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Caught Between Blocs: Georgian Foreign Policy and the Politics of Regional Integration

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Abstract. This paper examines Georgia's critical positioning between a European future and a return into Russia's orbit, analyzing how this geopolitical dilemma has placed the country on the new international agenda. The central research question asks: How does Georgia navigate between competing regional integration models—European and Eurasian—while pursuing national interests in an era of renewed great power competition? The study argues that Georgia's transitional position reflects the tension between its constitutional commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and the persistent structural pressures drawing it back toward Russia's sphere of influence, making it a pivotal case study in contemporary international relations. The findings reveal that Georgia occupies a precarious position where its symbolic importance as a democracy between Europe and Russia confronts the reality of geopolitical pressures and domestic political transformation.

Keywords: *Georgia, European integration, Russian influence, regional integration models, South Caucasus, post-Soviet transitions.*

Introduction

Georgia's post-Soviet trajectory represents one of the most compelling and unresolved geopolitical narratives in the contemporary international system. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the country has spent more than three decades oscillating between aspirations of Western integration and the gravitational pull of its Soviet past and Russian-dominated regional architecture. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia formally embraced a Euro-Atlantic orientation, inscribing NATO and European Union (EU) membership as constitutional goals—a commitment that was reaffirmed in the 2024 constitutional amendments. Yet, as

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this article argues, the gap between constitutional aspiration and geopolitical reality has widened considerably in recent years, rendering Georgia's strategic orientation increasingly uncertain.

The significance of Georgia's positioning extends well beyond its borders. In an era of renewed great power competition, the South Caucasus has re-emerged as a contested geopolitical space in which the European Union, Russia, and increasingly Türkiye and China vie for influence [1]. Georgia stands at the intersection of these competing forces. Its choices—and the constraints imposed upon them—offer critical insights into the limits of European transformative power and the resilience of Russian regional hegemony. This article examines three interrelated factors that determine Georgia's trajectory: domestic political developments, EU enlargement conditionality, and Russia's multi-dimensional strategy of influence.

Domestic Political Dynamics and the European Integration Paradox

The internal political landscape of Georgia has proven to be both the engine of and the greatest impediment to European integration. The ruling Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, has exhibited an increasingly ambivalent relationship with the Euro-Atlantic project. While officially committed to EU membership, the government's legislative actions have repeatedly raised alarms in Brussels. The adoption of the so-called “foreign agents” law in 2024—widely compared to a Russian analogous piece of legislation—triggered mass protests in Tbilisi and sharp condemnation from the European Parliament, effectively freezing Georgia's EU candidate status process [2].

This paradox—where a government rhetorically committed to Europe passes legislation antithetical to European democratic standards—reflects a deeper tension within Georgian society. Surveys consistently indicate that the overwhelming majority of the Georgian public supports EU and NATO membership, with approval ratings above 80% [3]. Yet electoral outcomes have produced a government that, whether by design or by institutional capture, systematically narrows the space for civil society and independent media—prerequisites of EU accession conditionality. The 2024 parliamentary elections and their disputed aftermath further illustrated this

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cleavage between popular pro-European sentiment and the trajectory of governmental policy.

Scholars of post-Soviet democratization have described this phenomenon as “competitive authoritarianism”—a regime type in which formal democratic institutions coexist with systematic incumbent advantages that undermine their substance [4]. Georgia under Georgian Dream increasingly fits this characterization, placing it in ambiguous territory where democratic backsliding and European aspirations coexist uncomfortably.

European Union Enlargement Policy and Conditionality Mechanisms in the South Caucasus

The EU's approach to Georgia must be understood within the broader context of its Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy, established in 2009 to foster political association and economic integration with six post-Soviet states. Among the EaP countries, Ukraine and Moldova advanced most rapidly toward candidate status following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which injected new urgency into the EU's enlargement agenda. Georgia, despite being granted candidate status in December 2023, subsequently saw that status frozen—a direct consequence of the democratic backsliding described above.

