A Sectoral Roadmap to EU Integration

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Introduction

On 28 November 2024, Georgia's government, led by the Georgian Dream Party, announced the suspension of its EU accession process until at least 2028, alongside a halt to EU funding (European Commission, 2025). This decision was reached after years of struggling to align with the EU acquis. A recent report published by the Commission (2025), highlighted that Georgia had failed to comply or even acknowledge most of the 9-step recommendations reflecting the conditions to become an EU country. The ruling party's growing political and economic alignment with Russia raises concerns about external influence and regional stability.

While Georgia is recognized by the EU as a strategic partner in the eastern region

(Piechowiak-Lamparska, 2019) – especially since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine (Georgian Institute of Politics, 2025) – the EU is not ready to fully integrate the candidate country because of three main challenges that stand in the way of accession: limited compliance with EU conditionality, the government's ambivalence towards integration, and the country's complex relations with Russia. However, the EU must establish a long-term plan to achieve this ambitious goal. This is not only to fulfill the demands of the Georgian population (EU NEIGHBOURS east, 2025) but also to avoid losing influence in a strategically vital region, which would allow Russia to deepen its traction in the area (Georgian Institute of Politics, 2025).

This policy proposal advances a sectoral integration framework as a practical way to increase cooperation between Georgia and the EU. It will elaborate on a collaboration in key sectors, on how to readdress the conditionalities within this framework, on how to build stronger cultural ties, and finally it will propose a collaboration within the security domain.

Problem definition

Georgia's integration into the EU is hindered by three obstacles: its limited compliance with the EU acquis, the government's ambiguous position towards the EU, and Georgia's dependence on Russia.

Structural Incompatibility with EU Acquis

A report published by the EU Commission (2025) illustrates the specific issues that make Georgia structurally incompatible with EU standards. These include the concentration of power in the hands of the leading party, an overall lack of pluralism due to the boycott of opposition parties in the Parliament, and

the systematic use of expedited legislative procedures. Oversight institutions – such as the Communications Commission and the Prosecutor General – remain highly politicised, limiting accountability. At the same time, restrictions on media and civil society, including the adoption of the 'Foreign Agents Law', alongside documented human rights violations, signal a broader deterioration of rule-of-law standards required under the Copenhagen criteria.

Government's Misalignment with EU Norms

Alongside these structural challenges, Georgia's government has adopted a strategic inconsistency in its behavior (Kakachia et al., 2024). On the one hand, the ruling party reiterates its commitment to entering the EU, while on the other, it leaves EU recommendations unacknowledged and often engages in aggressive anti-EU rhetoric. This dual strategy allows the government to maintain support from the large pro-European voting base (EU NEIGHBOURS east, 2025), while resisting reforms that would weaken its power. This translates into a low alignment in foreign policy: Georgia has selectively avoided supporting EU statements or sanctions, particularly where doing so could generate security risks. Interestingly, a report published by the GIP (2024) has shown that Georgia avoids issuing condemning statements or sanctions against countries that haven't recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia yet, while it is more likely to align with the EU against countries that have already done so and that therefore do not pose any security threat anymore. This highlights another important conclusion: as long as Georgia will feel vulnerable and left unprotected in the geopolitical sphere, it will not be able to fully align with the EU.

Dependence on Russia and Security Constraints

Georgia's dependence on Russia constitutes a structural constraint on its foreign policy alignment. The Georgian Dream party's rhetoric and policy choices increasingly align with Russian positions (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2025). This is reflected in the government's refusal to support sanctions against Russia (Caucasus Watch, 2026), the accusations against the EU of trying to coerce Georgia to participate in the conflict, and its adoption of legislation – such as The Foreign Agents Law – which echoes Russian regulatory models. The alignment between the two nations is interpreted by experts as a result of a persistent security threat, posed by Russia's occupation of 20% of Georgian territory and its dependency on the Russian

economy (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2025). Currently, one of Georgia's main suppliers of gas and electricity is Russia. Therefore, unless the EU finds a way to provide new sources of energy and reduce Georgia's strategic dependence on Russia, a full alignment with EU's sanctions would put Georgia in a condition of economic instability and endanger its security.

