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**Role of the European Union in the Transformation of the Georgian Politics and
Challenges for Further Integration**

Summarized version of the dissertation and research results

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Role of the European Union in the Transformation of the Georgian Politics and Challenges for Further Integration

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Since gaining independence in 1991, Georgia has encountered significant events and challenges, including separatist movements, a color revolution, war, and occupation, which have influenced its political landscape and foreign policy. These events have had mixed effects on the country's political, economic, and democratic development. Georgia has made notable strides in establishing democratic institutions, with successful elections and power transfers viewed as triumphs for its democracy. Despite regional challenges and neighbors' lack of commitment to democratic reforms and European integration, Georgia has emerged as a strong advocate of EU-promoted liberal democratic norms. Over the past decade, Georgia has shown a high commitment to reforms under the Eastern Partnership and Association Agreement, achieving EU candidate status in 2023. The European Union (EU) has significantly influenced various aspects of Georgia's political landscape, necessitating more in-depth research to understand its role in Georgia's transition from autocracy to democracy. However, the recent change of rhetoric of the Georgia's ruling elite towards the EU and the progress reports by the EU portrays rather contentious picture of the relations. Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyze Georgia's European integration through the neo-functionalism school of European integration theories and identify any divergences within this framework. The primary objective is to examine the EU's role as a key external actor in Georgian politics, identifying successful areas of influence and highlighting the limitations, challenges, and contentious aspects of Georgia's European integration. The research will analyze the dynamics of the EU's influence and policy tools, evaluating its soft and hard power, and exploring the impact of Europeanization on Georgia's political sphere. The research was conceived as a single case study focused on EU-Georgia relations. After deliberate consultations about methodology, it was

confirmed that the research objectives aligned with this approach, aiming to provide new insights, challenge existing theories, and suggest new directions for further research. The study employs qualitative methods, including process tracing, with some quantitative data from primary and secondary sources for evaluation. Content and discourse analysis play a significant role, examining language, characterization, and imagery. Empirical data, collected between 2021 and 2024 during the European Studies Doctoral program at the Institute for European Studies in Georgia, includes primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from agreements, press releases, speeches, EU publications, official documents, statistical surveys, interview transcripts, social media posts, and newspapers. Secondary sources included books, theses, scientific articles, and documentaries. Despite being primarily qualitative, the study also evaluated quantitative data to gain insights into Georgian domestic politics and perceptions of EU-Georgia relations. Data collection was the most significant part of the research, with most primary data coming from interviews with experts knowledgeable about EU-Georgia relations and Georgian politics. These experts, from NGOs, government entities, and universities, have significantly contributed to Georgia's political transformation and the Europeanization process, shaping the EU-Georgia relations narrative.

Keywords: Georgia, European Union, European Integration, Candidacy, Accession

Contents

List of Abbreviations	VI
CHAPTER ONE - Introduction.....	1
Introducing the study.....	1
Problem Statement and Research Objectives	6
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Research Design and Methodology	20
Literature Review	24
Limitations of the Study.....	47
Outline of the Study.....	48
CHAPTER TWO – Analysis of Georgia’s Political and Democratic Transformation and Attempts of European Integration.....	50
The First Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918 – 1921: A Georgian Democratic Experiment at the Crossroads of Empires.....	54
Georgia’s Soviet Experience: From a Privileged Status to a Suppressed Nationalism.....	60
Troubled Independence: Post-Soviet Transition of Georgia.....	69
Rose Revolution and the Political Transformation under the UNM.....	74
Political Transformation under the Georgian Dream and Increased Political Polarization	80
Conclusions.....	87
CHAPTER THREE - Role of the EU as an External Actor and Transformative Power in Georgia	92
Foreign Policy Tools of the EU as an External Actor.....	97
EU as a Transformative External Power in Georgia.....	103
European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership	107
Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia	113
Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area and Economic Assistance of the EU to Georgia	115
Visa Liberalization Action Plan.....	119
Membership Perspective and Road to the Candidacy Status.....	121
Conclusions.....	123
CHAPTER FOUR – Challenges for Further Integration and Limitations of The EU in Georgia	127
Political Polarization	133

De-oligarchization.....	138
Independence of Judiciary	141
Freedom of Media and Plurality	144
Vulnerable Minorities and Religious Values	146
Russian Federation and the Question of Territorial Integrity	149
Conclusions.....	158
CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS.....	162
Bibliography	176
Interviews	201

List of Abbreviations

AA - Association Agreement

CIS - Commonwealth of Independent States

CSFP - Common Security and Foreign Policy

CUG - Citizens' Union of Georgia

DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area

DCI - Development Cooperation Instrument

DRG - Democratic Republic of Georgia

EaP - Eastern Partnership

EFP - European Foreign Policy

ENI - European Neighbourhood Instrument

ENP - European Neighborhood Policy

EU - European Union

EUMM - European Union Monitoring Mission

FTA - Free Trade Agreement

GD - Georgian Dream

GOC - Georgian Orthodox Church

INOGATE - Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe

IPA - Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance

LGBTQIA+ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more.

LI - Liberal Intergovernmentalism

MEPs - Members of the European Parliament

MP - Member of Parliament

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NDICI - Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument

NGOs - Non-Governmental Organizations

NRP - New Rights Party

ODIHR - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PCA - Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

PESCO - Permanent Structured Cooperation

PM - Prime Minister

SMEs - Small and medium-sized enterprises

SSR - Soviet Socialist Republic

TACIS - Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States

TRACECA - Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia

UNM - United National Movement

US - United States

USAID - United States Agency for International Development

VLAP - Visa Liberalization Action Plan

CHAPTER ONE - Introduction

Introducing the study

Since regaining independence in 1991, Georgia has undergone significant events and challenges, including separatist movements, a color revolution, war, and occupation, which have played a defining role in shaping the nation's political landscape and foreign policy. These pivotal occurrences have had both positive and negative implications for Georgia's political, economic, and democratic development. The country has actively endeavored to establish democratic institutions, with the successful conduct of free and fair elections and the smooth transfer of power being widely regarded as a triumph for Georgian democracy (Mikhelidze, Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement: Good Governance and Fundamental Freedoms, 2018). Nevertheless, notwithstanding the challenges prevalent in the political landscape of Georgia, the current state of politics and democracy in a geographical context surrounded by neighbors who display a lack of inclination and commitment to democratic reforms and European integration is commendable. In contrast to other nations within its region and the post-Soviet space, excluding the Baltic countries, Georgia has emerged as the most fervent advocate for adopting liberal democratic norms promoted by the European Union over the last decade. Notably, the country has demonstrated a heightened commitment to reforms under the Eastern Partnership and Association Agreement and has recently attained the status of an EU candidate country in 2023.

Nevertheless, the democratic and political development in Georgia was not exempt from historical influences. The Soviet legacy, in particular, wielded a substantial impact during the post-independence era, leaving lasting imprints on the country's political dynamics. Additionally, the historical episode of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia, spanning three years from 1918 to 1921, serves as a source of pride for

contemporary Georgians. This early republic is revered for its democratic and progressive characteristics, contributing to its symbolic significance in the present day.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia has actively aspired to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community, driven by a multitude of reasons. The primary impetuses behind these aspirations stem from widespread public endorsement of integration with the West and successive governments that view Georgia as an integral part of the Western sphere, supporting integration alongside sustained reform initiatives, particularly since the Saakashvili era. However, achieving these objectives necessitates substantive and continuous involvement from the West, particularly leveraging EU structures that advocate for liberal democratic values through conditionalities and shared responsibilities. In the challenging years following Georgia's independence in the 1990s, the EU's engagement, primarily through TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States), was notably limited. (Karadag, *Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis*, 2019, p. 50). During this period, the European Union struggled to provide meaningful and constructive support to Georgia and the region. However, the advent of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1999 marked a shift, as the EU commenced supporting Georgia's endeavors to fortify democracy, stimulate economic development, and embrace a market-oriented economy. The transformative impact of the Rose Revolution in 2003 heightened expectations for both structural and institutional reforms, accelerating Georgia's integration processes with the Western sphere and fostering an embrace of European identity. In 2006, an Action Plan under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was adopted between the EU and Georgia, aiming to further economic integration and development by aligning Georgian legislation, norms, and standards with those of the European Union.

The European Union assumed a significant role in conflict management within Georgia, albeit operating within limited capacities in the region. Amidst the 2008

August War involving Georgia and Russia, the EU successfully facilitated a ceasefire to bring an end to hostilities between the two nations. Subsequent to the EU-mediated ceasefire, the European Union initiated the deployment of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia. The mission aimed to prevent a resurgence of hostilities and foster confidence-building measures between the conflicting parties. It is noteworthy, however, that the de facto authorities have consistently denied access to the mission for a period exceeding fifteen years (EUMM).

In 2013, Georgia entered into the Visa Liberalization Action Plan, committing to adopt a new law addressing discrimination (EU-Georgia Visa Dialogue Action Plan on Visa Liberalization, 2013). The 'Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination' was enacted in 2014 despite lacking substantial support or initiation from social demand (Berg & Kilp, 2017, p. 28). The legislation encountered opposition from conservative segments of Georgian society, contributing to increased societal polarization on the matter, contrary to the intended outcome. Presently, religious institutions in Georgia remain staunch defenders of national and traditional values, wielding significant influence in the political arena due to their high level of trust among the Georgian public (Berg & Kilp, 2017, p. 30). This also positions them as influential actors in EU-Georgia relations. Notably, the visa liberalization agreement has facilitated over 1,150,000 visits by Georgian citizens to the EU since its inception in March 2017 (European Commission, 2021).

On 23rd March 2018, the Georgian Parliament adopted constitutional changes, changing the electoral system to a more proportional one before the parliamentary elections in 2020 despite the calls from the opposition to introduce a fully proportional system (Karadag, Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis, 2019, p. 170). However, following the failure to implement a fully proportional election system by the parliamentary majority in 2019 with the facilitation of the Ambassadors of the EU, Germany, the US, and the Council of Europe, Georgian political parties

agreed on a compromise for the election system in 2020. The new model envisaged the immediate introduction of an electoral system with 120 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats and a 1% threshold in Parliament compared to the previous model of 77 proportional and 73 majoritarian seats and a 5% threshold (European Commission, 2021, p. 2).

The involvement of political parties plays a crucial role in Georgia's alignment with the European Union. Notably, the contributions of two specific political parties, namely UNM and Georgian Dream, were instrumental in shaping Georgia's "European choice" in the last decades. Since its formation in 2012 with the same alliance name, Georgian Dream has won three consecutive parliamentary elections in 2012, 2016, and 2020, as well as two presidential elections in 2013 and 2018. In the last decade, under the ruling Georgian Dream, Georgia and the European Union have signed essential agreements such as an association agreement, deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, and visa liberalization that positively contributed to Georgia's reform drive and over the years, EU's European Neighbourhood policy vis-à-vis Georgia has transformed from a simple partnership to a more tailored approach to support the countries reforms and consolidate the gains from association agreement. The political purpose of these agreements was, no doubt, to deepen the realization of Georgia's 'European choice' and its relations with the EU (Kostanyan, Emerson, Loo, Blockmans, & Kovziridze, 2016).

Undoubtedly, Georgia has made noteworthy advancements in the establishment of democratic institutions, cultivation of democratic culture, promotion of human rights, and combatting corruption, garnering widespread acknowledgment. However, various analyses have highlighted concerns about the vulnerability of Georgia's democratic and political achievements in light of the ongoing political crises between the ruling party and the opposition. It is an undeniable reality that these achievements are not immune to reversibility. Apprehensions regarding state capture, governmental

influence on judicial independence, and constraints on media freedom have prominently featured in the country's political discourse in recent years (Kelly, Kramer, & Inayeh, *A Country on the Verge: The Case for Supporting Georgia*, 2021). Following the parliamentary elections in 2020, Georgian politics encountered two significant crises within a short timeframe. However, the intervention of both the United States and the European Union played a crucial role in mitigating both crises, averting further escalation between the opposition and the government. On March 8, 2020, the U.S. and EU facilitated an agreement between the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties, and on April 19, 2021, the EU brokered another agreement. These instances serve as noteworthy indicators of the EU's expanding influence over the Georgian political landscape. The willingness of political parties to engage in compromise, mediated by the EU, underscores their commitment to fostering an inclusive parliament and upholding democratic values.

In recent years, Georgia has unmistakably manifested its commitment to aspiring for European integration by implementing numerous reforms within the framework of the Association Agreement, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and the visa-free regime. Initially scheduled for a 2024 EU membership application, the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine accelerated the process. In 2022, Georgia, along with Moldova and Ukraine, applied for EU membership. Subsequently, by the end of 2023, the country attained EU candidate status, albeit a year later than Moldova and Ukraine, due to the fulfillment of 12 recommendations required before obtaining the candidate status.

Undoubtedly, the European Union has exerted a multifaceted influence on the political landscape and political parties in Georgia. In instances of political impasse, the EU's impact has been instrumental in bringing political parties together for compromise. While it has effectively promoted liberal democratic norms and facilitated the adoption of a European identity by both politicians and society in Georgia, the EU's

soft power encounters limitations in an increasingly polarized political environment. Although its capability to convene prominent political actors for negotiations and consensus during political stalemates underscores its accrued soft power since Georgia's independence, substantial challenges and risks persist for the country's democratic development. Despite being deemed the most influential external actor in present-day Georgia due to its significant contributions to the country's political transformation, the candidacy process has highlighted challenges for both Georgia and the EU on the path to further integration.

As highlighted in this introduction, the European Union (EU) has played pivotal roles in shaping various aspects of Georgia's political landscape, including state-building, electoral systems, democracy, trade, conflict management, human rights, and minority rights. Consequently, there is a need for more in-depth research on how the EU influenced Georgia's transition from autocracy to democracy in the dynamic Caucasus region. The study aims to analyze and elucidate Georgia's European integration within this framework, employing the perspective of the neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism school of European integration theories. The study also seeks to identify any divergences within this theoretical framework where applicable.

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The principal aim of this study is to investigate the influence of the European Union (EU) as a significant external actor in shaping the transformation of Georgian politics. The research seeks to delineate the domains in which the EU has demonstrated success, particularly in garnering receptiveness from the Georgian political elite toward the EU's normative reform agenda. Concurrently, the study aims to discern the limitations, challenges, and contentious aspects of Georgia's European integration. To this end, this dissertation will analyze multiple dynamics of the EU's influence and policy tools in Georgia and evaluate its soft and hard power that has culminated over

the years while shedding some light on how the EU's soft power worked and attracted Georgia to embrace EU's normative reform agenda. We also plan to investigate Europeanization's impact on Georgia's political sphere.

Furthermore, we will analyze the EU's interactions with political actors in Georgia, such as government institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations, to give a general idea about the EU's engagement with the country in different dimensions. With this study, we also aim to explain the effects, limits, and shortcomings of the soft power and the policy tools of the European Union in Georgian politics as well as the Georgian government and society itself. Moreover, this research will delve into the deliberate "European choice" embraced by the Georgian political elite following the restoration of independence, particularly after the Rose Revolution. The examination will extend to the influence of the First Democratic Republic and the Soviet legacy on this strategic preference, shedding light on their impact on the continuous political transformation in the region. Readers will also have an opportunity to observe the country's engagement with the European Union under different periods, from the troublesome early days of the independence up until the Georgian Dream era governments, which have been the ruling party in Georgia since 2012, in various areas such as democratic reforms, human rights, economy and trade, conflict resolution, etc. The dissertation will also investigate the association agreement and DCFTA implementation since they have been vital stepping stones for Georgia to become a democratic, prosperous, and secure European state. Additionally, this study is going to contribute to the ongoing discussion and literature about the EU's increasing role in Georgian politics as a significant external actor.

Considering both perspectives, we intend to pinpoint the challenges that confront the relations between the European Union (EU) and Georgia within this framework. Aspects such as heightened political polarization witnessed in the country in recent years, the status of media freedom and pluralism, judicial independence, the

influence of religion, and endeavors toward de-oligarchization will be subject to examination. These areas have been focal points of contention between Georgia and the European Union and will be scrutinized for a comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, in the course of this investigation, we aim to scrutinize 'the Russian factor' in the context of EU-Georgia relations. This aspect stands as a pivotal challenge for Georgia's integration with the European Union and the broader Western sphere. It is crucial to comprehend the role of the Russian Federation in the policymaking processes of both Georgia and the EU within the region. In recent years, Russian interference in Georgian politics through media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political entities has affected the narrative shaped by the EU and Georgian authorities.

To this end, during this study, we will ask several research questions to reach the objectives above;

- What can Georgia's past political experiences tell us regarding its political transformation?
- How has the EU's influence in Georgia evolved since its independence?
- What are the primary tools of EU engagement with Georgia?
- What role has the EU played in Georgia's state-building?
- What kind of difficulties have been experienced during the implementation of AA and DCFTA?
- In which areas has the EU's soft power in Georgia become successful or failed?
- What kind of challenges do Georgia's relations with Russia pose for EU-Georgia integration?

- What kind of role can the EU play in Georgia's increasingly polarizing internal politics?

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical underpinnings of this research derive from the contemporary theories of European Integration, such as neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and multi-level governance approach, which deals with the characteristics of European foreign policy, enlargement and why the nation-states and political elites prefer to delegate their sovereignty to a supranational organization, in this case study, to the EU. According to Ernst Haas, the leading theorist of neo-functionalism, integration is a process 'whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties and activities towards a new center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states' (Haas, *The Uniting of Europe*, 1958, p. 16). Therefore, in order to better understand and explain the evolution of EU-Georgia relations, EFP regarding Georgia, and foreign policy instruments, this research aims to apply relevant theories of European integration mainly from a neo-functionalist perspective.

European integration theory does not have a uniform and singular research agenda. Instead, it encompasses diverse theoretical approaches that vary in terms of their underlying epistemological foundations, ontological assumptions, and analytical emphases (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015). In general, it is challenging to take a single European integration theory and apply it directly to this case study. Adopting such an approach would be flawed from a theoretical standpoint because European integration theories primarily diverge from one another in their attempts to address various facets of European integration in a complementary manner. Georgia's case of European integration can be discussed under European foreign policy, pre-accession,

enlargement, and neighborhood policy domains, which have been extensively utilized by contemporary European integration theories, mainly by neofunctionalists.

Hypothesis

The central supposition of this research is that through the mutually established mechanisms between the EU and Georgia, the European Union has been able to influence Georgian politics, including the ruling and opposition parties, using its external policy tools and soft power. Over the years, the EU's policy towards Georgia has supported state-building processes by encouraging economic and political reforms and helping them successfully transition to democracy (Mikhelidze, Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement: Good Governance and Fundamental Freedoms, 2018). It is no secret that the EU has sought to influence regional developments in its immediate neighbourhood by promoting its liberal democratic norms. This is what the European Neighbourhood Policy was built for, after all. However, Karadag (2019) argues that the EU's soft power in Georgia also influences her security notion as Georgia's security understanding covers establishing democracy, rule of law, human rights, and freedom, strengthening independence, and peaceful coexistence with other nations. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the EU's increasing role in Georgia's political transformation over the years to evaluate its overall policy towards its neighbourhood.

European Integration theories general summary and main phases of theory

In their work, Diez and Wiener (Diez & Wiener, 2018) outline the key trends and evolution of contemporary European integration theories across three distinct phases. However, it is essential to note that traditional European Integration theories emerged before the European Union's establishment. These early theories, including federalism (Spinelli, 1972, p. 68) and functionalism (Mitrany, 1943), recognized the issue of national sovereignty as the central challenge in the aftermath of the world

wars. They mainly addressed the role of the sovereign state within a higher-level political organization. The first phase of the European integration debate was dominated by neo-functionalism (Haas, *The Uniting of Europe*, 1958) (Lindberg, 1963) and intergovernmentalism (Hoffmann, 1966) (Milward, 1992), both approaches shared the assumption of rational actors. However, they identified the driving forces and influences for the integration process at varying levels and within different domains of society (Diez & Wiener, 2018, p. 12). They are still considered dominant theories in European integration. The debate between supporters of integration as 'the rescue of the nation-state' (Milward 1992), on the one hand, and as the overcoming of the nation-state, on the other, which began in this first phase of integration theory, has remained a consistent factor in social science analysis to this day. The second phase of European integration research -from the 1980s onwards- significantly expanded the range of empirical investigations and theoretical discussions. It also fostered a higher level of interdisciplinary collaboration. This phase emphasized comparative and institutionalist perspectives in the study of integration theory, focusing on inquiries about the true nature and functioning of the European Union as a political entity (Diez & Wiener, 2018). Multi-level approaches such as the multi-level governance theory (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996) also are the products of this phase.

To a certain extent, the third phase of integration theory sees the resurgence of IR Theory. In contrast to the first two phases, the third phase of integration theory faces a broader challenge of conceptualizing the objective or ultimate purpose of European integration, examining the conflicting ideas and discourses surrounding European governance, and considering the normative consequences of specific EU policies. Consequently, alongside problem-oriented theorizing, works during this phase have focused on questioning our comprehension of integration, exploring the factors that shaped the definition and evolution of specific policy areas, and analyzing the

political ramifications of these definitions and historical processes (Diez & Wiener, 2018, p. 14).

Apart from federalism, which primarily examines European integration from a normative standpoint, the integration theories and approaches emphasize elucidating the processes and outcomes of cooperation in the realm of EFP rather than concentrating on its effectiveness and impact. To put it differently, EFP is primarily considered as the outcome being studied, particularly within neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist accounts, as well as in policy network analysis and new institutionalism. The governance approach, specifically the literature on 'external governance,' may deviate from this observation by also focusing on how the establishment of the EFP governance system influences external actors and processes in the EU (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015, p. 15).

It is crucial for our study to explain the reasons behind our decision to choose and apply theories of European integration in the case of Georgia's European integration. First of all, European integration theories contribute to our understanding of what actors drive integration processes in the foreign policy domain and through what channels and mechanisms they do so. In particular, the governance approach, policy-network analysis, and neofunctionalism go beyond intergovernmentalist conceptualizations of foreign policy-making as a purely state-dominated process and highlight the involvement of non-state actors across different levels in decision-making processes. Consequently, they provide a more nuanced picture of the complex reality of European foreign policy-making. Secondly, European integration theories are crucial in enhancing our comprehension of the actors responsible for driving integration processes in the foreign policy domain and the channels and mechanisms through which they operate. In particular, the governance approach, policy-network analysis, and neofunctionalism extend beyond the intergovernmentalist perspective, which perceives foreign policy-making as predominantly controlled by states. Instead, these

theories emphasize the involvement of non-state actors at various levels in decision-making processes. By doing so, they offer a more nuanced understanding of the intricate reality of European foreign policy-making (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015).

Additionally, European integration theories, mainly through the intergovernmentalist theory, have the capacity to elucidate the phenomenon of non-decisions and inaction in European foreign policy, i.e., 'sovereignty consciousness' and 'domestic constraints. (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015, p. 16)

Neo-Functionalist Approach to European Integration Theory

Neo-functionalists adopted functionalist concepts and elaborated on the shift from a state-centric system to the establishment of supranational institutions. They analyzed how societal and market forces influenced elites to support the creation of such institutions within their respective policy domains. In this regard, Neo-functionalists showed more concern for the trajectory of regional integration rather than its final outcome (Diez & Wiener, 2018).

The Neo-functionalist approach perceives European integration as a dynamic process. This understanding implies that integration processes undergo evolution over time and develop their own unique momentum. Regional integration involves a multitude of actors, including supranational entities, who are diverse and subject to change. These actors also form coalitions that transcend national governments and bureaucracies (Haas, *Beyond the Nation State*, 1964). Decisions are made by actors who are rational and motivated by their self-interest. These actors possess the ability to learn from their cooperative decision-making experiences and are capable of adjusting their preferences accordingly (Haas, *The Uniting of Europe*, 1958, p. 291). In the decision-making process, incremental approaches are prioritized over grand designs. This means that seemingly minor adjustments are frequently motivated by the unintended consequences of previous decisions (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015, p. 6).

Neofunctionalism proposes a forward-moving integration process influenced by spillover effects and path dependencies from the initial stages of integration. The initial steps taken towards integration are often inadequate, unfinished, and precarious, as they tend to align with the minimum agreement among national preferences rather than functional necessities (Moravcsik, *Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach*, 1993). Nonetheless, they generate diverse forms of spillover effects (Niemann, *Explaining Decisions in the European Union*, 2006), mechanisms for supranational institutional development (Sweet & Sandholtz, 1997), and connections across borders (Schimmelfennig, 2018, p. 4).

The concept of 'spillover' effectively summarizes the idea of change within neofunctionalism. In the definition of spillover, Lindberg states that "a situation arises in which a given action, associated with a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be secured only by taking further actions, which in turn create the need for more actions and so on (Lindberg, 1963, p. 10)." Typically, three categories of spillover have been recognized in the literature: functional, political, and cultivated spillover. Political spillover refers to the phenomenon where national elites recognize that significant problems cannot be adequately resolved at the domestic level. This realization initiates a gradual learning process in which elites modify their expectations, political engagements, and, as suggested by Haas, even their allegiances towards a new center in Europe. As a result, national elites would actively advocate for deeper integration, thereby providing a political impetus to the integration process (Haas, *The Uniting of Europe*, 1958). Haas (1958: chapters 8 and 9) specifically emphasized the influence exerted by non-governmental elites in this regard (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015, p. 6).

They pay close attention to the dynamic consequences resulting from supranational activism. Supranational actors, acting as policy entrepreneurs, induce

policy spillover by facilitating agreements and engaging national bureaucrats or interest group leaders (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Neofunctionalism argues that loyalties will gradually be transferred to the European level. This theory is based upon the assumption that national identities are not as deeply rooted as intergovernmentalists argue. According to Bergmann & Niemann (2015), European foreign policy, specifically pre-accession, enlargement, and neighborhood policy, has been the primary domain where neofunctionalism has been extensively utilized by the likes of (Niemann, 1998), (Özen, 1998) (Renner, 2009), (Macmillan, 2009).

In Georgia's case, the spillover phenomenon has been quite observable since the inception of the relations in the early 1990s, when the political elite was eager for cooperation even though the EU interaction with the region, in general, was limited to insignificant technical and economic assistance. As neo-functionalism suggests, early engagement of the EU towards Georgia's integration was quite inadequate; nonetheless, these engagements have generated quite diverse spillover effects in the relations over the span of more than thirty years with the initiation of further integration efforts such as ENP, EaP, DCFTA, Association Agreement processes leading to possible candidacy status. Notably, the strategic decision of integrating the country with the Euro-Atlantic community of the national elite after the Rose Revolution coincides with Haas's suggestion of where national elites recognize that significant problems cannot be adequately resolved at the domestic level, and thus they modify their expectations, political engagements, and, even their allegiances towards a new center in Europe and advocate for deeper integration, thereby providing a political impetus to the integration process.

Overall, neofunctionalism envisions integration as a process that may encounter obstacles and crises that can temporarily slow down or hinder its progress. However, the fundamental belief is that, in the long run, policy spillover and supranational activism will lead to a continuous upward trend in integration. The term "European

integration" itself implies that the process has a definite direction, aligning with the neo-functionalism notion of a purposeful and evolving path (Hooghe & Marks, 2019).

Other Schools of European Integration Theories

Intergovernmentalism highlights the significance of the nation-state in the process of integration and asserts that the nation-state is not rendered obsolete by European integration (Hatton & Sonny, 2011). The central tenet of intergovernmentalism is that EU member states, as the primary political actors, strive to maximize their advantages throughout the EU integration process (Gjeta, 2020).

A prominent intergovernmentalist writer, Alan Milward, contended that national governments played a central role in the integration process. In contrast to neo-functionalism, Milward argued that these governments gained strength rather than weakened due to integration (Milward, 1992). In contrast, Stanley Hoffmann proposed that integration had the potential to succeed in domains involving less significant political issues, like economic integration. Nevertheless, integration encountered insurmountable challenges when it came to issues that directly impacted crucial national interests (Hoffmann, 1966).

Intergovernmentalists contend that they can account for periods of significant transformation within the EU by examining instances when the interests of member state governments align, and they have shared objectives. They also argue that slower integration occurs during periods when governments' preferences diverge, leading to disagreements and an inability to reach a consensus (Hatton & Sonny, 2011).

From an intergovernmentalist standpoint, the EU integration process is based on the assumption that member states are the primary actors that engage in cooperation and coordination with internal and external stakeholders based on a cost-benefit analysis. The fundamental objective of conducting this analysis is to safeguard national interests (Cini, 2015, p. 67). Intergovernmentalists recognize the significance of

supranational institutions but perceive them as enablers of the integration process rather than as actual decision-makers. Consequently, the treaties governing the institutional structure allocate more power to the member states in shaping the enlargement policy despite the growing influence of supranational institutions like the Commission and European Parliament (Gjeta, 2020).

Georgia's European integration can also be examined through the lens of enlargement policies, particularly from an intergovernmentalist approach, since the country has been promised an EU candidate status. While Georgia's European integration has been primarily managed by supranational bodies within the EU such as the Commission, External Action Service, and EP, etc. when it comes to the enlargement policies, the process has inevitable intergovernmentalist nature where member states have been the key players, and Georgia's precarious geopolitical position may have a broader implication for the EU as well as member states. Intergovernmentalism has been a significant aspect of European integration despite being frequently disregarded, predating the accession process. For instance, a Georgian expert who engaged in official negotiations with the EU in the past told us in a personal communication that certain EU member states have utilized their presidency term to secure concessions from Georgia in bilateral relations.

The EU's enlargement, which entails the integration of neighboring countries, is a complex process involving multiple actors, such as member states and EU institutions. Over the course of the EU's existence, this process has undergone significant changes, resulting in profound implications for the political, economic, social, and geographical dimensions of the EU (Gjeta, 2020). However, it is easier to understand when analyzed from an intergovernmental standpoint, as the overall process has shown that member states have been the key players, in addition to the involvement of neo-functionalism and multi-level governance approaches.

Moravcsik (Moravcsik, *Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach*, 1993) (Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe. Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, 1998) has formulated the intergovernmentalist approach, which deviates from the traditional understanding of intergovernmentalism that regards national interests as emerging solely from the state's perception of its relative position within the international system. In contrast to classic intergovernmentalism, Moravcsik's approach, known as Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI), integrates state preferences into a liberal model of preference formation. According to this perspective, national governments possess a clear understanding of their interests and actively pursue them through negotiations with other member states (Hatton & Sonny, 2011). Moravcsik and Vachudova (*National Interests, State Power, and EU Enlargement*, 2002) employ Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI) to analyze the Eastern enlargement of the EU and make a similar argument. They contend that EU member states held considerably stronger bargaining power compared to the applicant countries due to the latter's reliance on Western European investments and access to the market. Consequently, the candidate countries chose to accept the conditions for EU membership rather than risk exclusion from the Union.

In this context, the EU's increasing influence in Georgia's domestic and foreign policies can be explained from a liberal intergovernmentalist approach where the political elite of the country have been eager for European integration and how the EU has gained political, economic, and cultural influence in Georgia through the use of mutual integration mechanisms. For instance, during the EaP Initiative, the EU evaluated Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine as being under the same group, and Georgia has often been touted as the most hardworking of the trio. However, the decision to delay Georgia's EU candidacy status, in contrast to Moldova and Ukraine, prompted Georgia to comply with the recommendations of the Commission. However, the recent actions by the Georgian government and the reduction in the reliance on EU

investments due to unparalleled economic growth, increasing unfriendly rhetoric towards the EU contradicts and complicates Moravcsik and Vachudova's (2002) argument.

There are other integration theories that deal with the formation of policies in the European Union. For instance, multi-level governance (MLG) is a much newer theory of European integration that argues that policymaking and integration in the EU are very complex issues that cannot be explained by contemporary static integration theories. They perceive policy formation within the European Union as uneven and subject to frequent fluctuations. Consequently, they emphasize the inadequacies of alternative European integration theories that overlook the substantial presence of diverse actors across all levels of governance in Europe (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996).

