

EU market in Sight, Russian at the Gate: Three Decades of Aspiration and Resistance

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Abstract

Since 1991, Georgia has followed a difficult yet ambitious path. The declaration of independence and the pursuit of a Euro-Atlantic future placed the country before numerous formidable challenges: Russian occupation, economic collapse, hybrid warfare, painful transitions of ruling power, and deep political polarization. Despite these obstacles, Georgia emerged as a leading Eastern Partnership country, implemented notable digital and infrastructure reforms, and secured EU candidacy in 2023. This parallel dual process reflects both the nation’s steadfast commitment to its European choice and the persistent efforts to break its resilience from the North.

Georgia’s progress, achieved amid external sabotage, faced renewed destabilisation after its inclusion in the EU enlargement package. What war could not accomplish, Russia pursued through media influence, capital inflows, market manipulation, and exploitation of Georgia’s unresolved vulnerabilities, ultimately reorienting its economy. The failure of the DCFTA further weakened Georgia’s European trajectory, while Russian immigration and asset flows reshaped its political landscape.

This article questions whether the EU acted too late in opening broader access to the internal market for Georgia. In parallel with political processes, could earlier and more intensive market integration have ensured stability, economic convergence, and social well-being? Instead of a fragmented model, could this have fostered a synchronised process of political, economic, and social Europeanization? Does Georgia’s trajectory reflect not only a national setback, but also a broader failure of the EU’s influence in the region?

Methodologically, the article employs analytical-descriptive and historical-assessment approaches, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources, including EU documents, International agreements, resolutions of international organizations, official reports, Georgian legal acts, historic documents, scholarly articles, statistical data, as well as media/journalistic sources. This combination serves to construct a comprehensive account of Georgia's European integration dynamics from independence to the present.

Keywords: Georgia, Middle Corridor, EU, Russia, EU Internal Market, Euro-Atlantic Integration

Introduction

Georgia is a paradoxical example of parallel dualistic processes and polarizations: it recognizes European integration as the cornerstone of both foreign and domestic policy, yet resists the process of legal approximation to EU law and standards (a characteristic feature before 2014); it carries out an intensive process of legal approximation (after 2014) while simultaneously undermining diplomatic relations with the EU (from 2022); it experiences economic growth while the number of socially vulnerable people and emigration in search of employment continue to rise; it aspires to economic independence but implements opaque privatization processes or permits the influx of unhealthy foreign investments into the country; it declares education a priority and successfully participates in the Erasmus+ programs, yet reading comprehension and critical thinking continue to decline; it fears the loss of the Georgian language, and yet, to this day, a significant number of ethnic minorities holding Georgian citizenship (many of whom have lived in the country for generations) either cannot speak Georgian, continuing instead to use Russian (This linguistic reality perpetuates enduring ties with Russia); it expresses a desire for freedom, equality, and the rule of law, while infringing on the rights of sexual minorities; it adopts market competition legislation while worsening consumer economic interests; it has pursued European integration for three decades, yet European standards have not penetrated everyday life or ensured decent working conditions; it legally guarantees personal freedom, yet banking policies erode its foundations - private property and income; it seeks EU membership while accusing the Union of dragging the country into war and undermining traditional family values.

This bipolarity can be attributed to the asynchronous and unbalanced progression of Europeanisation and democratisation processes, which unfolded across political, economic, and social dimensions in a manner that often generated mutual disruptions rather than reinforcing one another.

Since declaring independence in 1991, Georgia has embarked on an extremely turbulent but ambitious path. The declaration of independence, the

struggle for a Euro-Atlantic future, and the historical and cultural will for freedom placed Georgia before numerous formidable challenges: the occupation of Georgian territories by Russia Federation, the emergence of separatist regimes, the crime (largely imported from Russia), a dubious and mismanaged privatization process, predatory banking policies, political polarization, social hardship, the collapse of core industrial and energy projects, mass emigration flows, and hybrid warfare.

On the other hand, over the course of three decades, Georgia demonstrated steady progress. It became a beneficiary of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and a leading country in the Eastern Partnership (EaP); a key player in the Black Sea region - not only a recipient of security but also a contributor to it; a secure host country for refugees; an implementer of regional and international infrastructure and connectivity projects; a participant in the Silk Road initiative; a recipient of the Schengen visa-free regime; a country granted EU candidate status; an innovator of unique models for smart business establishment and the one-window-principle in public services; a pioneer of digital governance and e-customs; and a driver of ambitious energy diversification projects (notably the Baku-Tbilisi-Turkey corridor).

The above-mentioned is a testament to the Georgian nation's willpower and its unwavering aspiration to return to its historical European roots. However, after 2022, particularly, following December 2023, when Georgia's inclusion in the EU's new enlargement framework ("*Copenhagen +1*") solidified its European future and marked the beginning of a new geopolitical role for this small Black Sea country (even positioning it as a competitor to both Russia and Turkey), while redefining the strong contours of its Middle Corridor mission, foreign negative forces began to act swiftly in new and multifaceted ways.