Recommended approach

Sectoral integration

A feasible and low-risk strategy is a gradual integration of strategic sectors to make Georgia independent from Russia, particularly the energy sector. Georgia's current energy mix relies heavily on hydropower alongside imports from Russia and Azerbaijan. The EU could invest in renewable energy infrastructure, including hydropower, while also improving cross-border energy interconnections. By investing in

transport infrastructure, such as ports and rail links, the EU could strengthen Georgia's integration into European supply chains and reduce dependence on Russian routes.

Fostering a cultural network

The EU should implement cultural and educational exchange programmes, particularly targeting youth mobility and academic cooperation. For instance, student exchange and joint research programmes would strengthen interpersonal networks and increase long-term societal alignment with European norms. These initiatives would also reduce the impact of disinformation and polarising narratives by fostering a direct link between Georgian and European societies. Over time, this could help bridge the ideological gap that currently complicates the integration.

Using Administrative Law

As Georgia becomes increasingly integrated into EU markets, market access will require regulatory compliance. Participation in these markets requires compliance with EU regulatory standards, such as anti-corruption frameworks, transparency rules, consumer protection legislation, and most importantly, independent regulatory oversight. These mechanisms and actors provide the safeguards and oversight that would support Georgia in its compliance to EU requirements, increasing institutional alignment. For instance, independent regulatory agencies would increase the accountability or transparency issues mentioned in the previous sections, while not directly interfering into national politics.

Prioritization of the Conditions

Collaboration in the Security Sector

Finally, EU-Georgia cooperation should include a security partnership as a safeguard to Georgia. This would include intelligence sharing, military training programmes, cooperation in cyber defence. This engagement would provide Georgia with meaningful security mechanisms, without entering into military guarantees that would alarm Russia and lead to a potential escalation.

Risks and mitigation

A risk that this strategy presents is that the Georgian government may benefit from the strategic agreements while making no effort in the harmonization with the EU acquis. To overcome this, conditionalities – such as the ones in the 9-step Commission recommendations – may be introduced in the forms of contract terms in the written agreements between Georgia and the EU. For instance, a collaboration in the energy sector can require transparency standards that the government would have to uphold in regards to public procurement, respect for workers rights, or transparency. Given that a failure to comply would end beneficial contracts which would cause an important financial loss for Georgia, sectoral integration could have a positive spillover effect into Georgian structural issues.

Another challenge of the strategy is the potential perception of political interference. For instance, if the EU were to delegate supervisory power to a new independent agency, the Georgian government may accuse the EU of attempting to meddle in Georgian politics. For this reason, a safer option would be to employ existing frameworks, which include independent agencies that have enforced a predetermined set of rules for years. This would release pressure from Georgia specifically, and normalise this form of oversight as part of the regulatory mechanisms of the sector.

Finally, there is the possibility that Russia may perceive security agreements between Georgia and the EU as a threat and decide to respond aggressively. For this reason, the EU must adopt a gradual,

non-escalatory approach, such as focusing on cyber defense, intelligence sharing, and capacity building. By avoiding formal security guarantees, the EU can reduce the likelihood of provoking retaliation from Russia, while still promising support to Georgia.

Conclusion

Overall, Georgia is currently facing challenges that are severely stalling its integration into the EU. Its institutional incompatibility with the EU acquis, its strategic ambiguity, and its relations to Russia may lead to a never-ending stalling in negotiations with the EU. However, the Union should not disregard negotiations, now more than ever, given today's context of military and geopolitical instability that make it necessary to strengthen its political and economic connections in the area. By adopting a sectorial approach, reframing conditionalities, prioritizing strategically, and collaborating in the security sector, the EU could speed up the accession process. These steps will allow the EU to build a relationship of trust and strategic convenience with Georgia that will strengthen relations and speed up Georgia's accession. Although multiple challenges remain, such as the risk of free riding, the threat of political interference, and potential retaliation from Russia, with a pragmatic and sustained engagement strategy, this plan is not only feasible, but necessary to secure the EU's long-term influence in the region.

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