With regard to politics in the European Union, the concept of multi-level governance assumes that decision-making competencies and power are not exclusively held by the governments of EU member states but also shared by supranational institutions (such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Justice) and diffused over different levels (supranational, national and regional/local level) (Bergmann & Niemann, 2015) (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996).

Each contemporary European integration theory has something to offer in explaining the course of European integration, but they do so from different standpoints with different puzzles in mind (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). In our case study, which mainly focuses on the process of Georgia's political transformation under the EU's influence, we argue that the neo-functionalist accounts provide the best explanation for Georgia's European integration journey. Remarkably, the initiatives and programs before or under the European Neighborhood Policy, bilateral agreements, etc., and their results in Georgia's political domain provide solid examples of different types of spillover phenomena.

The European Union employs the enlargement strategy to effectively enhance its influence and strength as a non-military power by incorporating economic, diplomatic, and cultural aspects, as well as its overall appeal, rather than resorting to force in its foreign policy. By exercising control over the enlargement process through conditionality, the EU is able to shape its trajectory, making enlargement a highly appealing and effective policy instrument for the Union.

Regarding Georgia's European integration, the process of integration has been mainly headed and managed by supranational institutions (such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Justice) but also shared and supported by the governments of the EU member states. The political integration of Georgia can be analyzed under the subdimensions of political integration, which can be divided into four categories such as policy integration, institutional integration, civilizing and security dimension, and attitudinal dimension; however, if Georgia gains candidacy status and starts the accession process, Georgia's European integration will also need to be analyzed from an enlargement perspective as the enlargement cycle starts with the approval of member states in the European Council and ends up with their final ratification which indicates that it has primarily remained an intergovernmental process (Gjeta, 2020).

Research Design and Methodology

From the very start of the research, including the proposal process, we approached this study as a single case study, albeit not limited to it, as the objectives of the research solely focused on the implications of the EU-Georgia relations. After consulting with relevant methodology professors, we realized that the objectives of the research overlapped with the single case study approach and our aims of providing new insights into the subject, challenging or complementing the existing theories and assumptions, and opening up new directions for further research; therefore, we decided to go ahead with the single case study. In this context, this research is a single case

study based on qualitative research methods using process tracing, although some quantitative data were also extracted from primary and secondary sources and utilized for the evaluation and better understanding of the research problem. Content and discourse analysis constituted a significant part of the research in this context. However, qualitative content analysis is used to examine language, characterization, and imagery.

Using a single case instead of multiple cases has a significant drawback: it does not allow for generalizable conclusions (Khuntsaria, 2014, p. 7). However, in this research, the focus is not on generalization. Instead, it emphasizes within-case analysis and a thorough exploration of process tracing regarding Georgia's political transformation under the EU's influence. In this context, the research prioritizes the number of observations and a detailed examination of identified variables to enable credible inference rather than the quantity of cases.

The methodology will use inductive reasoning based on our observations, experiences, and the data we collected during the research phase, which “involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns through series of hypotheses” (Bernard, 2011, p. 7). According to Taylor et al. (2016), when using inductive and intuitive processes for research, there are no simple procedures or techniques for this kind of analysis” (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Therefore, we will begin this research with vaguely formulated research questions; however, after spending some time researching and based on the data we will collect during this research, we will be able to identify patterns and reach conclusions using the bottom-up method. In order to achieve this objective, process tracing techniques form a significant aspect of the approach used to examine the progression of EU-Georgia relations. This involves presenting the theory's and hypothesis's observable consequences, focusing on the chronological order of events. Process tracing, which is recognized as a prominent method for case studies, emphasizes not only the number of observations but also their quality and approach. Using

Bayesian probability makes it feasible to draw robust causal conclusions from a limited amount of data during the process tracing analysis.

The relevant empirical data, which had been utilized throughout the research, had been collected between 2021 and 2024 during the duration of the European Studies Doctoral program of the Institute for European Studies in Georgia. In addition to primary sources, secondary accounts, and analysis were also taken into account as they provided valuable insight and additional perspectives related to the development of EU-Georgia relations. Despite being a qualitative study overall, during the research, quantitative data sources such as surveys and official government statistics were also evaluated to gain further insight into Georgian domestic politics as well as perceptions of EU-Georgia relations in Georgian society.

The data collection efforts constitute the research's most significant and time-consuming part. Relevant empirical data had been extracted from primary sources such as agreements (AA, DCFTA, etc.), press releases, speeches, EU publications (progress reports), official government documents, statistical data (surveys conducted in Georgia and internationally etc.), interview transcripts (conducted in-depth interviews), social media posts and newspapers as well as from secondary sources such as books, thesis, scientific articles and documentaries related to our research objectives.

The majority of the primary data in the study comes from interviews. In this study, we carefully chose experts with extensive knowledge and expertise regarding the development of the relationship between the European Union and Georgia, as well as Georgian politics in general. These experts were selected from various non-governmental organizations, government entities, and universities that have played a significant role in Georgia's political transformation, observed the Europeanization process of Georgia, published relevant works in the relevant field, and actively contributed to the creation of the EU-Georgia relations narrative. They were then

engaged in conducting thorough interviews to gather comprehensive information related to the objectives of our research. To facilitate this process, an interview guide was created in collaboration with experienced academics with prior experience in conducting expert interviews, aiming to collect pertinent data from the interviewees mainly using open-ended questions. Using open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews allows the interviewees to make their own comments regarding the research. In general, it is crucial to create a comprehensive guide for conducting semi-structured interviews and to recognize the essential skills required for an interviewer. These skills encompass active listening, maintaining eye contact, and displaying genuine interest in the interviewee's responses, among others. These elements collectively play a significant role in the overall interview process and significantly impact the quality and depth of information gathered from the respondents (Khuntsaria, External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union, 2014).

We were aware of the strengths and limitations of conducting interviews. While expert interviews offer valuable insights, we also considered potential issues like social desirability and motivated bias, where the interviewee may be hesitant to answer specific questions truthfully to present themselves or their views in a favorable light. Additionally, there's a risk of the interviewee reconstructing reality to suit their interests or avoid any potential risks. However, we implemented several measures to address these concerns. By creating a well-structured interview guide, paraphrasing questions as needed, and utilizing follow-up questions, we aimed to minimize the possibility of reality reconstruction and ensure a more reliable and candid exchange of information.

Obviously, the most challenging part of the interviews is finding relevant experts or officials and convincing them for an interview. In this context, convenience was a significant factor during the sampling of interviews as some officials and experts

in Georgia were not immediately ready for interviews, while others declined or ignored our requests for an interview. In addition to convenience, snowballing was also an essential factor in our interviews, as most of our interviewees directed us to other relevant experts to conduct further interviews. Therefore, the overall approach in our sampling can be considered an adaptive one.

Analyzing the collected raw data from the interviews was also a time-consuming endeavor as each interview required numerous listening and readings for transcription and textual analysis. Then, to make sense of the data and make an appropriate interpretation, we compared the collected data to the primary sources, like reports, press releases, and official policy documents, to the secondary sources of existing literature to see if there are any differences or irregularities between the official perspectives and the reality on the ground provided by interviews.

Literature Review

Naturally, the EU's engagement in the Caucasus region in the 1990s was quite limited compared to the former Soviet Republics in its immediate periphery. During this period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia discussed applying for EU membership after the independence. Gogolashvili and Gvedashvili (2017, p. 5) state that Georgia has a long history of wanting to join the European Union, and this has been a consistent priority for the country's government since it gained independence. Initially, it was believed that this goal was achievable. However, after discussions with the EU, it was determined that it would not be possible for Georgia to apply for membership without negative consequences for its relationship with the EU. In this context, Beacháin & Coene (2014) argue that the Euro-Atlantic discourse has been employed domestically by the political elite as a legitimacy management strategy and in seeking Western patronage, a key foreign policy goal. Throughout decades, the EU has utilized different policy tools to bring Georgia closer to EU legislation and values. Many suggest

that the EU's main tools for engagement with Georgia are policy transfer and conditionality (Delcour L. , 2013), flexibility and accommodation (Dobrescu & Schumacher, 2018), and security and comprehensive assistance (Freire & Simao, 2013); moreover, Sierra (2011) argues that due to the capacity of the EU, there is a common expectation from it to transform its near abroad and influence the domestic politics. To that end, Dobrescu and Schumacher (2018) found that the EU has dramatically adjusted its frameworks and practical implementation to accommodate Georgia's 'problematic sovereignty.'

In comparison, Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) suggest that the European Union invested heavily in transforming Georgia into a democratic and market-oriented country. Its cooperation with European nations and partnership with the United States enabled Georgia to overcome many internal and external challenges. However, despite the point that EU-Georgia relations have reached today, there are many challenges ahead of Georgia's full membership target, such as unfavorable geopolitical circumstances, enlargement fatigue, economic underdevelopment in Georgia, fragmented region, and frozen territorial disputes (Gegeshidze, 2018). Contrary to other countries in its region, Georgia's unwavering pursuit of the European goal also receives criticism. For instance, according to Patalakh (2017, p. 155), Georgia is among a group of countries that are primarily driven by their European identity when it comes to foreign policy rather than by pragmatic considerations. Being aligned with the EU satisfies their desire to be part of the Western group of "civilized" nations, distancing themselves from their Communist history and present-day Russia, which they see as outdated and underdeveloped.

However, EU-Georgia relations did not get to where we are in one day, and initially, relations were quite limited for many different reasons. During the initial stages of relations from 1991 to 2003, EU leaders had a prevailing perspective that Georgia was a weak nation with poor economic, political, and defense capabilities

(Gamkrelidze, 2022). According to Khuntsaria (2014), the first ten years of EU-Georgia relations show that the EU's engagement in the newly independent country was primarily humanitarian and developmental. It mainly aimed to vitalize the country's economy and build its infrastructure (Khuntsaria, *External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union*, 2014, p. 50). TACIS programs were at the forefront of the EU's engagement in Georgia during this period. Under six different TACIS programs from 1992 to 2003, the EU provided technical and financial assistance to Georgia, mainly for institution building, infrastructure, and economic development. However, Khuntsaria mentions the fact that TACIS programs were standalone activities that only aimed to provide limited assistance in certain areas and did not aim to deepen political cooperation. However, this started to change after the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1999, which envisaged a wide variety of reforms that aimed to approximate Georgia's legislation to the EU. In view of this, Gabrichidze (2018, p. 56) states that the PCA had a clause that suggested Georgia should work towards gradually aligning its laws with those of the EU; however, it was not a mandatory requirement, and no specific deadlines were set for its completion. Khuntsaria also claims that in the period between 1992 and 2003, Georgia achieved inconsistent progress, particularly in democratic reforms, due to relatively small funding for democratic programs compared to overall funding allocated for Georgia from the EU instruments (Khuntsaria, *External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union*, 2014, p. 56) and Shevardnadze's government never followed its promise for legal approximation reforms that would have led to democratic reforms in the country (Khuntsaria, *External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union*, 2014, p. 74). However, as Gamkrelidze (2022, p. 215) noted, the EU's policies towards Georgia evolved alongside Georgia's improved reputation as an EU partner, transitioning from technical and economic assistance to bilateral political and economic relations and eventually trade policies. Given what has

been said, despite the significance of TACIS and PCA programs in state and institution building and market economy transition, democratization efforts remained limited due to the EU's prioritization during this period. Thus, the EU's approach to the Caucasus lacked a clear strategy post-Soviet collapse, characterized by standalone initiatives focused on technical and economic assistance, reflecting the circumstances prevailing in Georgia at that time.

The early 2000s marked a pivotal phase in EU-Georgia relations, characterized by intensified cooperation resulting from significant policy shifts in both Europe and Georgia. According to Karadag (2019, p. 3), in the early 2000s, both Georgia and the European Union experienced 'critical junctures' that led to closer cooperation between the two. For the EU, embracing former communist countries as new members, thanks to the most significant single enlargement in its history towards the East, has opened new horizons for neighborhood policies. Meanwhile, in Georgia, the Rose Revolution in 2003 was deemed as the final breakup of Georgia from its Soviet past, which led to the policy of full integration with the West at both the ideational and institutional levels. Papava (2006) argues that the Rose Revolution was supported by the Bush administration, the EU, and its member states. This suggests that the EU's role in the Rose Revolution was intentional and calculated. According to Chochia and Popjanovski (2016), the revolution significantly impacted Georgia by bringing in a youthful, pro-Western government. With its new approach to politics, this government was able to implement difficult but necessary reforms, significantly decrease corruption, and create a favorable business environment. This resulted in regained trust and support from Western partners, increased investments, and a significant improvement in the country's economy. Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) suggest that as a result of the Rose Revolution, a new revolutionary government was invited to participate in the EU's Neighborhood Policy In 2004, which followed a regional/block-based approach towards its neighbors.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), initiated in 2004 following the European Union's significant enlargement, aimed to establish closer ties with newly adjacent neighbors in the Eastern and Southern regions. ENP, along with its Action Plan, played a pivotal role in enhancing economic cooperation and fostering deeper political integration for Georgia in the post-revolution era. In this regard, Dudaiti, Bagaeva, Koibaev, and Tauchelov (2020, p. 589) assert that Georgia's relationship with the EU under the ENP was based on the spread of European norms and values through socialization. Particularly in the period after 2009, the relationship between Georgia and the EU has strengthened, and with the signing of the association agreement, it reached a new level in which EU socialization mechanisms played a crucial role in implementing constitutional reforms and moving towards further integration with the EU. However, the implementation of the ENP related reforms receives mixed criticisms in the literature; according to Sierra (2011), despite having high goals, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) has faced skepticism about its ability to bring about reforms and create a "circle of well-governed neighbors," and many have questioned the ENP's potential to have a transformative effect on the EU's neighbors. Gogolashvili and Gvedashvili (Georgia-EU Relations and Future Perspectives, 2017, p. 9) state that thanks to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Georgia's own efforts, the country made significant progress in improving its institutional and legislative systems and bringing them closer to EU standards. It is important to note that the EU-Georgia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) remained in place as a means of interaction, and implementing the ENP action plan was considered a way of fulfilling the commitments of the PCA. However, between 2006 and 2008, Georgia's economic policies were influenced by libertarian ideas, which sometimes diverged from the obligations set out in these agreements with the EU. Gegeshidze (2018) notes that during the creation of the ENP Action Plan, Georgia pushed for the inclusion of the aim for full membership in the document's introduction despite it being unsuccessful. Full

EU membership was no longer just a desire but a well-defined goal, and all government bodies started displaying the European flag during this period. Despite its shortcomings at the time it was implemented, ENP-related reforms acted as a stepping stone for Georgia as they paved the way for the EaP and Association Agreement and played an essential role in the development of EU-Georgian relations.

Geopolitics has been another catalyzing factor in Georgia-EU relations. In this context, the 2008 August War between Russia and Georgia and the ongoing Russian occupation in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be considered another vital turning point in EU-Georgian relations. For instance, Gegeshidze (2018) argues that the 2008 conflict with Russia significantly altered the relationship between Georgia and the EU. The EU realized that its inactive geopolitical stance in the post-Soviet region and ineffective normative policies put smaller Eastern European countries at risk of being isolated as well as influenced by Russia, endangering the EU's own interests. It became evident that the ENP was insufficient in that regard, and a deeper form of cooperation with these nations was necessary. During the 2008 conflict, the EU engaged in intense diplomatic efforts, which led to Russia and Georgia agreeing to a ceasefire on August 12th. The EU played a prominent role in mediating the conflict resolution dialogue with Russia and also proposed a series of post-conflict measures. In contrast, before the 2008 War, the EU had rejected entirely any involvement in peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia or Tskhinvali region (Gogolashvili & Gvedashvili, *Georgia-EU Relations and Future Perspectives*, 2017). After this period, Georgia's policy towards the EU was also renewed with greater strategic attachment. The government put more emphasis on meeting its commitments to legislative and institutional reforms. Georgia even began to develop medium-term strategies for reforms in areas such as food safety, competitiveness, technical regulations, and agriculture, even though it had previously been opposed to introducing new regulations in these areas. This was a pre-condition for beginning negotiations on a free trade agreement (Gogolashvili & Gvedashvili,

Georgia-EU Relations and Future Perspectives, 2017). Sierra (2011) argues that the 2008 Russo-Georgian war in South Ossetia prompted the EU to expedite the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program. The EaP aimed to improve relations between Eastern European countries and the EU, with the possibility of signing stronger Association Agreements. Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) also suggest that the Russian attack on Georgia in 2008 sparked greater interest and involvement from the EU in its Eastern borders. However, the 2008 War also had adverse effects on Georgia's European integration. According to Chochia and Popjanevski (2016), there was hesitation among European capitals to expand the EU, particularly with regard to countries close to Russia, which hindered the integration process. Concerns over security threats and potential conflict with Moscow in the Eastern Partnership region have caused some member states to be reluctant to fully commit to enlarging the EU in that area. Overall, there seems to be a general consensus among scholars that the 2008 August War between Russia and Georgia expedited the process that led to the Eastern Partnership Initiative and increased the awareness of the region for EU policymakers.

As the Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was founded at the Prague Summit in 2009. Compared to the ENP and its Action Plans, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program was a much more significant initiative that promised Georgia tangible benefits in the context of EU-Georgia bilateral relations. According to Fix, Gawrich, Kakachia, and Leukavets (2019), the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was designed to provide more significant incentives and benefits, moving the cooperation towards a more equal partnership rather than an unequal one. Since then, Georgian Governments have been more than aware of these benefits and seized this opportunity to develop bilateral relations with the EU, which is often touted as the most progressive of the trio of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. For instance, Chkhikvadze (2017) argues that the Eastern Partnership Initiative offered Georgia enticing carrots such as economic integration, mobility of citizens, and visa

liberalization, and from the very beginning, Georgian governments have been more interested in developing bilateral dimension with the EU rather than multilateral dimension to forge closer economic ties and gain the status of 'best pupil in the class' to get even more benefits from the EU. However, Chkhikvadze also acknowledges the shortcomings of the EaP as it fell short of tackling the main concerns in Georgian society, such as unemployment, poverty, and economic integration, which did not translate into a substantial increase in foreign direct investments. Despite these shortcomings, thanks to visa liberalization, millions of Georgian citizens were able to travel to Schengen countries for a variety of purposes (Chkhikvadze, et al., 2019, pp. 60-61). Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) argue that the Eastern Partnership Initiative has been instrumental in supporting Georgia's reforms since its creation, offering both political guidance and financial support. Georgia's achievements in areas such as criminal justice, personal data protection, border management, anti-corruption, and anti-discrimination would not have been possible without these reforms, leading to visa liberalization and free trade opportunities. However, Gegeshidze (2018) points out that The Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Association Agreement (AA) are part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) toolkit, and their purpose was not to lead partner countries toward EU membership. The highest goal that can be reached within this framework is the establishment of a free trade zone and political association. In that regard, EaP remains essential in terms of opening the way to agreements such as those between DCFTA and AA. Neither the EaP nor other agreements indeed recognize the perspective of Georgia's candidacy status, let alone a full membership, but thanks to these programs, Georgian legislation has been brought closer to the EU *acquis* and eventually, in 2022, Georgia was able to get a promise of candidacy status from the EU on the condition that the country implements necessary reforms in twelve priorities.

The implementation of AA and DCFTA has been the most critical influence point of the EU on Georgia's political transformation to this date. Over the years, one of

the criticisms of the implementation of the Association Agreement and reforms has been the lack of a clear perspective for Georgians. For instance, Mikhelidze (2020) argues that “signing the association agreement with Georgia in 2014 did not suffice to trigger the necessary development of democracy, and it needs a serious follow-up in terms of political and financial conditionality from the EU’s side” (Mikhelidze, What Role for Europe as Georgia Heads Toward Political Turmoil?, 2020). Neither the Association Agreement nor the DCFTA provided Georgia with a prospective European future; instead, these agreements were part of the EU’s integration tools provided under its neighborhood policies aimed at mutual benefits and shared values. However, in the end, both agreements proved to be important stepping stones towards European integration, bringing Georgian legislation and EU’s *acquis* closer, boosting trade between the EU and Georgia, and establishing a democratic environment in Georgia. For example, according to Kurashvili (2020) “even though the EU-Georgia Agreement does not include any commitments for Georgia’s EU membership, it is still highly accompanied by such perceptions and expectations from the government and population. However, it is the case when the journey towards the end goal can be as beneficial as the end goal itself - bringing the real perspectives of well-being and sustainable development for the people of Georgia” (Kurashvili, 2020, p. 5). Rommens (2017) found that despite the increased involvement of NGOs in EU policies, the role and impact of civil society within Georgian politics and society have remained limited.

For instance, Gabrichidze (2018, p. 63) found that with the implementation of the EU-Georgia AA, the influence of EU law is established on a solid international legal foundation. It includes many provisions for Georgia to align its national laws with those of the EU. Unlike the non-binding provisions of the EU-Georgia PCA and ENP Action Plan, the approximation clauses in the EU-Georgia AA are legally binding. These provisions are more emphasized in the DCFTA part of the Association Agreement, which is logical as it deals with market access and compatibility, which are the main

goals of all parties involved. According to Wyrzykowska (2015), there is a significant difference between Georgia and EU countries in terms of economy, society, institutions, and laws, making EU membership appear unlikely. However, this may not always be the case and could change in the future. Wyrzykowska (2015, p. 93) also argues that the reduction of tariffs and border restrictions under the DCFTA will have limitations because Georgia had already established an open economy before the AA took effect and had access to the EU market with preference. Nonetheless, the Agreement will secure Georgia's integration into the Western economic and political system. On the contrary, Abuselidze (2019) argues that in the long term, the DCFTA will substantially change Georgia's export-import, GDP growth, average wages, and the population's purchasing power. However, implementing the legislation will require significant resources in the short term, and there may be negative short-term impacts. Additionally, Abuselidze (2019) found out that despite the DCFTA and the fact that Georgia is not a member of the CIS, it has very close and growing trade relations with CIS member countries.

According to Emerson and Kovziridze (2021), overall, Georgia has managed to achieve a largely de-corrupted economy as a result of the implementation of AA and DCFTA. However, in recent years, the democratic standing of the country has declined somewhat due to the role of dominating oligarchs, electoral irregularities, and a dysfunctional parliament. Petrov (2015) found that there are two significant challenges to the effective implementation of the AAs: ensuring effective implementation and application of the AAs within the legal orders of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia and solving potential conflicts between the AAs and the Constitutions of these countries. Moreover, according to Khuntsaria (2015), the convergence reforms that the EU has outlined in the scope of the association process were complex and required severe domestic political and economic commitments.

As part of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) agreed upon with the EU in 2013, Georgia committed itself to enacting a law to eliminate all kinds of discrimination. Although the controversial ‘anti-discrimination law’ entered into force in 2014, the legislation itself continues to remain a sore point in EU-Georgia relations due to its implementation or lack thereof by the unwilling Georgian governments. While the law ensures the protection of vulnerable minorities and their rights, neither the government nor certain parts of the Georgian society, such as the Georgian Orthodox Church, have not been thrilled about the fact that this law also protects LGBTQ rights in the country (Karadag, Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis, 2019). Georgian Orthodox Church is one of Georgia’s most trusted and respected institutions (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2021) due to its inseparable historical role in representing Georgian statehood and identity and preserving Georgian culture. Therefore, official views of the Patriarch and the Church hold a vital weight in society as well as domestic politics in Georgia. This is especially true when it comes to the “anti-discrimination law” and its turbulent implementation in Georgia.

The Georgian Patriarchate consistently condemns Pride Week demonstrations, urging both the government and European officials not to endorse them due to concerns about destabilization in Georgia (Agenda.ge, 2021). Consequently, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) presents a significant obstacle to Georgia's integration with the EU. As Jones (2020) illustrates, the GOC serves as a formidable impediment to political inclusivity, shielded from domestic criticism by its status as a symbol of Georgian identity and cultural resilience (Jones & Macfarlane, 2020). While this immunity is reinforced by the GOC's historical ties to Georgian identity, recent violent incidents targeting Pride demonstrations by right-wing extremists have tarnished Georgia's standing in European capitals at a crucial juncture (France24, 2021). However, when it comes to the fact why the Georgian Orthodox Church is actively

working against this law compared to other European Orthodox Churches, Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili (2021) argue that the Georgian Orthodox Churches conservative view stems from Orthodox practices, as opposed to the European Orthodox Churches such as Greece and Bulgaria, Georgian Orthodox Church was not exposed to Renaissance and Enlightenment nor the post-Soviet reforms after Georgia's independence in 1991. Therefore, the Georgian Orthodox Church sees itself as the protector of Georgian values, which are difficult to define (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society, 2021).

The turbulent aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse significantly enhanced the Orthodox Church's role as the guardian of Georgian identity, culture, and history. Following decades of suppression under Soviet rule, Georgian Orthodoxy swiftly filled the ideological void created by the demise of the Soviet regime, offering a means for Georgians to distance themselves from the Soviet legacy (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society, 2021). Overall, it is true that the Georgian Orthodox Church has a unique and enormous respect among the Georgian people, but the indisputable conservative views of the Georgian Orthodox Church and its aggressive attitude towards vulnerable minorities are sabotaging the EU-Georgia relations. The silence of the Georgian government on this issue and the immunity status enjoyed by the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most significant contradictions in front of Georgia's integration with Europe.

Since 2012, Georgian Dream (ქართული ოცნება) has been the ruling party in Georgia, winning majorities in 2012, 2016, and 2020 general elections in addition to the presidential elections in 2013 and 2018. Georgian Dream was founded by Georgian businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili on 19 April 2012, with politicians mostly opposing the UNM (ერთიანი ნაციონალური მოძრაობა/United National Movement) government which had been the ruling party under its leader Mikheil Saakashvili since the Rose Revolution in 2003. While most essential deeds such as the Association Agreement and

Visa Liberalization towards EU integration have been realized under GD rule since 2012, the ruling party also came under fire frequently for mismanaging the relations with the EU and also authoritarian practices such as media censorship and persecution of the opposition. Political polarization and democratic backsliding have managed to become one of the most talked about and debated topics in the international arena for Georgia in recent years. This situation was especially noted in the reports evaluating the implementation of the Association Agreement prepared and published by the European Parliament (GeorgiaToday, 2022). According to Chochia and Popjanevski (2016), a change in leadership in Georgia has caused some uncertainty in European capitals about the country's future dedication to European objectives. Despite this, Georgia is considered to be ahead of the other two EaP countries in terms of progress. The international community is becoming increasingly critical of Georgia's democratic setbacks, and the country is losing support from those who previously advocated for its integration into the EU. The government is not responding well to criticism, dismissing it as uninformed and biased. Political maneuvering within the country is negatively impacting not just the quality of democracy in Georgia but also its foreign policy, including relations with the EU and Ukraine (Sabanadze, 2022).

Gegeshidze and De Waal (2021) describe the conflict between GD and UNM as a struggle among elites to control economic resources for their respective voter base. Some believe that the rivalry between the ruling and opposition parties is driven by competition between their leaders, such as Ozturk (2021), who states that the division between parties in Georgia is based on the charisma of their leaders rather than their policy positions, as most parties have similar views on domestic and foreign policy. Additionally, Panchulidze and Youngs (2021) also attribute the significant decline in democracy in Georgia to this political feud between GD and UNM. Both UNM and GD governments have continued to practice highly personalized clientelism, causing

Georgian democracy and institutions to suffer and leading to a dominant party regime in the country today.

Kelly, Kramer, and Inayeh (2021, p. 17) highlight the decline in democracy in the country in recent years and note that the Georgian Dream has adopted an authoritarian approach, concentrating power through investigations, prosecutions, and imprisonment of key politicians from the UNM party, as well as suppressing opposition media. While Burkadze (2022) suggests that weak democratic institutions are the primary driver of democratic backsliding in Georgia, Changiani (2022) argues that antidemocratic political processes are mainly to blame for democratic backsliding in Georgia. Moreover, Grillo and Prato (2019) argue that opportunistic authoritarians are the main drivers of democratic backsliding. Therefore, the main drivers of democratic backsliding in Georgia can be considered a super presidential system, a weakly organized and fragmented opposition, the adverse impact of authoritarian neighbors, weak democratic institutions, opportunistic authoritarians, and antidemocratic political processes. Additionally, the opposition parties are too fragmented and disorganized to make a meaningful change. As demonstrated by the July 3, 2022 demonstration, they lack a clear idea of what the country needs, which results in the majority of the population being disengaged from the political process. (Avdaliani, Georgia's Rocky Road to Europe, 2022) Looking ahead, despite some progress on its EU path, Georgia's position will remain weakened by internal division. Sabanadze (2022) argues that, at present, the biggest hindrance to Georgia's integration with the EU is its domestic politics. In this context, the Georgian government needs to prioritize reforms and be open to sharing power. Instead of deflecting blame, it should take criticism seriously and work towards a consensus-based democracy. Without shared power, Georgia will not be able to overcome the current division and the winner-takes-all political culture.

Another notable issue garnering attention is the intriguing rhetoric directed towards the European Union by leaders of the GD party in recent years. Chkhikvadze

(2022) outlines the recent stark differences between the current Government and the EU, arguing that there have been clear instances where the ruling party has taken actions that go against the EU-mediated agreement known as the "Charles Michel Document" or "A way ahead for Georgia," such as withdrawing from the agreement and not implementing the reforms outlined in it. Additionally, the appointment of six new judges to the Supreme Council without considering the agreement, failure to take action against those responsible for attacking representatives of critical media on July 5th, 2021, lack of investigation into the wiretapping of diplomats, including the former EU Ambassador to Georgia, and the abolition of the State Inspector Service are examples of this disregard for the agreement. Moreover, Gaprindashvili (2022) suggests that in addition to a lack of interest in the EU before Russia's war in Ukraine, Georgia's decline in democracy in recent years has also been a barrier to progress. The country has been hampered by ongoing political crises caused by increasing division between the ruling and opposition parties, as well as significant issues related to good governance and the rule of law. There is a general consensus among scholars that there is a democratic backsliding in Georgia mainly stemming from the oppression of opposition figures and the reluctance of the ruling party to power-sharing and political polarization. The EU also acknowledged this in the conditions put forward regarding candidacy status.

The European Union has also started to assume an essential role as a mediator and facilitator in Georgia's domestic politics, which has been the scene of deep political crises in recent years. For instance, the political crisis experienced after the 2020 parliamentary elections can be considered another milestone as it shows the solidarity and resilience reached in EU-Georgia relations. The crisis has shown that the EU can also play an important role in Georgian domestic politics and in reducing political polarization and tensions between political parties. However, Delcour L. (2018) argues that the EU is unable to significantly influence domestic developments when local

actors resist change, and this is more than apparent in the case of the EU's 19 April agreement between the ruling and opposition parties in Georgia. According to Emerson (2021), the so-called Michel Agreement envisaged the release of political prisoners and opened the possibility of early parliamentary elections if the GD failed to get more than 43 percent in the municipal elections in October 2021. In addition, it included provisions related to reforms in electoral legislation, administration, and the justice system. On April 19th, 2021, the GD and a number of the opposition parties signed the agreement, but the UNM refused to sign it until its leader, Nika Melia, was released from prison.

There seems to be no consensus over who withdrew from the agreement first. While some blame the ruling party, others mainly blame the main opposition party, UNM, for being reluctant to sign the agreement. For instance, Sabanadze (2022) points out that the ruling party withdrew from the April 19 agreement, which was brokered by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and aimed to decrease polarization in the country by incorporating power-sharing and committing to a reform agenda. The main opposition party also chose not to participate, and the agreement ultimately failed due to internal conflicts, resulting in a political setback for Brussels. The involvement of the EU in Georgian internal politics has drawn attention as well as criticism in recent years. For example, Smolnik et al. (2021) claim that the “EU takes on risk by becoming an actor in the domestic confrontation and trying to help offset the deficits of Georgia’s political system at least in the short term and if the EU does not live up to expectations, that may also hurt its credibility in the eyes of both the local elite and the Georgian people” (Smolnik, Sarjvaladze, & Tadumadze, 2021). For example, Meister (2021) argues that the agreement brokered by the EU and the US in the spring of 2021 did not resolve the conflict; instead, both sides are facing growing criticism from political figures in Georgia.