What could not be achieved through war or other coercive instruments of influence was instead accomplished through media channels and increased income flows from Russia and its allied states. At this juncture, it became visibly and transparently clear that three decades of development and state transformation had not fundamentally altered the core business behaviour models. The Georgian market rapidly reverted to a Russian orientation and embraced the "taste of money."

In parallel, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement between Georgia and the EU proved vulnerable. From 2014 to 2023, it failed to achieve a degree of market integration and EU market openness that would firmly anchor Georgian business within a pro-European outlook. Meanwhile, the massive influx of Russian emigrants and capital into Georgia directly influenced its political processes.

Why and how was Russia able to penetrate the Georgian market so swiftly and quickly - not only politically, but economically as well? What triggered the polarization of Georgia between the European Union and Russia? While much emphasis is placed on political/governmental shortcomings (as most analyses tend to do), the critical dimension lies in understanding the everyday reality and condition of the people/business. Politics cannot be divorced from the people. It was, after all, the Georgian people who accepted the influx of Russian capital, which in effect led to a partial replacement of European economic presence.

This article critically explores questions (supported by facts and statistics) that are often overlooked or left in the shadows (rarely voiced openly). The problems facing Georgia today must be examined from all angles; otherwise, one is left with the troubling impression that Russia knows Georgia better and is therefore more successful in achieving its objectives than the European Union.

This article legitimately poses the following paradigm: has the EU arrived too late in Georgia, or has it failed to truly understand the country in depth?

Methodologically, the article employs analytical-descriptive and historical-assessment approaches, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources, including EU documents, International agreements, resolutions of international organizations, official reports, Georgian legal acts, historic documents, scholarly articles, statistical data, as well as media/journalistic sources. This combination serves to construct a comprehensive account of the dynamics of Georgia's European integration from the moment of independence to the present. It must further be emphasized that Georgia's recent history has not been objectively (in a non-polarized and non-politicized manner) documented in either scholarly or historical terms. Consequently, in some cases, it becomes necessary to refer to sources which, by their nature, are not strictly academic but which nonetheless serve as essential records of the facts and developments of specific periods (However, the percentage of such sources does not exceed **17.23%**).

The selection of sources was based on the following **objective criteria**: 1. **Chronological distribution** is employed. The distribution of sources is consistent and logically diversified according to the respective years. The article traces the full trajectory of Georgia's European integration process, encompassing both its positive and negative paradigms across different stages. Referencing sources by their year of publication (documented attitudes) is therefore of critical importance, as it safeguards against interpreting the phenomena under investigation solely through the prism of contemporary reflection, be it political, academic, legal, or historical. Rather, the analysis is grounded in documents and perspectives that reflect the specific

influences, constraints, and contexts prevailing at the time of their production. 2. The sources were selected based on their credibility and recognition. Each source employed in the article is beyond dispute and possesses an official character, being cited, utilized, read, and analyzed both within the academic/scientific community and by the political class alike. 3. The sources were selected based on both their levels of influence and their originating actors, specifically encompassing the perspectives of the international, regional and national levels, the non-governmental (third) sector, as well as those of experts and academia. 4. The sources were selected according to thematic categories, encompassing normative, legal, historical, political, comparative, scholarly, and factual sources.

Legacy of Resistance: Decades Marked by Georgia’s Resilience, Patience, and Endurance

No external actor has ever supported Georgia for as long and as substantially as the European Union. In fact, there is no sector or field in Georgia that has remained untouched by EU assistance, be it financial, technical, intellectual, educational, programmatic, or humanitarian. Naturally, this is a policy of mutual interest. The European Union seeks peace, justice, and freedom in its neighbourhood, as well as the advancement of its geopolitical interests through a democratic order that enables *economic connectivity, energy and trade diversification, and regional security*. Georgia, in turn, aspires to free itself from the influence of Russia and other external powers and seeks *freedom, security, and independence*. On the one hand, the European Union has made substantial investments and efforts; on the other hand, Georgia’s struggle, hard work, and resilience have been equally immeasurable. Georgia’s ambitions as a small state, along with its value-driven aspiration to assume a role as a central corridor and to “sit at the table” as an equal alongside larger powers, were met with positive assessments and support from the European Union. Both extended mutual trust toward one another. However, beyond the interests of the official political parties of Georgia and the EU, as well as the broader global dynamics at play, it is essential that these processes be understood by the people themselves. In Georgia, the profound polarization that characterizes Georgia currently demonstrates and confirms the fact that the benefits of thirty years of European integration, together with the very nature, essence, concrete actions, and outcomes of the EU’s continuous assistance, have not been conveyed to the Georgian population in a sufficiently sound and well-argued manner. This failure has resulted not only in political polarization, but also in a division of society into those committed to the EU and those who gaze conformistically toward Russia. The contours of European integration have, for the most part,

remained confined within the informational sphere of political groups rather than becoming embedded in the collective civic consciousness.

