

## CHAPTER 8

# From Dreaming of to Dealing with Europe

## How the Political Elite in Georgia Frames and Contests the EU

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### Abstract

How do Georgian political elites frame the EU and EU integration in their discourse? Why do they simultaneously support and contest the EU? How does the membership perspective recently opened for Georgia alter this discourse and contestation? In this chapter, we argue that the EU became the cornerstone of domestic political struggle in Georgia. Local elites regard the EU and EU integration as a strategic process, producing new opportunities and challenges. They contextualize events related to the EU and EU integration through the lenses of their interests and expectations. This reveals the limits of the EU's transformative power, and therefore conditionality, even within the membership perspective, especially in the liminal periphery with competing forces such as Russia. Along with secondary data regarding

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Georgia–EU relations, the chapter draws on original interviews with members of the Georgian parliament, both from the ruling party and the opposition, and their public statements.

**Keywords:** EU, transformative power, conditionality, Georgia, political elite

## Introduction

In 2020, during the election campaign, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party declared that Georgia would submit a formal application for EU membership by 2024. This announcement was widely received as purely electoral populism and politically ‘unthinkable’ (Groeneveld, 2021). In less than two years, however, Georgia had sent the membership request to the EU, using the window of opportunity opened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Paradoxically, the new reality caused a split in the previously uncontested recognition of EU integration as a positive goal. GD, willing to embrace integration two years earlier, turned cautious if not Eurosceptical, and began to critically approach some EU policies and practices (Emerson & Blockmans, 2022). It suddenly became apparent that, contrary to previous assumptions about unanimous support for EU integration among the political elite and the population alike – surveys still show over 80 per cent public approval of the EU (NDI & CRRC, 2023) – EU and EU membership are contested and highly politicized issues in Georgian politics.

This chapter addresses the following research questions: how do the political elites frame the EU and EU integration in their discourse? Why do they simultaneously support and contest the EU? How does the membership perspective recently opened for Georgia alter this discourse and contestation? The chapter article connects to the overarching question of the current volume: how is the EU’s role as a transformative power perceived by elites in its inner and outer periphery and what are the main reasons for its contestation?

The chapter has the following main argument: based on the rational choice institutionalism assumption about the domestic response to adaptational pressure from the EU to ultimately meet the Copenhagen Criteria, we believe that political elites in Georgia (incumbents and the mainstream opposition represented in parliament) perceive EU integration as a strategic process producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They see the events of

integration through the lenses of their ordered interests and expectations. The incumbents are largely satisfied with the status of ‘liminal periphery’ (see below), since it allows them to pursue a cherry-picking strategy towards adaptation – implementing reforms fitting with their regime survivalist agenda and avoiding others. The incumbents also feel the limits of the EU’s transformative power in the periphery, and they use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU, which softens the conditionality of EU integration as an outcome. Opposition members continue to express univocal and unconditional support for the EU, since they perceive it to serve their interests in competing with the incumbents and increasing their electoral support.

This does not mean, however, that Georgia is abandoning its EU integration path. It remains ‘embark[ed] on seeking prospective EU membership (thus aiming for convergence with EU requirements), while on certain topics [it takes] a differentiated or even opposite perspective’ (see [Chapter 1](#)). This results in simultaneous support for and contestation of the EU, especially among the incumbents.

As a periphery of the EU, Georgia represents a case of a geographical and political ‘liminality’ (‘neither East nor West’ – see [Chapter 1](#)). It has been through different stages, though: in the 1990s, when Georgia became independent, the country was a remote, unimportant geographical area far away from Europe. Over time, and with EU support, it has succeeded in finding a niche, mainly as a corridor connecting Europe with the Caspian Sea and further to Central Asia. After the adoption of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003, the EU and EU integration became attractive symbols for all mainstream political actors in Georgia. After a change of government in 2003, the flags of the EU were put next to the Georgian national flags above all public buildings (Ó Beacháina & Coene, 2014, p. 930). The political elite, both those in power and the opposition, used the promise of ‘uniting with Europe’ to garner electoral support in the country. The dream of the EU – however far-fetched and unrealistic it sounded – had its political gains: during the last decade, more than 70 per cent of the Georgian population showed unconditional support for the country’s EU integration. The asymmetrical relations between parties or ‘deficit of reciprocity’ – Georgia willing to embrace the EU but the EU avoiding a clear answer – did not undermine this support within the elite (Sabanadze, 2022). The unanimous acceptance of the EU by the