It was believed that the 19 April agreement, which was brokered by EU President Charles Michel, would quickly resolve the political polarization in the country. For instance, Akhvlediani (2021) suggests that increased involvement from the EU could bring swift solutions to the political deadlock between the ruling party and the opposition. However, despite the EU being seen as a significant external influence, it has failed to reduce the polarization and intense rivalry between the ruling class and opposition party leaders.

Even though the security dimension is one of the most critical dimensions of the relationship in the Georgian-EU relations equation, the perspective provided by the EU in the security dimension has been historically reasonably limited, both because of the distance of the region to the EU and its proximity to Russia, and because parts of Georgia's territory is actually under Russian occupation. Interestingly, Russia has been both a roadblock and a driving force for EU-Georgian relations from the past to the present.

Georgia's struggle for territorial integrity dates back to the very early days of its independence from the Soviet Union. For example, Lejava (2021) argues that as Georgia struggled to deal with the aftermath of civil and territorial wars in the 1990s and its forced accession to the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States, many Georgians saw the West primarily as a protector, especially against Russia. Lejava (2021) also suggests that some people in Georgia believe that the country's ancient and Christian traditions can make up for its lack of modernization compared to Western countries. They have a different idea of what it means to be European, which is more conservative and focused on the past and is not shared by many Western Europeans who tend to have more secular values. This view of Georgia as a Christian and European country is also meant to differentiate it from its Muslim neighbors in the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, which have a mix of Islamic and secular traditions.

Georgia's desire to be more closely aligned with the West is not just about moving away from Russia but also about distancing itself from these other countries.

Security cooperation between Georgia and the EU, or lack thereof, is another subject that needs more attention while evaluating Georgia-EU relations. Although the EU was not founded as a security organization, security cooperation in the Union has been steadily developed with specific tools and programs such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Since the restoration of her independence, Georgia has had territorial integrity problems with its two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, exacerbated by constant interference by the Russian Federation from very early on. According to Smolnik et al. (2021) “key EU deficits in Georgia include its insufficient offers of security cooperation and its limited role as an actor in conflict transformation” Smolnik, Sarjvaldze, & Tadumadze (2021) and Karadag argue that even though the majority of Georgians assume the EU as a ‘soft power’ they still expect the EU integration would contribute to solving Georgia’s territorial conflicts (Karadag, Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis, 2019, p. 193). Darchiashvili and Bakradze (2019) argue that the spread of Human Rights culture through European or Euro-Atlantic soft power methods will remain unbeatable in the long term. However, to overcome Russia's revisionist policy in the present, the West, particularly the EU, must rethink its traditional foreign policy strategies and find a more effective mix of soft and hard power.

The European Union assumed a prominent role in securing the ceasefire in 2008 and subsequently underscored its dedication to the region through the deployment of an observation mission. However, Popescu (2010) also found that in the absence of strong EU political engagement in conflict resolution, EU assistance to civil society could not prevent the re-escalation of the conflict and the radicalization of the Abkhaz and Georgian societies. This suggests that the EU's main tools for engagement with Georgia are insufficient for preventing conflict escalation. However, the EU's assistance

to civil society did contribute to strengthening civil society on both sides of the conflict lines. Therefore, the EU's main tools for engagement with Georgia, while insufficient for preventing conflict escalation, can be considered successful in terms of supporting civil society. In this context, Uchida (2020) argues that the EU has responded positively to Georgia's aspirations for closer ties through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Association Agreement including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and the visa-free Schengen Area regime. Meanwhile, Russia has put pressure on Georgia through aggressive rhetoric and by increasing military presence and building fences in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As a result, the EU continues to influence Georgia strongly, while Russia pushes Georgia towards the Euro-Atlantic sphere. The EU supports Georgia's move towards closer ties but is concerned about Russia's actions due to security reasons.

Delcour L. (2018) found that Russia's and the EU's macro-level policies intersect (rather than compete) with each other and thereby create loopholes for domestic actors to pursue their own objectives. These findings suggest that the EU may have some influence on Georgia's domestic politics. However, one should also not ignore the influence of Russia on Georgia's domestic politics. For instance, Gamkrelidze (2022, p. 212) points out that Russia takes advantage of Georgia's domestic issues and lack of organization to try to destabilize the country through various means of soft power, including cyber and disinformation threats. Russia also utilizes the long-standing cultural connections, particularly Orthodox Christianity, between the two countries to maintain influence over Georgia, push its own agenda, and obstruct the process of integration with the EU. Moreover, Sarjveladze (2017) argues that for the EU to stop the rise of conflicts in its vicinity and safeguard its economic and energy interests, it must adopt an assertive foreign policy. If not, Russia will exploit the conflicts in the Eastern Partnership countries that are open to integration and use anti-European media

and political groups as part of its propaganda effort to push an anti-European agenda in the medium to long term.

Georgia's territorial integrity problem might be the most significant geopolitical problem that threatens the future stability of its relations with the EU. Nearly %20 of the country has been under Russian occupation since the very early days, and the 2008 War between Georgia and Russia has only worsened the situation for people living in the immediate vicinity of these areas. Since then, physical 'borderization' has been a problematic issue between Georgia and the two breakaway republics, and those activities have been well documented by the EU's EUMM monitoring mission, which is only allowed on the Georgian side. Overall, the Russian occupation constitutes a severe roadblock for further integration of Georgia with the West in general since Georgia was promised NATO membership at the 2008 Bucharest summit. There are also those who suggest that the EU Commission's decision not to grant Georgia candidacy status as opposed to Moldova and Ukraine was based on geopolitical considerations.

Geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus region are evidently undergoing shifts influenced by current circumstances. Therefore, the European Union's enlargement strategy is undergoing adjustments in response to the Ukrainian conflict. While the timing of the subsequent enlargement remains uncertain, until 2022, there had been no definitive indication of whether the Associated Trio of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), comprising Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, would ultimately join the EU. Cenusa (2022) noted that granting candidacy status to these nations signifies a notable shift in the EU's approach towards Eastern Partnership countries despite the substantial disparities in meeting EU standards.

Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia's inability to obtain EU candidacy status has become one of the most important agenda items in the country's politics since the summer of 2022. Conditions set for the candidacy status set by the EU Commission have

been very controversial as well, to say the least. Within the sphere of EU-Georgia relations, the issue of candidacy debacle has emerged as a prominent subject of discourse in recent years. For example, Thomas De Waal (2022) contends that the conditions set forth by the EU regarding the requisite reforms are predominantly political rather than technical. Unlike previous instances of enlargement, where the EU could rely on technical prerequisites due to the vastness of the EU's *acquis* comprising numerous legal documents and regulations, De Waal asserts that the demands placed on Georgia by the EU are primarily political in nature. As such, he argues that the EU should approach them accordingly. While granting candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova in the summer of 2022, the EU Commission's decision to leave Georgia behind was tremendously disappointing for the Georgian public because many in Georgia believed they were the trio's most progressive. According to Gegeshidze (2018), Georgia has surpassed Ukraine and Moldova in terms of European integration and has become a leading player in the Eastern Partnership region.

On the contrary, there are many who think that the EU Commission's decision was based on merit and that the current government is responsible for not getting the candidacy status. For example, Chedia (2022) claims that the European bloc's decision on whether to admit Georgia or not was based on its geographical location in the South Caucasus region or pressure from other neighboring countries. The primary obstacle was that the Georgian government was unable to demonstrate to their European partners that they had followed through on their commitments to political reforms. According to Avdaliani (2022), the EU's decision was not unexpected, given the strained relationship between the ruling party and the EU and the ongoing criticisms. Additionally, internal issues in the country, such as arrests, demonstrations, and divisions within the political class, have contributed to this. The impact of these events is still uncertain, but initial analysis suggests that the geopolitical situation in the region played a significant role. The government may have been concerned about any signals

of hostility towards Russia from another country that is promised NATO membership and has a history of resistance to Kremlin aggression.

The issue of de-oligarchization has also become an essential pillar of the EU's conditions for candidacy status. Of course, at this point, important nuances separate Georgia from Moldova and Ukraine precisely when we look at the origins of their oligarchy. Konończuk, Cenusa, and Kakachia (2017) point out this difference, saying spheres of control in Georgia were not divided between a wealthy group of people since there was no previous oligarchy in the same sense in Moldova and Ukraine for reasons such as the small size of its market, slow economic development, and political instability. However, this situation led to the birth of another type of oligarch who made their fortunes in Russia in the 1990s, when the oligarchy was at its peak power in Russia. In the late 2000s, these oligarchs of Georgian descent decided to return to their homelands and tried to translate their wealth into political power. Cenusa et al. specifically mention three names: Kakha Bendukidze, who served as a state minister for Reform Co-Ordination and was one of the leading figures of the Rose Revolution in 2004; Badri Patarkatsishvili who contested in the 2008 presidential elections and came third with 7.1% of the votes and finally Bidzina Ivanishvili founder of the Georgian Dream political party who served as the Prime Minister of Georgia between 2012-2013 and later announced his retirement from politics. However, he is seen as the most influential political actor in Georgia despite his retirement from party ranks. Konończuk, Cenusa, & Kakachia (2017) also warn about the risks of continuing dependence on the state and Georgian Dream for financial resources and the personality of a single person and question the transparency of the government and informal governance in Georgia as a result.

Interestingly enough, the EU's de-oligarchization requirement does not refer to any particular person, and EU officials have so far refrained from naming any individual de-oligarchization. However, this situation naturally encouraged the opposition, which

was already against Ivanishvili, to create a public opinion that this condition was indeed aimed at Ivanishvili. The ruling party officials, on the other hand, insist that this condition does not target Ivanishvili since he is not an oligarch and claim that the opposition is supported by oligarchs.

Avdaliani (2022) thinks that whatever the cause of the Georgian leadership's actions, it is unlikely that the country will make substantial progress toward the accession process. A significant issue is the highly divisive nature of Georgian politics, which makes it difficult for opposing parties to engage in constructive dialogue. The underlying issue is that implementing these and other suggestions would threaten the position of the Georgian Dream. This makes it unlikely that there will be any significant changes before the next parliamentary elections in October 2024. Sticking to a trio format and not lagging behind Moldova and Ukraine could also be beneficial for Georgia in the long run. For instance, Chkhikvadze (2022) argues that the use of a group of three, known as the "trio format," is an essential tool for Georgia to counter negative attitudes towards it within the EU, such as the view expressed by French President Emmanuel Macron that Georgia is not in the exact geopolitical location as other countries being considered for EU enlargement. However, there are those who argue that the European project for Georgia has always been an elusive dream. For example, Lejava (2021) argues that many people in Georgia feel that the country's goal of closer ties with Europe is a long-term and ongoing project that may never be fully realized. While the possibility of stronger links with Europe gives them hope for the future, it can also feel like an unreachable dream, similar to the failed promise of a better future under communism in the Soviet Union.

Since her independence, Georgia has sought closer ties with the EU and NATO, with membership aspirations for both organizations as part of her Euro-Atlantic integration aims. Specifically, with the introduction of the Association Agreement, the EU has become the most important external actor in both Georgia's domestic and

foreign policies. Therefore, the EU's influence on Georgia's state and civil institutions, society, foreign policy, and even domestic politics can be felt and observed in today's Georgia as well as in the literature concerning EU-Georgia relations. However, there are numerous areas where the EU's shortcomings in influencing Georgia are also observable, such as security cooperation, anti-discrimination, judicial independence, and the implementation of the association agreement. While the EU is forthcoming about Georgia's European future, providing necessary frameworks to integrate Georgia with its respective legislations, the EU was not in a hurry to grant candidate status to Georgia alongside Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 without addressing the issues it deemed priority reforms that should be tackled before the candidacy. However, the road to the candidacy debacle was not easy since Europe provided Georgia with an integration perspective using several different tools based on conditionality.

Overall, we think that the EU's role in the transformation of Georgia, its influence on domestic and foreign policy, and its soft power in Georgia need further research. In addition to the already established literature above, this study strives to fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature and contribute to it through a meticulous field study involving expert interviews and discourse analysis.

Limitations of the Study

One of the most significant and general limitations of this study is the fact that the state of EU-Georgia relations is not a constant, and they have been evolving, sometimes faster than expected, sometimes for better or worse. Considering this fact, we have done our best to make our analysis based on the most up-to-date literature and sources and limited the scope of study until the candidate gained status. Nonetheless, some of our findings and analysis may or may not hold against time as EU-Georgia relations have their ups and downs, and most of the achievements realized by decades of cooperation between the EU and Georgia are, in fact, reversible, as witnessed by other examples.

Outline of the Study

The study consists of four main chapters designed to tackle the research questions in line with the paper's objectives and to satisfy specific academic criteria. After introducing the study in Chapter One and stating the problem, we will put forward the research questions and hypotheses regarding the problem and then will explain the design and methods utilized throughout the study by referring to the research design and methodology. In addition, we will review the literature on the role of the European Union in the political transformation of Georgia, which is our main subject in the paper, and evaluate what has been written and said on this subject until today.

In the second chapter, we will look at the political transformation of Georgia through the lens of history and reveal what kind of political processes the country went through in the 20th century. In this section, we will evaluate the First Georgian Republic, which existed between 1918-21, and the political experience under the Soviet Union, including regional and assimilation policies towards the Caucasian Republic in this period. We will take a look at the post-Soviet transition period, which led to painful processes in many post-Soviet countries, as was the case in Georgia with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and evaluate the political turbulent events in this period, the effects of which are still felt today throughout the country.

In the third chapter, we will explore the European Union's role as an external actor in facilitating political transformations across Georgia. This examination aims to clarify the EU's foreign policy tools and its capacity to foster democracy and reforms in neighboring regions. Often regarded as a preeminent economic and political force within its sphere, the European Union has exerted considerable influence over numerous countries in its immediate vicinity, encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Chapter three has been organized to fulfill the objectives and

research inquiries outlined in this study, including the evolution of the EU's influence in Georgia since its independence, the principal tools utilized by the EU to engage with Georgia, the EU's role in Georgia's state-building process, and the challenges encountered during policy transfer and reform implementation, as well as the areas where the EU's soft power in Georgia has seen success and failure. Additionally, this section will explore fundamental concepts and debates within the literature concerning EU external actorness and policy transfer and the EU's utilization of soft power, democracy promotion, and foreign policy instruments in its neighborhood policy, with a particular emphasis on Georgia.

The fourth chapter of this study will examine the enduring challenges within the EU-Georgia integration process, aiming to elucidate the principal limitations of the EU's political, economic, and social influence in Georgia. These constraints provide valuable insights into potential hurdles during membership negotiations and are crucial for ensuring long-term relations' sustained viability. Furthermore, the chapter will explore the extent of the current political elite's receptiveness and commitment to integrating Georgia with the EU's norms and values. Lastly, assessing Georgia's potential full EU membership would be inadequate solely based on EU values, norms, and standards. Given Georgia's strategic importance to the EU amid geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus region, this aspect will also be addressed in assessments of the relationship in that chapter. In the concluding chapter, Chapter Five, we will thoroughly discuss and present all the findings obtained throughout the study. Additionally, we will provide recommendations derived from these findings.

CHAPTER TWO – Analysis of Georgia’s Political and Democratic Transformation and Attempts of European Integration

“Our life today and our life in the future...is indissolubly tied to the West, and no force can break this bond...” Noe Jordania, Chairman/President of the Georgian government, declared in 1919.

It is appropriate to contend that the contemporary Republic of Georgia, with a historical trajectory spanning more than three decades and its resurgence into independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, possesses considerable political experience derived from its longstanding political history that extends over centuries. To comprehend and analyze the political evolution of a nation that underwent the rule of the Russian Empire, a brief yet ambitious period of independence under the Democratic Republic of Georgia from 1918 to 1921, and subsequent Soviet Union governance until re-establishing independence in 1991, it is crucial to examine this transformation through a historical lens. The scrutiny of the accumulated political experience and its legacy over the years becomes indispensable. Furthermore, an examination of the political milieu predating the country's engagement with the European Union assumes significance, as it may shed light on the rationale behind the Georgian political elite's preference for the European trajectory over other regional alternatives, notwithstanding the formidable challenges posed by the reformative endeavors.

The origins of Georgian social democracy established during the Georgian Democratic Republic can be traced back to Europe. At the time, pioneers of the Georgian social democratic movement drew inspiration from the concepts of equality, self-determination, democracy, and civil rights, which were instilled by Georgia's Europeanized intelligentsia. This intelligentsia, educated in both Russia and Europe,

played a pivotal role in the Georgian Democratic Republic. Despite Georgia's economic challenges, its underdevelopment, and geographical isolation from Central and Western Europe, European social democratic ideals exerted a more profound influence on Georgian social democrats compared to Russian socialist ideologies (Jones S. , Remembering Georgia's First Republic, 2018).

“The commitment to European models of government, and to an alliance with European powers, began with the Georgian Democratic Republic.”
(Jones S. , Remembering Georgia's First Republic, 2018)

After the Bolshevik Revolution in the Russian empire and during the ensuing civil war between the Reds and Whites, the Georgian political elite tried to reach out to the European Capitals to secure the stability of the newly founded republic and seek out guarantor states in Europe for its independence. In its early stages, the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG) functioned as a protectorate under the German Empire. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the relations between Germany and Georgia were also impacted. As a consequence, Germany was obligated to withdraw its military presence. The nation experienced partial occupation by British forces dispatched to thwart a potential Bolshevik incursion (Janelidze, 2018). The Treaty of Moscow mandated the British withdrawal in 1920, a diplomatic agreement wherein Russia acknowledged Georgia's independence contingent on the assurance that DRG would not harbor forces antagonistic to Russian interests (Peace Treaty, Concluded in Moscow, 1920).

Georgia's social democrats went beyond mere emulation of European ideas; they actively engaged in debates and put forth inventive resolutions to the tensions between nationalism and socialism, the equilibrium between reform and revolution, and the controversies surrounding the role of the state. The government crafted an exceptionally progressive constitution, ensuring private property and the rule of law while incorporating labor protections and social rights. It implemented broad civil and

political liberties for all citizens and established an innovative network of self-governing institutions. Despite the country's commitment to democracy rooted in its pro-Western stance, the practical application of democratic principles remained imperfect (Jones S. , Remembering Georgia's First Republic, 2018). Regrettably, the Georgian Democratic Republic faced adverse repercussions from the civil war in Russia and the shifting power dynamics in Europe following World War I. It became vulnerable to the Bolshevik occupation, leading to the rupture of Georgia's organic connection with Europe and its receptive political elite. Consequently, the government found itself compelled to go into exile in France.

Even though the Democratic Republic of Georgia held significant promise from 1918 to 1921 as a political initiative, it was abruptly halted by Soviet dominance over the entire Caucasus region. Nevertheless, the political legacy and fervent nationalism associated with this period persisted, adapting and evolving during both the Soviet era Georgia and the post-Soviet period, which is remembered as a particularly challenging time for the entire country. Following the Bolshevik occupation, Georgia underwent a phase of detachment from European ideals, marked by the decimation of its political elite and intelligentsia under Soviet rule. Concurrently, the post-Second World War and the Cold War era witnessed the division of the European continent and the establishment of an iron curtain, diminishing the significance of the Caucasus region for European powers. Indeed, the seven-decade-long Soviet dominance in Georgia, along with the Cold War era, significantly limited Europe's political and economic engagement with the Caucasus. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, the European Community or the EU faced challenges in establishing substantial influence in the region throughout the 1990s and was unable to provide tangible integration opportunities for the countries in the area. The EU's financial assistance was modest and conditional, and its political dialogue was often overshadowed by security and energy

issues, which prevented the EU from developing a comprehensive and effective partnership with the South Caucasus countries.

In this context, this chapter aims to answer research objectives about and what insights can be inferred from Georgia's historical political experiences concerning its ongoing political transformation and its journey toward becoming a candidate for full EU membership. Moreover, the chapter seeks insights from the nation's political history to shed light on overarching facets of its political transformation and contemporary political landscape. Additionally, it endeavors to ascertain whether the influence of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) had any discernible impact on the political trajectory initiated subsequent to the regaining of independence in 1991.

Overall, this chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the chronological progression of Georgian politics, commencing with an analysis of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Subsequent sections will delve into the political landscape and nationalist activism during the Soviet era, followed by an exploration of the intricate post-Soviet transition characterized by the secession of two regions with support from Russia. The analysis extends to elucidate the underlying causes of pivotal events such as the Rose Revolution, the 2008 war, and the persisting Russian occupation, alongside a thorough examination of their consequences. Furthermore, the chapter includes an assessment of the contemporary political climate and polarization dynamics and an exploration of the prospective trajectory of the country. These elements are deemed crucial, as they have played instrumental roles in shaping the nation's political transformation throughout the past decade.

The First Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918 – 1921: A Georgian Democratic Experiment at the Crossroads of Empires

Examining the democratic and political history of Georgia reveals the noteworthy role of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as a symbol in the nation's political narrative. In hindsight, this period stands out as a remarkable yet tragic episode in the country's past. Even in contemporary discussions or literature on Georgia's democratic evolution, numerous references highlight the Democratic Republic of Georgia as a foundational element of the nation's democratic roots. Regrettably, this distinctive attempt at democracy in the Caucasus region during that time was brief, leaving a lasting wound in Georgia's collective memory.

In the 19th century, the Georgian "intelligentsia," much like its Russian counterpart, was not a distinct social group but rather a stratum characterized by radical ideas and opposition to the Tsarist regime. As the Tsarist state implemented modernization measures such as the Emancipation reforms, educational expansion, and the establishment of local governance, the intelligentsia's numbers grew, and their political awareness increased. Inspired by European radicalism and Russian populism, the Georgian intelligentsia adopted the role of cultural leaders of the "people" with a strong national focus. By 1905, the majority of the intelligentsia were supportive of Georgian Menshevism, a position that had already gained widespread backing from other social classes in Georgia (Jones S. , *The Establishment of Soviet Power in Transcaucasia: The Case of Georgia 1921-1928*, 1988, p. 624).

The revolution in February 1917, which led to the collapse of the Russian Empire and the subsequent disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, created favorable geopolitical conditions for the potential independence of Georgia. Following the declaration of independence by the Georgian Church and peace negotiations with German and Turkish delegations, Georgia officially proclaimed its

independence in the spring of 1918 (Janelidze, 2018, p. 12). This declaration occurred after the Russian Empire's collapse and the Transcaucasian Federation's dissolution, formed by Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in February 1918. Despite its brief existence of three years, the Democratic Republic of Georgia implemented pioneering political reforms in the region. Notably, it granted women the right to vote and run for office, established a constitution, enacted anti-discrimination measures to safeguard ethnic and religious minorities, and, deviating from the historically strong Church-Government relations, adopted French-style secularism, a departure from the regional norm at that time (Gegenava, 2018). In the elections held in February 1919, where men and women had equal voting rights, fifteen political formations participated, with a total electorate of 876,910 people and a voter turnout exceeding 60%. The Social Democrat party emerged victorious, securing 109 out of 130 seats (Janelidze, 2018, p. 20).

The process of working and adopting the 1921 constitution of the newly declared country was a complex and slow process that was eventually hampered by a foreign invasion of Georgia. The content of this document mirrored the democratic aspirations of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, and had it not been for the Soviet occupation, the country could have secured a notable standing in the civilized world (Papuashvili, 2012). Nevertheless, the 1921 constitution remains a remarkable achievement for Georgia's political and democratic history as its contents were progressive and libertarian for the period. With the 1921 constitution, essential breakthroughs were made in terms of fundamental human rights and individual freedoms for 1921 standards. Papuashvili states that the articles of the 1921 constitution reflect human and citizenship rights as its most outstanding achievement in terms of the progressiveness of the constitution. For instance, the adoption of the principles of habeas corpus in the constitution aimed to prevent unfair and arbitrary arrests and long trial periods, and the death penalty was abolished. Freedom of belief is constitutionally

guaranteed, and the state and church are separated. Additionally, freedom of speech and the printed press were recognized as political freedoms, and workers were given the right to form trade unions and strike. Papuashvili also claims that the progressiveness of the 1921 constitution in regard to socio-economic rights also stems from the fact that lavish promises made by the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia at that time, and Georgian legislators probably did not want to fall behind (Papuashvili, 2012).

Georgian historians commonly characterize the political system of the First Republic as a multi-party democracy. Although the nascent nation-state embraced democratic features such as the freedom to establish political parties, nominate candidates, distribute political propaganda, and uphold freedom of speech, the ruling party, with its substantial majority in the Constituent Assembly, often leveraged its numerical superiority in ways that deviated from democratic norms. The dominant social democratic party, still aligned with Marxist ideology, was deeply engaged in the class struggle and employed revolutionary strategies to secure its grip on power during its initial ascent. The opposition was quick to highlight any breaches of democratic principles by the government and ruling party MPs. They also accused the ruling party of intentionally delaying the adoption of the constitution, a move perceived as a strategy to preserve social democratic dominance in the country (Daushvili & Kacharava, 2020, pp. 32-33).

The republic was recognized by several European powers, including Germany, France, Britain, and Italy, and had a progressive constitution that granted equal rights to all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religion. However, the 1921 constitution was not perfect either. For instance, the governance system was not ideal as it did not aim for a proper checks and balances system. The parliament was only able to dismiss individual ministers instead of an entire government, and the government could not dissolve the parliament in case of crisis.

However, the republic faced numerous challenges, from internal divisions, territorial disputes, economic difficulties, and foreign interventions. It had to deal with separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as border conflicts with Armenia and Azerbaijan over disputed regions (Janelidze, 2018). It suffered from a lack of natural resources, industrial development, and infrastructure, as well as a severe famine in 1920-1921 that affected about half of its population. It also had to cope with the pressure and hostility of its powerful neighbors, especially Bolshevik Russia and Kemalist Turkey. Despite its efforts to maintain its sovereignty and independence as well as diplomatic relations and military alliances with other countries, such as Germany, Britain, and France, the republic was unable to resist the invasion of the Bolshevik Red Army, which began on February 11, 1921, and ended with the Soviet annexation of Georgia on February 25, 1921. The government of the republic went into exile in France, where it continued to claim legitimacy until the 1930s.

When it comes to the question of exactly how the First Democratic Republic of Georgia contributed to the political landscape in Georgia today or whether it has any impact at all, the answer is that it has some role in memory politics and is used as the symbol of collective memory. Obviously, it would be naive to expect otherwise after seventy years of far from democratic Soviet rule. For example, an academic based in Tbilisi “It has had a role. The historical memory of it right, not the republic itself, but the fact that it existed and was used in collective memory and memory politics suggests that it does have some role to play. Furthermore, I think it can play a productive role. People like Steven Jones have made that argument, as well as others, that the First Republic has a productive role to play. You see, every now and again, on official and unofficial commemorations where news websites will do so. Remember the first Republic, this thing happened, depending on the time of the year, but I do not think that it has so much happening in terms of its actual impact” (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). Another academic, an Associate Professor from the Ilia

State University, also mentions that the First Democratic Republic's influence can be seen in many ways today, and that is a topic in itself while also adding that the first democratic republic's influence in itself was marginalized, and attempts to recover it play a significant role also today in Georgia (Associate Professor from Ilia State University, personal communication, 2023). One other expert also emphasized the importance of the First Republic while acknowledging the difficulty in measuring the impact on Georgia's political transformation;

It is quite a difficult question because no one measured to what extent this legacy and past really matter in current democratization and in current political life, but why this is so because we had this long period of Soviet rule, almost 70 years, that interrupted, this links and connections of current Georgia to the First Republic, definitely, the First Republic had not only symbolic, but it was something that had importance in terms of establishing the real statehood in terms of modern statehood. (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023)

The Democratic Georgian Republic displayed characteristics of a progressive and democratic constitution. Its democratic nature was evident in its inclusive representation of various groups, including Muslim minorities, with the noteworthy presence of the first Muslim woman in the Georgian parliament. Despite some political controversies among crucial actors, the republic inherently embodied a democratic spirit. Additionally, it exhibited early signs of Westernization as the political elites, educated in European universities alongside Russian ones, fostered strong connections with Western European powers. Germany notably played a crucial role in encouraging Georgian political elites to declare independence. However, the Bolshevik revolution disrupted the republic's positive trajectory, leading to the reconstruction of national identities and the Soviet occupation. Although short-lived, the first republic played a unifying role, instilling a sense of national identity and sovereignty. It was characterized by a degree of pluralism and democracy. Nevertheless, the emergence of totalitarian and fascist trends globally, coupled with ideological differences, resulted in

the exile or persecution of the old elites. Despite not directly influencing the 1995 Constitution under Shevardnadze, the legacy of the First Republic remains significant for its inspirational value in understanding Georgia's historical experience with democracy, especially considering the democratic ethos of its people and political elites during that era (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Some argue that the First Democratic Republic of Georgia, which was ended by Soviet rule and its subsequent de-intellectualization, is a painful and unforgettable experience for Georgia's memory politics. For instance, a European studies researcher with a Ph.D. degree addressed this issue in one of our interviews:

Although the Democratic Republic of Georgia only lasted for three years, it was the very first step for Georgia to start to function as a democracy and to build its institutions. The country would have had a totally different picture if the Soviets did not take away its independence from it. However, the loss of independence was only one element of the “tragedy”; the real challenge that SSR brought to Georgia was its “de-intellectualization,” replacing Georgia’s aspiration for innovation and institution-building with terror and totalitarian rule with obedience. Therefore, yes, both of the periods had an impact on Georgia’s political environment, and Georgia stands on these two controversial experiences. (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023)

In the broader context, the first democratic republic of Georgia is considered an essential milestone in Georgian history and a source of inspiration for the modern Georgian state. On one hand, it represents a source of national pride and identity, as well as a historical precedent for democratic aspirations. Many Georgian politicians and activists invoke the legacy of the republic to inspire and mobilize the public for political change. On the other hand, it also reflects a source of trauma and lingering issues, such as territorial integrity, national security, and social justice. Many Georgian conflicts and controversies are rooted in the events and outcomes of the republic era. Therefore, the

first democratic republic of Georgia is not only a historical milestone but also stands as a living memory and a political vision for many Georgians today.

Georgia's Soviet Experience: From a Privileged Status to a Suppressed Nationalism

In this segment, we will explore Moscow's assimilation strategies in the area, encompassing the political changes and notable political events in Georgia throughout the period of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (1922-1936) and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (1936-1991). Despite variations in Moscow's approach to the region and its constituent republics under different leaderships, a prevailing sentiment in Georgia characterizes Soviet governance as oppressive. The recollection of assimilation policies directed at ethnic or religious minorities during the communist regime remains prominent in the collective memory of many Georgians. In terms of how the politics have functioned in the country after the independence, the Soviet legacy as well as the ensuing Russian interference, played a significant role.

Despite the Soviet occupation that ended the first democratic Republic of Georgia, the process of 'Georgianisation' in the republic persisted during the 1920s. However, it happened more gradually compared to similar transformations in Central Asia. The slow 'Georgianisation' of urban areas had already been noticeable before 1917, and while still present at the republic level in the 1920s, Georgian political influence was reduced to a much slower pace compared to the 1918-1921 period. During this period, the Georgians experienced what can be described as 'national setbacks.' These included the surrender of their political and economic independence to a Transcaucasian federation, suppression of their national church, and heightened competition with other minority groups in Georgia, like the Abkhazians and Ossetians, who also benefited from the *korenizatsiya* program. Other challenges involved the erosion of distinct civil and political institutions, the substitution of national symbols

such as the flag and constitution with Soviet variations, a rise in administrative centralization in Moscow, and territorial losses. The crackdown on the Menshevik party, which was closely associated with Georgia's national sovereignty, was likely perceived by many Georgians as a form of national oppression as well (Jones S. , The Establishment of Soviet Power in Transcaucasia: The Case of Georgia 1921-1928, 1988, pp. 634-35). Georgians were also displeased with the decision to integrate Georgia into the USSR as part of a broader Transcaucasian federation. These moves diminished Georgia's influence and authority within the Union, causing the Georgian central committee to resign in protest. This issue was the primary political concern in Georgia from 1921 to 1923, and the outcome, favoring centralization in Moscow, dealt a significant blow to Georgian national pride. In the 1924 uprising against Soviet governance in Georgia, approximately 3,000 rebels were killed, and many former Georgian officials, even those who did not participate in the revolt but were accused of conspiring against the Soviet authorities, were executed (Jones S. , The Establishment of Soviet Power in Transcaucasia: The Case of Georgia 1921-1928, 1988, p. 627).