Today, Georgia-EU relations are unfolding in a radically altered environment characterised by overt public criticism, suspended financial and technical assistance, a stalled negotiation process, mutual estrangement, and reciprocal accusations. It is evident that the conduct of both sides ultimately serves to strengthen Russia's interests. But why? Perhaps Georgia lacked the prudence required being a state under constant threat from Russia, including the risk of renewed military aggression, and facing ongoing territorial fragmentation. However, what about the European Union's rationality, its historically tested capacity for inclusiveness (rather than exclusiveness), and its tradition of strategic foresight and pragmatism? After all, the European Union faces similar challenges related to democracy and Russian influence in other enlargement countries as well (e.g., Serbia). Moreover, without the constant adoption of critical resolutions or without public persistent critique, the European Union cooperates with strategic patience with Turkey (despite of the fact that accession negotiations being officially suspended and it is the participant of the 3+3 format (Civil Georgia. 2023) and with Azerbaijan (a EaP country which, blamed the EU in double standard policy and has a problem of political prisoners, elections, democracy, (Alieva L. 2015) [AFET. 2017] etc. and as well as is the participant of 3+3 format). Why, then, is the public confrontation between the EU and Georgia so exceptionally severe? Is this the result of lobbying-driven politics, media and technological manipulation, or the work of an invisible hand pursuing far-reaching strategic objectives? Let's delve into layers that are traditionally left unspoken or deliberately overlooked, and examine some chronological dynamics that may, in fact, reveal better Georgia's resilience, endurance, willpower, and patience.

In the 1990s, when the Russian Federation, through formal and informal groups (composed of Russians, Abkhazians, Chechens (McGregor A. 2007) and Armenians (Arveladze B. Mibchvani T. 2009) waged war and perpetrated ethnically motivated killings of Georgians, thereby depriving Georgia of a significant portion of its Black Sea coastline and a key railway junction, the European Union, in its Copenhagen document (European Council, 1993), nonetheless referred to the Russian Federation as an important actor in European security (Kardava E. 2024). Furthermore, it took Georgia years to demonstrate that the conflict was not a Georgian-Abkhaz war (not an ethnic conflict), but rather a war between Russia and Georgia. However, it also took considerable time for the United Nations and other international organizations to acknowledge this. Even then, international official actors did not ultimately dare to adopt the terminology of "Russia-Georgia war", but the term "*Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*" was replaced with more neutral wording such as "*conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia.*" Only after 2008 was the international

community able to say “*occupation*” and “*Russia-Georgia war.*” (EaP resolution, 2008) (CoE PA resolution, 2009) (EaP resolution, 2018).

Since the 1990s, Georgia has continuously endeavoured to demonstrate its aspiration for freedom, development, and European integration. At no point Georgian people did the reconsider this orientation. On the contrary, Georgian people courageously withstood all forms of criminal infiltration (especially those exported from Russia), bombings by the Russian Federation, provocations that triggered internal national confrontations, as well as negative developments both within and beyond governmental structures (in public sector, in business sector, in NGO sector) - without ever abandoning the European path. After every fall and every war, Georgia rose from its knees and use to call again upon governments to implement pro-European reforms (which can be divided into three dynamic phases: 1999–2003, 2004–2014, and 2014–2022); It has stood out within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, resisting Russian pressure in numerous instances (e.g., signing the Association Agreement with the EU while Armenia succumbed to Russian pressure and joined the Eurasian Union). It has persistently demanded timely NATO accession, an accelerated granting of a European perspective, enhanced security guarantees, and more intensive opening of the DCFTA.

Each of the deliberately orchestrated shocks was aimed precisely at derailing Georgia from its European course. it was nonetheless overcome - whether rightly or wrongly [forms or processes]: The country’s aim at energy diversification and its participation in the Baku-Tbilisi-Turkey transit corridor were met with an assassination attempt on the Georgian President In February 1998;¹ When Georgia sought to reduce its dependence on Russia by constructing regionally and internationally significant oil and gas pipelines, with support from the European Union and the United States, internal (national) protests emerged opposing the routes of these pipelines (focusing on Environmental policy). Notably, Russia directly opposed the construction of these transit corridors, while some of the internal protest movements received backing from foreign actors. Despite this resistance, the pipelines were successfully built in the 1990s, but In subsequent years, similar scenarios reoccurred in Georgia, particularly again in the energy sector, where large-scale hydropower projects such as the *Khudoni HPP* and the *Namakhvani HPP* (Razmadze M. 2024) faced intense public opposition and ultimately

¹ The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, designed to transport Azerbaijani oil through Georgia to Turkey, was a strategic alternative to Russian-controlled energy routes. First proposed in the mid 1990s, serious discussions culminated in 1998, the year of the Shevardnadze assassination attempt. In October-November 1998, the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and the U.S. (Bill Clinton) met during the OSCE summit in Istanbul and formally endorsed the BTC route.

