and protecting national sovereignty that precedes liberalism and supranationalism. Orbán uses the sovereignty discourse to justify its support for Georgia despite the country's failure to meet EU recommendations instead of condemning the EU for meddling in Georgia's internal affairs (Agenda.ge 2024). Hungary's government even defended Georgia's foreign agent law, arguing that it should be adopted across the EU (Orbán 2024; Agenda.ge 2023). Consequently, Orbán creates an alternate assessment of Georgia's EU bid, framing it not as an attack on democracy but as a protection of national sovereignty.

Hungary's authoritarian turn and increasing isolation within the EU suggest that its Georgian advocacy is part of Orbán's strategy of building an illiberal bloc within the EU. While Orbán is openly Eurosceptic, he is aware of the benefits Hungary receives from its EU status (Kelemen 2020). However, Orbán currently lacks allies within the EU. After the defeat of PiS in Poland, Slovakia, whose political trajectory mirrors Hungary, emerged as Orbán's most important partner. Nonetheless, this alliance leaves much to be desired as Slovakia's Prime Minister, Robert Fico, primarily focuses on consolidating his own power and is unlikely to challenge the EU too openly. Given Orbán's limited number of allies, he is actively leveraging his support for Georgia within the EU to increase Hungary's influence. Specifically, Orbán seems to be using Georgia as a bargaining chip in EU-wide discussions on Eastern Partnership countries (Jozwiak 2023). Orbán can leverage his veto power to block Ukraine's progress unless Georgia is granted candidate status. Therefore, it is no surprise that Hungary is looking for new allies.

What is key about his efforts is that Hungary is looking for more than just other illiberal governments. Instead, its democratic backsliding directly inspires such processes elsewhere. Countries experiencing democratic backsliding use the same playbook. Even Hungary's concept of illiberal democracy (Sata and Karolewski 2023) is modelled after President

Vladimir Putin's view of sovereign democracy (Krastev 2006). This form of 'democracy' allows for democratic backsliding based on attacking the media and judiciary and the promotion of a state-controlled cultural agenda rooted in traditional values whilst maintaining that this type of government needs to be respected as a viable alternative to Western liberal democracies. This playbook was initially adopted by Hungary and Poland, with the two countries allying on issues of Euroscepticism, protection of sovereign democracy, and the ability to leverage their veto power to evade EU infringement procedures. Gradually, this model spread to other EU members, notably Slovakia.

Georgia also clearly follows this pattern, as evidenced by attacks on the judiciary; it is no coincidence that both Georgia and Hungary have been criticised for politicising the judiciary (OSCE 2021; European Commission 2023). As Thomas de Waal noted (De Waal 2023), the 'Orbanizing of Georgia' shows that European illiberal processes are intimately interlinked through a common framework of democratic backsliding.

The Risks of Illiberal Alignment: the Future of Georgia's EU Aspirations

Adopting Hungary's democratic backsliding may ultimately sabotage Georgia's EU aspirations because other EU members might hesitate to admit 'another Hungary' into the club. Already, EU members experienced frustrations regarding an EU-wide statement condemning the foreign agents law, delayed by Hungary and Slovakia, which did not wish for the EU to intervene in another country's domestic affairs (Brzozowski 2024). Subsequently, by aligning with Hungary, Georgia risks alienating itself from EU countries that genuinely support the country's democratic development. Notably, the European Commission has once already launched an infringement procedure against Hungary's NGO-restrictive LexNGO law that required organisations receiving more than €7.2 million annually from abroad to register as foreign-funded organisations (European Commission 2017). Therefore, it is questionable whether the EU would be willing to welcome another country that has taken a similar legislative path of democratic backsliding into its structures. Besides, what puts Georgia into a more precarious situation is that, unlike Hungary, it does not have the leverage of EU membership, making Georgia's position vis-à-vis the EU significantly weaker.

Conclusion

The emergence of the Patriots political entity in European politics presents a double-edged sword for Georgia. On the one hand, joining a faction founded by Hungary, which was expelled from the EPP for democratic backsliding, might seem like a natural alignment for Georgia as Georgian Dream found itself in a similar predicament, having lost its observer status in the Party of European Socialists due to political developments in the country (PES 2023). Simultaneously, other EP parties have already moved to curb the Patriots' influence through a cordon sanitaire (Fortuna 2024), preventing the faction from securing key committee positions – a strategy previously used against the far-right ID group (Sorgi 2023). Therefore, similarly to bilateral relations with Hungary, joining far-right factions to find new allies in the EP likely carries more long-term risks than benefits for Georgia, given the strong anti-extremist position of other EP members.

Nonetheless, it does not seem that the Georgian government considers the risks that an alliance with Hungary poses to the country's EU accession. Quite the opposite, considering that Georgian Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili thanked Hungary for supporting Georgia's European integration while expressing hope for future cooperation (Kartozia 2024). This alliance still makes sense for Georgian Dream because Hungary sets a precedent for Georgia on how to get closer to the EU without addressing its democratic shortcomings. Moreover, this alliance also emboldens Georgian Dream to attack civil society further, especially since Hungary has assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Should Georgian Dream decide to meddle with the integrity of the October elections, Hungary could release a statement supporting the election results whilst creating the illusion that it is speaking on the EU's behalf. Such a scenario might not be so far-fetched because Hungary has already, through the Presidency, attempted to open negotiations between Ukraine and Russia without discussing such steps with other EU members.

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