political elite continued when Georgia signed the Association Agreement in 2014. The soft conditionality of the Agreement enabled the Georgian authorities to select the reforms they wanted to implement and avoid those that would undermine their power.

The war in Ukraine dramatically changed the conditions from 2022 onwards. The EU acknowledged the new geopolitical realities and decided to open the gates for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Georgia's unanimous support for the EU and its own experience of Russian invasion of 2008 suggested that the authorities would embrace the new chance and strictly and swiftly implement whatever Brussels requested. However, the Georgian authorities turned cautious about the EU.

The transition from dreaming of to dealing with the EU in the case of Georgia reveals that the EU and EU integration are embedded in domestic political contestation. It also reveals the limits of the EU's transformative power, even within the membership perspective, especially in the face of competing external forces such as Russia that 'challenge the EU in their shared neighbourhood' (see [Chapter 1](#)). On a larger scale, our findings contradict previous assumptions that EU conditionality is more efficient within the membership perspective (accession conditionality).

The chapter is structured as follows: in the first section, the methodological approach and theoretical framework are presented; the second section provides a short overview of EU–Georgia relations, focusing on the transformation of the periphery; the third section embeds our research object in the current debate about the EU's transformative power, or more specifically the outcome of its conditionality; in the fourth section we analyse and present our empirical findings; and the final section summarizes the main conclusions.

## **Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework**

The chapter is based on original research that began in late 2021, with semi-structured interviews conducted from December 2022 to May 2023. The research and the chapter primarily cover developments between 2020 and 2022, particularly looking at elite attitudes towards the EU before and after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. In some

cases, the analyses reach as far back as 2003, when the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy.

In methodological terms, the research is qualitative-interpretative, utilizing data generated from scholarly works and analytical papers, open media sources, and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide covering topics such as perceptions of the global role of the EU, Georgia–EU relations in general terms and specific events taking place during the last decade, and the EU reaction to crisis and war. The semi-structured interviews allowed us to control the flow of conversation while at the same time maintaining a degree of freedom to adapt to new information provided by the interviewee. We targeted representatives of the political elite, operationalized as national decision-makers, represented in the parliament.

On the one hand, the political landscape in Georgia is significantly fractured: in the most recent (2020) parliamentary elections, 60 political parties participated (Election Administration of Georgia, 2020), while the parliament, with 150 members, has two factions, seven political groups (political groups have almost the same rights as factions but consist of a smaller number of parliamentarians), and 14 independent members (as of October 2023; see Parliament of Georgia, 2020a). On the other hand, the landscape is dominated by the ruling GD, which controls power on a national level and in almost all local municipalities. This makes Georgia a case of dominant-power politics with some elements of feckless pluralism (see Berglund, 2014).

Considering the above, we targeted members of the parliamentary Committee on European Integration of Georgia for interviews. The Committee has 14 members, eight representing the ruling majority and seven representing six groups of the opposition (as of October 2023; see Committee on European integration, n.d.). Initially, we aimed to conduct six interviews – three from the majority and three from the opposition. Despite all attempts, the majority representatives refused to participate. We added one interview with an opposition representative to compensate for this shortcoming, reaching four interviews in total. As for the ruling majority, we rely on public statements accessible in media sources. For this purpose, we systematically searched through national online media sources such as [IPN.ge](#) (Interpressnews), Georgia Today, [Civil.ge](#), and [Netgazeti.ge](#). We used the English-language pages whenever the media outlets had them. Where

the author translated information available only in Georgian, this is indicated in the citations. The same applies to interviews, which were conducted in Georgian, transcribed, and translated by the author. All interviewees choose to remain anonymous.