In Georgia, the gradual approach to integration policies, such as *korenizatsiya* and the New Economic Policy (NEP), had, by the mid-1920s, reduced a significant portion of the initial opposition among various social groups. However, some segments of the intelligentsia continued to resist until the early 1930s, when all forms of opposition, whether based on ethnicity or other factors, were brutally suppressed during the Great Purge. Many people in the population likely welcomed the civil and economic order established by the Bolsheviks in Georgia, especially after the tumult and conflict of the revolution and civil war that occurred between 1917 and 1921 (Jones S. , The Establishment of Soviet Power in Transcaucasia: The Case of Georgia 1921-1928, 1988). In the era of the New Economic Policy, Georgia managed to avoid both civil conflicts and anti-Communist wars. Georgians, in particular, experienced certain advantages in comparison to other Soviet citizens and held a notably high number of

roles in the administration of the federal republic. However, with the passing of Stalin, Georgia's favorable position within the union began to decline (Cornell, 2001, p. 138).

Another turning point for Georgia's political activism under the Soviet regime came in 1956 in the form of mass demonstrations that were suppressed violently by the Red Army. The March 1956 demonstrations, also known as the 1956 Tbilisi riots or the 9 March massacre, were a series of protests triggered by Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policy, which deeply unsettled Georgians who supported Stalin's ideology (Vatcharadze, 2020). During this period, many young Georgian elites held the belief that following Stalin's death in 1953, Georgian students were gradually losing their opportunities to study in prestigious Moscow universities, Georgian officers were being systematically removed from military service, and prospects for career advancement outside of Georgia were diminishing (Blauvelt, 2009, p. 659). These protests mainly unfolded in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, where initially, spontaneous gatherings to commemorate the third anniversary of Stalin's death and express dissent against Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin quickly escalated into an uncontrollable and large-scale demonstration that brought the city to a standstill. As the protests progressed, political demands emerged, including calls for a change in the central government in Moscow and even the independence of Georgia from the Soviet Union. The local Georgian authorities, bewildered and demoralized, transferred the responsibility to the Soviet military.

On the evening of March 9, 1956, the Soviet troops deployed in the city resorted to opening fire on the students who were picketing government buildings, which the official Soviet account characterized as an "act of self-defense." Despite this violent suppression, the agitated crowds continued to resist on March 10, only to be eventually dispersed by the intervention of tanks. Estimates of the number of casualties vary, ranging from several dozen to several hundred individuals. Martial law lasted three days until the situation returned to normal (Central Intelligence Agency, 1959). Despite

the rapid quelling of the protests, the events of 1956 marked a turning point, significantly eroding Georgian loyalty to the Soviet Union and further intensifying the nation's drive for consolidation and self-determination.

Georgian nationalist activism was very reactive to the developments in Moscow throughout the Soviet rule in Georgia. In 1978, there was a Soviet proposal to remove Georgian as the official language in the nationalistic Caucasus republic of Georgia. This led to protests in the streets of the capital city, Tbilisi. After the protests, Georgian party leader Eduard A. Shevardnadze agreed to restore the local language to its official status, and Moscow approved Shevardnadze's reinstatement of the constitutional guarantee in the same year (Whitney, 1978).

Eduard Shevardnadze, a Georgian politician, played a significant role in both the Georgian SSR and the Soviet Union until its dissolution. He was among the most influential and controversial figures in the history of Georgia and the Soviet Union. His journey took him from a local Komsomol leader to the positions of head of the Georgian Communist Party, Soviet foreign minister, and president of independent Georgia. During his time in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia, Shevardnadze faced a mix of achievements and challenges as he navigated between reform and stability, the balance of national interests and international obligations, and the complexities of democracy and authoritarianism. Shevardnadze's ascent to the position of the first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972 followed his exposure of corruption within his predecessor, Vasil Mzhavanadze's leadership. His tenure was marked by a vigorous campaign against bribery, nepotism, and crime, earning him the moniker "the White Fox." (Akhmeteli, 2014) Furthermore, he introduced liberal reforms, particularly in the cultural and economic domains, allowing greater freedom of expression. Additionally, he supported the growth of tourism, agriculture, and industry in Georgia, contributing to the region's prosperity and making it one of the most economically prosperous areas in the Soviet Union.

In 1985, Eduard Shevardnadze assumed the role of the Soviet Union's foreign minister under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev regarded Shevardnadze as a dependable ally in his initiatives of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness). Shevardnadze played a pivotal part in bringing an end to the Cold War and enhancing relationships with Western nations. He was instrumental in the negotiation of various arms control agreements, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Furthermore, he lent his support to the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the self-determination of Eastern European nations, and the reunification of Germany (Ekedahl & Goodman, 1997).

Whether the Georgian leadership was actively mobilizing during the 1956 events remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it appears that the critical lesson drawn by local Georgian leaders from these incidents was the effectiveness of mobilization in achieving their objectives in dealings with the central government in Moscow. Even if the extent of this mobilization during the 1956 case is debatable, Georgian leadership and local ethnic elites in other Soviet republics would subsequently adopt a more overt approach to mobilizing national sentiments. They employed this strategy to secure advantages in future interactions with Moscow. This shift in tactics is exemplified by events such as the April 1978 demonstrations, which protested the change in the status of the Georgian language in the new constitution. Furthermore, it encompasses the demonstrations that occurred during the Perestroika period in the late 1980s, both in Georgia and in other regions of the Soviet Union (Blauvelt, 2009, p. 667).

Georgia faced many challenges under Soviet rule, such as repression of its national identity, culture, and language, collectivization of agriculture, industrialization, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. For example, the Soviet authorities banned the use of the Georgian alphabet and promoted Russian culture and education, suppressed the Georgian Orthodox Church, deported

thousands of Georgians to Siberia and Central Asia, and executed or exiled many dissidents and intellectuals in different periods. Despite these hardships, Georgia also experienced some positive developments, such as education; for example, Georgians were the nationality in the Soviet Union with the highest share of the population in higher education (Cornell, 2001, p. 140). Similar to other nations within the Soviet Union, the era also gave rise to stereotypes specific to Georgia. During the Soviet era, Georgians gained renown for their excellence in the arts and entertainment, as well as for their cuisine, which became a favored ethnic choice throughout the Soviet Union, often enjoyed with Georgian wine. Another prevalent stereotype in Soviet humor and anecdotes, possibly reflecting reality to some extent, portrayed Georgians as having a significant presence in the realms of organized crime and corruption (Scott, 2007).

During Soviet rule, Georgia's resistance to Soviet domination was manifested in various forms of dissent and opposition, such as nationalist movements, underground organizations, protests, strikes, and demonstrations in different periods. As noted by Blauvelt in 2009, the aftermath of these events seemed to have a positive impact on Georgia's status. It was evident that Georgia could no longer maintain its prior "most-favored lord" status following 1956, and the regime made significant efforts to emphasize that Georgians were no longer considered "favored." However, Georgia did not experience a reduction to a "colonial" status. Instead, Georgia's status appeared to shift towards what Laitin (1988, p. 67) refers to as "integralist," similar to the situation in the Baltic republics. In these republics, the local elites had limited opportunities within the central government but enjoyed substantial autonomy over local cultural and administrative matters in their respective regions. This autonomy was granted as long as they complied with central government requirements and refrained from overt expressions of nationalism, allowing them to maintain "institutional completeness" within their own sphere of influence (Blauvelt, 2009, p. 667).

In 1989, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who became the first president of Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, led a massive demonstration in Tbilisi that demanded Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union. The protest was brutally suppressed by the Soviet army, which killed at least 20 people and injured hundreds more. This event, known as the April 9 tragedy, galvanized the Georgian public and increased Gamsakhurdia's popularity and influence. In 1990, Gamsakhurdia formed a political coalition called the Round Table—Free Georgia, which united several opposition parties and movements. The coalition won a landslide victory in the first multi-party parliamentary elections in Georgia, defeating the ruling Communist Party of Georgia. Gamsakhurdia became the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia, the highest legislative body in the country.

When we take a look at the legacy of the Soviet Union in Georgia, the turmoil and the violence of the 1990s are the first things to come to mind. Naturally, there are those who say that the Soviets left only a legacy of violence in Georgia (Associate Professor from Ilia State University, personal communication, 2023).

Unfortunately, there was not a favorable spirit at the time. We saw the Bolshevik revolution and how it started to reconstruct violent and autonomous national identities, as well as the political structures in different geographies within the Soviet Union, and then started the occupation. It is hard to say afterward that there was any kind of democratic process or situation because what we have seen was just a capture of political power. In this capture, political terror was very much used, and a new kind of system of statehood and state institutions was created, which were undemocratic by nature and started the 'Great Purge' and terror when all the people who had different political views were executed. There were definitely some elements of modernization, like building infrastructures and metros, but it was not really translated; it was nothing about democracy. If we look at the Soviet Constitution, you had elections, but the electoral process was very uncompetitive because there was only one Communist Party, and almost all the Citizens were obliged to be part of the Communist Party. They wanted to get promoted in different fields of their activities. (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023)

However, in terms of today's political environment in Georgia and the fact that Georgia is a post-Soviet state, the trends and resemblances to other political processes in different post-Soviet states are pretty obvious and have a foothold in Georgian politics. Another expert interviewee argued that as well; "When it comes to it, about political culture and how the history of past political regimes have affected current day Georgia and I think that that is the Soviet practices are still like, well ingrained in terms of politics and how politics function here. So, the Soviet Union has had a much clearer impact on current practice in Georgian politics" (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). Consequently, it is not always an easy task to get rid of the political, cultural, and economic legacy of the Soviet Union. One expert pointed out the fact that Georgia's political culture is struggling today due to this legacy;

Such a political experience is very hard to uproot, especially when it lasts for more than half a century. As a result of this legacy, Georgia's political culture today is struggling to get used to the "multi-player" system, where decision-making is not coming only from one "powerful" sovereign but instead is the result of the consensus and is overseen by the system of "Checks and Balances. (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023)

A commonly used phrase for the nations formerly belonging to the Soviet Union is "Post-Soviet States." However, this term carries a nuanced implication. It typically denotes the precarious political landscape of these countries, marked by unresolved territorial disputes, economic downturns, high levels of corruption (accompanied by nepotism), and feeble governmental institutions. Georgia is certainly not an exception to these challenges. The Soviet Union, originally envisioned as an economic and societal prosperity project, deviated from its roots, evolving into a system marred by corruption, manipulation of institutions for absolute obedience, a lack of critical thinking, and an insistence on unwavering loyalty (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023). The EU also appreciates and acknowledges the high price paid by Georgians during the collapse of the Soviet Union and their continued support for EU integration in the aftermath. The EU's ambassador to Georgia, Pavel Herczyński,

characterized the primary motivator for developing EU-Georgia relations as the will of the Georgian people and added that he is overwhelmed by the high level of support for the EU among the Georgian public. He noted that this sentiment is closely linked to Georgia's persistent efforts to break away from its Soviet past and transition into a modern, independent European nation. The ambassador acknowledged the sacrifices Georgia made for its independence, highlighting the lasting impact of events such as the violent suppression of a peaceful rally on April 9, 1989. He pointed out that Georgia holds the distinction of being the first non-Baltic state to achieve independence following the 1991 referendum, in which an overwhelming 99.5% of voters supported independence. This statistic underscores the depth of Georgian aspirations for self-determination. Furthermore, the ambassador indicated the evolution of EU-Georgia relations from initially being characterized by donor-recipient dynamics to now constituting a robust partnership. Moreover, since last June, Georgia has been an enlargement country (Koridze, 2023).

In its entirety, the political evolution of Georgia under Soviet governance was a multifaceted and paradoxical journey that significantly influenced its contemporary history and national identity. Despite Moscow's strenuous efforts to quell nationalistic sentiments through diverse policies, the persistent uprisings and protests against Soviet authority in Georgia during various periods indicate not only the resounding failure of these policies but also set the stage for an exceedingly ambitious form of nationalism in Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the impact of the Soviet era is still discernible in Georgia's political, economic, and cultural spheres, as well as in its relationships with Russia and neighboring nations. Nonetheless, this does not imply a lack of determination on the part of the country to distance itself from the Soviet Union. Subsequent chapters will illustrate that Georgia has embarked on a substantial commitment through EU reforms and is faring comparatively well in terms

of democracy when juxtaposed with other post-Soviet states in its vicinity and Central Asia.

Troubled Independence: Post-Soviet Transition of Georgia

The period when Georgia separated from the Soviet Union and the subsequent tumultuous years constituted a turbulent phase that left a lasting imprint on the country's history, identity, and political landscape. This era also held noteworthy consequences for Georgia's regional and international relationships with its neighbors. Following the country's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in April 1991, marked by a referendum boycotted by the ethnic minorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the breakup was far from peaceful. Instead, Georgia encountered civil war, separatist conflicts, economic downturn, and political upheaval in the ensuing years. In this context, this section will take a closer look at Georgia's painful and volatile post-Soviet transition in the early 1990s. During the ongoing disintegration of the Soviet Union, secessionist demands from Abkhazia in order to join Russia fueled Georgia's nationalistic approach, gained widespread support from the population, and created the base for controversial policies of the country's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (Gabritchidze, 2010). Consequently, the beginning of the 1990s was riddled with ethnic conflicts, and this situation significantly contributed to the image of a state torn by ethnic conflicts and civil war in the West. Two separatist wars in Abkhazia (1992 -1993) and South Ossetia (1991-1992), coupled with a civil war in Tbilisi (1991-1992), devastated the country (Steenland & Gigitashvili, 2018).

Predictably, in the years that led to the independence, concerns related to minority affairs reemerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as inter-ethnic relations became more prominent. In Abkhazia, Georgians, despite constituting a democratic plurality, expressed dissatisfaction and frustration over their limited influence in policy-making and regional institutions. At the same time, South Ossetians were angered by a

law in 1988 that strengthened the position of the Georgian language (Cornell, 2001, p. 148). Cornell argues that as Georgian nationalism took shape during the Soviet era, it provided limited opportunities for the growth of minorities in Georgia or their integration into Georgian society. Minorities were often viewed as instruments at the disposal of Moscow, used to undermine Georgia's strength (Cornell, 2001, p. 140). Gamsakhurdia's administration demonstrated a dual approach to minorities, showing a degree of respect for the indigenous rights of the Abkhaz and, to a lesser extent, the Ajars. However, there was a complete disregard for the Ossetians, who were viewed as outsiders to Georgia. During this time, Georgia witnessed the emergence of powerful paramilitary factions like the Mkhedrioni. With Georgia lacking its own military, Gamsakhurdia allowed these paramilitary groups, a decision that ultimately contributed to his downfall (Cornell, 2001, p. 150).

In 1991, following Georgia's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, Zviad Gamsakhurdia won the presidential election with an overwhelming 87% of the votes. His election was historic as he became Georgia's first and only president to be directly elected by the people. He assumed the presidency on May 26, 1991, a date significant for Georgia as it coincided with the anniversary of the country's initial declaration of independence in 1918. Remarkably, the first president of Georgia after its independence was deposed through a military coup in January 1992, just shy of completing a year in office. His removal was prompted by allegations of authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and excessive nationalism (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021). Following his ouster, Gamsakhurdia sought refuge in Chechnya, and his death there in 1993 remains shrouded in mystery. Meanwhile, his supporters persisted in opposing the new government led by Eduard Shevardnadze, who had returned to Georgia in 1992 and formerly served as the Soviet Union's foreign minister (Sartania, 2021). Even today, Gamsakhurdia continues to be a contentious and polarizing figure in Georgian history and politics. While some regard him as a hero and

a symbol of Georgia's struggle for independence and honor, others consider him a negative figure and an extremist who introduced turmoil and violence to the country. His legacy remains a subject of ongoing debate and contention among various political groups and factions in present-day Georgia, though the overwhelming majority of Georgians continue to see him as a true Georgian patriot (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021).

According to Gabritchidze, an examination of Georgian nationalism and politics in 1918 and 1991 highlights two significant phases in the Georgian pursuit of an independent and democratic nation. In both instances, the attainment of independence resulted from the dismantling of pre-existing structures, namely the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, respectively. These profound shifts provided the opportunity to establish an autonomous state. While similar threats, such as Russian dominance and ethnic tensions, persisted in both scenarios, there were also notable differences. In 1918, Georgian intellectual elites leaned towards social democracy, while in 1991, radical nationalism gained prominence, influenced by experiences within the Soviet Empire. Gamsakhurdia effectively rallied society around the goal of national independence. However, his governance failed to establish robust state institutions or cultivate a stable society, primarily due to his personalized approach to politics. Instead of implementing structural reforms, key positions were filled with new, often inexperienced individuals chosen solely for their allegiance to Gamsakhurdia. Rather than fostering unity, his divisive policies led to internal fractures and, subsequently, civil unrest and ethnic conflicts. (Gabritchidze, 2010, s. 121-122).

Shevardnadze assumed leadership of a nation in turmoil, characterized by extensive corruption, crime, poverty, and ethnic tensions. His objectives focused on restoring order and democratic governance, although he faced resistance from various factions and regional warlords. In 1994, he negotiated a ceasefire agreement with Russia to resolve the conflict in Abkhazia, a region that had declared independence from

Georgia with Russian support. However, the terms of the agreement left Abkhazia beyond Georgia's jurisdiction, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Georgian refugees. A similar scenario unfolded in South Ossetia; another separatist area backed by Russia. Despite these challenges, Shevardnadze did bring about some stability and secured international aid for Georgia in the mid-1990s. His international reputation as an experienced and pro-democratic leader who served as a foreign minister of the Soviet Union placed Georgia on the Western radar during that period (Gabritchidze, 2010).

Moreover, Shevardnadze also pursued closer relationships with Western organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe. He aspired to join NATO and the European Union, which was a move that unsettled Russia (Corboy, Courtney, & Yalowitz, 2014). In 1995, the Republic of Georgia, now an independent nation, implemented a new constitution that instituted a presidential republic as its chosen form of government, drawing inspiration from the structure of the United States Constitution (Erkvania, The Government versus the President A new competence dispute brought before the Constitutional Court of Georgia, 2022).

During his second term as president, Shevardnadze faced a decline in his political fortunes compared to his first term. He encountered mounting criticism due to his inability to resolve territorial conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, his inability to tackle corruption and crime effectively, his reliance on foreign aid, and his autocratic tendencies. Allegations were made against him for election manipulation, suppressing opposition parties and media outlets, violating human rights, and appointing loyalists to key positions. His standing also diminished among former allies in both Russia and the West, who perceived him as an impediment to regional collaboration and stability. In response to large-scale protests known as the Rose Revolution that called for his removal, Shevardnadze resigned from the presidency in

2003. He was succeeded by Mikheil Saakashvili, a youthful reformist leader who pledged to carry out the unfinished objectives of Shevardnadze's administration (Kandelaki, 2006).

Shevardnadze indeed managed to create a singular party, the Citizens Union of Georgia, in the mid-90s. However, the party lacked a clear ideology and primarily functioned as a patronage system for Shevardnadze loyalists. Consequently, as the president's popularity declined, key allies deserted him, leading to the party's disintegration in 2001-2002 (Way, 2008, p. 63). By this point, a governance system akin to the American model had been instituted in Georgia, characterized by a robust presidential republic, as the semi-presidential model was not deemed suitable in the 1990s. Throughout Shevardnadze's tenure, the opposition remained fragmented and lacking in strength. Despite numerous challenges posed by various parties, a compelling alternative to the electorate did not emerge from the opposition. Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili, who assumed power on February 6, 2004, augmented presidential powers through constitutional amendments, reinforcing the dominance of the president-elect party in a robust presidential system. The opposition parties, marked by pragmatism and weakness, failed to present an effective alternative to Georgian society within the framework of the prevailing political landscape (Benashvili, 2020).

The primary factors behind the Rose Revolution were the economic mismanagement, political corruption, poverty, and state failure that characterized Shevardnadze's administration (Welt, 2009). The ruling party during most of Shevardnadze's presidency, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), represented the interests of his loyalists and associates. However, the party experienced internal divisions and defections, with many officials and deputies leaving to join or establish other parties like the New Rights Party (NRP) and the United National Movement (UNM). In September 2001, Shevardnadze himself stepped down from the

chairmanship of the CUG. When faced with relatively small crowds, estimated to be in the tens of thousands, Shevardnadze chose to flee Georgia. This decision was influenced by his lack of control over the military and security forces, making him politically weak and unable to order any repressive actions. (Way, 2008).

In November 2003, Shevardnadze was compelled to step down as a result of a peaceful uprising recognized as the Rose Revolution. The catalyst for this revolution was widespread claims of electoral misconduct during the parliamentary elections held that year. Led by opposition figures such as Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania, and Nino Burjanadze, the demonstrators called for Shevardnadze's resignation and demanded fresh elections. They employed roses as a symbol of their commitment to non-violence and democratic principles. Saakashvili assumed the presidency of Georgia in January 2004, securing a resounding victory in the impromptu presidential election. He pledged to combat corruption, reestablish territorial sovereignty, and facilitate Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions (Lynch, 2006, p. 26).

Rose Revolution and the Political Transformation under the UNM

This subchapter examines the implications of the Rose Revolution in November 2003 in Georgia, which resulted in the removal of President Eduard Shevardnadze, effectively marking the conclusion of the Soviet-era leadership in the country. The revolution not only resulted in a change of government and prompted new presidential and parliamentary elections in Georgia, leading to notable shifts in the political landscape, but also brought about fundamental alterations in Georgia's foreign policy direction and its positioning within the international sphere. In this context, the Rose Revolution remains a pivotal event in Georgia's history and a source of inspiration for many Georgians who aspire for democracy, freedom, and prosperity. It also serves as a reminder of the challenges and risks that come with political change. The Rose Revolution was celebrated as a triumph of nonviolent protest and a shift toward

democracy. It was recognized as part of a broader trend of peaceful uprisings that occurred in the early 2000s across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. This revolution was notable for the significant involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the active participation of students, particularly a group called Kmara ("Enough"). Kmara organized a series of campaigns and boycotts against Shevardnadze's government (Kandelaki, 2006).

In November 2003, under the leadership of young reformist Mikheil Saakashvili, a former Shevardnadze ally and founder of the United National Movement, thousands of protesters carried out the Rose Revolution, ousting Shevardnadze. Subsequently, Saakashvili and his party, the United National Movement, managed to win the presidential and parliamentary elections held in January and March 2004 by an overwhelming majority. Following the Rose Revolution, Georgia followed a pro-Western policy, declaring the country's integration with the European and Euro-Atlantic alliance as a priority policy. In this context, the Rose Revolution can be considered an essential breakthrough for Georgia-EU relations, opening a new chapter and dimensions for the relations. For instance, Karadag (2019) argues that the Rose Revolution showed off Georgia's longstanding and acute aspirations for Europeanization and gave significant momentum to improve relations as Georgia became a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and started new domestic reforms as a result of closer cooperation with the EU. Accordingly, Georgia set NATO and EU membership as primary foreign policy goals as part of the new state-building process in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution (Karadag, *Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis*, 2019, p. 107). Unsurprisingly, until the Rose Revolution, the South Caucasus had been a distant region characterized by ethnic tensions and heavy Russian involvement. Prior to the Rose Revolution, the European Union's interaction with Georgia had been constrained to standalone assistance programs focusing on

institution building, sectoral reforms, and economic development, lacking a comprehensive overarching strategy. On June 14, 2004, however, Georgia became a member of the European Neighborhood Policy with the resolution of the Council of the European Union, and on November 14, 2006, the EU-Georgia ENP action plan was adopted and implemented annually.

Following the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, there were also significant changes in the governance system. The Georgian constitution of 1995 underwent systematic revisions in 2004 (Venice Commission, 2004). This constitutional reform officially established a semi-presidential government system, though, in practice, it operated as a super-presidential system. As part of the subsequent constitutional changes in 2010 (Venice Commission, 2010), the proposed governmental structure was in transition from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary republic. Nevertheless, the updated constitution also exhibited imbalances: the 2010 constitutional reform facilitated a shift from a super-presidential system to a super-prime minister system (Erkvania, The Government versus the President A new competence dispute brought before the Constitutional Court of Georgia, 2022).

During this period, initiatives pertaining to defense and security reforms were also instituted, aligning the nation more closely with the Euro-Atlantic alliance. The newly instated government embarked on the formulation of two documents that Shevardnadze had hitherto neglected. In May 2005, a draft of the National Security Concept was introduced, followed by the National Military Strategy towards the end of the same year. Shevardnadze's reluctance to finalize such documents stemmed from his limited commitment to substantive security sector reform. Moreover, the former president refrained from definitively elucidating Georgia's foreign policy orientation to prevent the emergence of external threats that could jeopardize his political authority. Consequently, Shevardnadze refrained from aligning Georgia distinctly either in a pro-Western trajectory or a pro-Russian one (Lynch, 2006, p. 30).

However, one other significant event under the presidency of Saakashvili brought Georgia and the EU even closer and paved the way for closer foreign policy alignment and cooperation in the region. When NATO welcomed the membership aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia and agreed that these countries would eventually become members in the 2008 Bucharest Summit, it was a serious red flag for the Russian Federation just after Kosovo's declaration of independence in the Balkans (Hamilton, 2018, p. 11). However, as we have seen in previous chapters, the Russian Federation has been a part of the feud between Georgia and two breakaway republics since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union to use the situation as leverage against Georgia to force the country into the Commonwealth of Independent States to have access to military bases in Georgia and to keep the country away from aligning with the Euro-Atlantic Community. On the contrary to his predecessor, President Saakashvili adopted a more confrontational stance towards Russia, accusing it of meddling in Georgia's internal affairs and supporting the separatist regions. When faced with Russian military aggression and provocations along the line of contact (Batashvili, 2018), he launched a military operation to regain control of South Ossetia in August 2008, which triggered a five-day war with Russia. The war ended with a ceasefire brokered by the EU and France but resulted in heavy losses for Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia and a few other countries, such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Syria (Hamilton, 2018).

After the war with Russia, the EU's political role in Georgia as an external actor has increased considerably. In August 2008, the EU co-hosted a high-level international donor conference. It was attended by 65 countries and promised USD 4.55 billion in aid for the war-ravaged country (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019, p. 133). Furthermore, the European Union Monitoring Mission was established on 15 September 2008 with the aim of monitoring the agreed ceasefire. While EUMM's role is solely observational in

practice, it shows support for Georgia's territorial integrity and stands as a deterrence for potential provocations on the border.

The conflict resulted in Georgia losing control of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia completely. The territories declared their independence, and Russia recognized them as independent states. The war had political repercussions for President Mikheil Saakashvili. His handling of the crisis faced criticism both domestically and internationally. Some accused him of miscalculating the situation and provoking the conflict, leading to a decline in his popularity (Welt, 2009). Consequently, the war contributed to shifts in the political landscape of Georgia. The opposition, critical of Saakashvili's leadership, gained momentum, and discontent with his government grew. The 2008 war became a focal point for political debates and criticisms within the country. Saakashvili's popularity declined after the war, as he also faced criticism for his authoritarian tendencies, human rights abuses, and mishandling of the economy (Human Rights Watch, 2013). He also faced mass protests and opposition from his former allies, such as Burjanadze and Irakli Alasania (Lomsadze, Georgia: Another Saakashvili Friend Turns Foe, 2008). He completed his second and final term in office in October 2013, handing over power to his successor, Giorgi Margvelashvili. However, the foundations of many later success stories, particularly with the EU, such as Visa Liberalization, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and Association Agreements, were laid during his term. On the other hand, by making the right decisions at the right time and extending a helping hand to Georgia in times of need, the EU managed to provide a proper EU integration framework and became the most important driving force of the political transformation in Georgia in the 2010s.

Overall, after the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili's early actions received acclaim for strengthening the state, restoring the government's control over the use of force, and combatting criminal organizations. He notably reduced corruption and demonstrated the state's ability to perform fundamental functions like tax collection

and the provision of essential public services. Additionally, he bolstered the country's military and police forces, which arguably ensured the state's survival. However, his decision to engage in a conflict in South Ossetia, which played into Russia's hands, resulted in military intervention and diminished prospects for reuniting Georgia's separatist regions. His increasingly authoritarian behavior eroded his government's support, leading to a decline in popularity in 2008. His violations of human rights further contributed to his eventual loss of power in 2012. It is worth noting that Saakashvili sometimes reacted to pressure or protests from Western countries. Moreover, he left a significant legacy for Georgia's democracy in 2012 when he allowed the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power to the Georgian Dream coalition, which had defeated the United National Movement (UNM). He stepped down in 2013 without resorting to violence (Steenland & Gigitashvili, 2018). After the elections, Saakashvili departed Georgia and was unable to return due to ongoing criminal investigations and legal proceedings against him. Following an eight-year absence, he returned on October 1, 2021, only to be promptly arrested and has remained in prison since the arrest. The matter will be further examined in subsequent chapters, mainly focusing on the imprisonment of political figures and the political polarization in Georgia.

Towards the end of Saakashvili's leadership, it became evident that the Rose Revolution did not establish a more democratic system in Georgia. Undemocratic practices and political consolidation were notably pronounced in the post-Rose Revolution period, particularly from 2010 to 2012. For instance, Gigantino (2023) argues that the notion of Georgia being exceptionally democratic at the time resulted from a mutually advantageous relationship between the Bush administration and UNM since it served as political capital to justify U.S. democracy promotion and interventionism while domestically reinforcing the idea that UNM alone rendered Georgia as an exceptional state poised to join Western institutions despite economic

challenges. However, despite the apparent shortcomings of Saakashvili and the UNM, one notable outcome from the Saakashvili era is undoubtedly the commencement of the EU integration process, which persisted and developed during the Georgian Dream era. The influence of the geopolitical context in this progression cannot be overlooked. Both the Rose Revolution and the 2008 War shaped a political environment that provided an opportunity for enhanced alignment between the EU and Georgia.

Political Transformation under the Georgian Dream and Increased Political Polarization

Over the past decade, Georgian society and politics have undergone significant transformations. Political developments aligning Georgia more closely with Europe have contributed to the country distancing itself from its autocratic history. Presently, Georgia is generally perceived as being more democratic and transparent compared to its authoritarian neighbors. While Georgia's democratic score has witnessed a decline in recent years, and criticisms have been directed at the ruling Georgian Dream party for polarizing decisions and resistance to EU-sponsored reforms, it is crucial to acknowledge the party's role in enhancing the country's international standing and modernizing its political landscape which has held sway in Georgia's politics since 2012.

The 2012 elections marked a pivotal moment in Georgia as the country witnessed its first peaceful transition of government from the United National Movement (UNM) to the Georgian Dream. This transition occurred against a backdrop of escalating authoritarian practices during President Saakashvili's and the UNM's final years in power. However, after the party's founding father, Bidzina Ivanishvili, resigned after only 13 months. Even though there is only one ruling party at the helm of Georgia, party leadership and prime ministerial posts have seen more than several shake-ups.

At the helm of the country since 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition initiated several changes to the constitution, reforming the election code of Georgia and transforming the country from a robust presidential system to a parliamentary one. Most notably, the amendments of 2017 (Venice Commission, 2017) and 2018 (Venice Commission, 2018) transformed the country into a parliamentary system with a commitment to fully proportional elections in 2024. Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, when Georgia made a decisive move to break away from its Soviet Union-era political legacy, only two parties have been able to form governments in the country. This has been due to a large number of parliamentary seats have been allocated based on single-seat majoritarian constituencies (Georgian Parliament, 2020). These constituencies put smaller political parties at a disadvantage and do not accurately represent the votes in the parliament. Efforts have been made to reduce the number of single-seat majoritarian constituencies and transition to a fully proportional system (A way ahead for Georgia, 2021), and the 2024 parliamentary elections will be fully proportional thanks to the constitutional amendments in 2020.