failed to materialize (so, still Georgian remains dependent on others, Russia is happy, Georgia is burdened with debt; yet to this day, there has been no transparent public disclosure regarding the sources of funding behind the continuous waves of protest, the unceasing flow of media, information, and propaganda, or the financial channels through which the NGO/civil sector operated); The launch of a new, pro-Euro-Atlantic state-building process in 2004 was followed by armed escalations in the Tskhinvali region of Georgia;² in 2008, when it was explicitly declared that Georgia [and Ukraine] would become a NATO member (Bucharest Declaration. 2008), the 2008 August war ensued. When Russia was claiming that Georgia had started the war, while Georgia was confirming that Russia initiated and carried out military, provocative, and offensive activities in the territory of Georgia and that Georgia had entered into a defensive mode, exactly at that time, the Tagliavini report from Europe [EU] accused Georgia of starting the military operation and of using disproportionate force (*“disproportionate force in artillery assaults on South Ossetia and in some cases used disproportionate force in their ground assault”*... *“Late in the evening of August 7, Georgian forces initiated massive shelling of Tskhinvali and surrounding villages in an attack that is widely considered the start of the war”*...); (IIFMCG. 2009). Moreover, Georgia was compelled to sign a six-point agreement (Peace Plan. 2008), lobbied from European capitals, which was not in Georgia’s favour (*“Georgian forces must withdraw to their usual barracks”*; *“Russian forces must withdraw to positions they held prior to the outbreak of hostilities”*). This agreement stipulated that Russia should return to positions held prior to August 2008, effectively “legitimizing” Russia’s presence in territories of Georgia occupied since the 1990s.

The year 2008 was a turning point and pivotal for Georgian people - a moment that resulted in territorial gains for Russia and to which the international response remained inadequate. Georgia stood entirely alone against Russia. While substantial financial aid was provided from the EU and the international community, militarily it received no support. Unlike in previous wars, Georgia was, for the first time, assigned blame by the international community. The accumulation of such contradictions has

² Starting in June 2004, Georgian authorities began increasing their law enforcement and special forces in the areas around the Tskhinvali region. This move was partly aimed at disrupting illegal trade and smuggling, which had flourished under the protection of Russian peacekeepers and local separatists. Russia accused Georgia of escalating the situation, while Georgia claimed Russia was backing and arming the separatists. Russia reinforced its presence under the guise of the CIS peacekeeping mission, and Moscow overtly supported the South Ossetian de facto authorities. A fragile ceasefire was brokered in August 2004, with international actors (notably the OSCE) involved. No significant political resolution followed. Instead, the 2004 conflict froze the situation. Russia’s military, political, and financial support to South Ossetia increased dramatically in the following years, deepening the separation.

provoked heterogeneous reactions and triggered partially critical inquiries and expressions directed at NATO, the USA and the EU. Russia masterfully exploited this moment in its hybrid disinformation warfare. From that point onward, a latent or explicit sense of grievance, anger, and somehow a consciousness or subconsciousness of self-blame became embedded within the Georgian public. This psychological and reputational pressure later served as fertile ground for disinformation campaigns which blurred the lines between *war and peace* and led to severe political polarization currently.

The government (Georgian Dream) that came to power in the name of justice and peace - one that to this day prosecutes the former ruling party United National Movement (Fact-finding commission of the Parliament of Georgia, 2025) and blames it for starting the war (a claim partially echoed in the *Tagliavini Report*) - met Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine with silence and restraint. Unambiguously, it chose a path of refraining from condemning Russia and remaining "loyal" to its own political slogans and narratives. At the same time, it carefully monitored public sentiment and, recognizing society's deep fear of renewed war, effectively transformed *dignity and peace* into the cornerstone of its electoral appeal. Indeed, a significant portion of the population supported this position.

And now, these very people find itself exhausted, with inadequate and insufficient income, reliant on East Asian "investments", and surrounded by huge Russian migration flows and jobs connected to the Russian market and/or Russian capital. (IDFI, 2023)³ And in such circumstances, where is the European capital, European standard of living? Where is the EU market that was meant to connect with Georgia's market, businesses, and people strengthening them and leading the country toward a dignified standard of existence?

Where is the EU in Georgia now? In Georgia today, EU is in criticism (which is of course directed towards the government), but half of Georgia perceives it as its own criticism, even those who sincerely want to be in the EU, because they cannot accept the fact that the EU "supports" Saakashvili

³ "The trend of entry of Russian citizens into Georgia has been increasing against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Over the past three years, based on first-quarter data, the highest number of border crossings from Russia into Georgia was recorded in 2023. In 2022, 62,304 individuals from the Russian Federation were registered as immigrants in Georgia, which is six times higher than the corresponding figure for 2021. In 2022, the number of real estate purchases by Russian citizens in Georgia increased. By September 2022, Russian citizens had purchased 15,164 buildings/structures (including 13,262 apartments) and 13,850 land plots in Georgia. According to 2022 data, over 11,000 businesses of Russian origin were registered in Georgia. Surveys reveal a negative attitude among Georgian citizens toward the influx and economic activity of Russian nationals. Research indicates a desire among Russian citizens to establish a Russian community in Georgia, which against the backdrop of prevailing negative sentiments may pose a challenge to public peace".