The EU's conditionality mechanisms operate on the assumption that the prospect of membership constitutes a sufficiently powerful incentive to induce domestic reforms—a logic that proved highly effective in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s and 2000s [5]. However, the South Caucasus presents a significantly more complex environment. The combination of unresolved territorial conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain under Russian effective control), economic dependencies on Russia, and governments with mixed reform incentives substantially weakens the EU's transformative power. Georgia is geographically non-contiguous with EU territory, which reduces the immediacy of membership prospects and, consequently, the leverage of conditionality.

A comparative glance at Ukraine and Moldova is instructive. Both countries have moved forward on accession chapters despite being engaged in active or recent conflicts, primarily because their governments have demonstrated a

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credible reform trajectory and political will. Georgia, by contrast, has sacrificed conditionality compliance for domestic political consolidation, revealing that EU leverage is contingent not merely on the attractiveness of membership, but on the political calculations of governing elites [6].

Russia's Multifaceted Strategy of Influence in Georgia

Russia's influence over Georgia operates through multiple, interlocking channels that together constitute a formidable structural constraint on Tbilisi's strategic autonomy. The most visible instrument remains the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which followed the 2008 August War—a conflict that demonstrated Russia's willingness to use military force to prevent Georgia's NATO membership and punish Western-oriented leadership [7]. The occupied territories represent a permanent security vulnerability and a coercive tool that Moscow deploys implicitly in any negotiation about Georgia's Western trajectory.

Beyond hard security, Russia employs sophisticated soft power and economic instruments. Georgia's economic entanglement with Russia—through remittances, trade in wine and mineral waters, and the significant Russian tourist inflow that has expanded since 2022 as Russians relocated to avoid sanctions and mobilization—creates constituencies within Georgia that benefit from good relations with Moscow. Russian-owned or Russian-aligned media and political financing channels have also been identified as factors in Georgian domestic discourse [8]. The Georgian Orthodox Church, an institution of immense social authority in Georgian society, has historically maintained warm relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, providing an additional vector of cultural influence that operates largely outside formal diplomatic channels [9].

Russia's strategy toward Georgia is not premised on the expectation of reintegration into a formal Eurasian bloc—Tbilisi has resolutely rejected the Eurasian Economic Union—but rather on managed ambiguity: keeping Georgia outside both the EU and NATO while ensuring that its governments remain sufficiently cautious as not to actively challenge Russian regional interests. This strategy of “integration prevention” [10] has proven effective, demonstrating that great power influence need not take the form of direct control to substantially constrain a smaller state's strategic choices.

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Conclusion

Georgia's contemporary predicament illuminates a broader truth about the limits of liberal international order in contested post-Soviet spaces. The country possesses a pro-European citizenry, a constitutional Euro-Atlantic vocation, and a signed Association Agreement with the EU—yet it finds itself today further from meaningful European integration than at any point in the past decade. This outcome is the product not of a single failure but of the interaction among three distinct forces: a governing elite that has instrumentalized Euro-Atlantic rhetoric while undermining its prerequisites; an EU whose transformative leverage is contingent on the political will of domestic actors and diminished by geographic distance; and a Russia that has mastered the art of “managed disruption,” using a combination of hard security threats, economic ties, and soft power to arrest Georgia's Western trajectory without the costs of direct annexation.

Georgia's case offers important comparative lessons for scholarship on post-Soviet transitions and European enlargement. It demonstrates that candidate status alone, absent sustained political will and reduced geopolitical vulnerability, cannot serve as a sufficient anchor for democratic consolidation. It also highlights the need for the EU to develop more differentiated and resilient instruments of engagement for countries operating under acute geopolitical pressure—moving beyond the binary of full accession versus frozen process toward more creative forms of deep partial integration that can provide real benefits and real incentives even in the absence of a clear membership horizon.

Ultimately, Georgia remains a country in transition—but the direction of that transition is no longer as predictable as it once appeared. Whether its citizens' profound European aspirations can be translated into durable institutional realities will depend on the convergence of internal democratic renewal, credible EU engagement, and a shift in the regional security environment. Until those conditions align, Georgia will remain one of contemporary international relations' most instructive and unresolved geopolitical puzzles.

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