The heightened political significance of the prime minister's role led to an unforeseen development described by some authors as an oligarchic system. Despite Ivanishvili's brief tenure as prime minister from 2012 to 2013, during which he resigned without retaining formal political or party roles, he continued to be widely acknowledged as the most influential political figure in Georgia, effectively exerting control over Georgian politics. His informal governance approach involved influencing major political decisions and essentially selecting and dismissing prime ministers. His influence was further amplified after the 2016 elections when the GD party secured a supermajority in parliament, a prerequisite for implementing constitutional changes. The fact that Ivanishvili officially assumed the position of chairperson of the GD party in May 2018 should not be seen as formal rules superseding informal practices. Instead, it signals to voters that he remains engaged in politics and committed to his party

despite any potential doubts. This new role establishes a more robust connection between his identity as an influential and affluent businessman and the GD party (Kakhishvili, 2020, p. 12).

Due to his claimed role in Georgia's politics as the shadow ruler of Georgia, such as dismissing and appointing new prime ministers and ministers, Georgia has been increasingly criticized for oligarchic rule in recent years (Genté, 2022). While Georgian Dream officials vehemently deny any suggestion that portrays Ivanishvili as an oligarch. However, statements coming from the Georgian Dream officials portray a completely different picture (Agenda.ge, 2023a) (Interpressnews, 2023a). Unsurprisingly, one of the EU's recommendations for granting candidate status to Georgia was the de-oligarchization after the country applied for full membership in the aftermath of the War in Ukraine. Moreover, President Salome Zourabichvili stated in an interview that "He obviously has a dominant authority over the existing rulers. There is no oligarch in Georgian politics today other than Ivanishvili" (Vincent, 2023).

Security policies during the era of the Georgian Dream have undergone significant shifts, particularly in managing relations with Russia and adopting a somewhat more reserved stance towards NATO aspirations. The 2008 War and insufficient responses to Russian actions prompted Georgia to reassess its security policies and priorities. Recognizing that attaining full NATO membership is currently impractical, the government has adjusted its approach. Notably, the Georgian Dream has faced more criticism in the West, not just for undemocratic and polarizing practices but also for the warming relations between Russia and Georgia. This is noteworthy considering the prevailing majority of public opinion that is firmly against Russia for evident reasons such as the continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian forces.

While distancing itself from NATO aspirations during the Georgian Dream period, Georgia's relations with the European Union have entered a new phase. The adoption of the Eastern Partnership roadmap marked a significant milestone, leading to the successful conclusion of negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) as part of the Association Agreement in 2013. The Association Agreement was signed on June 27, 2014, and officially came into force on July 1, 2016, following the EU Foreign Affairs Council's decision to complete the ratification procedure. This comprehensive agreement encompassed reforms in political cooperation, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and sectoral cooperation, establishing the groundwork for political association and economic integration between the EU and Georgia (Association Agreement, 2014). The agreement facilitated the opening of the EU market for Georgian businesses and products, and the Visa Liberalization Agreement enabled Georgian citizens to travel visa-free to the Schengen area. As a result of visa liberalization, more than one million Georgian citizens have visited Schengen countries without visas. Moreover, the EU has become Georgia's largest trade partner and donor, providing over €120 million in grant money annually to support Georgia's ambitious reform agenda (European Union External Action Service).

On March 3, 2022, Georgia officially applied for membership in the European Union. Subsequently, on June 23, 2022, the European Council acknowledged the European Perspective for Georgia and indicated its willingness to confer the status of a candidate country upon Georgia after addressing the 12 specified priorities outlined in the Commission's opinion on Georgia's membership application. This significant decision marks a pivotal step for Georgia on its path toward EU integration, affirming the country's potential to join the European Union. As part of this process, the EU releases annual implementation reports documenting Georgia's progress in the reform process.

However, as outlined in the 12 recommendations of the EU, the report revealed critical deficiencies in Georgia's domestic politics, which will be discussed in detail in other chapters. These deficiencies include problems in the judiciary, corruption, freedom of media, political polarization, de-oligarchization, alignment with the CSFP of the EU, and imprisonment of political figures. For instance, the alignment with the EU's CSFP has decreased significantly in recent years (Akobia, 2023).

Furthermore, the era of the Georgian Dream has witnessed a heightened level of political division between the ruling party and the opposition. In recent years, Georgia has been confronted with a substantial challenge of political polarization, where prominent political factions have maintained opposing stances on various issues and have been resistant to finding common ground. This has resulted in political standoffs and crises, such as the boycott of the parliament. The Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM), two prominent political parties in Georgia, have competed intensely for power and influence since the Rose Revolution. This enduring rivalry has significantly influenced Georgian politics over the past decade, with roots in the nation's recent history. Their ongoing struggle for political supremacy has been characterized by contentious and divisive political campaigns at times, contributing to an overall atmosphere of heightened political polarization and setbacks in the democratic process in Georgia.

Through its alignment with the European Union (EU) and participation in initiatives like the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), and the Association Agreement over the previous decade, Georgia has made notable advancements in combating corruption, enhancing transparency, establishing efficient institutions, and adopting EU-mandated reforms, which have garnered widespread acclaim. In 2018, Georgia transitioned to a parliamentary system of governance following substantial constitutional amendments in 2017. As a result, the Parliament's role has been significantly enhanced, particularly in relation to the Government, which

is now more accountable to the legislative branch. This increased accountability has been reinforced through subsequent reforms in the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, expanding its functions and introducing new, effective mechanisms to enhance the execution of legislative, oversight, and representative duties (UNDP, n.d.).

However, since 2019, the GD government has taken a more uncompromising position against the opposition in the country. It adopted more conservative rhetoric at home and abroad when Irakli Garibashvili was re-elected prime minister in 2021. In this period, tensions were also observed in relations with the EU, which is perhaps the most significant stakeholder in democratic reforms in the country. GD government officials are now publicly criticizing the EU and sometimes even blaming it openly. Alongside verbal disagreements, Georgia's alignment with the European Union (EU) has experienced a decline in recent years, as indicated in EU assessments of the partnership agreement. Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia did not attain EU candidate status in 2022, receiving instead 12 recommendations aimed at achieving this status. Georgia was finally granted candidate status in December 2023 but lost one year with the reforms aimed at tackling the twelve recommendations.

Furthermore, in recent times, various Western allies of Georgia have expressed apprehensions regarding human and minority rights, along with the independence of the judiciary and investigations targeting the opposition that may carry political motivations. Notably, the 2022 report from the US State Department on Human Rights Practices in Georgia brought attention to several critical issues. These concerns encompassed doubts about the judiciary's impartiality, politically driven investigations and prosecutions, unwarranted intrusions into personal privacy, severe restrictions on freedom of speech and media, violent assaults and threats against journalists, substantial barriers to peaceful assembly and association, forced deportation of refugees, and acts of violence against individuals and activists who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex. (US Department of State, 2023). The issues of state

capture, judicial independence, and corruption are interconnected in Georgia and have collectively tarnished the country's global standing. Notably, both state capture and corruption have negatively impacted Georgia's international reputation in recent times. In 2023, the US Department of State took a public stance by imposing sanctions on four Georgian judges, accusing them of substantial corruption. The allegations suggested that these judges exploited their roles as court Chairmen and members of Georgia's High Council of Justice (U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, 2023). In response, the Georgian government deemed the decision entirely incomprehensible and unacceptable, expressing that it would harm the longstanding amicable relations between Georgia and the United States (Civil.ge, 2023a).

Regrettably, the critiques directed towards the Georgian Dream in recent years extend beyond the scope outlined thus far. Substantial concerns have been raised regarding the promotion of media pluralism. Notably, collaborative efforts with the People's Power party, aligned ideologically with the ruling faction, were undertaken to introduce a media law closely resembling the legislation in effect in Russia. This proposed legislation sought to restrict media organizations from securing external funding, prompting reactions both domestically and internationally (Cordell, 2023).

Furthermore, under the governance of the Georgian Dream, the dynamics of Georgia-Russia relations assume considerable significance in the context of the nation's political evolution and aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Despite Russia's ongoing occupation and provocations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with its formal recognition of these regions as independent entities, Georgian-Russian relations have evolved during the tenure of the Georgian Dream government. Notably, Moscow has expressed approval of this situation (Moscow Hails Tbilisi's 'Balanced' Stance on Russia Sanctions, 2023). The trajectory of the relations has experienced an uptick, particularly following the Ukrainian conflict. During this period, Georgia opted not to participate in the economic sanctions imposed by Europe and the United States against

Russia, fostering an improvement in economic ties (Camut, 2023). Civil flights were reinstated between the two countries, and officials from the Georgian Dream even alleged that the European Union and Ukraine were endeavoring to establish a secondary geopolitical front in Georgia against Russia (Agenda.ge, 2023b), (European Union External Action Service, 2023).

Despite the array of criticisms levied against the Georgian Dream administration, the political, democratic, and economic transformation witnessed in Georgia over the past decade constitutes a narrative of notable accomplishment. Over this period, the nation pursued integration with the European Union through the prism of its neighborhood policy, elevating its position to a privileged partner of the European Union in the Caucasus following the signing of the Association Agreement. Subsequently, Georgia attained the status of a candidate country for European Union membership. Despite the challenges confronted within the country and ongoing scrutiny and critique by the European Union, the Georgian Dream government adeptly navigated a balanced relationship with Russia and simultaneously undertook substantive political, economic, and legal reforms, aligning these endeavors with the perspectives and recommendations of the European Union.

Conclusions

Given the nation's tumultuous events, Georgia's political transformation and endeavors toward democratization in historical and contemporary contexts were intricate. Situated in a region marked by imperial intersections, Georgia embarked on a political experiment that incorporated remarkably progressive and democratic concepts for its era, exemplified by the establishment of the first Republic. Regrettably, this experiment was curtailed by the Bolsheviks, ushering in a 70-year epoch characterized by one-party governance, undemocratic practices, oppression, and corruption. Presently, the First Republic is venerated as a democratic milestone that elicits pride

throughout the Georgian populace, assuming a significant role in the country's collective memory politics and offering insights into ongoing democratization endeavors. However, its substantive influence on Georgia's contemporary political transformation post-independence remains modest. Notably, the revered first constitution, celebrated for its progressive attributes, did not serve as the foundational framework for the post-independence constitution. Conversely, the enduring impact of seven decades of Soviet rule looms large over Georgia's political evolution and democratization, significantly shaping the prevailing political landscape in the country despite the efforts toward European integration.

During the seven-decade span of Soviet influence, Georgia maintained its political existence as both part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Throughout this period, Moscow's policies towards Georgia exhibited temporal variations. The implementation of *korenizatsiya* policies in the early stages of the Soviet era not only brought forth the prominence of the Georgian identity but also accentuated the identities of other ethnic minorities within Georgia. Stalin, a native Georgian, elevated the status of the Georgian nation among the Soviet people, and Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin and the Georgians triggered bloody unrest in Tbilisi. Subsequent attempts to relegate the Georgian language from its official status in favor of Russia prompted significant upheavals, compelling Moscow to backtrack. The suppression of the Georgian Orthodox Church during this period and the resultant injustices endured have positioned the Church as an integral element of the post-independence Georgian identity, garnering substantial public significance.

Moreover, this era laid the groundwork for the emergence of the territorial integrity predicament involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would dominate the nation's post-independence political agenda, accompanied by Russia's military, political, and economic interventions in the region. Contemporary challenges

encountered by Georgia can be traced back to the Soviet era, underscoring their enduring impact on the nation's present circumstances. These challenges are persistently prominent issues within the country's contemporary political agenda. For instance, a significant obstacle in establishing a robust and democratic Georgia was the absence of democratic values, democratic culture, and an underdeveloped civil society, primarily stemming from the Soviet legacy (Gabritchidze, 2010, p. 123).

The era following the Soviet Union's dissolution emerges as a pivotal phase in Georgia's political evolution. Within this timeframe, the nation confronted a profound political upheaval instigated by the contentious policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the inaugural president of Georgia, and the secessionist policies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following a coup orchestrated by armed militias, Gamsakhurdia was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Union Minister of Foreign Affairs. His international recognition endowed him with the capacity to confer much-needed legitimacy and stability upon Georgia. The subsequent ascension of Eduard Shevardnadze to power coincided with the adoption of a new constitution in 1995, ushering in a presidential system of governance. This marked a departure from the initially envisaged mixed, semi-presidential model of government (Demetrashvili, 2010, p. 94).

The Rose Revolution of 2003 is arguably Georgia's most pivotal political development since its independence from the Soviet Union. The Georgian political elite not only purged the administrative apparatus of Soviet cadres and practices but also consciously opted for strategic alignment with the Euro-Atlantic political and security framework despite the attendant risk of antagonizing the Russian Federation. This decision represented the only rational course of action for a nation grappling with pervasive issues such as corruption, poverty, authoritarianism, civil strife, and foreign occupation. Drawing upon the Neo-functionalist theory of European Integration, as envisioned by Haas, it is discerned that when the political elite recognizes the

intractability of significant domestic challenges, they adapt their expectations, political engagements, and even allegiances towards a new European center, thereby fostering a political impetus for the integration process. This impetus materialized immediately following the Rose Revolution and manifested in subsequent years, as both Georgia and its European counterparts committed themselves to deeper integration through various frameworks, including the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), and the Association Agreement.

The influence of Russia on Georgia's endeavors to integrate into Euro-Atlantic security and political structures following the Rose Revolution is a factor of considerable significance. Despite advancements in bilateral relations during the rule of the Georgian Dream, Russia has solidified its status as an occupying power within Georgia's political memory. According to (Sartania, 2021), If the goal of the national movement in the 1990s was to restore independence, in modern times, the narrative is that Georgia is still in danger of losing its independence—so the overriding goal is to preserve it. Russia and its occupations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are seen to pose an existential threat, which drives Georgia's ongoing aspirations for its integration into the EU and NATO.

The Saakashvili era undeniably fostered closer ties between Georgia, Europe, and the United States. However, it is equally incontrovertible that this period fell short of realizing the aspired democratic advancements. Notwithstanding the anti-democratic tendencies observed towards the conclusion of the Saakashvili tenure, a noteworthy development occurred with the peaceful transfer of power through the 2012 elections, marking the first instance of such a transition in the country's history. It is imperative to acknowledge that, subsequent to independence, each post-Soviet leader in Georgia ascended to power in opposition to their predecessor, inevitably grappling with challenges to their legitimacy over time.

With the Georgian Dream coming to power in 2012, Georgia's political transformation has entered its final phase, which we are currently witnessing. During this period, Georgia entered a very comprehensive EU reform process with the commitments under the EaP and Association Agreement. Noteworthy changes during this period encompass the transition from a presidential system to a parliamentary system within the governance framework, the adoption of a proportional electoral system stemming from comprehensive constitutional reforms, and the enactment of requisite legal provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights and interests of vulnerable minority groups in Georgia.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the strides made in democratic and political advancements, the persistence of an anti-democratic party structure remains a prominent issue within the realm of Georgian politics, evident in both the ruling and opposition factions. In Georgian reality, clans are patron-client networks that consolidate around an influential leader and change with the ups and downs of that leader's power and economic position. Such clans are closed structures, united and driven by the desire to avoid open legal space and to derive group benefit from state institutions. Many analysts contend that the connections between Georgian political parties and distinct social groups are relatively tenuous, often serving as instruments to advance the narrow interests of specific factions. There is a belief that these parties seek parliamentary entry primarily for personal benefits, advocating for specific business interests and manipulating legislative tools. This strategic use of mechanisms is then employed to convey the impression to both their constituents that the party genuinely represents their concerns and to Western governments that Georgia operates as a democracy (Benashvili, 2020).

Overall, in the last thirty years, Georgia has experienced substantial changes in its governmental structure, moving from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. This evolution involved four constitutional reforms that collectively molded Georgia into a

conventional parliamentary-style nation. These reforms were intricately tied to political developments, and it is noteworthy that a majority of political factions in present-day Georgia endorse the establishment of a parliamentary republic. The EU has been significantly involved in the reforms that transitioned the country from a strong presidential system to a more pluralistic parliamentary system, even though these changes have not yet resulted in any kind of coalition for the government.

CHAPTER THREE - Role of the EU as an External Actor and Transformative Power in Georgia

In the third chapter, we will delve into the role of the European Union as an external actor in political transformation in different regions and countries in order to understand the EU's foreign policy tools, its ability to promote democracy, and reforms in its neighbourhood. The European Union, which is usually assumed to be the most significant economic and political power in its region, has been able to penetrate and

co-opt many countries in its immediate periphery politically, economically, and culturally. By using its enlargement opportunities, appeal, and attraction, and sometimes by the initiatives of some of its members, the European Union managed to shape significant political, social, and economic changes in these countries by preference. In this context, the European Union (EU) holds a distinctive and influential position globally, characterized by a unique set of values, principles, and policy approaches that shape its interactions with other global actors. The EU actively participates in processes of political change, both domestically and internationally, intending to promote peace, stability, democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development. However, the EU's role as an external actor driving political transformations is not static or without challenges and limitations. Operating within a complex and dynamic global landscape, the EU also competes with various powers seeking influence and resources, necessitating continual adaptation and development in response to its interactions with diverse stakeholders.

The enormous economic and soft power of the European Union can undoubtedly be seen in many countries in Europe and its periphery, both in terms of democracy promotion, reform efforts, and adaptation of the EU's legislation and standards. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the European Union has achieved success by only using its foreign policy tools, as we will see in this chapter. Likewise, it is undeniable that the economic incentives and soft power applied by the EU may not provide the desired level of reforms in the target country.

Within this framework, the European Union's role in shaping Georgia's political transformation over the last three decades holds significant relevance for our study. The EU's manifestation of its transformative influence as an external actor is crucial in understanding the issues, resistances, and obstacles encountered in this process. Importantly, for the EU to effectively convey its political, economic, democratic, and humanitarian values, a fundamental prerequisite is the openness and receptiveness of

the political elites in the targeted nation to engage in integration and reform initiatives. Regarding Georgia, particularly in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, the political elite demonstrated openness and receptivity towards integration and reform initiatives. Consequently, Georgia participated in several EU neighborhood programs, culminating in the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, with the latter achieving EU candidate country status in December 2023. This underscores the significance of the EU's engagement in the Georgian context. It would not be prudent to assume that through the application of hard and soft foreign policy instruments over the last decades, the EU has become the most influential external actor in Georgian politics. However, the candidacy debacle of Georgia was also a litmus test for the countries' European integration. This undertaking has brought to light various concerns within the relations between Georgia and the EU, indicating potential challenges in the future accession process and signaling a complex integration journey for both sides.

Being a candidate country undoubtedly amplifies the obligations and commitments of the Georgian government vis-à-vis the EU via the accession process. A pivotal dimension of this lies in the influential force of public support for the EU in Georgia, which firmly anchors the country to Europe. The Georgian public's overwhelming support for the EU obviously gives the Union political leverage in Georgia since this encourages the political movements in the country to engage with the EU in a positive and receptive manner. When asked about the European Union (EU), 89% of Georgians either "fully support" or "somewhat support" joining the alliance (International Republican Institute, 2023). Therefore, this kind of continued support might be instrumental for Georgia's accession process.

Overall, chapter three has been structured to address the study's objectives and research questions, such as: How has the EU's influence in Georgia evolved since its independence? What are the primary tools of EU engagement with Georgia? What role has the EU played in Georgia's state-building? What kind of difficulties have been

experienced during the policy transfer and implementation of reforms, and in which areas has the EU's soft power in Georgia become successful or failed? Moreover, this section will delve into key concepts and discussions within the literature on EU external actorness and policy transfer. Additionally, the subsequent section will scrutinize the soft power, democracy promotion, and foreign policy instruments employed by the European Union (EU) in its neighborhood policy, with a specific focus on Georgia. The analysis will extend to a comparative examination of EU policies in neighboring countries, shedding light on the effectiveness and success of EU initiatives in specific areas and identifying instances where policy tools may have proven inadequate.

EU as a Political Transformative Power

The transformative capability of the EU can be characterized as its capacity to influence other actors to embrace its norms and standards, encompassing principles like democracy, human rights, the rule of law, a market economy, and multilateralism. The concept of EU external actorness refers to the EU's ability and willingness to act as a coherent and influential actor in its external relations based on its identity, interests, and values. The literature on EU external actorness has developed various approaches to conceptualize the EU's role and influence in world politics, such as civilian, normative, ethical, market, or structural power. These approaches highlight different aspects of the EU's identity and capabilities, such as its soft power, its normative agenda, its ethical standards, its economic clout or its institutional leverage (Manners, 2002) (Meunier & Nicolaïdis, 2006) (Aggestam, 2008). However, these approaches have also been criticized for being too idealistic, static, or Eurocentric, overlooking how the EU's external actorness changes and evolves by virtue of its attempts to diffuse its norms and policy practices worldwide. As Serban (2023) argues, a reinforced EU external actorness agenda should look at how EU norms and policy practices interact with each other and how the agency of non-EU actors contributes to the evolving EU external actorness.

This analytical approach has the potential to unpack the EU's learning journey when translating norms into new policy practices (Serban, 2023). An approach to scrutinizing the EU's role as an external actor in political transformation involves employing the concept of policy transfer. This concept encompasses the process through which knowledge concerning policies, administrative structures, or institutions is conveyed from one political system to another. Policy transfer manifests in various forms and extents, encompassing activities like lesson drawing, emulation, adaptation, or imposition. Engagement in policy transfer can also implicate diverse actors and mechanisms, including networks, dialogue, conditionality, or socialization (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

In this context, the EU has been both a source and a recipient of policy transfer in various domains and regions. For instance, the EU has transferred its norms and policy practices to candidate countries through the enlargement process, to neighbouring countries through the European Neighbourhood Policy, to developing countries through development cooperation, or to regional organizations through interregionalism. At the same time, the EU has also learned from other actors and adapted its policies accordingly. For example, the EU has adopted new policy practices such as delegated cooperation or budget support from other donors or has incorporated new norms such as human security or responsibility to protect from other international organizations (Hackenesch, Bergmann, & Orbie, 2021). It is acknowledged that the EU significantly influences political and economic transformations, particularly in nations with a receptive political elite. Within this framework, the attractiveness of full EU membership status persists for less developed countries, both candidates and non-candidates, in the EU's neighboring regions, primarily due to the Union's substantial economic power.

In this context, the attractiveness of these framework programs is contingent on conditionality, with promises aimed at capturing the attention of both the political elite

and the public, emphasizing the significance of the union. Notably, attractions include visa liberalization and mobility facilitation, enabling citizens of EaP countries to travel more easily to the EU for short-term visits and fostering educational, cultural, and professional exchanges. Additionally, trade liberalization and market access provide EaP countries with preferential entry into the EU's single market, aligning their standards and regulations with EU counterparts. Financial assistance and technical cooperation extend substantial grants and loans to support reforms and development projects across various sectors, including energy, transport, environment, agriculture, education, and health. Furthermore, political dialogue and institutional cooperation allow EaP countries to engage in regular consultations and negotiations with the EU on diverse issues of mutual interest, spanning security, foreign policy, justice, and domestic affairs.

Foreign Policy Tools of the EU as an External Actor

The European Union uses a variety of foreign policy tools to protect and maintain its policies and strategic interests, particularly in its immediate neighborhood. To this end, the EU utilizes various tools such as partnerships, instruments contributing to stability and peace, election observation missions, European Union Sanctions, etc., to protect the EU's strategic interests, promote democracy and human rights, conflict prevention and peace-building, and so on. In the past decade, the European Union has endeavored to consolidate and strengthen its influence in foreign policy by organizing the foreign policy instruments it employs within the framework of policies and regulations, for instance, the creation of the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) for funding aid to developing countries for sustainable economic, social, and environmental development and the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and respect for human rights (Parry & Segantini, 2017). European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which transformed into Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe), supports political cooperation and aims to create an area of shared

prosperity and good neighbourliness between European Union (EU) Member States and partner countries (European Commission, 2021), and also Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) which provides development assistance to the candidate countries as pre-accession funds are a sound investment into the future of both the enlargement region and the EU. They support beneficiaries in implementing the necessary political and economic reforms, preparing them for the rights and obligations that come with the EU membership (European Commission, n.d.).

For this purpose, the EU has been involved in various political transformation processes worldwide, using different tools and strategies depending on the context and objectives as an external actor in political transformation. Since the union's inception, the EU has supported democratic transitions and reforms in countries through various instruments such as electoral observation missions, democracy assistance programs, or sanctions (Youngs, et al., 2024). It has contributed to conflict prevention and resolution in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia through diplomatic initiatives, mediation efforts, or peacekeeping operations (EEAS, 2023), promoted human rights and the rule of law in countries such as through dialogues, declarations or human rights defenders' schemes (Kaskina, 2023). Additionally, the EU has fostered sustainable development and climate action through aid cooperation, trade agreements, and green partnerships (De Bruyn, 2019). The sheer economic power of the EU stands out as an essential foreign policy tool on its own. Most of the time, even if neighboring countries are not interested in the EU's conditional integration process, they must comply with EU-compatible standards and policies, albeit to a limited extent, to develop their commercial relations with the EU.

Another critical feature of the EU's approach to its neighbors is the use of soft power, which can be defined as the ability to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and positive incentives rather than coercion or threats. The EU's soft power is based on its normative values, such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, market

economy, and multilateralism, as well as on its economic attractiveness, cultural diversity, and diplomatic influence. The EU seeks to project its soft power in the EaP countries by offering them a range of benefits and incentives (Nye J. S., 2004). The measurement of soft power has been quite tricky since Nye perhaps first popularized this term in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* in 1990. For this reason, explaining the soft power of the EU using previous engagements with the neighboring countries in this chapter is an excellent example of the EU's engagement in Georgia. According to Nye, three primary sources of soft power are "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)." (Nye J. S., 2011, p. 84)

According to Olli Rehn, former European commissioner for enlargement, enlargement is at the core of the EU's soft power – its power to transform its nearest neighbors into functioning democracies, market economies, and true partners in meeting common challenges. Enlargement has proven to be one of the most essential instruments for European security. It reflects the essence of the EU as a civilian power, extending the area of peace and prosperity, liberty and democracy. The EU has achieved far more through its gravitational pull than it could ever have done with a stick or a sword (Rehn, 2007). The prospect of joining the Union can be a powerful catalyst for stabilization, reconciliation, and reform in countries facing complex problems. The accession process provides these countries with a political anchor, economic opportunities, financial assistance, and guidance through a host of policy dilemmas (Rehn, 2007). While enlargement stands out as a prominent tool employed by the EU in its efforts to influence its neighborhood, it also presents a dual challenge within the integration process. For instance, according to Olli Rehn, "Every time that countries gain the impression that the process may not lead to membership, it diminishes the power of our conditionality." (Rehn, 2007)

Like Olli Rehn's suggestion, the EU's soft power in the EaP countries is not without challenges or limitations. The absence of a unified and consistent approach among EU institutions and member states in dealing with Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries could potentially sow confusion or mistrust among EaP partners (Börzel & Risse, 2012, p. 13). Additionally, the EU's accomplishments and benefits may suffer from insufficient visibility and communication in EaP nations, diminishing awareness and appreciation of the EU's role and significance among the public (Chaban, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2019, p. 246). Furthermore, the lack of leverage over EaP countries might diminish the pressure for reforms or compliance with commitments to the EU and pave the way for unconditional incentives from competing actors such as Russia (Ademmer, Delcour, & Kataryna, 2016). The existence of competing or conflicting interests and actors in the EaP region, such as Russia, Turkey, or Iran, poses a challenge to, or may undermine, the EU's influence or appeal in EaP countries (Freire & Simão, 2013, p. 16).

The promotion of Democracy and human rights has been at the core of the EU's external action, which allows the EU to create a favorable public opinion in the countries where the political elite is receptive towards these reforms. However, this also limits the external influence of the EU in authoritarian and hybrid-regime countries. To this end, the EU adopted the Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy in 2012 (Council Of The European Union, 2012) and, to this day, implemented three Action Plans on Human Rights and Democracy. The Union utilizes a wide variety of tools for the implementation of its human rights policy, such as public diplomacy, statements and resolutions in multilateral fora, statements and démarches, sanctions, projects and programs, trial observations, and human rights and political dialogue (EEAS, 2021). Obviously, the European Union is not alone in its efforts to advance democracy in its neighboring regions. However, it stands out due to its significant capabilities, resources, and legal authority for implementing, overseeing,

and upholding democratic systems, good governance, and social unity within its borders and in adjacent areas. Liberal-democratic values and institutions form the fundamental ideological, political, and social basis against hybrid threats, and the EU recognizes this and actively encourages them. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) serves as an illustration of this commitment (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019).

Nevertheless, the EU's role as an external actor in political transformation faces challenges and limitations. Ensuring coherence and consistency in the EU's external action across diverse policies, institutions, and member states remains a critical objective (Gebhard, 2017). Examining the effectiveness and impact of the EU's external action and assessing its ability to achieve objectives and influence other actors becomes crucial (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). Additionally, the legitimacy and credibility of the EU's external action come into question, particularly regarding its adherence to its own values and principles and its responsiveness to the expectations and needs of other actors (Hyde-Price, 2008). The adaptability and resilience of the EU's external action in dealing with changing circumstances and emerging threats represent further challenging considerations in the context of policy transfer to different regions and countries (Biscop, 2016). Another factor affecting the political power of the European Union is the competition with other regional powers. In particular, Russia and China stand out as rivals that limit the EU's political and economic influence in the countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Despite these challenges, the EU's soft power remains a valuable asset and a strategic tool for advancing its interests and values in its neighborhood. The EU should continue to use its soft power innovatively and effectively to support the democratic transformation and economic development of the EaP countries, as well as to enhance their resilience and stability in a turbulent regional environment.

In the context of Europeanization and European integration, a retrospective examination of the 1990s, including post-communist states such as Hungary, Poland,

Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and others, reveals that the concept of Europeanization served as external stimuli influencing not only political aspects but also civil, economic elites, and various factors across the political spectrum. This external incentive played a pivotal role in shaping behaviors that favored democratic processes within domestic politics (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). In the case of the South Caucasus, until the early 2000s, the European Union (EU) did not prioritize engagement and integration with the countries of the region. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both the European Commission (EC) and EU member states maintained a relatively low level of engagement in this area. Only a few member states had established embassies in all three South Caucasus countries, and there was a single EC delegation in Georgia responsible for the entire region. Crucially, unlike the agreements with Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the agreements with South Caucasus countries did not include the objective of establishing a free trade area with the EU. Consequently, their coverage was considerably narrower. Additionally, the EU did not actively engage in the conflict resolution mechanisms related to the conflicts that emerged in the South Caucasus, such as the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

When comparing how the European Union (EU) shapes its policies and the way Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia respond to them, it becomes evident that there is a growing divergence in the methods the EU employs to manage its relationships with these nations. However, this differentiation has not necessarily resulted in the anticipated increase in the EU's effectiveness and visibility in the region so far. The analysis underscores that the current approaches suffer from three notable shortcomings. Firstly, by not significantly intensifying its involvement in conflict resolution, the EU fails to address the security requirements of these countries,

consequently not assuming a central role as a security provider in the region. Secondly, by essentially relinquishing political conditions in its engagements, the EU appears to tolerate undemocratic developments within these partner countries. This erodes the EU's reputation as a promoter of democracy, especially in the eyes of civil society organizations. The extent to which the EU can foster democracy through enhanced engagement remains uncertain. Lastly, the extensive reliance on exporting the EU's body of laws and regulations, known as the *acquis*, frequently falls short of meeting the specific needs of these countries, as illustrated in all three cases (Delcour & Katharina, *The EU's Policy in the South Caucasus*, 2018).

