



Managing Georgia's Turn against the EU

European member states are divided over how to handle ruptured ties with Georgia. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2026 – Spring Edition, Crisis Group looks at how the EU and member states can cooperate with Tbilisi without compromising on democracy and human rights.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia has shifted its foreign policy dramatically. Soon after applying for and receiving European Union candidate status in 2023, its relations with the bloc ruptured, as did its ties with the U.S.; it sought out new partners in Asia and the Middle East; and it struck an informal accommodation with Russia to minimise any blowback from the Ukraine war. Georgia's foreign policy turn has been accompanied by a steadily intensifying domestic crackdown. The government has heaped pressure on U.S.- and European-funded NGOs and the strongly pro-Western political opposition, accusing them of being tools in the hands of forces in the West who want to use Georgia as a weapon against Russia, heedless of the consequences to Georgians themselves. The ruling party, called Georgian Dream, argues that its foreign and domestic policies are part of a single strategy aimed at ensuring the survival

of the state. Critics argue that the party is instead interested only in consolidating its grip on power.

Georgia's foreign policy shifts have direct implications for the country's relationship with the EU and for European security as a whole. Even as prospects for Georgia's integration into the bloc rapidly recede, it remains in the EU's interest to maintain working relations with a country on Europe's doorstep, at a time when the South Caucasus is undergoing a sweeping geopolitical reconfiguration. The EU should look to scale down tensions with Tbilisi and cooperate in a pragmatic spirit, irrespective of the EU accession process.

Ukraine's Shadow

Four years on, the war in Ukraine continues to dominate the strategic thinking of Georgia's government. News of Russia's initial onslaught jolted the country, which suffered its

own Russian invasion in 2008, and caused the government to fear that Georgia might be the next target.

Both the U.S. and Europe immediately sought to enlist Georgia in resistance to the Russian invasion. The U.S. sent private requests for Georgia to aid Ukraine in some way – by supplying weapons from its stockpiles to Kyiv (which Washington would then replace) or by imposing bilateral sanctions on Russia. Brussels also repeatedly urged Georgian Dream to align its foreign policy with that of the EU. Georgia, however, perceived these entreaties to help Ukraine as an effort to exploit the country's pro-Western orientation, at a potentially ruinous cost to Georgians themselves. The U.S. may not have thought its requests were provocative, since they were making similar appeals to partners around the world, but officials on both sides now say Washington failed to take Georgia's unique sensitivities into account.

Georgian Dream, which has moved sharply to the right during its time in power, has depicted these entreaties as the work of a shadowy “global war party” based in Western capitals, which wishes to turn Georgia into a “second front” in a conflict with Russia. The government turned down the requests, instead seeking to avoid antagonising Russia while opening the door to deeper economic ties with its neighbour, re-establishing direct flights to Russian cities and increasing oil and gas purchases.

Georgian leaders' caution was rooted primarily in their perception that Russia would likely have the upper hand in the war in Ukraine, in contrast to more optimistic projections from Washington and European capitals. Georgian officials believe their approach has since been vindicated by events on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine and in negotiations between the U.S. and Russia, which they believe will culminate in defeat for Kyiv. An end to the war on Russia's terms would dramatically reshape the region, potentially enabling a victorious, battle-hardened Russia to impose a new sphere of influence, which by dint of history and

geography would most likely include Georgia. At the same time, some in Tbilisi believe that EU leaders will eventually be discredited by what they expect to be their ineffectual backing of Ukraine. They foresee that the balance of power within Europe will shift to conservative, sovereignist forces that will be more sympathetic to Georgian Dream.

While they may have misread the heights of Georgian paranoia in the initial post-2022 period, U.S. and European policies toward Georgia were on the whole measured and sympathetic to its vulnerable position. But Georgia's attempts to stay out of the Ukraine war drew acerbic criticism of Tbilisi in a number of European Parliament resolutions as well as in isolated comments by U.S. and EU lawmakers. While EU officials have insisted these remarks do not reflect official EU policy, both sides of Georgia's political divide have seized upon them as representative of the EU stance toward Tbilisi, driving a series of crises. For the opposition and critical NGOs and media, Europeans' disapproval of the direction Georgia has taken fuels hopes of outside intervention against the ruling party. For Georgian Dream, on the other hand, it has spurred fearmongering about a supposedly organised push to drag Georgia into war. Leaders of the party, above all its founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, have long resented what they perceive to be support in Western capitals for opposition politicians, who are political descendants of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, and believe these forces have goaded the U.S. and EU into more aggressive positions against Georgian Dream by portraying the party as “pro-Russia”.

