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Input paper: Adapting EU Policy – Enlargement and the Future of EU Neighborhood Policy

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**View from Georgia**, by Prof. Dr. Gvantsa Davitashvili (New Vision University / Georgian Institute of Politics).

Russia’s war against Ukraine that violates all principles of international and European security is a historic turning point for the EU to rethink and revise its foreign and neighborhood policy. The collapse of the security balance in its eastern neighborhood has determined enlargement policy as a priority in the EU’s agenda.

The EU’s efforts to intensify its engagement with the Associated Trio countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) by moving them from the neighborhood policy to the enlargement policy reflects also the EU’s desire to be a geopolitical actor in the region. ([Akhvlediani, 2023](#)) The EU has consistently upgraded its bilateral relations with Eastern European countries – by introducing the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and signing Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas – but a membership perspective has never been incorporated into bilateral relations with the countries concerned. By introducing the [enlargement package](#) and demonstrating its potential absorption capacity, the EU substantially enhanced its leverage. In planning changes in the EaP, it should be an important goal to use the experience of the new candidate countries in the region as a catalyst to bring more Europeanization to the eastern neighborhood. The changes should spread the positive impact of enlargement to the non-candidate countries of the EaP. Maintaining the regional dynamics of European integration and the increased role of the candidate countries in multilateral dialogues should be set as a goal in the new EaP framework, in which connectivity remains as a central issue.

The disparity between EU policies in the region is likely to persist and even increase, particularly after the recognition of Moldova and Ukraine, and potentially Georgia, as candidate countries. ([Delcour, 2023](#)) A variety of issues in the future neighborhood policy are still not envisioned and shaped. However, a new security architecture in the region should be a core element of the EU’s foreign policy agenda, and this is tightly linked to its strategic vision toward its Eastern neighbors. The methodology of European integration, due to the new wave of enlargement, is being substantially revised and conditionality as leverage acquires a revived meaning in bilateral relations with the Eastern neighbors.

Georgia will have to carry out substantial reforms within a short time frame. In this process, the challenge remains the role of political actors in supporting democratic consolidation and overcoming narrow, party-oriented interests. There is no fast track to joining the EU and carrying out reforms is costly. Providing tangible economic benefits to society will be important for the transformational processes in the domestic legal order, which will further increase the support for the EU and the pressure on the government. Civil society plays a special transformative role in this process and its continuous strengthening by the EU is important.

The membership perspective for Georgia and granting it candidate status is likely to amplify the EU’s influence over the country’s reform process and revive it, mitigate societal polarization and party-led radicalization, and enhance the EU’s influence in the region. ([Georgian Institute of Politics, 2023](#)) The risks in leaving Georgia without candidate status are high and costly for the country and the EU. For Georgia,

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it could lead to the further erosion of democratic institutions, increased authoritarian consolidation, and additional political destabilization. For the EU, it would increase skepticism and eroding trust in its commitments not only in Georgia but also in the region. ([Georgian Institute of Politics, 2023](#))

The lack of membership perspective reduces the EU's leverage on domestic reforms and transformation. While pre-accession financial assistance compensates for the political and economic costs of accession, 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 for Georgia may appear more abstract ([Kakachia, 2023](#)). It is crucial that the EU effectively communicate its expectations and desired reform outcomes in the context of its [nine recommendations to Georgia](#).

The new wave of enlargement imposes an obligation on the EU to take into consideration policies that have not been prioritized before in the EaP. It must focus not just on political and security challenges but also on geoeconomics, connectivity, energy security, access to natural resources, and ensuring key trading partnerships beyond Europe and its neighborhood. ([Soeren Keil, 2023](#)) While there is little hope that Georgia's political actors are ready to refrain from zero-sum games, granting candidate status would still increase the chances of institutionalizing a consensus-based political process. Receiving candidate status would also be a significant national triumph, which in recent weeks has suppressed the voice of openly pro-Russian forces.

Georgia's government has declared EU membership as its strategic goal and is making efforts toward reforms and legislative alignment. However, the lack of political will, inconsistency, and the controversial decisions of the political leadership undermine the reform-oriented processes as envisaged in EU recommendations. The government's balancing foreign policy in relations with Russia, non-participation in the EU sanctions on Moscow, and nonalignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is another threat to Georgia's EU path.

The main concerns around fulfilling the accession criteria relate to the political criteria, including the incomplete rule-of-law and democratic reforms, rooting out corruption and informal governance, and protection of human rights, where few steps have been taken in the past years. ([Akhvlediani, 2023](#))

The overwhelming majority of Georgians support the country's European future, which was recognized by the European Commission. Following the granting of candidate status, societal pressure may increase on the government to comply with the EU's recommendations. The parliamentary elections of 2024 will be a litmus test for Georgia's democracy when it must demonstrate its commitment to European values. At the same time, the EU should be prepared to unequivocally adhere to its values to avoid reputational damage.

It will be essential that the EU follow up on its commitment to enlargement and intensify communication with the government to agree on a common understanding of its recommendations. All the EU recommendations in the national political context are crucial, but not equally. The EU should strictly focus on Georgia's alignment with the CFSP, political polarization, and a fair and competitive electoral process. The EU is facing various internal challenges, especially related to member states prioritizing their national interests ([Tanja A. Börzel, 2023](#)) that may require deepening of the EU rules and norms to respond to the logic of the new wave of enlargement.

Accelerated and gradual integration has to be based on strong conditionality and a merit-based approach. ([Emerson and Blockmans, 2022](#)) At the same time, it should be linked to clear stages and predefined benchmarks that guarantee a sufficient level of alignment with the EU's *acquis communautaire*. ([Emerson and Blockmans, 2022](#)) Support for Georgia's reforms process will also require the EU's fully fledged engagement at all stages, especially with institutional capacity building in the

process of negotiations. In addition to that, the EU's ability to provide concrete and tangible benefits for citizens should be visible during the negotiations. The EU should keep prioritizing its reputation in Georgia as a value-based actor and security guarantor.

In recent decades, Russia's aggression has paralleled the pro-EU and pro-NATO aspirations of EaP countries. Thus, it remains essential that enlargement be embedded in the deterrence of Russia from any further acts of aggression against its neighbors seeking EU membership. ([Tanja A. Börzel, 2023](#)) The EU needs to remain an influential geopolitical actor and to be a guarantor of Georgia's national security together with NATO. At the same time, in line with the technical support that derives from the enlargement policy, it needs to enforce strict democratic requirements and especially watch the Georgian government's adherence to its recommendations related to democratic standards.