In terms of its theoretical framework, the chapter applies the theoretical model of domestic adaptation to the EU (or Europeanization) proposed by Börzel and Risse (2003; see also Lebanidze, 2020 for application to the post-Soviet space). According to this model, domestic change is needed as a result of the existence of “misfit” or incompatibility between European-level processes, policies, and institutions, on the one hand, and domestic-level processes, policies, and institutions on the other’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 58). The misfit is translated into top-down EU adaptational pressure (or conditionality) aimed at eliminating it (or achieving convergence with EU-level polity, policies, and politics, ultimately the Copenhagen Criteria). However, it is not a sufficient condition for domestic change to take place. The second condition (and more relevant for our purposes, since it reveals the bottom-up reaction of local, domestic actors) is the response ‘to the adaptational pressures [by] actors [or] institutions’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 58).

The authors of the model argue that domestic players’ reactions can be understood by a logic of either rational choice (the logic of consequentialism) or sociological-constructivist institutionalism (the logic of appropriateness). In this chapter, we follow the agency-centred rational choice perspective, according to which:

rational, goal-oriented, and purposeful [actors] ... engage in strategic interactions using their resources to maximize their utilities based on given, fixed, and ordered preferences. They follow an instrumental rationality by weighing the costs and benefits of different strategy options considering the (anticipated) behaviour of other actors. From this perspective, Europeanization is largely conceived as an emerging political opportunity structure that offers some actors additional resources to exert influence while severely constraining the ability of others to pursue their goals. (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 63)

The authors also argue that country-specific domestic structures (the number of veto players or the quality of formal institutions) can increase or decrease domestic resistance to adaptational pressure (Börzel & Risse, 2003, pp. 64–65). We argue that in countries of the EU’s

'liminal periphery,' the existence of alternative external forces and integrational models, such as Russia, constitutes an additional factor impacting the domestic reaction to external adaptation pressure from the EU, since it increases local actors' potential to 'resist'.

We agree that the sociological perspective should also be considered. Indeed, the 'collective understanding' of what is 'proper, socially accepted behavior' does 'influence the ways in which actors define their goals and what they perceive as "rational" action' (Börzel & Risse, 2003, pp. 65–66). 'The two logics ... are not mutually exclusive [and] often occur simultaneously or characterize different phases in a process, of adaptational change' (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 59). Therefore, the focus on rational choice logic in this chapter represents a solely methodological decision.

Applying this theoretical model to the empirical part of our study, we expect political elites to understand EU integration as a strategic process, producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They contextualize EU-related events through the lenses of their fixed and ordered interests and expectations, using available resources, including those offered by other external factors, such as Russia, to increase their domestic response power.

### **From Alien to Neighbour and from Neighbour to Member? The Transformation of 'Periphery' in EU–Georgia Relations**

Georgia's relationship with the EU is a matter of geography. In strict physical-geographical terms, the country lies in the South Caucasus, beyond the borders of Europe and part of Asia. While in the modern globalized world the salience of the location factor has diminished, it is evident that geographical proximity enhances linkages between countries and societies, especially in the people-to-people format. Therefore, the geographical location still impedes Georgia's route to the EU (Sabanadze, 2022, pp. 144–146). Over time, political, economic, and societal developments within the EU and in Georgia have contributed to the relativization of the geographical factor. Thus, Georgia has travelled from the non-European to the neighbouring periphery of the EU and currently faces a new transformation – from neighbour to membership candidate.

This journey started about 30 years ago, in the early 1990s, when Georgia gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Considering the trajectory mentioned above, these relations can be divided into three phases from the EU perspective: (1) contact with a largely unknown, alien country (outer or Russian periphery); (2) recognizing Georgia as a neighbouring country (liminal periphery); (3) acknowledging Georgia's membership perspective (inner periphery) (for a different periodization, see Sabanadze, 2022). Although the chapter focuses primarily on the latest developments, it is necessary to look at the previous periods briefly.