Claiming that its government is under attack by a campaign coordinated by Western powers, the Georgian Dream government passed laws restricting funding of NGOs and media in the country, (both civil society and media are heavily dependent on grants from the U.S. and Europe). It has jailed several leaders of opposition parties, mostly for refusal to testify in 2025 parliamentary hearings aimed at blaming the former government for provoking the 2008

war with Russia. It has also threatened to ban opposition parties outright, though it has yet to follow through.

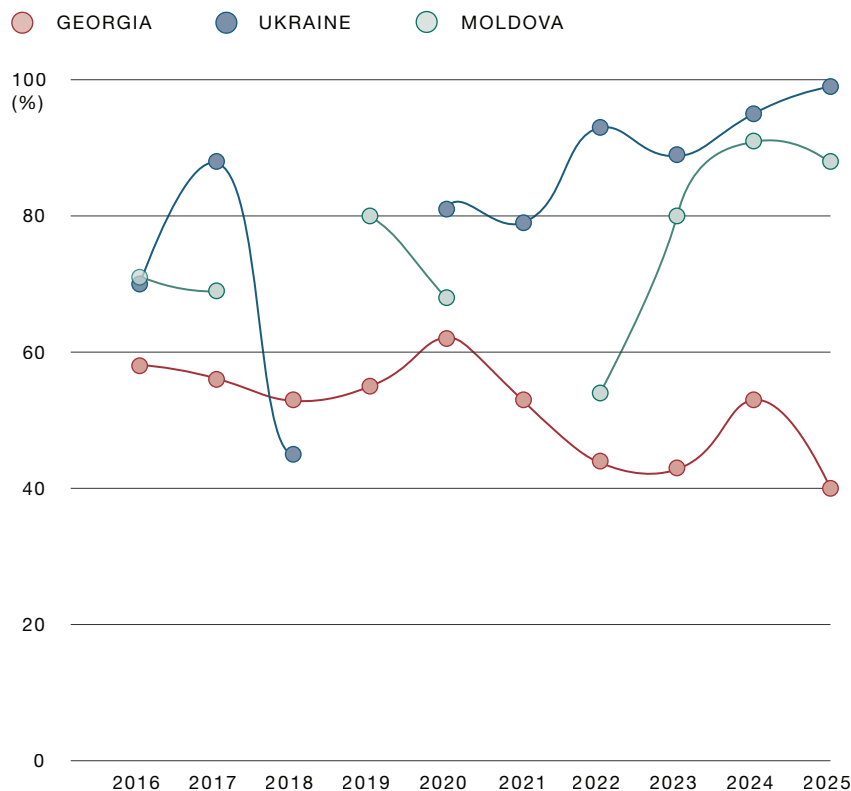
EU officials, who felt they had already over-extended themselves in granting Georgia EU candidate status, have responded with shock and a sense of betrayal. Whereas the EU membership process requires deep political reforms aimed at reinforcing democracy and the rule of law, the new NGO legislation drew comparisons to “foreign agent” laws that Russia had adopted a decade earlier. That the government has launched a vitriolic campaign against the EU leadership in general – and certain ambassadors in Tbilisi in particular – has only made matters worse. The bloc suspended high-level contacts with Georgian officials and announced that Georgia’s candidacy had come to a de facto halt.

Post-election Tensions

Parliamentary elections in October 2024 further heightened tensions. Ahead of the vote, European and U.S. officials made statements that, in effect, recommended to Georgian voters that they not re-elect Georgian Dream, breaking a long practice of declining to pick favourites in Georgian politics. EU officials also began mooting suspension of the visa-free regime that Georgian citizens enjoy with the EU. Georgian Dream eventually won the election by a sixteen-point margin. While observers assessed that there were more irregularities than in past elections, EU officials acknowledged that they could not prove that a cleaner election would have led to a different result. In any event, the opposition and critical NGOs urged European and U.S. policymakers not to recognise Georgian Dream

■ Georgia’s alignment with EU foreign and security policy was never total, but it has lessened of late.