EU as a Transformative External Power in Georgia

One of the main actors that has supported and influenced Georgia's political transformation since its independence is the European Union (EU). The European Union has employed conditionality as a soft power mechanism, tying its support and collaboration with Georgia to well-defined conditions pertaining to democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. This approach has motivated Georgia to initiate a range of political, economic, and institutional reforms. The EU has been engaged with Georgia through various instruments and mechanisms, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Association Agreement (AA), the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and the visa liberalization regime. These frameworks have provided Georgia with political and economic incentives and technical and financial assistance to implement reforms and align its legislation and standards with those of the EU (Delcour & Katharina, *The EU's Policy in the South Caucasus*, 2018).

This holds true, especially in Georgia's case. EU's ambassador to Georgia, Pavel Herczyński, defines the primary motivators behind the EU's engagement with Georgia as "it has probably been the speed and success of Georgia's transformation during the

past thirty years. From the day of its foundation, the EU has been enlarging and, despite challenges, continues to be an important force for peace and prosperity in Europe and worldwide. The EU tries to bring peace and prosperity to its partners and, by doing so, ensures that we have a predictable world based on international norms. The EU and Georgia have signed an Association Agreement that includes a free trade area and a visa-free regime, and I really hope that our relations move forward and Georgia is granted candidate status. For this, the time to act is now” (Koridze, 2023).

The South Caucasus region, which has connections to Central Asia and resource-rich areas, holds a unique appeal for the European Union. Furthermore, it serves as a crucial link between Europe and Asia. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the backing of global and regional powers played a vital role in the growth of the newly independent South Caucasus nations. In the 1990s, the European Union prioritized the execution of initiatives and projects aimed at fostering the economic and social advancement of these region's countries. These programs played a significant role in enhancing the infrastructure of the three South Caucasus countries (Aliyeva, 2022). Therefore, a detailed examination of the European Union's significant involvement in Georgia since its independence in 1991 holds considerable importance, even though the extent of this engagement varied in different periods due to the political dynamics in both Georgia and Europe. When assessing the relationship between the European Union and Georgia, it is appropriate to categorize it into three distinct periods. From Georgia's independence in 1991 until the 2000s, the European Union's engagement and support for Georgia were notably limited and not part of any strategic plan. Only after the EU appointed a special representative to Georgia in 2003 and the Rose Revolution, which led to the establishment of the Ministry of State for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in 2004 by the new Georgian government, did relations begin to take on a new dimension—with Georgia's entry into the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) based on the respective decision of the EU Council in 2004 and the following adoption

of the EU-Georgia Action Plan in 2006 opened the door for the EU to make a practical impact in the transformation of the country's politics.

In the early 1990s, even before Georgia had a clear legal framework for its relationship with the EU, the EU launched the TRACECA program to develop an East-West transportation corridor through the South Caucasus, followed by the EU-funded INOGATE program for the development of gas and oil pipelines from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus to the EU (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019). However, despite the region's apparent importance for the EU's energy security, taking a closer look at the early engagement of the European Union with Georgia during its early years of independence, including programs like TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) and up until the 2003 Rose revolution reveals critical deficiencies of EU's strategy towards Georgia. The Early state of the EU-Georgia cooperation, the EU's TACIS, and PCA programmes did not significantly advance the country's nascent democracy. From 1992 through 2002, in the scope of these programs and assistance instruments, EC/EU in total allocated € 395 million in grants to Georgia, excluding TACIS Regional or member states' assistance (Khuntsaria, External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union, 2014, p. 38). Additionally, between 1992 and 2006, within the framework of the TACIS, the European Commission allocated 131 million Euros in financial assistance for the socioeconomic development of Georgia (Lomia & Lomia, 2020).

From 1992 to 2003, Georgia had six different TACIS action plans. Overall, under TACIS programs, €84 million was provided to Georgia in order to deal with the related reforms in the country. However, the programs under TACIS in that period were primarily focused on economic development, rehabilitation, and building infrastructure and institutions. At the beginning of the program, democratic agenda was not a top priority for the EU, and the technical assistance provided under the program was a standalone activity; however, after the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation

Agreement between the EU and Georgia in 1999, TACIS became one of the significant instruments of implementation of the PCA in Georgia (Khuntsaria, External Democracy Promotion in Georgia: the Role of the European Union, 2014, p. 50). The PCA, which fully came into force in 1999, provided substantial incentives and opportunities for Georgia's Europeanization. Its stipulations obligated the country to various "soft obligations," including the establishment and enhancement of democratic institutions, the embrace of sound governance principles, and the formulation and acceptance of a sectoral policy. In return for these objectives, the EU committed to supporting Georgia across multiple sectors of its economy. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was characterized by a lack of consistency and clarity, primarily because the agreement did not provide a comprehensive roadmap for reform. Monitoring the intricate fulfillment of Georgia's "soft obligations," as outlined in the agreement, proved to be challenging due to ambiguous quality standards and timelines (Gogolashvili & Gvedashvili, Georgia-EU Relations and Future Perspectives, 2017, pp. 7-8).

In hindsight, PCA was an essential milestone in EU-Georgia relations since it paved the way for a much more formal and active political format for Georgia's Europeanization. The PCA covered a wide range of areas for reform and development, such as political cooperation, democracy, human rights, trade, energy, customs, education, monetary policy, anti-corruption, and cultural cooperation (Partnership And Cooperation Agreement, 1996). The agreement's apparent aim was to approximate Georgia's legislation to that of the EU in the abovementioned areas, even though it failed to convince the Georgian political elite to commit fully to the agreement's objectives. The implementation of the European Security Strategy (ESS), notably highlighting the significance of a stable and secure neighborhood for the EU, marked a pivotal development in 2003. Simultaneously, Georgia experienced a significant shift in its foreign policy towards the West following the 2003 "Rose Revolution," accompanied

by groundbreaking reforms. This strategic reorientation and Georgia's pro-European stance intensified the EU's interest in the country (Grigoriadis & Gugulashvili, 2022).

Upon the European Union's entry into Georgia, the initiation of substantial engagement can be traced to a later period, particularly around 2012. Although there were foundational efforts during the Shevardnadze era, such as the first partnership agreement in 1997, it became evident that a more substantial incentive was needed for the EU's involvement to exert a significant impact on political processes. This increased incentive materialized, notably from 2014 onwards, marked by considerations to sign the Association Agreement, trade agreements, and, most significantly, the visa liberalization in 2017 between Georgia and the European Union (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership

On June 14, 2004, Georgia became a participant in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) following the decision of the EU Council. Subsequently, on November 14, 2006, the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan was approved. In 2009, the EU introduced the Eastern Partnership initiative, encompassing six neighboring countries—Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—with the goal of advancing democracy, good governance, socio-economic reforms, and fostering people-to-people relations. To that end, Georgia joined the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) in 2009, initiated at the Prague Summit on May 7, 2009. Undoubtedly, the objectives outlined in these framework programs have become significant benchmarks for Georgia's political, democratic, and socio-economic reforms over the past decade, playing a pivotal role in the Europeanization of Georgia. Despite the absence of a direct route or even a vague promise of full membership, these initiatives served as potent tools for the EU's policy transfer in different countries. The primary rationale behind these programs was to

extend privileged partnerships to countries that did not fall within the EU's enlargement agenda at the time.

In this context, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) aimed to extend the advantages of the European Union's enlargement in 2004 to neighboring countries. These benefits include stability, security, and well-being, all of which are distinct from full EU membership. The ENP is built on a commitment to shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and respect for human rights, as well as the principles of a market economy. With the EU's expansion came new boundaries, prompting the EU to reconsider its approach to states on its periphery and the policies it adopts in response to potential and actual threats emanating from these regions (Aliyeva, 2022). To this end, EaP and the AA, which belong to the ENP toolkit and, as such, are political association tools that are not meant to pave the way for partner countries towards EU membership. The most significant objective that can be achieved within this framework is the creation of a free trade area, along with political association based on dialogue, cooperation, and conditionality, as well as on promoting civil society participation and empowerment (Gegeshidze, *The European Perspectives of Georgia: How to bring closer the Future*, 2018, p. 11).

The conflict in August 2008 bolstered pro-European sentiments and expanded the cohort of Georgians advocating for EU integration. Despite occasional instability in the aftermath of the war, Georgia persisted in its trajectory toward Europeanization. The Russo-Georgian war in 2008 served as an early alert to the EU, underscoring that its security extends well beyond its existing eastern boundaries and emphasizing the profound repercussions neighborhood developments can have on its overall well-being (Grigoriadis & Gugulashvili, 2022). Furthermore, the EU has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in Georgia, especially after the 2008 war with Russia over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by deploying a civilian monitoring mission (EUMM) to observe the ceasefire agreement and facilitate dialogue

between the parties. The EU has also supported the Geneva International Discussions, which are the leading platform for addressing the security and humanitarian issues related to the conflict. A European studies researcher (PhD) explained the reasoning behind the ENP and EaP policies as such in one of our interviews;

Since the EU came up with the ENP policy in order to establish the buffer zone that would have been more democratic and thus a better neighbor for itself (since it realized that yet another enlargement was looming), Georgia fell under its orbit. EaP was a bolder statement that allowed EaP countries more support from the EU as well as more integration, and under EaP, the prospects of Georgia being closer to the Union became more real. After the 2008 war, the EU played a significant role as well. From being more of a guiding/coaching institution, the EU turned into a protection shield, and in that regard, Europe played a political role as well. Overall, the support of the European Union is quite significant for the country. (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023)

Another pivotal component of the ENP is the Eastern Partnership initiative, inaugurated in 2009 with the objective of fostering increased cooperation and integration between the EU and its six eastern neighbors. The Eastern Partnership initiative was conceived as a dual-track undertaking featuring both bilateral and multilateral dimensions running concurrently, and the latter dimension aimed to foster a collaborative policy culture that addresses shared regional challenges. It was conceived as a forum for the exchange of information and experiences related to the partner countries' efforts in transition, reform, and modernization. Additionally, it was designed to provide the EU with an extra instrument to support and facilitate these ongoing processes (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019). Indeed, the Eastern Partnership aligned with the enduring trajectory of European and Euro-Atlantic political and scholarly discourse, which had wielded significant influence since the aftermath of World War II. It reflected the growing consensus among academics, policymakers, and diplomats that transcending narrow nationalistic perspectives in favor of promoting multi- or supra-national orientations was essential for fostering stability and prosperity

in Europe. Despite the intense confrontation of the Cold War era between Western democracies and the Soviet Union, both the European Community project and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established to safeguard the defense interests of the USA and its allies, were rooted in the principle of international cooperative security (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019).

With the introduction of the European Union's Neighborhood Policy, the EU has transformed how it approaches the South Caucasus region. The EU has started to provide not just economic assistance but also political support and initiatives aimed at bolstering civil society. The Eastern Partnership program has notably contributed to this deepening of support. Although the Eastern Partnership program may not have achieved its objectives entirely, it has created opportunities for diverse collaboration with the three South Caucasus nations—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—and has facilitated bilateral cooperation between these countries and the European Union (Aliyeva, 2022). The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) program has significant shortcomings from Georgia's perspective. Firstly, it does not provide any clear path toward EU membership, and the recognition of Georgia as an 'Eastern European country' and the 2014 Association Agreement does not provide much solace in this regard. Secondly, the EaP does not offer any solutions for Georgia's pressing security concerns. For instance, when it comes to Georgia's territorial integrity, the EU's actions have been limited to reiterating its support without taking more substantial measures, aside from having a monitoring mission on the Georgian side (Aliyeva, 2022).

The Eastern Partnership was designed to bolster the political and economic reforms of the partner countries while fortifying their resilience and stability, which operates on four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance, and stability; economic integration and alignment with EU policies; energy security; and people-to-people contacts. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership provides diverse opportunities for multilateral collaboration, including annual summits, ministerial meetings, a

parliamentary assembly, and a civil society forum (European Commission, n.d.). Active involvement of civil society and interpersonal connections play a vital role in cultivating shared understanding and confidence between the EU and Eastern Partnership (EaP) nations. This collaboration extends beyond, promoting mutual understanding among the EaP nations through diverse forums and networks involving civil society organizations, media entities, academic institutions, and youth groups (Delcour & Wolczuk, Spoiler or facilitator of democratization?: Russia's role in Georgia and Ukraine, 2015). The EaP has also been the main instrument for promoting democracy and human rights in countries, including the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in return for a framework for political association and economic integration with the EU. In this context, the EaP is tailored to each partner country's specific needs and aspirations and is based on mutual commitments to shared values, such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

The EU also provides financial and technical assistance to support democracy and human rights in the EaP countries through various instruments and programs. For instance, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) supports civil society organizations that work on human rights protection, democratic participation, electoral observation, and advocacy (European Parliament, 2015). The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) supports sectoral reforms that aim to strengthen democracy, human rights, and good governance in the partner countries (EU Neighbours). The EU's efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the EaP countries, particularly in Georgia, have yielded some positive results over the years. For example, some of the partner countries have made progress in conducting free and fair elections, strengthening judicial independence, fighting corruption, ensuring media freedom, protecting minorities, and implementing human rights conventions. However, there are also significant challenges and setbacks that hamper the democratic development of the region, such as political polarization, authoritarian tendencies,

political instability, armed conflicts, human rights violations, shrinking civic space, and external interference.

When we look at the ENP and EaP programs, we see that there is a general criticism in the literature regarding the scope of these programs. Of course, the most prominent of these criticisms is that these programs strictly avoid the membership perspective and that there is no promise of enlargement in return for the reforms to be made in Georgia. However, when we look at why these programs were created, it is a fact that they emerged as an alternative to EU enlargement. Therefore, if we consider the claims from the Georgian side that they were ahead of Moldova and Ukraine in terms of European integration progress, these programs have been instrumental in this achievement. For instance, an academic based in Tbilisi also mentioned this issue in one of our interviews.

Those programs gave Georgia technical capacity, which is the key area. And if you ask Georgian Dream folks what they think, they will say we are technically more capable than Moldova and Ukraine in the current political discourse. Moreover, taking advantage of those programs in Georgia is why that is actually true. At the same time, that criticism of the programs sort of misses the point because the key thing here is that Georgia's European integration is fundamentally a political decision. It is about politics, values, and actually wanting to be a member of that European family, which means fundamentally aligning values. Thus, Georgia faced a historic opportunity in large part, and that criticism does not feel fair at some point because, basically, with those types of programs, the EU is set to do development work. But also saying, when the political moment's ripe, this will help you make the argument. Thus, those programs allow you to basically say we are ready on all of these fronts; otherwise, Georgia would not be as ready without those. (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Overall, thanks to the ENP and EaP initiatives, the EU wields significant soft power in Georgia, which has been instrumental in shaping the country's domestic policies, governance structures, and aspirations, as well as garnering tremendous support from the public. These programs not only paved the way for Georgia's political

and economic association with the EU but also allowed the EU to promote its soft power through cultural programs and exchanges, including supporting cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions that foster a sense of shared European identity and create people to people linkages.

Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia

One of the critical components of the ENP is the Association Agreements (AAs), which establish a new legal basis for the relations between the EU and some of the EaP countries. The AAs include provisions on political dialogue, sectoral cooperation, trade liberalization, visa facilitation, and mobility, as well as on human rights and democracy. The AAs also set up dedicated platforms for dialogue and monitoring, such as the Association Councils, the Association Committees, and the Subcommittee on Human Rights and Democracy. The Association Agreement serves as the basis for the approximation process, and the implementation of the whole agreement could take years. At the same time, the whole progress is monitored by association committees and progress reports.

On 29 November 2013, the European Union and Georgia initialized the Association Agreement (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit. On 26 June 2014, the EU-Georgia Association Agenda was adopted. The Association Agenda established a set of jointly agreed priorities for the period 2014-2016 to prepare for the Association Agreement's implementation, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). On 27 June 2014, the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), was signed in Brussels. On 1 July 2016, the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia was fully entered into force.

Significant reforms have been carried out in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, the penitentiary system, education, science and innovation, agriculture, transportation, public service reform, energy, regional development, decentralization, and others. The benefits of the Association Agreement have been instrumental in Georgia's transformation towards a European country. Association agreement has undoubtedly brought Georgia closer to the EU, providing Georgian companies access to the EU market, enabling Georgian citizens to travel to Europe without needing a visa, and bringing 70% of EU acquis to Georgia's legislation. Moreover, thanks to AA, the EU has become Georgia's largest and most important foreign trade partner and has provided more than €1 billion of direct financial aid to Georgia over the course of eight years (Darchiashvili I. , 2022).

The EU's Ambassador to Georgia, Pavel Herczyński, noted that substantial work has been accomplished since the Association Agreement to bring Georgia and its legislation more in line with the European Union. It is challenging to pinpoint a few "most crucial" areas, but he emphasized the EU's significant support for businesses, particularly those led by women. This support extends to initiatives promoting environmental sustainability and public health, enhancing educational opportunities for young people throughout the country, addressing regional disparities, and investing in infrastructure projects, including those under the Economic and Investment Plan (Koridze, 2023). Furthermore, the ambassador highlighted concrete benefits for tens of thousands of Georgian citizens who have gained new skills through various programs, received modern equipment, or traveled to the European Union due to visa liberalization. As a result of reforms associated with the Association Agreement, over 8,000 standards have already been harmonized. This means that specific European standards, such as those related to food safety and energy efficiency, are already positively impacting Georgian citizens. With Georgia being one of the countries in the enlargement process, progress toward reforms is expected to accelerate, aided by the

EU-Georgia Association Agreement that has helped both sides achieve their objectives (Koridze, 2023). Moreover, the EU provided technical assistance and expertise in various sectors, helping Georgia modernize its institutions and regulations in line with EU standards. The EU trained more than five thousand judges, lawyers, prison and probation staff, and public defenders (Lomia & Lomia, 2020).

Overall, the implementation of the AA has been the most critical and substantial undertaking in the integration process by both sides. However, there is also criticism towards the implementation of ENP/EaP and, by extension, AA reforms by the Georgian governments. For instance, an Associate Professor from Ilia State University also argued that as part of the EU initiatives such as ENP and EaP, in some fields, perhaps too much was done when more effort should have been made from the Georgian side (Associate Professor from Ilia State University, personal communication, 2023).

Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area and Economic Assistance of the EU to Georgia

The EU has been a critical partner for Georgia's economic development, providing financial assistance, technical assistance, and market access. The EU is Georgia's largest donor, having allocated over 3 billion euros in grants since 1992. The EU is also Georgia's largest trading partner, accounting for about 30% of Georgia's total trade. In 2014, the EU and Georgia signed an Association Agreement (AA), which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that aims to create a closer political association and economic integration between them. The AA/DCFTA offers Georgia preferential access to the EU's single market of over 500 million consumers and creates opportunities for trade, investment, growth, and jobs.

The European Union views and employs legal approximation as a means to realize economic integration. Economic integration, in turn, can be regarded as an

objective within the European Union's foreign policy towards neighboring regions, with the aim to expand prosperity, stability, and security beyond the borders of the European Union. In essence, economic integration with the European Union is designed to assist neighboring countries in their pursuit of economic development, and the alignment of national laws with EU legislation is instrumental in realizing this objective (Gabrichidze, 2018, p. 57). To that end, DCFTA, in theory, should boost Georgia's economic and regulatory alignment with the EU, enhancing its appeal to foreign investors and traders. Moreover, access to one of the world's largest and wealthiest markets, the European Union, serves as a robust catalyst for the diversification and advancement of Georgian businesses, local production, and exports. This access provides a substantial foundation for enhancing Georgia's appeal to direct foreign investments. Consequently, this influx of investments is poised to facilitate the introduction of novel technologies and expertise, fostering the development of competitive local products and generating employment opportunities. Furthermore, it should contribute to the establishment of a trading system aligned with the EU market, stimulating economic growth through increased exports, improved product quality, and overall economic development (Abuselidze, 2019).

Initially, the Georgian leadership contemplated entering into a conventional free trade agreement, primarily centered on eliminating tariff barriers, aligning with its then libertarian economic stance. However, after conducting a feasibility study, the EU expressed a more substantial interest in an FTA+ arrangement. The EU argued that the most substantial advantages would be realized through a Deep FTA+ that entails a significant alignment of laws with the priorities outlined in the ENP Action Plan for Georgia. Additionally, the agreement would encompass supplementary measures on aspects such as competition and corruption, coupled with their practical implementation. This approach would entail a rebranding of Georgia as a secure and appealing investment destination (Chkhikvadze, et al., 2019, p. 61). However, further

research indicates that the rise in Georgia's exports to the EU is negligible, and the proportion of domestic exports to the EU in relation to total domestic exports has diminished. The nation's export sophistication remains modest, with a high concentration of exported products, suggesting a lack of successful structural economic transformation. Notably, the study reveals a significant surge in the export of resource-based products, while high-tech products are almost nonexistent (Topuria & Khundadze, 2022, p. 33).

Of course, there was a fear that the FTA with the EU may undermine the socio-economic fabric and would not benefit the Georgian economy. Indeed, the Georgian government aimed to disassociate the 'free trade' negotiations from the ENP process to expedite progress and avoid potential delays stemming from the comprehensive assessment of the Action Plan's implementation, particularly in trade and regulatory aspects. In the period from 2006 to 2008, Georgia experienced a slowdown in its economic and regulatory alignment with the EU. Critical reforms outlined in the Action Plan, including enacting a new labor code, competition policy, food safety regulations, and intellectual property rights, remained unaddressed. Despite Georgia's interest in enhancing relations with the EU, the reluctance to pursue these reforms can be attributed to two main factors: the perceived costs of reforms and ideological and normative divergences between the EU and the Georgian economic authorities were substantial at that time (Sierra, 2011, p. 1385).

Additional findings reveal an excessive focus on legal harmonization mechanisms within the agreement. This approach, while lessening the pressure for essential structural economic transformation in the country, simultaneously raises operational and administrative costs. Consequently, the government and local SMEs are reluctant to fully adopt EU standards and norms. It highlights the asymmetric nature of the DCFTA, as most of its terms reinforce the economic superiority of the EU and European SMEs (Topuria & Khundadze, 2022).

Despite not being a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Georgia maintains increasingly close trade ties with its member nations. Export trends show a rising inclination towards the European Union (EU) and a diminishing trend towards CIS countries. This shift is largely attributed to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) signed with the EU. The DCFTA encourages the enhancement of product quality and competitiveness within Georgia, facilitating the establishment of a trading framework aligned with EU market standards (Abuselidze, 2019). However, a closer look at Georgia's foreign trade figures reveals that the country's economy still depends more on the CIS countries than the EU members. For instance, in 2023, Georgian exports to CIS countries amounted to 65.9% of total exports, more than six-fold of the exports to the EU (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). This also creates a dilemma for the Georgian political elite; despite the number of economic reforms and commitment to economic integration with the EU, non-EU trade is still much larger than the trade with the EU 27. Therefore, to maintain the development of the Georgian economy, the ruling elite, for example, may very well choose to develop non-EU trade despite the EU's wishes. Obviously, the DCFTA agreement, which entered into force in 2016, is a vivid and practical step from the EU to Georgia and from Georgia to the EU as well; on the one hand, the EU is allowing Georgia to diversify and enlarge its market, on the other hand, Georgia is asked to meet specific requirements to reach its goal, that is to reach new market that would allow prosperity of Georgia's economy, which has been dependent on its oppressor, Russia (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023).

It should also be noted that the EU has become Georgia's most significant donor in the process of Georgia's European integration. Between 2007 and 2020, under the ENP/ENPI and EaP programs, the EU provided Georgia with €1.7 billion in financial assistance (Lomia & Lomia, 2020). However, despite this, it is evident that there have been a few problems in economic relations as well. For example, during the COVID-19

pandemic, a decision was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU on 25 May 2020 to provide Georgia with a Macro-Financial Assistance package of EUR 150 million. The first installment of EUR 75 million was disbursed in November 2020. The second installment was canceled by the Commission following Georgia's decision to refrain from requesting it and given the non-fulfillment of a vital policy condition related to the judicial system (European Commission, 2020).

Visa Liberalization Action Plan

One of the most significant visible results of EU integration and influence is the visa-free travel right granted to Georgian citizens within the scope of VLAP. Successful reforms implemented under the Association Agreement have facilitated the successful completion of the visa liberalization process in 2017, and the visa-free regime with the European Union/Schengen area countries has come into force for citizens of Georgia. In this context, VLAP has been the most successful and beneficial step for the AA from Georgia's perspective. Since the short-term visa exemption started, Georgian citizens have conducted more than 1.5 million visits to various European countries (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022).

As stipulated in the Visa liberalization agreement reached with the EU in 2013, Georgia committed itself to implementing anti-discrimination legislation. The legislation was introduced to the Georgian parliament in 2014, subsequently endorsed by the parliament and then-president Margvelashvili. The 'Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination' officially took effect on May 7 of the same year. Following this, the European Commission issued its fourth and final progress report on Georgia's adherence to the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) on December 18, 2015. In light of the Commission's report, a legislative proposal was presented on March 9, 2016, aiming to facilitate short-term visa waiver for Georgian citizens by amending Regulation (EC) No 539/2001. Consequently, on March 28, 2017, visa-free travel within

the EU became accessible to Georgian citizens. However, the adoption of the anti-discrimination law remains a contentious issue in Georgia. Criticism has been voiced by various actors, including the influential Georgian Orthodox Church, denouncing the legislation as an endorsement of practices deemed objectionable, and cautioning legislators about potential public backlash (Karadag, *Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis*, 2019). While the EU and other communities provide assistance and support to the vulnerable communities in Georgia, the EU has been very clear about the protection of vulnerable minorities in Georgia called the Georgian government at every opportunity to apply the necessary laws and make sure these communities are protected against hate and violence (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023).

One of the apparent advantages arising from the relationship between the European Union and Georgia is the EU's implementation of a visa liberalization regime for Georgian citizens. This policy permits citizens of Georgia to travel to the majority of EU countries (Schengen area) for brief stays without the need for a visa. This initiative has played a pivotal role in enhancing interpersonal connections and cultivating a perception of closer integration with Europe while giving Georgian citizens unprecedented mobility. Of course, there are also downsides to the Visa-liberalization regime with the Schengen area of the EU for Georgia. Due to the Visa-liberalization regime with the Schengen area, the country saw a negative migration balance between 2018 and 2021 (Civil.ge, 2023b). While migration to the EU countries contributes directly to the Georgian economy in the form of remittances, which is very high in the case of the Georgian economy, migration of young labor might have negative impacts in the long term.

Georgia maintains specific formats and relationships with European political structures, encompassing their representatives, technocrats, bureaucrats, and other key figures within social and political structures. However, there is a need to establish

people-to-people connections, and the implementation of a visa-free regime is anticipated to enhance these connections. Various educational initiatives, such as Erasmus and, more recently, Horizon programs, have been introduced to emulate and invigorate the Georgian educational system, particularly within academia. Although these efforts have commenced relatively recently, gauging progress necessitates allowing time for their effects to manifest (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). Overall, it can be said that visa liberalization has been an important soft power tool for the EU to create people-to-people linkages through cultural exchanges.

Membership Perspective and Road to the Candidacy Status

Before the war in Ukraine, Georgia was planning to complete its application for EU membership in 2024 (Kartozia, 2021). Undoubtedly, the unprovoked attack by Russia in February 2022, followed by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, has significantly altered the geopolitical and security dynamics for the Union, opening the path for the potential enlargement of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Of course, the initial plan for Georgia to submit its membership application in 2024 raises questions about how such an application would have been received in certain European capitals, considering the prevailing mentality regarding the enlargement before the Ukraine war. Therefore, this is a historic opportunity for Georgia, and the recognition of this opportunity by every stakeholder remains crucial for the success of the accession process.

The journey towards EU candidacy proved to be a challenging path for Georgia. Despite granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia encountered delays, waiting for more than a year before attaining candidacy status. Instead, it received a list of twelve priorities for swift reforms (EU Commission, 2022). This lagging behind Moldova and Ukraine naturally generated discontent among both the Georgian public and the governing elite (Senior Government Official, personal communication, 2022).

For example, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili highlighted Georgia's advancement, asserting that it outperformed other Eastern Partnership countries in various dimensions, including jurisdiction, free trade, and the visa-free regime (Dobordjginidze, 2022).

We also observed periods of heightened tension in EU-Georgia relations leading up to the granting of candidacy status. During this period, notable instances include the government and opposition's inability to adhere to the April 19 agreement, mediated by the EU, the persistent detention of former president Saakashvili, the legal proceedings against Nika Gvaramia, and the proposed foreign agents' law, perceived as a potential threat to media freedoms which the ruling party, alongside its affiliated party, sought to pass this legislation through parliament, contributing to the public rallies that prompted inquiries about Georgia both within the EU and globally.

Nonetheless, despite the limited progress in the twelve recommendations, the EU Council, considering geopolitical factors, opted to grant candidate status to Georgia in December 2023 (Civil.ge, 2023c). Simultaneously, the Commission expressed the desire for the resolution of the remaining nine issues on the understanding that the necessary steps are being taken by the Georgian authorities (EU Commission, 2023, p. 25). Naturally, these nine unresolved matters suggest that, despite prolonged integration endeavors spanning decades, the EU and Georgia might encounter significant challenges preceding and following membership negotiations, underscoring the limitations of the EU's influence in Georgia.

When contemplating an EU enlargement strategy encompassing Georgia, pivotal questions arise regarding Georgia's territorial integrity and the Russian military's presence in two regions of the country. In the past, enlargement tended to go hand in hand with NATO membership, particularly in the East, where NATO membership preceded EU membership because the former addressed security issues. In this sense,

Ukraine's and Moldova's cases will be crucial examples for Georgia. Georgia is also a key country in terms of the energy security of the European continent. Since July 2017, Georgia has been a member of the EU-established Energy Community and must regulate and liberalize its energy market to meet EU standards. Georgia's involvement in the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) projects may increase the EU and NATO's interest in accepting Georgia as a prospective member (Darchiashvili & Bakradze, 2019). In this respect, the security question is one of the issues that can play an important role in Georgia's EU membership process. In this respect, in addition to the political, economic, and social challenges, this issue will be carefully examined in detail in the next chapter of this research.

Conclusions

Beyond the political, economic, military, and soft powers wielded by individual member states, the EU exercises considerable influence through powers delegated to it by its member countries, contributing to an exceptionally significant and extensive political, economic, and soft power domain. The EU obviously has a wide variety of foreign policy tools to promote European norms, values, and standards in its nearby neighbourhood. In the case of Georgia, it appears that the EU initially viewed the South Caucasus region as a whole without making distinctions. However, as both Armenia and Azerbaijan failed to demonstrate the required commitment to the EU's conditionality-based neighborhood policies, primarily due to security and territorial disputes, Georgia emerged as the country most receptive to EU integration in the region.

Indeed, the EU's neighborhood policies and instruments are fraught with inherent challenges and uncertainties, and their success is not assured in every context or domain. Consequently, aside from adopting a tailored approach for each country, the EU must proactively and reactively adjust its norms and policy practices to

accommodate each region's evolving realities, expectations, or demands accordingly. The role of the EU as an external actor in political transformation is not static or predetermined; instead, it is dynamic and contingent. Therefore, the EU is obligated to consistently redefine its identity, interests, and values, as well as its capabilities, strategies, and tools, along with its relations, interactions, and influences. It has to learn from its successful and unsuccessful experiences, from its partners, allies, and competitors, and from its norms, policies, and practices.

In this context, it is an indisputable fact that the European Union's engagement with Georgia, spanning over three decades since its independence, has established the EU as one of the foremost actors in Georgia. However, the phase in which both sides began to attach greater significance to their relations aligns with the aftermath of the Rose Revolution in Georgia. Following this pivotal turning point, relations gained strategic impetus as Georgia became actively involved in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), embarking on a comprehensive political transformation facilitated by EU assistance based on conditionality. Throughout this process, Georgia distinguished itself from other South Caucasus countries in the eyes of the EU, emerging as part of a trio alongside Moldova and Ukraine within the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Examining the past three decades of relations, the European Union (EU) has increasingly taken a prominent role in Georgia, particularly after the 2008 war. The EU's pivotal role in orchestrating a ceasefire and its ongoing monitoring mission, the EUMM, in de-facto border regions to monitor the situation, has established the EU's reputation as a dependable partner and guardian in the eyes of both the Georgian public and political elite. Initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), Association Agreement, Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP), and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) have not only facilitated numerous structural reforms in Georgia but have also expedited the nation's political and economic integration.