(via resolutions and other means) and cannot accept the return of the political force that was "removed" in 2012.) In such a situation, it is already easy to build any other disinformation (like NGOs are financed from the EU, which lobby against EU membership;⁴ EU forces Georgia to legalize same-sex marriage etc.). The Georgian public is now deeply polarized and the EU must reconsider the Georgian situation more comprehensively. It is also necessary to consider the bitter reality that, due to the persistent emphasis on the past and the enduring support for Saakashvili, a segment of the Georgian electorate votes for the current political leadership precisely within this paradigm. When this situation is assessed more broadly, it effectively constitutes a precondition for the victory of Georgian Dream: the focus on the past, which sets the agenda for a largely unpopular opposition that is neither unified nor cohesive, engages in internal conflicts, and is, to some extent, associated with the United National Movement. Consequently, there is a widespread perception among the public that no third force has emerged capable of overcoming this polarization and thus attracting votes. Equally, a precondition for Georgian Dream's victory is the voice of the EU, its documents (European Parliament Resolution, 2025) which are themselves heavily imbued with references to Georgia's past and support for Saakashvili (despite the fact that during that past period there were also restrictions on media freedom, issues within the judiciary, aggressive actions and the arrest of political activists, violations of human rights and the war). Moreover, all of this is articulated in the polarized media and at the same time, under conditions of restricted media freedom, quite in a manner that creates the impression that the EU supports a specific political party (the United National Movement). This process continues uninterrupted, thereby serving to advance Russia's interests.

If indeed the people were the driving force, the ones who held every government accountable and prevented deviation from the European path, now - under conditions akin to an "anaconda-like" economic suffocation, social hardship, unworthy labor conditions, and despair over the absence of tangible improvements in well-being, the Georgian population has begun to emigrate (Russian and Asians are coming). European prosperity never materialized for the majority of citizens after decades of struggle. Consequently, the nation's resilience has declined. Georgia has not yet recovered from the trauma of the 2008 war. Moreover, there is definitely a strong dualism and two parallel worlds at play in Georgia; two distinct societies still coexist: one consists of a pro-European, while the other is composed of a Soviet-minded, pro-Russian, or predominantly Russian-

⁴ Some facts of such NGOs or civil experts expressing that Georgia does not deserve the candidacy because of the government, were really revealed. But such cases have been rare, while the entire NGO sector has been unjustly placed under the disinformation spotlight as a result.

speaking community. In Georgia, there are quite a few people who have never experienced the benefits of visa liberalisation at all due to the severe economic situation and social polarization, in contexts where Georgia is turning to high-income country (Georgia Today, 2024) but parallel reality is the poverty, as over the past ten years, the number of recipients of social assistance has increased by 62.29% (Social Justice Center, 2023). As a result, many do not even know what the nation is losing. Why did they not experience it? Social hardship and poverty, especially in the regions and rural areas, have deprived people of the opportunity to travel. It was precisely during this period that Russian capital entered the country, extending its influence not only over major cities but across Georgia more broadly.

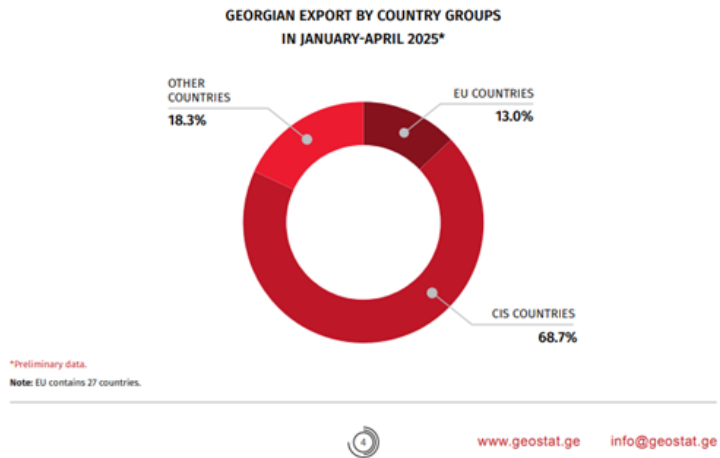
The EU today fails to fully grasp the condition, the inner sentiments, and most importantly, the regional context in which Russia is ideologically, politically, and economically dominant and victorious. It can now be boldly stated: is this not a defeat for the European Union in the region? Is this solely the burden of the Georgian people? Should the EU so easily relinquish Georgia?