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN 2016 AND 2025 TO THE EU’S COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY, BY YEAR (%)



Data was not available for Moldova in 2018 and 2021 and for Ukraine in 2019.

Source: Compiled from European External Action Service reports, March 2026.

as the legitimate government, citing violations of electoral rules. While European leaders did not publicly withdraw their recognition of the government, many maintained a deliberate ambiguity as to whether it was legitimate or not. That ambiguity was accentuated by the previous no-contact policy: every meeting with or apparent snub by a European or U.S. official became a hotly contested political issue in Georgia.

Rhetoric aside, in practical terms Georgia's foreign policy remains largely unchanged. Despite the scale of domestic acrimony over the issue, Georgia still has no official contact with Russia; the authorities say they cannot re-establish relations with Moscow until it ends what they call its "occupation" of the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Working-level cooperation between Georgian officials and their counterparts at the EU, NATO and the U.S. remains good, by all accounts, even if high-level contacts are suspended. Operations of the EU monitoring mission along the de facto boundaries of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (EUMM) continue unaffected. Lastly, while measures of Georgia's alignment with EU foreign and security policy have declined (see chart), the dropoff has not been precipitous (alignment was never total, even when EU-Georgia relations were much stronger). Georgian officials themselves deny that they have made a fundamental shift: instead, they describe what they have done as an act of self-defence, involving short-term moves designed to help them survive a turbulent period.

The Search for Geopolitical Relevance

Even as Georgia's leaders spar with EU leaders, they continue to seek practical cooperation with the bloc and its member states. Georgian leaders have watched as the Ukraine war spurred the EU into becoming a more dynamic geopolitical force and strengthening ties with less democratic neighbours such as Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Tbilisi believes that it, too, should be able to shape its ties with Brussels around

shared interests rather than shared values. It wants these bonds to be centred on exploiting Georgia's location to establish a "middle corridor" of trade and energy flows between Europe and Asia via Georgia and bypassing Russia.

While those plans are certainly a priority for the EU, European officials believe that Georgian leaders are overplaying their hand and exaggerating their country's geopolitical weight. Whatever Europe's reliance on Georgia has been, it has been diminished by a U.S.-brokered agreement to create transport links between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, if realised, could provide an alternative route between Europe and Asia that bypasses Georgia. As it develops a Caucasus transit strategy, the EU has been conspicuously leaving Georgia out of the discussion.

While it seeks a relationship with Europe that is more geared to shared geopolitical interests, Georgia has also tried to strengthen its ties with other powers. China, which has its own interest in new transit routes to Europe, signed a strategic partnership agreement with Georgia in 2023. That said, the signature Chinese infrastructure project in Georgia, a deep-sea port at Anaklia on the Black Sea, is apparently stalled, raising questions about the extent of Beijing's interest in Georgia as a transit node. Georgia is seeking new partners in the Middle East, too, though its ties there remain embryonic.

Perhaps ironically, given how it blamed Washington for pushing it toward war in 2022, Georgia is now pinning its biggest hopes on the U.S. Brussels and Washington have coordinated their policies toward Georgia for years, and the U.S. has in fact levied the most serious punishments on the country: in the last weeks of President Joe Biden's administration, Washington suspended its strategic partnership with Georgia and imposed sanctions on officials including Ivanishvili. (While some EU member states have also sanctioned Georgian officials, the bloc itself has not, hamstrung by Hungary's veto.)

Georgia now hopes to revive its ties with the U.S. on a new foundation. Georgian Dream leaders openly expressed their hopes that Donald Trump would win the 2024 election,

believing that his inclination toward right-wing, socially conservative parties in Europe would benefit them. The U.S. under Trump has certainly desisted from putting pressure on Georgia; but it has not reversed the sanctions from the Biden administration. Nor has it sought a reset with Tbilisi. For the last year, Washington has simply ignored Georgia, once the centrepiece of U.S. policy in the South Caucasus. When Vice President JD Vance visited Armenia and Azerbaijan in February, he skipped Georgia, underscoring how far Tbilisi's stock has fallen. Georgia has lost its once-close ties with the U.S. and the EU, and thus far it has not gained much in exchange.