In the first phase, we can distinguish two stages. Initially, EU–Georgia relations were overwhelmingly one-sided: the EU provided humanitarian aid to a newly established country. This nature of the relations was unsurprising considering the situation of Georgia in the early 1990s. With the civil war in Tbilisi and secession wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia was a candidate for a failing state. In addition, it is essential to mention that not only Georgia but all Soviet republics (except the Baltic states) were seen through the ‘Russia first’ policy prism (Lang & Lippert, 2015) or as a ‘Russian periphery’. At that time, Georgia received humanitarian assistance under the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme. The name of this programme was itself telling – the Commonwealth of Independent States was an organization established by Russia and other successor states of the Soviet Union (again excluding the three Baltic countries).

In the second half of this phase, the first legally binding frameworks – Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) – were signed between the EU and several former Soviet republics in 1996, including Georgia. The Agreement was important for Georgia since it established an institutional framework for sectoral cooperation and regular EU–Georgia contact under the Cooperative Council – the first institutional mechanism for promoting political linkages between the two parties. However, none of the PCAs envisaged integration. Only the agreements with Ukraine, Russia, and Moldova (not that with Georgia) included prospects for free trade agreements (Sabanadze, 2022, p. 141).

Despite this, gradually, Georgia gained its niche – first as a transport and energy corridor. From the second half of the 1990s, Azerbaijan began to exploit its hydrocarbon resources with the support



of Western companies and to transport them to the Western markets through Russia but also past Georgia. In 1995, INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe) was initiated by the EU to support energy cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus and, through this, enable the transportation of hydrocarbon resources to Europe. After almost 30 years, Georgia contributes to Europe's energy security. Currently, two strategic pipelines run through the country: the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (South Caucasus) gas pipeline, part of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) connecting Caspian gas fields to Europe. The importance of these pipelines has increased following Russia's weaponizing of energy resources before and after the invasion of Ukraine.

The second phase of the relations represents a qualitative change in the vision of the region held by the EU. It starts with the neighbourhood policy launched by the Union in 2003. Initially, Georgia (and the South Caucasus) was not considered a part of the EU neighbourhood. According to some observers, the Rose Revolution – a largely peaceful popular uprising that led to regime change and subsequent modernizing reforms in Georgia – contributed to the decision of the EU to include the South Caucasus in the policy (Simão, 2018, p. 312; Lebanidze, 2020, p. 136). Later, in 2009, the Eastern Partnership was launched in Prague to outline the Eastern dimension of the EU neighbourhood. This decision was partially a reaction of the EU to the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, where the EU mediated the ceasefire and sent observers that still operate in the country as a European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) (Lebanidze, 2020, p. 136).

EU–Georgia relations made a more significant qualitative leap with the signing of the Association and DCFT (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade) Agreements in 2014. The Agreements have been in force since 2016. From 2017, Georgian citizens can travel for short periods to most EU countries without a visa. Despite this considerable and tangible approximation of Georgia to the EU, neither the Eastern Partnership nor the Association Agreement has ever been regarded as a route leading to EU membership. On the contrary, the European Neighbourhood Policy was initially launched as a parallel, accompanying process to the so-called 'big bang enlargement' of 2004, with no membership perspective for countries addressed by the policy. It was simply an alternative to enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2018). The same

applies to the association agreements signed with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. None of these documents entails any indication of possible membership. In the broader picture, the EU was absorbed with its domestic problems. Even immediate candidates in the Balkans were stuck thanks to the Union's 'enlargement fatigue', which ultimately grew into 'enlargement resistance' (Economides, 2020).

This was the reality until Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Shortly after the invasion, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova applied to the EU for membership. In June, the EU granted membership candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and acknowledged the membership perspective of Georgia (Davitashvili, 2023). This decision represents the most profound transformation in the relations between the EU and Georgia and marks the new third phase. We will now turn to the Georgian perspective on the relationship and look at how this transformation changed the domestic perception of the EU and EU integration.