Market and Survival

The practical implementation of the DCFTA and rapid and flexible opening of the EU internal market for Georgian businesses (to merge and link markets and establish a customs union) would have been a great relief. The Georgian government adopted more than 300 legal acts to implement the DCFTA obligations from 2014 (after signing the AA/DCFTA). However, Georgian producers did not feel the benefit of this opportunity and turned instead toward markets where trade, sales, and the establishment of business ties were realized more quickly and easily. This shift was significantly facilitated by the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement with China in 2018 (MESD Georgia) and recently by the Russian economic “invasion”. If at first Georgia's share of foreign trade directed toward the EU rose to 30 percent (2014–2017), from 2018 it began to decline, reaching 20.9%". (European Commission. 2017) (European Commission. 2023) (see figure 1 and figure 2 of the current state of trade (import and export), which is the public source of the National Statistic Office of Georgia).

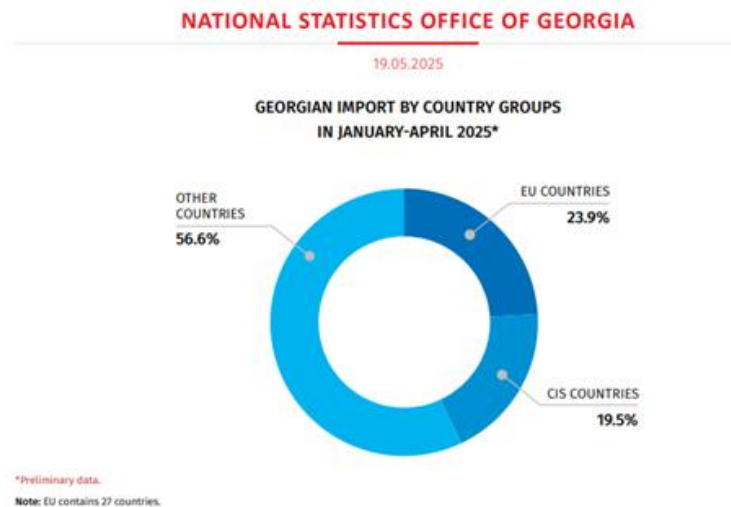
Figure 1:

The diagrams below show the share of the exports and imports of Georgia by country groups.



[GeoSTAT. 2025.]

Figure 2.



[GeoSTAT. 2025]

In 2023 and 2024, within the framework of the EU Enlargement Package, the European Union (European Commission) assessed all ten enlargement countries. The assessment was conducted according to the following structure: Fundamentals of accession (2 chapters) and 33 sectoral chapters grouped within 6 clusters. (EU Enlargement. 2024) (EU Enlargement. 2023). The narrative-based scoring indicators for the assessments of all ten countries are as follows (Kardava E. 2025):

“Overall score scale (summing all clusters and chapters):

- *Montenegro (76–78.5)*
- *Serbia (74.5–76.5)*
- *North Macedonia (74–76)*
- *Türkiye (71.5–71.5)*
- *Albania (63–65.5)*
- *Ukraine (43.5–45)*
- *Georgia (42–42)*
- *Moldova (32.5–35.5)*
- *Kosovo (32–33.5)*
- *Bosnia and Herzegovina (22.5–24)”*.

If examine the assessments of individual countries solely according to chapters in relation to trade, market functioning, and economic-related issues, Georgia, in some cases, demonstrates a comparatively competitive, equal or in some cases even more advanced standing than other countries (Kardava E. 2025). Georgia's lowest scores are primarily observed in areas related to alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, democracy, and political criteria. However, these challenges are also evident, to varying degrees, in the context of several other countries. (The current situation suspended negotiations on EU accession and the stagnation of progress from Georgia following the October 2024 parliamentary elections will, undoubtedly, further aggravate the country's assessment in this area).

Why did the progress achieved between 2014 and 2023, prior to the suspension of negotiations, fail to evolve into a tangible integration of markets and a significant intensification of trade relations? The responsibility to answer this question should primarily lie with the Georgian authorities. However, it is not solely Georgia's burden; it also represents a paradigm that requires examination and accountability from the EU's side.

Although the DCFTA envisioned greater access to the EU market for Georgian producers and enterprises, the actual implementation process proved challenging. Georgian exporters encountered significant hurdles stemming from intricate technical regulations, strict sanitary and phytosanitary requirements, and the financial burden of compliance. Consequently, for Georgian businesses, the European Union has remained more a symbol of prolonged compliance with technical standards than a space of greater access to and facilitation within the EU internal market (Climate Report Georgia. 2024) while Georgia has aligned with many EU standards, its businesses have struggled to penetrate the EU market meaningfully. Georgian exports to the EU remain limited, concentrated in a few raw materials or low-value-added goods. EU investment in Georgia remains disproportionately small compared to that of Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf countries. Trade facilitation was not followed by sufficient trade capacity development or large-scale investment

in production infrastructure. In short, the EU market was "in sight," but not in reach.