What is at Stake for the EU

The Georgia conundrum has created a dilemma for EU leaders: whether to keep imposing punitive measures in an attempt to steer Georgia's foreign and domestic policy back to the path toward membership, or to put membership on the back burner in favour of regional cooperation and broader geopolitical interests. EU member states are split. The dominant camp, largely representing northern member states and EU institutions themselves, takes a hardline approach. They hope that increased pressure will force Georgian Dream to return to a more EU-friendly track or enable a more compliant government to take power. The other camp, consisting mostly of southern member states, adopts a more pragmatic approach. These states tend to have closer bilateral ties with Georgia than do northern states: they often buy natural gas from Azerbaijan that transits through Georgia, they host large numbers of Georgian migrant workers and they want constructive ties with Tbilisi, any political differences notwithstanding. In the opinion of these governments, the current hardline EU approach damages European interests in the region.

The cold shoulder given to Georgian leaders stands in stark contrast to the warm relations that EU officials have with neighbouring governments that have much worse records on

democracy and human rights, like Azerbaijan and Türkiye, which also remains a candidate country even though its accession process is frozen. EU officials justify what seem to be different rules in two ways. One is that Georgian Dream itself has asked to be judged by higher standards in seeking EU membership and by continuing to tell voters that membership remains a realistic goal. The other is the perception, rooted in *realpolitik*, that Azerbaijan and Türkiye are much more important to Brussels: Azerbaijan for its role in supplying non-Russian energy to Europe, and Türkiye for cooperation on migration, Ukraine, Syria and several other critical issues. Unlike Georgian Dream, finally, Turkish and Azerbaijani leaders have not sought to intimidate European diplomats.

Yet even among the Europeans most critical of the Georgian authorities, there is recognition that isolation and pressure have not yielded the desired effects, and a sense that new ideas are needed to break the impasse. France, for instance, has evinced fresh interest in engagement with Tbilisi after previously showing little inclination to soften its stance toward Georgia.

The EU and its member states should:

- **Seek rhetorical de-escalation.** From the EU side, a shift in rhetoric to take the focus away from attacking Georgian Dream and toward encouraging concrete reforms could go a long way toward creating the right environment for dialogue. Brussels should make this shift as a reciprocal gesture for a similar reduction in hostile rhetoric from Tbilisi. As crises in EU-Georgia relations have often been sparked by the pointed remarks of MEPs, EU bodies should make clear that, while often highly visible, European Parliament resolutions and public statements by MEPs are largely declaratory and do not reflect official EU policy toward Georgia. More broadly, the EU should recognise that the fear of war in Georgia is genuine, not feigned or over-sold, and a fundamental element of Tbilisi's

strategic calculations. It can coexist with overwhelming support for EU membership among the population.

- **Separate EU enlargement from cooperation on regional priorities.** Though Georgia's current foreign policy understandably disappoints EU officials and diplomats, the country's status as an EU candidate should not block all other areas of cooperation. While remaining firm on compliance with its accession rules and obligations, EU officials could draw a distinction between issues that are related to that process, such as pre-accession funds, which the EU has already partially suspended in response to democratic backsliding, and those that are not connected, like cooperating on transit routes. Likewise, cooperation on the EUMM should continue, as it has done so far despite diplomatic tensions.

- **Re-engage Georgia on transit issues.** The EU could also re-engage Georgia on issues of transit through the Caucasus. Excluding Georgia from these discussions is not just counter to the EU's own interests in fostering connectivity, including through its new Black Sea Strategy. It also risks squandering a chance to boost greater cooperation inside the Caucasus. With the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process making progress, there is real potential for the first time in the region's post-Soviet history for trilateral integration initiatives – and all three states have themselves made small movements in that direction. The EU's regional policies in the Caucasus should seek not to foster competition, but to encourage the emergence of new forms of cooperation.

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