### **Membership Perspective versus Survival Strategies: Why Dreaming of Europe Is Better Than Dealing with Europe**

In the literature on the European Neighbourhood Policy, there is almost a unanimous consensus that the EU's leverage to push for political or policy changes is less potent in countries that enjoy no membership perspective than in countries with such a perspective. The membership perspective is the strongest incentive ('golden carrot') in making EU-induced reforms possible. Therefore, scholars believe that the European Neighbourhood Policy cannot produce outcomes in democratization and modernization to the same level that enlargement policy can (Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Davitashvili, 2023; for earlier works, Lehne, 2014; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008).

In this chapter, we argue, however, that the strength of EU pressure for adaptation (or conditionality power) is not determined solely by the membership perspective. On the contrary, as we see in the case of Georgia, introducing the membership perspective can even have a negative effect. Since the membership perspective became more real, a coherent and undoubtedly positive image of the EU and EU integration has been deconstructed and linked to specific interests of political

elite actors. This change produced cleavages and contestations that did not exist in Georgia before in relation to the EU.

Two structural conditions must be considered to understand the dynamic at play. First, Georgia is a hybrid regime (Wheatley & Zürcher, 2008). The incumbent actors apply regime survival strategies that dictate that they implement those reforms fitting into their agenda to enhance popular support and avoid others that may undermine their grip on power. For instance, they may be willing to implement infrastructural projects and reform the police or tax authorities because this enhances their attractiveness and capabilities. On the other hand, they are reluctant to give up control over the judiciary or electoral administration because this limits their power. In the case of EU–Georgia relations, the survival strategy translates into cherry-picking adaptation (Bolkvadze, 2016), which undermines the efficacy of conditionality (Mgaloblishvili, 2023). The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Association Agreement frameworks allow this type of selective behaviour on the part of the receiver country, since specific reform agendas are mutually agreed upon. On the other hand, the membership perspective is based on stricter criteria and is more consequential in its adaptational logic.

The second conditional factor (which was not present at earlier stages of EU enlargement) is the existence of the competing model of integration (more delicately called ‘overlapping regionalism’ by Buzogány, 2019). In the case of Georgia (as with Moldova and Ukraine), EU integration is contested by Russia. Russia launched its regional integration in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union, forced Ukraine (and Armenia) to decline association agreements with the EU in 2013, and invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, when Ukraine ultimately signed the agreement with the EU (about the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative to the EU, see Korosteleva, 2018). On the one hand, by applying harsh methods, Russia is further pushing Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova towards the West from a security perspective. However, it still constitutes a key spoiler of EU democratization and modernization efforts by feeding anti-liberal and anti-EU actors in the region (see Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

Although the past of Russian–Georgian relations – the 2008 war and Russia’s recognition and occupation of two territories of Georgia – limits the possibility of rapprochement between the two states, the Russian factor still expands the spectrum of choices of the Georgian

government while dealing with the EU. In other words, it increases the potential of the incumbents to resist EU-induced adaptation pressure. This situation became more salient following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, when the trade turnover between Georgia and Russia increased considerably, causing the growth of the Georgian economy by more than 10 per cent – giving the ruling regime both economic and political dividends (Cordell, 2022; for recent Russian–Georgian approximation see Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

The combination of these two factors (regime survival preference and existence of alternatives) affects the mechanism of how EU conditionality usually works while inducing domestic change and adaptation in the targeted countries: it increases the manoeuvrability of incumbents to counter external pressure from the EU. It enables them to avoid strict conditionality and continue with a cherry-picking strategy. Now we can turn to domestic actors and try to understand the rational underpinnings of their enduring or changing perceptions about the EU and EU integration in times of war.