Additionally, these initiatives have played a crucial role in fostering social integration by nurturing people-to-people connections.

Indeed, formalizing these agreements through signatures does not imply exhaustive implementation of all articles and regulations nor guarantee universal success across all domains within these initiatives. The portrayal of EU-Georgia relations in recent years is not universally positive, with challenges and complexities existing alongside the achievements. We also saw that not every EU initiative is immediately successful or beneficial for Georgia, such as in the case of DCFTA. Despite the economic reforms, the countries' foreign trade with the EU is not at the desired level, and trade with the EU's economic competitors remains significant and crucial for the Georgian economy.

Georgia's pursuit of EU membership alongside Ukraine and Moldova in the aftermath of the Ukrainian conflict elevated the dynamics of their relations with the EU to a much different level. Within this framework, the intricate process of Georgia's EU candidacy has recently assumed prominence in scrutinizing Georgia-EU relations. This candidacy process has concurrently functioned as a litmus test for the state of relations and the progress of Georgia's European integration. Previously less prominent issues have surfaced through the twelve recommendations outlined by the EU Commission, underscoring the significance of the Georgian political elite's commitment to addressing these matters. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, the prolonged pre-candidacy process has also revealed the risk of some Georgian political elites moving away from the EU path. In this context, although Georgia fully met only three criteria, the EU granted candidate country status to Georgia in December 2023 by postponing the other nine issues. Of course, the EU's failure to persuade Georgian officials to take tangible measures and reforms on the remaining nine issues, despite the prolonged pre-candidacy process, has revealed the limits of its soft power, even though the EU is considered a compelling foreign actor in Georgia.

While there appears to be a widespread agreement among the population, civil society entities, and political figures in Georgia regarding the nation's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, it is essential to distinguish between establishing a political association with the EU through ENP frameworks and the distinct process of becoming a member. Achieving the latter requires the Georgian ruling elite to undertake substantial and practically applicable reforms, which they are currently hesitant to pursue for various reasons. The forthcoming domestic political developments in Georgia and the duration until the start of membership negotiations may offer insights into the country's path to EU membership. It is evident that the membership process will span over several years, yet the challenges faced by Georgia prior to candidacy might manifest in different forms in the ensuing years. Such circumstances can potentially induce enlargement fatigue within both the political elite and the public, constituting an inherent aspect of the EU membership trajectory that warrants consideration.

The evident contributions and assistance extended by the EU to Georgia over the years are clearly visible in this chapter. A noteworthy emphasis should be placed on the ability of the Georgian public and governing elite to fulfill the expectations set by the EU throughout this course. The EU supported Georgia's efforts to strengthen its democratic institutions, such as the parliament, the judiciary, the media, and civil society, through various programs and projects that promote good governance, accountability, transparency, and participation. It promoted media freedom and freedom of expression in Georgia, supporting independent journalism and media outlets for fostering democracy and transparency. The EU has also monitored elections and provided recommendations for improving the electoral system and ensuring free and fair polls. Moreover, the EU has advocated for the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Georgia, especially for vulnerable groups such as minorities, women, children, and persons with disabilities. In this context, the European Union has played a significant role in facilitating the enduring political,

economic, and social transformation experienced by Georgia since gaining independence.

CHAPTER FOUR – Challenges for Further Integration and Limitations of The EU in Georgia

As evident from other chapters of this study, significant challenges persist in the relations between the European Union (EU) and Georgia, both in contemporary times and the recent past. The initiation of Georgia's EU membership application and subsequent assessments by the EU Commission have accentuated these challenges. Following the evaluation, the EU called for the execution of a reform package comprising twelve recommendations to confer candidate status upon Georgia in 2022. A closer examination of these twelve provisions reveals the imperative need for substantial political reforms and the inherent challenges in the practical implementation of these reforms due to various factors, mainly stemming from the social, economic, and political situation in Georgia.

When examining the dynamics of EU-Georgian relations, a notable concern for the future lies in the escalating political polarization witnessed within the country in recent years. Beyond the rhetorical differences and mutual allegations characterizing interactions between the ruling party and the primary opposition faction, there is a legitimate apprehension regarding the potential emergence of undemocratic practices resulting from this ongoing political rivalry. The EU appears to recognize the risk of democratic regression in Georgia and has consequently intensified its engagement in the country's internal political affairs and proceedings in recent times. The EU's involvement, notably exemplified by the April 19 agreement, despite not being endorsed by both governmental and opposition factions, underscores the EU's capacity to serve as both a facilitator and mediator in resolving political crises within Georgia.

Concurrently, it is evident that the EU's influence within the country remains insufficient to conclusively resolve the longstanding discord between the government and primary opposition forces.

We also saw a rise in the confronting rhetoric of Georgian Dream officials vis-à-vis the EU in recent years. For example, according to Irakli Kobakhidze, who became the Prime Minister of Georgia in 2024, “Membership of 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” (InterPressNews, 2023b). The rhetoric maintained by Georgian Dream (GD) officials against the EU, particularly in light of the assistance extended by the EU to Georgia during the GD governments, warrants attention and is quite remarkable, to say the least. Therefore, it is also imperative for this study to explain the reasons behind this rhetoric towards the EU in Georgia.

Then there is the elephant in the room in the EU-Georgia relations – that is de-oligarchization. Although retired several times from politics, the wealthiest businessman and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili continues to wield considerable influence within the ruling party. His oversight has been associated with frequent and unforeseen changes in the prime ministerial role within Georgia. While officials from the ruling Georgian Dream party vehemently refute assertions of his control over the government, opposition figures, the Georgian president, and international bodies have characterized his influence within the party as oligarchic.

Furthermore, structural and technical challenges within Georgia may impede the process of EU integration. Principal among these challenges are issues related to judicial independence and corruption. Recent instances highlighting concerns regarding judicial autonomy and corruption within the judiciary underscore the need for further improvement in this realm. These matters are subject to regular monitoring and

reporting by both the EU and various international bodies. Moreover, the issue of media independence in Georgia has drawn significant attention from the EU in recent years. Particularly, pressures faced or anticipated by media outlets and journalists perceived as having oppositional leanings emerge as potential threats to future relations. As will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections, this matter has recently sparked EU scrutiny and elicited widespread protests throughout the nation.

When analyzing the challenges in EU-Georgia relations, it is essential to consider not only structural and technical issues but also potential cultural obstacles. Particularly noteworthy is the stance of Georgian society, the state, and the Georgian Orthodox Church toward liberal reforms endorsed by the EU. In this context, the significant image and influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church within Georgian society, particularly in shaping public opinion, add complexity to this matter. The perspectives held by the Church and the general public diverge from those advocated by the EU, particularly concerning the protection of vulnerable groups. Instances of violence targeting sexual minorities and the lack of accountability for the perpetrators could escalate into another source of friction in the relationship.

Additionally, geopolitics emerge as a significant hurdle to address in the relationship between Georgia and the EU. The strategic location of the South Caucasus region traditionally limits the EU's influence. In this context, a distinct consideration pertains to Russia's role in the region, notably its ongoing occupation of two Georgian regions and the associated challenge to Georgia's territorial integrity since 2008. Predicting the implications of this issue for Georgia's EU accession process proves challenging. However, given its historical impact on Georgia's international policies, it is possible to anticipate the potential pitfalls and complexities it introduces. Notably, the pragmatic approach toward Russia during the tenure of Georgian Dream governments and the subsequent improvement in relations could strain Georgia-EU ties, given Russia's status as the primary competitor of the EU in the South Caucasus region.

Furthermore, the burgeoning commercial and economic ties between both nations subsequent to the Ukrainian conflict highlight a significant competition concern for the EU. The growing reliance of the Georgian economy on Russian investments presents a fundamental challenge for the EU, whose primary appeal in the region lies in fostering prosperity and welfare.

In this regard, Georgia's EU alignment rate has been in a declining trend in recent years (Akobia, 2023). The EU authorities particularly have highlighted Georgia's low alignment rate with the Common Foreign and Security Policy and emphasized that there is a need for an increase in this area (European Union External Action Service, 2023). Therefore, it is also imperative to take a closer look at this misalignment, particularly in Georgia's foreign policy, to identify the risks that might arise during Georgia's accession process.

In this context, the fourth chapter of the study will focus on these persistent challenges in the EU-Georgia integration and will strive to reveal the critical limitations of the EU's political, economic, and social influence in Georgia. These constraints not only offer insights into potential challenges during membership negotiations but also hold significant importance in ensuring the long-term high-level sustainability of relations. Moreover, the chapter will also delve deeper into the question of how receptive and committed the current political elite of Georgia is to the integration towards the EU's norms and values. Lastly, It would be erroneous to assess Georgia's potential full EU membership based solely on EU values, norms, and standards. Georgia's strategic significance to the EU in the context of geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus region should not be disregarded when evaluating the relationship.

The present status of Georgia's relations with the European Union reflects a mixed picture, characterized neither by optimal cooperation nor by complete stagnation. A focal point of concern among Georgians has been attaining "candidate

status," a milestone pivotal to the country's aspirations for European integration. While the government of Georgia expresses support for this integration, its efforts in this regard are perceived to be lacking. The primary impediments to progress are identified as deficiencies within the judicial system and weaknesses in governmental institutions, issues that are inherently interconnected. Despite these challenges, successive Georgian administrations have harbored long-standing ambitions for EU membership. The evolving political landscape and shifting geopolitical dynamics have presented a fresh opportunity, prompting a renewed push towards enlargement within the EU framework. Consequently, the government is strategically navigating this opportune moment in pursuit of its European aspirations (Diplomat in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). The deliberations will center on Georgia's trajectory toward EU accession, political discourse, economic collaboration, trade affairs, and nonviolent conflict resolution. These discussions, emphasizing the EU's dedication to upholding Georgia's sovereignty and its progression towards deeper integration with the EU, will simultaneously assess the dedication of the Georgian political leadership to European integration.

Even though Georgia recently gained the candidate country status, the current state of relations between the two parties is notably strained, possibly marking the lowest point since the late 1990s. This downturn is concerning, and there is little room for optimistic interpretation. According to an academic we interviewed in Tbilisi, while proponents of the Georgian Dream party may attempt to present a different narrative, the reality is stark. Despite previous challenges, the situation (between Georgia and the EU) has deteriorated significantly. The persistent political turmoil has not only strained bilateral relations but has also had adverse effects on the nation as a whole (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). Another Associate professor from the Ilia State University also defined the current relations under the GD government as "turbulent," and after 2021, it is a course of confrontation and identified the "Prime

Minister Gharibashvili – and what he stands for” as the biggest obstacle in front of Georgia’s full membership in the EU (Associate Professor from Ilia State University, personal communication, 2023).

I believe it was a prudent decision to submit the application for EU membership, although there remains uncertainty regarding the sincerity and commitment of the Georgian Dream faction towards this objective. While some within the Georgian Dream express genuine intentions and aspirations for membership, questions persist regarding their level of dedication and the conditions under which they seek accession. There appears to be a desire for a form of membership that overlooks discrepancies with EU values and standards, instead emphasizing shared cultural identity and superficial compatibility. The discourse surrounding membership in recent years has been characterized by ambiguity and inconsistency, making it challenging to decipher the true motivations behind the rhetoric. Consequently, the sincerity of the Georgian Dream's stance on membership remains a significant and unresolved question.

There is also the fact that the narratives portrayed recently by both the ruling party and opposition may be unreliable. According to the opposition's perspective, the assertion that the government is intentionally undermining EU membership appears plausible. They argue that the government is actively working to sabotage membership efforts while avoiding overt actions that could incite public backlash or unrest. However, the reality likely lies somewhere between these opposing narratives, as neither side presents a wholly reliable account. Many within the ruling party may harbor reservations about EU integration, as may some within the opposition. Fundamental differences in values further complicate matters, as evidenced by disagreements over legislation such as the foreign agent law. Notably, the departure of staunchly pro-European individuals from the ruling party sheds light on these underlying tensions (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Overall, despite the nation's recent attainment of EU candidate status, the present state of relations does not appear particularly promising. Therefore, it is imperative for relations to pivot towards a constructive agenda following the acquisition of candidate status.

Political Polarization

One of the foremost challenges jeopardizing both the democratic framework and the prospects of European integration in the country pertains to heightened political polarization. Over recent years, the European Union has underscored the necessity of mitigating escalating political discord, particularly between the ruling administration and opposition factions. In response, the EU has actively engaged in constructive interventions aimed at fostering de-escalation and fostering a more conducive political environment. In this context, the intensifying political discourse, notably marked by a bitter rivalry between the Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM), is eroding the democratic advancements of the nation. Allegations suggest that legal actions and detentions targeting significant former political figures are politically driven, thereby disrupting relations with the European Union (EU). Conversely, the ruling party alleges that the opposition is undermining Georgia's relationships with Western allies by actively advocating against it in Western capitals.

Accusations of being the "Russian party" and the "war party" exchanged between the ruling and main opposition factions are impeding Georgia's advancement towards European integration. Currently, there are scant indications that Georgia is inclined to mitigate its volatile political environment through moderation and decorum. However, Europe's influence and the fervent aspiration of Georgian voters to align with the EU may compel Georgian political actors to navigate towards this objective (Lomsadze, Europeanizing Georgia's hot-tempered politics, 2023).

A notable event that underscores the European Union's increasing significance as a pivotal external political actor in Georgia over the past decade is the political turmoil following the 2020 parliamentary elections. Amidst the ensuing political impasse between the ruling party and the opposition, the European Union's earnest endeavors at the highest echelons to mediate and reconcile the disputing factions in Georgia stand as a testament to its commitment to Georgian democracy. The widespread consensus among political elites in Georgia regarding the EU's role as an impartial mediator and facilitator underscores the trust and influence that the EU has garnered in Georgia. However, despite concerted efforts, the failure of the main opposition party to promptly endorse the agreement led to the ruling party's decision to abandon the accord, signaling a limitation to the EU's sway over Georgian political parties despite its well-intentioned interventions. Georgian Dream's unilateral withdrawal from the agreement on April 19 was met with disappointment by the EU. Nevertheless, the EU reiterated its stance that the agreement remained the optimal solution for ensuring free and fair local elections in Georgia and urged all parties to reconsider their positions (European Council, 2021).

Indeed, the circumstances surrounding the breakdown of the Michel agreement and the attribution of responsibility for its failure are subjects of ongoing debate, with both the government and the opposition assigning blame to each other. Through expert interviews conducted, it became evident that neither party emerged unscathed from this debacle. Furthermore, despite concerted endeavors by the EU and President Michel personally, the failure of both sides to uphold their obligations underscores the entrenched nature of Georgia's challenging political environment, which presents considerable obstacles to resolution. Charles Michel Agreement mostly failed in that it could not end the polarization. Both the government and the opposition failed to deliver upon the agreement.

Obviously, the failure can be attributed to the Georgian Dream (GD) party, as they did not implement measures in good faith, which presents a significant challenge. This lack of genuine commitment was evident in the government's handling of the twelfth-point agreement aimed at obtaining candidate status. For instance, when the speaker of the parliament forwarded documents to the Venice Commission, there were reports of GD members discussing plans to remove opposition members during the second reading, indicating a lack of sincerity. Similar issues arose with the Michel agreement, where specific provisions were passed in a pro forma manner. However, they were later repealed, such as in the case of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Commissioner election. Despite GD's initial acceptance of the agreement, they unlawfully overturned it in Parliament due to a lack of quorum, contrary to their prior assurances. This lack of good faith ultimately led to the collapse of the agreement. It is worth noting that while GD was responsible for their actions, the opposition's decision to boycott Parliament was also unwise (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Another pressing matter that dominates discussions between the government and the opposition, thereby shaping the nation's political landscape, pertains to the arrest and ongoing detention of political figures. While the prolonged detention of Georgia's former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, stands out as the most prominent case, recent years have witnessed the apprehension of several key opposition figures on various charges. Both EU authorities and members of the EU parliament closely monitor these incidents. Given the potential detrimental impact on Georgia's political climate and democratic principles, the EU plays an instrumental role by urging restraint from the authorities. It is evident that such high-profile arrests not only impact relations between Georgia and the EU but also tarnish the country's reputation and democratic credentials, mainly as they receive widespread coverage in Western media outlets, usually without any background. The incarceration of political figures typically

signifies deficiencies in democracy; thus, any nation aspiring to join the European Union should avoid such practices.

“Arresting people like Gvaramia for things that are pretty clearly trumped-up charges as opposed to Saakashvili. Saakashvili probably committed some crimes, and they arrested him for crimes that he committed. Whether that is a good decision and makes sense, you can debate. There are reasonable people who would disagree and agree with both sides of that. With Nika Melia, there is no real argument for why he was being arrested specifically at that time besides politics. With Nika Gvaramia, it is pretty similar; his charges boiled down to a company car, which is a bit too much. The only thing they got him on was using his company car to drive his kids to school. I do not know too many countries where that is going to be an embezzlement case, and I also do not know where it will be in democracies. I think those cases do a lot of damage to the country and particularly to its European perspectives. Saakashvili’s case is obviously not helping. It has a larger political impact because of the larger figure. However, all of these other cases undermine the country in a much more significant way. The resignation of Gakharia was obviously in response to Melia’s arrest. That is a pretty clear signal despite the sort of conversations that were going on around that time.”
(Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Besides the enduring polarization between the ruling administration and the opposition, the political tensions between the Georgian Dream (GD) party and President Salome Zourabichvili in recent years constitute a significant aspect of the nation's political landscape. President Zourabichvili, whose presidential tenure is scheduled to conclude in 2024, secured her position in 2018 with the backing of the GD party. Disagreements between the governing Georgian Dream party and President Salome Zourabichvili in areas like the incarceration of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, the proposed foreign agent legislation, and the nation's foreign policy are interrelated matters that have a significant impact on Georgia's prospects for closer European integration. In August 2023, despite the government's opposition, President Zourabichvili undertook a series of visits to European leaders with the aim of convincing them to grant Georgia EU candidate status by year-end. During her visits, she met with German President Frank Walter Steinmeier and European Council President Charles

Michel (Civil.ge, 2023d). In reaction to this, Irakli Kobakhidze, the chair of the Georgian Dream party, announced the initiation of impeachment proceedings against the President. He accused her of attempting to exploit potential developments concerning Georgia's candidate status for personal gain and of trying to hinder Georgia's progress in obtaining candidate status. However, he also acknowledged that impeachment requires the support of 100 votes, making it impossible without the backing of the opposition (Civil.ge, 2023e). In response, several EU Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and diplomats from EU nations labeled this move as absurd and expressed solidarity with the President (Civil.ge, 2023f).

Membership of the EU has vast electoral power in Georgia, and it means that both incumbent and opposition have to have European integration on the agenda (Foreign Diplomat in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). The opposition could play a significant role in negotiating and fostering relations with the Baltic States and Poland, given the Georgian government's historically strained ties with these nations. Past controversies involving European Parliamentary members from the Baltic States, Poland, and the current government underscore the need for improved relations. With the rise of Donald Tusk's party in Polish politics following recent elections, which has shown support for Georgia's former ruling party and Saakashvili, there exists an opportunity for enhanced cooperation between the Georgian government and the opposition. It is imperative for decision-makers on both sides to carefully consider these dynamics, as collaboration between the government and the opposition could serve as a constructive intermediary in navigating this complex situation. Political negotiations necessitate reaching a consensus and compromising on specific issues. However, the fragmented nature of the Georgian political landscape, marked by internal crises within both camps, particularly within the opposition, poses challenges. These disagreements primarily revolve around foreign policy matters, with some minor differences extending to domestic politics. Resolving these internal conflicts and fostering

beneficial cooperation hinges on effective strategic communication, both domestically and internationally.

De-oligarchization

One aspect generating divergent interpretations between the Georgian Government and the EU concerns the concept of "de-oligarchization." Included in the reform agenda released by the EU Commission, the term sparked varied understandings regarding its target, particularly in relation to Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili, a billionaire entrepreneur whose personal wealth nearly equals one-third of Georgia's annual gross domestic product, holds significant influence as the founder of the ruling party, Georgian Dream, and served as prime minister from 2012 to 2013. Despite his purported withdrawal from active politics, assertions persist that Ivanishvili retains control over the ruling party, judiciary, and state institutions, effectively positioning him as Georgia's de facto leader (Kelly, Kramer, & Inayeh, *A Country on the Verge: The Case for Supporting Georgia*, 2021).

The Georgian Government vehemently asserts that the concept of de-oligarchization does not pertain to Bidzina Ivanishvili, contending that labeling him as an oligarch undermines Georgian democracy (InterPressNews, 2022a). Following the setback in the candidacy process, numerous members of the European Parliament expressed skepticism (InterPressNews, 2022b) towards Georgian Dream's argument that de-oligarchization does not target Bidzina Ivanishvili, citing his two withdrawals from the party and politics in 2013 and 2021. However, certain MEPs explicitly stated that the objective of de-oligarchization is indeed to diminish Ivanishvili's influence over Georgian political affairs (GeorgiaToday, 2022).

Head of the EU delegation in Georgia, Carl Hartzell conducted an extensive question and answer session subsequent to the decision and its implications on Georgian politics. These exchanges hold significance in reflecting the European Union's perspectives on the country's recent events. Ambassador Hartzell emphasized that

Georgia has exhibited its capability in fulfilling the requisites to advance its European aspirations by effectively concluding agreements such as the Association Agreement, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and visa-free regime. While commending the peaceful demonstrations in support of Georgia's European trajectory, the ambassador underscored that the onus is on Georgian politicians. They must meet the 12 conditions outlined in the Commission's report, emphasizing that the assessment and decision were merit-based. Georgia's potential candidacy status is attainable. However, regarding de-oligarchization, Ambassador Hartzell refrained from specifying individuals and highlighted that the Commission's perspective focuses on systemic challenges rather than specific persons. He also noted that successful implementation of the other 11 conditions would diminish oligarchic influence in the nation (EU Delegation to Georgia, 2022). While a recent report from USAID was more forthcoming about the situation of oligarchization and state capture in Georgia,

“As it became clear over the past decade that the richest oligarch in Georgia has captured the state, their research examined the impunity of corrupt officials, Georgia’s growing economic dependence on Russia, and the oligarch’s secret businesses in Russia.” (USAID, 2022)

It should be noted that these allegations are rejected by both the government and the ruling party officials. However, President Salome Zourabichvili of Georgia characterized Ivanishvili as the sole oligarch within the nation, highlighting uncertainties regarding his genuine involvement in the country's economic matters. She emphasized the lack of transparency surrounding his influence, which appears to impact the incumbent authorities significantly. Zourabichvili further asserted that Ivanishvili stands as the sole oligarch in Georgian politics presently and accused him of maintaining pro-Russian inclinations (JamNews, 2023). The reactions from government officials and members of the Georgian Dream party to accusations of state capture by Bidzina Ivanishvili have been notably stern, depicting the former Prime Minister and GD founder as a philanthropist committed to safeguarding Georgia's interests.

Consequently, the defensive stance adopted by senior government figures and the Georgian Dream leadership further strengthens suspicions that Bidzina Ivanishvili retains significant control over the Georgian Dream party as its de facto leader, despite assertions of his withdrawal from party affairs. Unsurprisingly, he announced his return to active politics in 2023 (Light, Georgian billionaire ex-PM Ivanishvili returns to politics before election, 2023).

The GD leaders have acknowledged Bidzina Ivanishvili's immense contribution to the Georgian economy numerous times. For example, former prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili pointed out that more than \$3 billion of charity was provided to the country's development by the ex-prime minister Ivanishvili (InterPressNews, 2023c).

In response to the European Union's 12 recommendations, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party formulated a de-oligarchization bill which drew widespread criticism from the opposition (Kinch, Georgian Dream's 'anti-oligarchy law' set to bypass Ivanishvili and target his rivals, 2022). This bill underwent assessment by the Venice Commission to solicit expert opinion before its presentation to the parliament for approval. However, the Commission critiqued the legislation for adopting a "personal" rather than "systemic" approach, as it aimed at identifying specific individuals as "oligarchs." Such a targeted approach raised concerns regarding potential political misuse and arbitrary enforcement (Venice Commission, 2023). Consequently, following the criticisms from the Venice Commission, the GD withdrew the bill. Subsequently, the GD devised an alternative strategy termed the "Action Plan for Avoiding the Excessive Influence of Vested Interests in Economic, Political, and Public Life in Georgia" within this context (Government of Georgia, 2023).

In considering the expectations of the European Union regarding Georgia's efforts towards de-oligarchization, it becomes evident that achieving the EU's anticipated outcome, particularly the removal of Bidzina Ivanishvili's influence from the political arena if that is the case, is improbable under the governance of the

Georgian Dream party. Despite Ivanishvili's previous declarations of retirement from politics following his tenure as prime minister, subsequent returns to the political arena in one form or another have been recurrent. The crux of the issue lies in Ivanishvili's indirect engagement in governmental affairs, notwithstanding his absence from official cabinet positions or the prime ministerial role. Statements from Georgian Dream officials suggest the cultivation of a personality cult around Ivanishvili within the party, coupled with frequent shifts in the prime ministerial role and abrupt changes in the cabinet, which reinforce assertions of his behind-the-scenes leadership in Georgia. Consequently, the resolution of the de-oligarchization issue in Georgia is unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future if the intended outcome is the reduction of the influence of Ivanishvili.

Independence of Judiciary

Unsurprisingly, one of the factors contributing to political polarization in Georgia is the issue of judicial independence. As Erkvania and Lebanidze (2021) outlined, three primary challenges are closely associated: judicial corporatism, the politicization of the judiciary, and its reliance on political influence, alongside a lack of institutional transparency. Judicial corporatism represents a significant obstacle within the Georgian judicial framework, signifying an imbalanced influence wielded by a select group of judges over judicial operations. This group utilizes various strategies to subject the judiciary to executive control, thereby executing political objectives. Moreover, judicial corporatism undermines the principles of good governance and justice within the judiciary, fostering detrimental practices such as nepotism, compliance, and clandestine dealings.

The reform of the judiciary represents one of the most pressing challenges in Georgia. Despite several attempts to reform the judiciary, tangible outcomes have yet to be realized. Issues such as the absence of robust checks and balances, a lack of separation of powers, and a notably weak judiciary persist. Furthermore, politically

motivated cases have highlighted the judiciary's inability to assert its independence from the executive branch of the government. The most challenging aspect of this situation is the apparent absence of political will within the government to instigate systemic changes within the judiciary (Director of an Academic Institute, personal communication, 2024).

In recent years, Georgia has continued to face scrutiny concerning the autonomy of its judiciary, including the independence of its Constitutional Court (U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 2021). During the last decade, the Georgian ruling party has implemented various reforms in the judicial system and has appointed several judges at once in the Supreme Court, which has been criticized by the ODIHR (ODIHR, 2020). Overall, the four waves of reforms introduced numerous favorable aspects over the last decade. Consequently, there have been formal enhancements and refinements within the Georgian judicial system. Nonetheless, these reforms fell short of addressing the core issues and effectuating the Georgian judiciary's transformation into an autonomous and transparent entity. Consequently, despite several successful superficial reforms, substantial challenges persist within Georgia's judicial system and administration of justice. Therefore, achieving full implementation of the rule of law and the establishment of legal supremacy has remained elusive (Erkvania & Lebanidze, *The Judiciary Reform in Georgia and its Significance for the Idea of European Integration*, 2021). Problems in the judicial system and weak governmental institutions remain the biggest obstacles to Georgia's Europeanization, which are intertwined (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023).

The 2022 report issued by the US State Department on Human Rights Practices in Georgia highlighted numerous significant concerns. These included doubts regarding the impartiality of the judiciary, investigations, and prosecutions influenced by political motives, unwarranted intrusions into personal privacy, severe limitations on freedom of speech and media, violent attacks and threats against journalists, significant obstacles to

peaceful assembly and association, forced deportation of refugees, and instances of violence against individuals and activists identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) (US Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, in 2023, the US Department of State took a public stance by imposing sanctions on four Georgian judges, alleging substantial corruption. These judges were accused of exploiting their positions as court Chairmen and members of Georgia's High Council of Justice (U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, 2023). Georgian government officials described this move as a significant disappointment that would harm bilateral relations (Civil.ge, 2023a).

The European Union (EU) is widely acknowledged as a significant advocate for Georgia's democratic and institutional evolution. Historically, the EU has primarily focused on providing technical support for judicial reform, overlooking the political barriers impeding progress. Additionally, in the development, approval, and subsequent execution of the Association Agreement (AA), the EU's approach of disregarding the caliber of reforms and entrusting them to domestic authorities has indirectly resulted in the ineffectiveness of these reforms (Erkvania & Lebanidze, *The Judiciary Reform in Georgia and its Significance for the Idea of European Integration*, 2021). Moreover, the issue of judicial independence is intricately linked to both political polarization and media autonomy within the nation. Instances of stringent judicial rulings targeting opposition figures and journalists underscore the significance of addressing the influence of political authority over the judiciary. In this context, guaranteeing the autonomy of the judiciary and restraining politicians from exploiting the judicial system to target the opposition, along with conducting thorough investigations into corruption allegations within the judiciary, will unquestionably facilitate Georgia's position in the membership negotiations.

Freedom of Media and Plurality

Another pertinent concern that could impact the trajectory of Georgia-EU relations pertains to media independence and pluralism within the nation. The European Union (EU) is notably attentive to this matter and extends support to media entities within Georgia, a practice consistent with its efforts in various countries and regions. This emphasis on media independence and pluralism was underscored by the EU Commission's inclusion of this necessity among the 12 recommendations preceding Georgia's attainment of candidate status. Evidently, this highlights the imperative for Georgia to address existing deficiencies in this realm, a task requiring concerted efforts on the part of the Georgian authorities.

The media environment in Georgia mirrors the country's political landscape with a notable level of polarization. Media entities in Georgia rely heavily on the backing of political parties for economic sustainability, given the frailty of the advertising market. Consequently, both national and regional media outlets exhibit stark polarization, with their coverage predominantly aligned with party-political agendas (Zondler, Basilaia, Matschke, & Meier, 2023). The heightened focus on the safety of journalists has been triggered by a notable increase in reported attacks over recent years. Additionally, journalists have drawn attention to the recent exposure of extensive surveillance conducted by the State Security Service of Georgia, targeting various public figures such as journalists, activists, clergy members, politicians, and diplomats (Zondler, Basilaia, Matschke, & Meier, 2023). According to the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on June 9, 2022, “after several years of improvement, has rapidly deteriorated over the past few years and an unprecedentedly high number of violent physical attacks against journalists have occurred in Georgia since the mass violence against the Tbilisi Pride march on 5 July 2021” (European Parliament, 2022). A particular example of this was the case against Nika Gvaramia, owner of the opposition-leaning TV channel Mtavari. From the beginning, the case

received widespread criticism from the West (Kinch, Protests and Western condemnation follow jailing of Georgian government critic, 2022). He was released from prison with a presidential pardon after he was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for using the company car for personal affairs (OC Media, 2023).

Due to several reasons that we mentioned above, donations from the international community and foundations are crucial for the media to continue operating independently in the market. In this regard, the assistance provided by international donors and Western foundations to specific media organizations in Georgia plays a vital role in enabling their independent operations, as outlined earlier. However, the endorsement by the Georgian Dream (GD) party of the controversial foreign agents' law is concerning and conflicts with the nation's aspirations toward European integration.

Since the inception of the proposed legislation, it has garnered significant responses from the media, public, opposition factions, and the international community, prompting extensive protests outside the parliament in Tbilisi. The deployment of law enforcement to disperse the demonstrators escalated tensions, resulting in heightened violence from both sides. Consequently, the ruling party retracted its endorsement of the legislative initiative aimed at potentially curtailing media liberties. The resurgence of challenges previously believed to have been resolved last year has emerged once again. Presently, the law on foreign influence is under scrutiny, posing a significant potential challenge. This observation is evident in the discourse of our Western counterparts, including representatives from the EU and its member states (Director of an Academic Institute, personal communication, 2024).