Typically, such vulnerability or reluctance of businesses to transition to European standards is rooted in a set of complex challenges. Georgia lacks a stable industrial economy and is largely dependent on small and medium-sized enterprises. Under conditions of wars and within the global financial crisis environment, structural upgrading becomes particularly difficult. This is further exacerbated by Georgia's de facto predatory banking credit system, a political landscape heavily influenced by business interests, and, at the same time, the burden of European standards imposed on businesses particularly in the social and environmental domains. Privatization plays a significant role in this context. It raises critical questions about whose hands public assets have ended up in, and whether business activities are being conducted in alignment with Georgia's national interests. (For example, the transfer of airports into Turkish ownership, the issue of manganese production in Georgia, the privatization of the energy and telecommunication sectors, and similar cases all illustrate the strategic importance of examining whether key economic assets are being managed in line with Georgia's state and people's interests). As to competition policy and market freedom (including issues related to cartels, abuse of dominant position, state aid, and mergers) according to the European Commission's reports, present a concerning picture.

The economy, market, production, and trade are not merely matters of wealth generation, they constitute the capital and power that finance the national budget and provide the state with the capacity to invest more in meeting political criteria and advancing democratization. A nation burdened with external debts, characterized by unstable (and at times dubious) business practices, and influenced by investments driven by Northeastern geopolitical interests, faces significant obstacles on its path toward European integration. If the market does not orient itself toward Europe, the nation as a whole will struggle to move in that direction.

This is why it has been, and continues to be, fundamentally important for both the national authorities and the EU to ensure motivation and flexibility in fostering deeper market interlinkages over decades.

Georgia is a Black Sea country geopolitically situated on the connectivity routes. The EU has traditionally relied on connectivity primarily through Russia and Turkey. Positioned between these two dominant powers, Georgia holds significant potential for diversification (Kardava E. 2024). The European Union has already "disengaged" from Russia; and under such circumstances, if the EU concedes Georgia (effectively leaving it to Russian influence), it becomes entirely dependent on Turkey, thus perpetuating the very problem of lack of diversification. It is essential to underscore once again that Turkey itself faces serious democratic challenges, and its accession

negotiations with the EU are also suspended. Therefore, the question arises: why has it become so difficult to implement a policy in which Georgia would serve as a middle corridor and a vector of diversification? Indeed, Georgia's accession to the EU would not merely provoke Russian aggression; it would also position Georgia as a reliable partner for the European Union through the development of direct connectivity, transit routes, and increased regional competitiveness. Yet, given that such an ambitious strategic vision has been adopted by both Georgia and the EU, it is imperative to sustain it. This requires strong political will not only in Georgia but equally within the EU itself. Georgia has a unique strategic value for the EU, one that remains underutilized. Georgia could be a counterweight to Turkey's geopolitical assertiveness and Russia's coercive power in the Black Sea region. However, this requires a much more ambitious EU strategy.

"In the global connectivity competition, Georgia is a key country. In the long term Moscow wants to reestablish the South Caucasus as its sphere of influence and bring Georgia back into the Russian orbit. It wants to establish transactional platforms like 3+3 to solve regional problems with authoritarian countries without the US or the EU. In Putin's ideal world, all countries of the South Caucasus would also join institutional frameworks like the BRICS, SCO and Eurasian Economic Union, with the aim to create alternatives to U.S.-dominated global institutions". (Meister S. 2025).

It should be stressed that Georgia still does not participate in the 3+3 format

According to public data of the National Statistics office of Georgia, in January-February 2025, *"the share of the top ten trading partners by imports in the total imports of Georgia amounted to 75.5 percent. The top partners were the USA (USD 478.3 million), Russia (USD 344.3 million) and Türkiye (USD 337.9 million); in January-February 2025 the share of the top ten trading partners in the total external trade turnover of Georgia amounted to 71.9 percent. The top trading partners were the USA (USD 486.9 million), Russia (USD 416.2 million) and Türkiye (USD 384.3 million)" (GeoSTAT. 2025).*

Russia's strategic intentions are, in effect, being realized through the inflow of Russian capital into Georgia, sustained trade relations with Russia, and the enrichment of Georgian businesses and individuals through these ties. It is a fact that the Georgian market has once again pivoted toward the Russian market. At this decisive point, the overarching question arises: has the European Union's engagement with Georgia come belatedly?

It is particularly noteworthy that the intensity of people-to-people contacts also strengthens business relations and fosters EU awareness politically, economically, culturally, and socially. Yet, flights from Georgia to the EU remain very expensive. The Georgian public still remembers how easily and cheaply one could travel to Moscow - a strategic move by Russia, allowing frequent and effortless access to the “center,” which historically directed trade, education, and economic activity toward Moscow. Today, this factor must also be considered in the context of Georgia’s European economic integration: the intensification of interpersonal connections, which can enhance Georgia’s links to the EU, and facilitate Europe-oriented business, requires travel routes (flights) be simple and price-affordable. Currently, the discourse surrounding the suspension of the visa-free regime which is often accompanied by exaggerated disinformation, intensifies polarized sentiments in Georgia, creating the perception that the country is being punished and progressively distanced from the EU. This, in turn, reinforces the notion that Georgia will never get real EU membership.