### **Deconstruction of EU and EU Integration: Friends and Foes inside the EU?**

Until recently, the EU, with all its institutions and member states, was the shining city on the hill for Georgian political elites, ruling and opposition alike. Political actors unanimously recognized the country's accession to the EU as a positive and shared goal. Article 78 of the country's constitution states that 'the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). The Georgian political elite has massively shaped public attitudes on this matter (see Ó Beacháina & Coene, 2014, on how Euro-Atlantic aspirations were embedded in Georgia's modern political identity). The overwhelming majority of the population has supported EU integration over the last decade – on average more than 75 per cent, and more than 80 per cent since 2022 (NDI/CRRC 2023).

In accordance with this spirit, in 2020 the ruling GD unveiled an ambitious plan to apply for EU membership by 2024. The chair of the party, Irakli Kobakhize, placed the EU at the centre of the party programme while campaigning during the national elections:

The European Union is an irreplaceable space for preserving and developing our identity and creating decent living conditions for each of our citizens. Our election program is based on the ambition of the 'Georgian Dream' political team to create all the conditions for Georgia to apply for full membership in the European Union in 2024. (Netgazeti, 2020a)

Other representatives of GD supported the party leader and emphasized the importance of joining the EU. The chair of the parliament, Archil Talakvadze, repeated the same political commitment in his inaugural speech:

We take a pledge to the society that through consistent and coordinated actions, we will create all the conditions for Georgia to apply for full membership in the European Union by 2024; at this important historical moment of our country, the parliament is committed to cooperation, discussion with healthy political forces, and we are equipped to fulfil the powers imposed by the Constitution. (Parliament of Georgia, 2020b)

The chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration, Maka Bochorishcili, sounded very dedicated and quite optimistic:

Naturally, the accelerated implementation of the Association Agreement by 2024, the fulfilment of key commitments will be the first basis for Georgia to have ambitions to apply for EU membership in 2024. (IPN, 2020)

In 2020, opposition representatives did not question integration as an objective per se but they did doubt the feasibility of the ruling party's promises. Opposition leaders interpreted the GD statements as pure electoral populism. One of the members of the parliament commented:

It is a part of the election campaign by 'Georgian Dream', but it is important for our country ... we have a similar initiative, and other opposition parties do as well. (Netgazeti, 2020b)

The political consensus regarding the EU and EU integration as a common und contested goal of Georgia suddenly shattered in February 2022 after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Shortly after the start of the war, Ukraine sent its membership application request to the EU. In the beginning, GD, the initiator of the EU membership bid for 2024, hesitated to follow and even announced that it would keep to its initial

plans of submitting the bid in 2024. Later, however, an application was drafted and sent, as it was also by Moldova.

In June 2022, the EU (European Commission and European Council) decided to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine but asked Georgia to address 12 priorities as a prerequisite for granting the same status (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2022). Following the decision, the GD majority in the parliament set up working groups and started to address the priorities. The opposition and civil society declined to participate in the proposed format, regarding it as a façade. After several months of work, in May 2023, the ruling party declared most of the priorities fulfilled and blamed the opposition for failing to contribute and for intentionally blocking the implementation of some priorities – for instance, priority number 1 on decreasing political polarization.

Tracing how the discourse about the EU and EU integration has altered during this period is essential for our investigation. The opposition shows a certain degree of continuity in univocal and unchallenged acceptance of the EU and EU integration as a positive end. Representatives of the opposition, in public statements and during our interviews, portray the EU as a ‘peacemaker’, ‘stabilizer’, ‘union of values’, ‘successful project’ globally, and ‘friend’, ‘supporter’, and ‘home’ for Georgia.

An alternative to the EU does not exist for representatives of the opposition:

The EU is our historic choice. It is our unique historical chance. If not in the EU, we will be in a grey zone, post-Soviet space, without a clear future, with bleak prospects for democracy or prosperity. Alternatively, we will be just swallowed by Russia. (Interview 2)

There are only two options: we are part of the EU family or the backyard of Russia. (Interview 1; Interview 4 provided a very similar comment)

If we want democracy, prosperity, human rights, and security ... the EU has no alternative. Only the EU can provide all together. (Interview 3)

The opposition is outspokenly positive about the EU’s support for Georgia’s development during the last decade. The main achievements are named as the Visa-Free Regime Agreement, which enables ‘our citizens to travel, to see and learn what Europe is ... and that there is no return to the Soviet past’ (Interview 4), but also the Free Trade Agreement, which ‘unfortunately is not fully used yet but has a great

potential to decouple us from the post-soviet market' (Interview 3; again, an almost identical comment was made in Interview 4). It is worth mentioning that the ruling-party representatives also share a positive attitude regarding past achievements in EU–Georgia relations. However, they present this as an argument that Georgia deserves candidate status under their administration. See, for example, Kakha Kaladze, mayor of Tbilisi and secretary general of GD:

The Georgian government achieved visa liberalization. It is the merit of the Georgian Dream, together with the public, that [we] travel freely to Europe with a Georgian passport, without a visa. In addition, the Association Agreement, Free Trade Agreement was signed by Georgian Dream and we will do our best to get the candidate status. (IPN, 2022b)

The opposition does not share Euroscepticism and strongly disagrees that the EU challenges Georgian statehood or identity. Quite the contrary:

For Georgia, the three are inseparable – consolidation of statehood, securing future development, and membership in the EU. (Interview 2)

The EU has always been a reliable partner, including in times of crises:

The EU was the biggest material supporter, including the vaccination, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU also supported us in fighting the anti-vaccination propaganda during that time. (Interview 1)

Members of the opposition portray the EU as capable of adjusting to the challenges it faces. Even though they see the EU as a multi-level, multi-actor entity, they believe that in times of crisis, it can act unanimously:

We often criticize the EU because it needs time to make decisions, because of the many diverse members, and because of the consensus needed. However, in times of crisis, the EU is quite capable ... The EU is slow because of its size, but it has very effective mechanisms. (Interview 3)

The opposition's unconditioned acceptance of the EU and EU integration contrasts with the statements of ruling-party representatives. Their rhetoric, as already mentioned, has considerably changed since the beginning of 2022. Nowadays, the ruling party offers a more diversified description of the EU and EU integration. First, the deconstruction

happens on institutional levels: the EU is not one coherent entity any more but consists of different institutions representing diverse interests and having different weights in policy-making. For instance, the GD representatives emphasize the limited role of the European Parliament compared with other bodies of the EU, based on the European Parliament's critical resolutions and its members' critical statements. For instance, Irakli Kobakhidze said of one of those resolutions:

The absurd records of the European Parliament cannot have any value. I will say once again that even the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union would be envious of this level of absurdity. It is already the third time that the European Parliament has made incredibly absurd decisions. Neither the first nor the second resolution was shared by the European Commission or the European Council. (Georgia Today, 2023)

Similarly, the ruling party began to distinguish between EU members, sorting them into those considered more 'biased' or more 'objective' towards Georgia. In this regard, Kobakhidze, while commenting on the resolution mentioned above, acknowledged the role of Hungary:

Hungary had a healthy position, which is very welcome. The Hungarian MEPs do not obey the general coordination directed against our country. (Georgia Today, 2023)

One more deconstruction relates to EU integration itself. The GD leadership downplayed the importance of candidate status – or more precisely, the fact that Georgia did not receive it together with Ukraine and Moldova. According to this discourse, Ukraine was granted candidate status because of the war, and Georgia was denied it because it did not join the sanctions or even the war (here, the authorities deliberately omit the case of Moldova, which did not join the sanctions and yet received status):

The connection between the war and the candidate status was directly emphasized by the leaders of the European Union. They directly said that Ukraine was granted candidate status because of the war ... If we get involved in the military conflict, EU candidate status will be guaranteed for us. (IPN, 2022a)

Georgia should have received candidate status. Georgia deserved to receive candidate status because it was the most successful among the three countries in all aspects, with all kinds of reforms. We were told



that this was a political decision and that they were giving it to Ukraine because Ukraine was involved in the war. We know they did not give it to us because Georgia did not get involved in sanctions and war. (IPN, 2022b)