Conclusion

Meaningful and sustainable progress on the political criteria, rule of law, human rights, and democratic institutions cannot be achieved without a resilient economy encompassing the state, businesses, and citizens. In Georgia’s case, the lack of a robust domestic industrial base, limited access to the EU internal market, and insufficient economic integration with EU capital flows significantly undermine its political reform agenda. Moreover, in the context of the global economic struggle, Georgia had its specific role and geopolitical significance to the extent that, together with the European family, it created a secure (democratic - albeit hybrid and developing) connecting space. This reality “compelled” the East/Asia to engage with Georgia and operate within it, since for them, Georgia represented a pathway to Europe. For the European Union, on the other hand, Georgia served as a diversified connector to the East. Eliminating such a role as a connector would increase Georgia’s economic dependence and further open opportunities for Russia to advance its own interests in the region, which would be detrimental to none of the global actors.

Economic stability, employment, and social justice are essential prerequisites for securing public support necessary to sustain challenging reforms. When Georgia’s economy is more responsive towards Russia or China (CIS countries) than to EU internal market or EU structural funds, its trajectory toward European integration remains fragile and exposed to external vulnerabilities.

Georgia’s European future cannot rest solely on political rhetoric or legal approximation. The EU must recognize that visible economic integration

and tangible investments are essential to build resilient societies, not wait for the next 30 years. The current imbalance where everyday financial survival depends more on others than on the EU, it should come as no surprise that part of Georgia will continue to look toward the North (and East) particularly those who were already ideologically inclined in that direction and who would have needed to feel the tangible benefits of the EU market in a competitive way to appreciate the value of the new reality.

At the same time, the EU must not forgo the strategic opportunity that Georgia represents as a channel for diversification and as a competitive counterbalance to Turkey. The EU should not risk losing the investments, financial resources, and political capital it has already committed to Georgia. However, if the prevailing approach devolves into a contest of “who outmanoeuvred whom publicly” or a reaction of “how dare they criticize us,” thereby squandering valuable time and opportunities, Georgia will inevitably drift fully into Russia’s sphere of influence. What benefit would the European Union derive from such an outcome?

There is also a political reality that must be acknowledged: the EU should refrain from engaging in the Georgian government’s political narratives centred on the constant re-examination of the past. By repeatedly referencing former President Saakashvili in its resolutions, the EU inadvertently reinforces elements of Russia’s agenda and allows itself to be drawn into a geopolitical discourse shaped by Russian strategic framing. Meanwhile, significant segments of the Georgian public struggle and find it difficult to accept such an approach from the European Union. It is therefore essential for the EU to develop a more nuanced understanding of Georgia’s present-day political and societal context. While the continued rule of the Georgian Dream party into a fourth term marked by political polarization, concentration of power, and democratic backsliding poses serious concerns, these should not compromise the EU’s strategic pragmatism. Effective policy engagement must also take place through discreet, face-to-face ,results-oriented diplomacy, rather than relying solely on distance criticism (until the Georgian people resolve their internal challenges through elections or other democratic means).

It is of critical importance that, in the process of analyzing European integration, objective academia and researchers become more actively engaged. For a genuine and in-depth understanding of Georgia (from the EU part), including the acquisition of informational balance and a multifaceted perspective, cooperation and communication from the EU in Georgia should be strengthened and extended to reach not only the powerful (and simultaneously monopolistic) non-governmental sector but also other actors.

In a context where the parties are almost entirely unable to communicate with one another, it would be beneficial to appoint a

spokesperson/political negotiator who, in the eyes of the Georgian public, is not associated with any past or present political movements, and who would be regarded by both the European Union and Georgia as largely trustworthy, academically credible, and well-versed in Georgia's European integration. Using this mechanism, a document (or set of rules) could be developed outlining how cooperation could be maintained and a minimal dialogue sustained on mutually selected issues prior to democratic changes in Georgia. What is needed is an interim, moratorium-like process, involving direct (behind-closed-doors) dialogue, transitioning from a politically unfavourable media-technological environment to a space of genuine political agreements.

There is a need for strengthened, intensive non-stop informational and strategic communication, on the one hand, within Georgia regarding the European Union (including with ethnic minorities, in their languages), which should not carry the character of political confrontation but rather foster understanding of the EU. On the other hand, it is fundamentally necessary, at the regional and international levels, to preserve Georgia's reputation. The information space should not create the impression that Georgia is the region's largest subject of dictatorship (which is clearly not the case). It would be advisable to establish an EU Information Center (or revive a previously closed one) in Georgia, with regional representations. However, these recommendations can only be implemented once communication between the EU and Georgia is restored at the diplomatic and official levels. If establishing such an official structure (and its representations) proves impossible, social networks and internet media should be utilized for resilience, overcoming these difficult years, and maintaining connections between the Georgian and European communities for the future agenda through unstoppable and widely accessible informational products with broad impact. Today's media in Georgia tends to politically "divide" the European Union (touch the EU in political discourse only), rather than explain it and foster public appreciation of it every day.

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