Furthermore, ‘dignity’, preservation of ‘sovereignty’, and ‘traditions’ are often quoted as prerequisites for Georgia for ‘accepting’ the EU membership:

We deeply believe that membership in the European Union is not possible at the expense of giving up dignity and independence; with a slavish attitude, it is possible only by preserving dignity and independence. (IPN, 2023)

Initially, People’s Power, a splinter group of GD, expressed the most radical anti-EU and anti-liberal statements. The group was formed in the parliament by members of the ruling party in August 2022. Their most notorious initiative was a draft law to tighten control over civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media. In parallel, the same group verbally attacked civil society representatives, especially from the LGBT community. Western partners criticized the anti-CSO draft law. It also resulted in large-scale public protests in Georgia, after which the ruling party withdrew the drafts from the parliament. From this moment on, GD openly adopted the anti-liberal rhetoric of its splitter group. The party suddenly moved from its officially declared centre-left ideology to the radical right camp. The prime minister of Georgia and a member of the political council of GD attended and addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference hosted by Hungary in May 2023, drawing critical comments from the Party of European Socialists (PES), in which GD was an observer member (Civil.ge, 2023). Anticipating exclusion, GD left the PES.

Although we cannot conclude that GD is against EU membership, the above statements are in sharp contrast not only with the assessments of the opposition but with the positions expressed by the ruling party before 2022.

After analysing the aforementioned discourse, we can conclude that the EU and EU integration remain key issues for Georgian political elites. However, they approach these issues primarily from a domestic political contestation angle and through the lenses of their specific interests. Both the ruling party and the opposition look at and use the

EU from the perspective of power competition and regard the opening of the membership perspective as a strategic change that creates opportunities and challenges for them. It seems profitable for the opposition to frame and present the EU as a unified actor, an unconditional and reliable friend, because against this background, the government, which hesitates to follow EU recommendations and even dares to criticize them, looks more negative. On the other hand, it is beneficial for the government to present a deconstructed view of the EU, where there are both friends and foes, and the foes (not the EU as a whole), linked to the local opposition, are culprits who can be blamed for all problems on the path of integration.

## Conclusions

The EU and EU integration have been at the core of Georgia's domestic political discourse since 2003, after adopting the European Neighbourhood Policy. At that time, the country began a transformation from belonging to the outer or Russian periphery to belonging to the liminal periphery. The EU and EU integration enjoyed the unconditional support of the elite and the population alike. This remained firm despite the 'reciprocity deficit' – while Georgia was seeking membership, the EU was ready to grant a Free Trade Agreement, a Visa-Free Regime Agreement, and an Association Agreement but not a membership perspective.

Unconditional support and recognition of the EU and EU integration ended after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The EU made a bold decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and laid out 12 priorities for Georgia as a precondition for granting the same status. Yet contrary to the expectation that Georgian political elites would embrace this opportunity, the new reality caused the first ruptures in the so-far unconditional support for the EU – it suddenly became contested and politically disputed. The opposition largely continued its unquestioned support of the EU. At the same time, the authorities represented by the ruling party began to deconstruct the EU (at institutional and country levels) and express some doubts, if not scepticism, regarding EU integration.

Based on the rational choice institutionalism argument about the domestic response to adaptational pressure from the EU, we believe that this turn occurred because political elites in Georgia perceive EU

integration as a strategic process producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They see the events of integration through the lenses of their ordered interests and expectations. The incumbents are largely satisfied with the status of 'liminal periphery', since it allows them to pursue a cherry-picking strategy towards adaptation – implementing reforms fitting into their agenda while avoiding others. The incumbents also feel the limits of the EU's transformative power and its conditionality and use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU. The opposition continues to show univocal and unconditional support for the EU, perceive it to serve their interests in terms of competing with the incumbents and increasing electoral support. The outcome is simultaneous support for and contestation of the EU, especially among the incumbents.

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