The initiation and endorsement of such legislation by the ruling party, GD, prompted skepticism about the party leadership's sincere commitment to European integration and its accompanying principles and goals. Consequently, safeguarding

media independence becomes crucial to shield media entities and journalists from financial constraints imposed by additional regulations. Given the keen scrutiny of this matter, particularly by the EU, the Georgian government's avoidance of regulatory measures that could exacerbate the media landscape and refraining from pursuing punitive legal actions against opposition journalists will contribute to resolving this issue.

The rhetoric is somehow blurred. On the one hand, they claim that their foreign policy goal is still making sure that Georgia becomes part of the EU. However, on the other hand, we see this bizarre rhetoric about the global war party, which wants to involve Georgia in the war and hostilities, in addition to some very harsh criticism of our Western partners. We witnessed the initiation of foreign agents' law last March, and this draft legislation with the changed title is again on the agenda; parliament is discussing adopting it as a law (Director of an Academic Institute, personal communication, 2024).

Vulnerable Minorities and Religious Values

In recent years, another issue with the potential to strain bilateral relations is the protection of vulnerable minorities within the country. While the Georgian government has enshrined the rights of vulnerable minorities in the country's constitution, as outlined in the Visa Action Plan with the EU, recent escalations of attacks, mainly targeting the LGBT community, and the perceived failure of Georgian security forces to protect these individuals adequately have cast doubt on the government's dedication to implementing agreed-upon reforms and laws concerning this matter. This has prompted scrutiny from the EU regarding Georgia's commitment to upholding these standards. The significant influence wielded by the Georgian Orthodox Church in both societal and political spheres, coupled with conservative societal tendencies, has also rendered this matter increasingly intricate.

The protection of vulnerable minorities emerges as another point of contention in Georgian-EU relations. However, this issue is multifaceted, extending beyond mere politics, and is influenced by sociological and religious factors. In accordance with the Visa Liberalization Plan negotiated with the EU in 2013, Georgia committed itself to enacting anti-discrimination legislation. The bill was introduced to the Georgian parliament in 2014 and received approval from then-President Margvelashvili. Consequently, the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination was officially enforced on May 7. Following this, on December 18, 2015, the European Commission issued its fourth and final progress report on Georgia's compliance with the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP). Subsequently, on March 9, 2016, the Commission proposed legislative changes to Regulation (EC) No 539/2001, aimed at establishing a short-term visa waiver for Georgian citizens, based on Georgia's progress. As a result, on March 28, 2017, visa-free travel to the EU for Georgian citizens came into effect (The European Parliament and the Council, 2017).

The enactment of the anti-discrimination law remains a contentious issue in Georgia, evoking widespread debate and opposition. Notably, influential entities such as the Georgian Orthodox Church, along with its clergy, have vehemently criticized the law, denouncing it as a legitimization of behaviors deemed immoral, particularly regarding LGBTQ rights (Karadag, Georgian Europeanization: an Ideational and Institutional Analysis, 2019). Despite the law's intended purpose of safeguarding vulnerable minorities, segments of Georgian society, including the government, have expressed reservations about its inclusion of LGBTQ protections (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2021). Given the significant historical and cultural role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in shaping national identity and preserving Georgian heritage, the opinions of its leadership, notably the Patriarch, carry considerable influence in both societal discourse and domestic politics. This influence is particularly

pronounced concerning the implementation of the anti-discrimination law, reflecting broader tensions surrounding social and cultural norms in Georgian society.

The Georgian Patriarchate consistently condemns Pride Week demonstrations, urging both the government and European officials to refrain from endorsing them, citing their potentially destabilizing effects on Georgia (Agenda.ge, 2021). This stance underscores the significant challenge posed by the Georgian Orthodox Church to Georgia's integration with the EU. As Jones and Macfarlane (2020) assert, the Church serves as a formidable impediment to political reform, enjoying widespread immunity from domestic criticism due to its role as a symbol of Georgian identity and cultural resilience. However, despite this immunity, violent incidents targeting Pride demonstrations by right-wing extremists have tarnished Georgia's standing in European capitals, particularly at a critical juncture (France24, 2021). Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili (2021) posit that the Georgian Orthodox Church's conservative stance on such matters stems from its adherence to Orthodox traditions, compounded by its isolation from Renaissance, Enlightenment, and post-Soviet reforms experienced by other European Orthodox Churches. Consequently, the Church perceives itself as the guardian of Georgian values, albeit ones that are challenging to define precisely.

The tumultuous period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union has significantly bolstered the authoritative role of the Orthodox Church as the guardian of Georgian identity, culture, and history. Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili assert that the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet regime was swiftly filled by the Georgian Church, which had endured suppression under Soviet rule and emerged as a beacon for Georgians seeking to shed the Soviet legacy (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, *The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society*, 2021). While the Georgian Orthodox Church commands widespread respect among the Georgian public, its conservative doctrines and hostile stance toward marginalized groups pose significant obstacles to relations between Europe and Georgia. The government's reluctance to address this issue and the

privileged position enjoyed by the Orthodox Church present a fundamental contradiction to Georgia's European integration efforts. Notably, the Church and its Patriarch often attribute Georgia's readiness for independence prior to the Soviet Union's collapse to their influence (InterPressNews, 2024).

Within this framework, a notable incident in recent history pertains to the unfortunate events that transpired during the Pride Week commemorations of 2021. Following a tumultuous Pride Week in Georgia in 2021, marked by attacks on Pride offices in Tbilisi and resulting in fatalities and injuries, there was widespread condemnation from Western NGOs and European officials. Consequently, these incidents were cited in EU prerequisites for candidate status, urging Georgia to prosecute those responsible for the attacks swiftly. However, in 2022, the Georgian government and its security forces took measures to prevent any extremism during Pride demonstrations. The following year, immediately after the EU Commission's decision not to grant candidate status to Georgia, the Georgian police apprehended 26 individuals linked to far-right factions planning to disrupt Pride Week events in Georgia (Civil.ge, 2022a). This action demonstrated the Georgian government's acknowledgment of the concerns raised by its European counterparts and its readiness to address the issue effectively. Nevertheless, the Georgian Dream (GD) party has recently introduced legislation seeking to prohibit sex changes and adoption by same-sex couples, as well as to restrict gatherings promoting same-sex family or intimate relationships in order to safeguard "family values and future generations" against what it perceives as "pseudo-liberal values" (Light, Georgia's ruling party proposes new law cracking down on LGBT rights, 2024).

Russian Federation and the Question of Territorial Integrity

Since its independence, the enduring and complex relationship between Georgia and Russia holds significant implications for EU-Georgia relations. While merit is often cited as the basis for the EU's granting of a candidate or membership status,

geographical factors, notably evident in Georgia's circumstances, also exert considerable influence. Presently, over twenty percent of Georgia's territory remains under Russian occupation, posing a substantial challenge to EU engagement with the country. Therefore, to comprehensively assess the impact of the Russian factor on Georgia-European Union relations, it warrants dedicated examination in this study. This section aims to explore the ramifications of Russian-Georgian relations and occupation on Georgia's interactions with the European Union, considering perspectives from both European and Georgian standpoints.

The geographical location of Georgia, which is in close proximity to expansionist Russia, has always posed challenges to its sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, and democratic progress. Even though Georgia's NATO membership bid has taken a backseat in recent years in favor of the EU membership, demonstrating its commitment, the Georgian military has actively participated in various NATO exercises and deployed troops to Afghanistan in support of NATO missions, international peacekeeping operations, and training initiatives, thereby contributing to Euro-Atlantic security and combating global terrorism. However, despite these efforts, Georgia has yet to fulfill all the prerequisites outlined by NATO for receiving a formal invitation to join or participate in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) (Iakobishvili, 2023). To meet NATO's standards, Georgia must persist in its democratization endeavors and simultaneously undertake further defense reforms. Nevertheless, both the political leadership in Georgia and their counterparts in Europe recognize the constraints imposed by the prevailing geopolitical dynamics in the region, which curtails the flexibility and options available to both parties. For instance, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated that they know that to become a NATO member, Georgia must first solve its territorial integrity problem (Georgian Prime Minister's NATO Remarks Stir Controversy, 2022). Moreover, during the candidacy debacle, French President Emmanuel Macron said that Georgia was in a 'different place geopolitically,'

hinting that there are indeed geopolitical considerations in the evaluation of Georgia's European future (Caulcutt, 2022).

The impact of the Ukrainian conflict reverberated across Europe and the South Caucasus, catalyzing an early phase of a new EU enlargement. Notably, among the countries aspiring for EU membership, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia share a common predicament: their territories are partially occupied by Russia and pro-Russian separatists, posing challenges to their territorial integrity. Consequently, the membership applications of these nations following the Ukrainian conflict are underscored by this shared issue. On June 17, 2022, the European Commission issued recommendations to the Council endorsing the prospective membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in the European Union (EU) and providing its assessment on granting them candidate status. While expressing full support for Ukraine's and Moldova's potential candidacy, the statement outlined that Georgia should address several priorities before candidate status is granted. This decision elicited significant disappointment within Georgian society, prompting various rallies advocating for Georgia's European integration, with support from multiple political factions and the country's president. However, initial reactions from the Georgian government were measured, acknowledging and appreciating the EU's support. Prime Minister Garibashvili indicated readiness to commence collaborative efforts with Brussels upon the Council's approval of these recommendations, noting the challenging circumstances faced by Ukraine and Moldova in securing candidate status (Georgian PM on European Commission's Recommendations, 2022).

European Commission's list of priorities that Georgia should address before granting candidate status was outstanding with twelve bullet points, including the 19 April Agreement, judicial reforms, anti-corruption, de-oligarchisation, free media, protection of vulnerable groups, and so on (Civil.ge, 2022b). In recent years, it was accepted by many that there was a democratic backsliding in Georgia on most of these

issues and that the government did not fulfill its duty on some issues, such as the protection of vulnerable groups. While many in Georgia, including the opposition, claimed that the Government missed a historic opportunity by not working intensively enough with European capitals and its anti-Europe rhetoric (Interpressnews, 2022c), the EU has also acknowledged that Georgia's future lies with Europe by providing a membership perspective for Georgia. In that regard, not having a candidate status together with Ukraine and Moldova should not be considered a total loss or defeat but a setback. Granting membership status to Ukraine and Moldova while the former was being occupied, the latter's breakaway region was explicitly threatened with annexation by Russia, which was a significant sign of European solidarity that was severely needed in the aftermath of the Russian occupation of Ukraine. Furthermore, granting candidate status to Georgia before addressing the problems seen as a significant setback for Georgia's European future by the EU authorities in recent years would have been considered an award for authoritarian practices observed by EU progression reports. However, although the Commission is willing to grant a candidate status to Georgia based on merit, there are other signs that Georgia's possible accession talks with the EU might also be overshadowed by its geopolitical position.

In broad terms, the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine has created uncertainty and concern for Georgia, impacting its security, regional interactions, and relationships with both Russia and Western nations. The invasion occurred in February 2022, and Georgia's subsequent response has further strained its relations with Ukraine. This is partly due to the imprisonment of former Georgian president and long-time Ukrainian official Mikheil Saakashvili. Furthermore, the invasion carries broader implications for regional stability and the geopolitical balance in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. It could prompt a reevaluation of security arrangements and alliances in the region, with countries seeking closer ties with NATO or other international organizations as a deterrent against Russian aggression. It may also exacerbate tensions

between Russia and the West, resulting in a more confrontational relationship and potential economic and diplomatic consequences for Georgia. Georgia's unwillingness to align itself with the EU's restrictive measures against the Russian Federation was also noted by the EU in the country's 2023 enlargement report:

“Georgia did not align with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus, nor with the related statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU. In May 2023, the Georgian government's decision to resume flights with Russia also raised concerns in terms of its commitment to align with the EU in its foreign policy, as per the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.” (European Commission, 2023)

EU's ambassador, Pawel Herczyński, mentioned that the Georgian government has chosen not to participate in the trade sanctions imposed by the European Union against Russia. Noting the importance of trade with Russia, a neighboring state, for Georgia, the Ambassador reminded that other EU members are also bearing economic costs and expressed hope that Georgia's compliance will be increased. The Ambassador stressed the importance of Georgia's compliance with the EU's strict and unanimous decision to ban all direct flights between the EU and Russia. While recognizing the economic impact on EU member states with citizens in Russia and reliance on Russian tourists, the collective decision reflects a moral obligation to exert maximum pressure on Russia (Civil.ge, 2023g).

However, one might interpret Georgia's actions regarding Ukraine and Russia primarily from an economic standpoint, suggesting that Georgia is motivated by its economic interests, mainly benefiting from the influx of wealthy Russians who no longer want to reside in Russia. In the aftermath of the Ukraine War, money transfers from the Russian Federation to Georgia saw an unprecedented increase, and the trade between the two increased considerably (National Bank of Georgia, 2023). Nevertheless, this perspective reinforces the broader trend of improving relations between Georgia and Russia across various domains. The Georgian government refrains

from criticizing Russia, raising doubts about its long-term commitment to the Euro-Atlantic security alliance, especially when weighed against the immediate economic advantages from Russia. The increasing trade relations and the growing number of Russians in Georgia have also raised concerns among ordinary Georgians, as evident in recent surveys in the country. This unease primarily stems from high inflation, particularly in accommodation costs in major cities, resulting from the influx of wealthy Russians. While the Georgian government boasts about economic growth figures, expanding trade ties, and tourism income, it remains debatable how beneficial these developments are in the long term for the average Georgian citizen as well as its European perspective. The recent shift towards China in Georgia's foreign policy can be attributed to the growing trade ties with Russia. This inclination was formalized through a strategic partnership agreement signed in 2023 between the two nations. Signed during Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's visit to China, the agreement outlines enhanced economic, political, infrastructure, and educational collaboration between Georgia and China (Avdaliani, What's Behind China's Strategic Partnership With Georgia?, 2023). In this context, the recent critique by President Zourabichvili concerning human rights abuses in the People's Republic of China elicited a negative response from the government. This occurrence holds significance as it reflects the value that the Georgian government places on its recently enhanced relations with China (Shoshiashvili, 2023). Moreover, according to President Zourabichvili, China's involvement in numerous infrastructure endeavors within Georgia is primarily driven by cost efficiency and a disregard for various laws and labor rights. However, this situation also arises due to the relatively limited engagement of Georgia's Western allies. It could be argued that Georgia would benefit from the increased participation of Western partners in major infrastructure initiatives (Zourabichvili, 2024).

In this context, trade diversification is crucial and imperative for Georgia. Recent trends have demonstrated a concerning shift where Russia has emerged as a

dominant trade partner in specific sectors, raising apprehensions among the Georgian population. While diversifying trade relations with countries like Russia and China holds potential benefits, uncertainties surround the recently announced strategic partnership with China due to the lack of transparent information. This opacity prompts questions regarding the potential risks associated with a foreign policy shift. Despite this, there is widespread support for European integration among the Georgian population, underscoring its legitimacy. Historical precedents underscore Russia's unreliability as a partner, often leveraging trade relationships for political manipulation, as evidenced in past attempts to influence policy-making in Georgia. Moreover, Russia's current status under sanctions further complicates intensified trade partnerships, potentially resulting in adverse economic consequences, particularly for the general population. Therefore, aligning with Europe and the United States emerges as the preferred course for Georgia, considering its geopolitical positioning and long-term economic stability (Director of an Academic Institute, personal communication, 2024).

In return for Georgia's controversial position regarding the Ukraine War and its unwillingness to participate in the Western-led economic sanctions against Russia, Moscow has presented several carrots and concessions to Georgia, mainly in the economic sphere. Following the lifting of visa restrictions for Georgian citizens and the revival of direct flights between the two countries, another sign of improving Georgia-Russia relations came in the sphere of education. On August 2023, the Russian Interests Section at the Swiss Embassy in Georgia announced that Georgian citizens, stateless persons, and Russian citizens residing in Georgia with appropriate permits will be eligible to participate in a competition to receive free education in Russian higher educational institutions in the academic year 2024-2025 at the expense of the federal budget of the Russian Federation (Civil.ge, 2023h). In light of the improving relations between the two countries, Georgia's general policy regarding the Russian Federation has been praised by Moscow numerous times in recent years (Civil.ge, 2023i).

As per the comprehensive document issued jointly by the European Union concerning candidate countries, Georgia is advised to harmonize its foreign policy with that of the EU. Currently, Georgia's foreign policy direction appears ambiguous, making it challenging to discern its strategic trajectory. While the constitution mandates state institutions to support Euro-Atlantic integration, the practical implementation of this directive remains uncertain. The prevailing caution among the political leadership regarding Russia's aggressive stance is understandable, given past hostilities and the imperative to safeguard national security. However, amidst this cautious approach, questions arise concerning Georgia's alignment with its strategic partners, particularly the United States, and its aspirations for NATO integration. The extent to which American and European interests converge in terms of foreign policy remains uncertain (Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023). The Georgian Government is also aware of the fact that the start of negotiations with the European Union and subsequent stages depends on the security environment and political and economic reality; therefore, it is safe to say that geopolitical balance and considerations in the South Caucasus might have positive and negative impacts on Georgia's road to the full membership (InterPressNews, 2023d).

Obviously, the condition of being occupied should not be perceived as a barrier, nor should it impede the path to membership in the economic union. While complications may arise when considering membership in NATO, a military-political organization, the significance of territorial claims is comparatively less pronounced within the European Union. Although not a precise parallel, the territorial dispute involving Cyprus, specifically between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, exemplifies this complexity (European Studies Researcher, personal communication, 2023). Given historical precedents and the potential for political opportunities to arise, it is feasible to attain membership status. The timing of such advancements is often unpredictable, as demonstrated by the unforeseen circumstances preceding the current situation. Despite

initial projections suggesting a candidate status application in 2024, unforeseen events have the potential to create openings for progress. While the specific nature of these opportunities remains uncertain, the possibility of full membership remains plausible (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

If the territorial in the associated trio countries were deemed problematic, the EU would not have extended its enlargement policy to them. The viability of this policy hinges on the sustained advancement of democratic reforms within these nations. Should they successfully consolidate democracy and adhere to the Copenhagen criteria, potential obstacles may be mitigated. However, significant challenges persist, including reluctance or inadequate capacity to enact reforms in line with the Copenhagen criteria and the pervasive threat of Russian influence meddling in their political processes to maintain control over what it perceives as its sphere of influence. Consequently, these countries grapple with implementing reforms while navigating constraints on their sovereignty, which complicates the reform trajectory. While occupied regions present challenges, they are comparatively less troublesome than unreformed institutions and issues related to elections, judiciary, and propaganda (Director of an Academic Institute, personal communication, 2024).

A scholar situated in Tbilisi identifies the primary impediments to Georgia's EU accession process as the current governmental administration followed by Turkey. The rationale behind including Turkey in this assessment is not due to Turkey's opposition but rather its geographical placement. The scholar notes the potential anomaly of integrating another non-contiguous state into the EU. Given the current trajectory of Turkey's European integration efforts, characterized by minimal progress, significant advancement appears improbable unless a substantial shift occurs within the Turkish government. While unforeseen developments remain a possibility, the likelihood of such occurrences is deemed low. Consequently, the prospect of Georgia attaining EU membership while Turkey, situated between mainland Europe and the contiguous EU,

remains outside the fold appears improbable (Academic based in Tbilisi, personal communication, 2023).

Conclusions

Moving forward, it is imperative to acknowledge that Georgia's pathway toward EU membership will increasingly involve intergovernmental processes. Given the requirement for unanimous agreement at various junctures in the negotiations, Georgia cannot afford to overlook its interactions with both the EU Parliament and select EU member states. Thus, it is crucial for Georgia to heed the warnings issued by the EU Parliament and certain EU member states in a timely manner to facilitate the smooth and robust progression of membership negotiations. Nevertheless, the escalating prominence of these issues in recent years underscores their significant implications for the European Union's (EU) influence within the nation. Despite Georgia's persistent endeavors towards EU integration post-Rose Revolution, its elevated status as a privileged partner, and eventual attainment of candidate status, the EU's inability to sway the Georgian ruling elite on numerous fronts underscores the constraints of its political leverage.

The escalating political polarization witnessed in recent years within the country is characterized by a profound inability of both the government and the opposition to reach a consensus even on fundamental matters concerning human rights and freedoms, alongside the dissemination of hostile rhetoric and accusations between factions, parliamentary boycotts, and brawls, has extended into the judicial sphere. This is evident in the litigious pursuits targeting opposition figures, mounting pressure on journalists affiliated with the opposition, and media entities. This irreconcilable polarization constitutes a formidable obstacle not only to Georgia's progression toward EU membership but also to the sustenance of democratic principles within the nation.

The imperative of mitigating the prevailing polarization and tension within the political landscape is of paramount significance, with the onus falling primarily on the government, vested with state authority. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that the ruling party perceives polarization as advantageous, given the fragmented nature of the opposition, which does not pose a substantial electoral challenge as witnessed in recent elections. Recent legislative actions and the governing party's stance toward both the opposition and the presidency cast doubt on the viability of reducing the polarization and instead strengthen the notion that the GD elite might think that further polarization might help them in the elections. Opposition, on the other hand, should realize that an uncompromising position is not helping their cause but damaging the country's democracy as well as its reputation. Therefore, when the opportunity arises, like the Michel Agreement, they should seize it instead of coming up with a new set of demands. Reducing the political polarization between the ruling party and the opposition will help with judicial matters, freedom of media, and plurality, as well as ease the tensions in the country during election periods. In this context, reducing polarization in the country might also help to improve relations with the Baltic States, Poland, and Ukraine, which have warmer relations with the opposition in Georgia, enabling Georgia to garner more support for its accession negotiations.

It is evident that the issue of media independence and the ability of media members to do their jobs freely without fear of being persecuted will be an essential issue in the upcoming process leading to the opening of membership negotiations. Addressing the polarization within the media sphere and alleviating the constraints faced by opposition outlets stemming from declining advertising revenues is important. Furthermore, imposing limitations on the revenue streams of media entities or categorizing them, along with NGOs, as foreign agents due to their receipt of donations from the EU and Western sources contradicts Georgia's EU aspirations. Henceforth, it is imperative for the Georgian political leadership to prioritize the promotion of media

pluralism as a means to demonstrate their dedication to the process of European integration.

Furthermore, alongside these challenges, issues within the judiciary system and its independence from political influence represent significant hurdles in Georgia's relations with the EU and Western nations. Recent politically motivated trials targeting opposition figures and the government's antagonistic stance towards former President Saakashvili not only tarnish the country's democratic reputation but also detrimentally impact bilateral ties with several European states. The close scrutiny by Western entities of ongoing cases suspected to be politically motivated, along with protests against judicial rulings, underscores the complexity of this challenge in Georgia's path toward EU integration. The imposition of sanctions by the USA on certain Georgian judges for serious corruption further underscores the pressing need for substantial judicial reforms.

In recent years, one of the observed challenges in the integration process between the European Union (EU) and Georgia pertains to safeguarding vulnerable minorities. This delicate matter is closely monitored by both the EU and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Recent unfortunate occurrences highlight the potential of this issue to strain relations between the EU and Georgia. The escalating negative discourse concerning LGBTQ communities in certain European nations, coupled with authoritarian regimes and populist sentiments, may influence the narrative surrounding LGBTQ rights in Georgia. Concurrently, this issue presents both an avenue for demonstrating the Georgian political elite's dedication to European values and a potential stumbling block in their integration efforts.

Examining the array of issues discussed in this chapter pertaining to Georgia's recent relations with the EU prompts an inquiry into the extent of the Georgian Dream leadership's dedication to European values and the reform agenda. As anticipated by

neo-functionalist theory, local leaders often redirect their national loyalties towards European supranational organizations, perceiving them as superior venues for safeguarding and advancing their personal and national interests. This proposition holds partial merit for Georgia, especially in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution and the August War. However, recent actions undertaken by the Georgia's governing elite, despite objections from EU officials and institutions, along with statements accusing the EU and the broader Western sphere of interfering with the nation's sovereignty, suggest a waning validity of this proposition within Georgia.

From the European Union's standpoint, it is evident that alongside adherence to EU standards and reforms, geopolitical considerations play a significant role in evaluations within the South Caucasus region, with particular emphasis on Georgia. Georgia stands out in this region as the sole enthusiastic EU partner. Positioned as both an associated partner and having achieved candidate status, Georgia not only serves as the EU's anchor in the region but also potentially facilitates other countries' engagement with the EU. However, the precondition for this lies in Georgia's EU integration process transforming into a noteworthy success story.

There is a likelihood of heightened competition between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation across all three South Caucasus nations. Moreover, China's investments in Georgia are on the rise, positioning it as an economically dependable partner, particularly in significant infrastructure ventures within the country. Moreover, empirical evidence underscores the considerable surge in commercial ties with Russia, particularly following the Ukrainian conflict; this trade has significantly bolstered the nation's economic growth figures in recent years. Despite being Georgia's primary external financial contributor, it is evident that the forthcoming years will witness heightened competition for the European Union (EU) in this regard. Within this framework, the economic prospects and financial mechanisms

available to Georgia as a candidate nation through the EU may serve as a deterrent against other actors accruing excessive political and economic influence in Georgia.

Upon scrutinizing the challenges encountered in Georgian-EU relations thus far, it becomes evident that a significant obstacle lies in the commitment of the Georgian political leadership to EU principles and values such as democracy, pluralism, inclusivity, and a culture of compromise. However, even if the Georgian political elite were to demonstrate unwavering dedication to these EU ideals in the coming years, the resolution of complex issues such as Georgia's territorial integrity, as well as its evolving economic ties, particularly with Russia, cannot be expected to resolve automatically. Hence, the intricate geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus region, along with the potential for economic interests to impede Georgia's accession process, remain salient concerns that demand attention.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS

The primary objective of this research was to examine the role of the European Union (EU) as a significant external actor influencing the transformation of Georgian politics. The study aimed to identify areas where the EU has achieved success, particularly in fostering acceptance of its normative reform agenda among the Georgian political elite. Simultaneously, it aimed to uncover the challenges, limitations, and contentious issues surrounding Georgia's European integration process. To achieve this goal, the dissertation analyzed various aspects of the EU's influence and policy instruments in Georgia, assessing both its soft and hard power accumulated over time.

Furthermore, it explored how the EU's soft power has attracted Georgia to adopt its normative reform agenda and investigated the impact of Europeanization on Georgia's political landscape. Additionally, the study examined the EU's interactions with key political actors in Georgia, including government institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations, across different dimensions. The research also aimed to elucidate the effects, limitations, and deficiencies of the EU's soft power and policy tools in Georgian politics, as well as their impact on the Georgian government and society. Moreover, it delved into the deliberate "European choice" embraced by the Georgian political elite following independence, particularly in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, exploring the influence of the First Democratic Republic and the Soviet legacy on this strategic preference and their implications for ongoing political transformations in the region. The dissertation provided insights into Georgia's engagement with the EU over different periods, ranging from the challenging early years of independence to the governance under the Georgian Dream era, across various domains, such as democratic reforms, human rights, economy, trade, and conflict resolution. Additionally, it examined the implementation of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) as crucial milestones for Georgia's aspiration to become a democratic, prosperous, and secure European state. Furthermore, the study contributed to the existing discourse and literature on the EU's growing role as a significant external actor in Georgian politics.

In this context, our objective was to identify and analyze the challenges that impact the relationship between the European Union (EU) and Georgia, taking into account perspectives from both sides. We aimed to examine various aspects, including heightened political polarization observed in the country in recent years, the state of media freedom and pluralism, judicial independence, the influence of religion, and efforts towards de-oligarchization. These aspects have been areas of contention between Georgia and the EU, warranting thorough examination for a comprehensive

understanding. Additionally, our investigation aimed to explore 'the Russian factor' in the context of EU-Georgia relations. This factor poses a significant challenge to Georgia's integration with the European Union and the broader Western sphere. It is essential to comprehend the Russian Federation's role in the policymaking processes of both Georgia and the EU in the region. In recent years, Russian interference in Georgian politics through media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political entities has influenced the narratives shaped by both the EU and Georgian authorities.

Georgia's journey towards political transformation and democratization, spanning historical and contemporary periods, unfolded amidst complex challenges and significant historical events. Positioned within a region marked by intersecting imperial influences, Georgia embarked on a political experiment marked by progressive and democratic ideals, notably exemplified by the establishment of its first Republic. However, this experiment was abruptly halted by the Bolsheviks, leading to a prolonged period of seventy years characterized by single-party rule, authoritarian practices, oppression, and widespread corruption. Despite the revered status of the First Republic as a democratic milestone and a source of national pride, its direct impact on Georgia's contemporary political landscape post-independence remains limited. While it holds a prominent place in the collective memory politics of the nation, offering valuable insights into ongoing democratization efforts, its influence on the foundational framework of the post-independence constitution is minimal. Instead, the enduring legacy of seven decades of Soviet rule continues to cast a significant shadow over Georgia's political evolution and democratization processes, exerting a substantial influence on the current political dynamics in the country despite the aspirations for European integration.

During the seven-decade span of Soviet influence, Georgia maintained its political existence as both part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Throughout this period, Moscow's

policies towards Georgia exhibited temporal variations. The implementation of korenizatsiya policies in the early stages of the Soviet era not only brought forth the prominence of the Georgian identity but also accentuated the identities of other ethnic minorities within Georgia. Stalin, a native Georgian, elevated the status of the Georgian nation among the Soviet people, and Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin and the Georgians triggered bloody unrest in Tbilisi. Subsequent attempts to relegate the Georgian language from its official status in favor of Russia prompted significant upheavals, compelling Moscow to backtrack. The suppression of the Georgian Orthodox Church during this period and the resultant injustices endured have positioned the Church as an integral element of the post-independence Georgian identity, garnering substantial public significance. Moreover, this era laid the groundwork for the emergence of the territorial integrity predicament involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would dominate the nation's post-independence political agenda, accompanied by Russia's military, political, and economic interventions in the region. Contemporary challenges encountered by Georgia can be traced back to the Soviet era, underscoring their enduring impact on the nation's present circumstances. These challenges persistently feature as prominent issues within the country's contemporary political agenda. For instance, a significant obstacle in establishing a robust and democratic Georgia was the absence of democratic values, democratic culture, and an underdeveloped civil society, primarily stemming from the Soviet legacy.

The period subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union emerges as a crucial juncture in Georgia's political trajectory. During this epoch, the nation grappled with significant political upheaval stemming from the controversial policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the inaugural president of Georgia, as well as the secessionist aspirations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following a coup orchestrated by armed militias, Gamsakhurdia was ousted, and Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Union Minister of Foreign Affairs, assumed leadership. Shevardnadze's international stature conferred

upon him the ability to bestow much-needed legitimacy and stability upon Georgia. Concurrently, the implementation of a new constitution in 1995, coinciding with Shevardnadze's rise to power, introduced a presidential system of governance, marking a departure from the initially envisaged mixed, semi-presidential model.

The Rose Revolution of 2003 stands out as a seminal political event in Georgia's post-Soviet history. This transformative episode saw the Georgian political leadership undertake a concerted effort to dismantle the vestiges of Soviet-era governance and embrace a strategic orientation towards Euro-Atlantic political and security structures despite the potential for strained relations with Russia. This strategic shift was deemed imperative in addressing the nation's myriad of challenges, encompassing issues such as corruption, poverty, authoritarianism, internal discord, and external occupation. Drawing on Neo-functionalist principles of European Integration, as expounded by Haas, it becomes evident that when confronted with entrenched domestic obstacles, political elites may recalibrate their priorities, engagements, and affiliations towards a new European focal point, thereby catalyzing the integration process. This impetus, witnessed in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, found concrete expression in subsequent years, as both Georgia and its European counterparts committed to enhanced integration efforts through mechanisms like the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), and the Association Agreement.

The impact of Russia on Georgia's pursuit of integration into Euro-Atlantic political and security frameworks subsequent to the Rose Revolution holds significant weight. Despite strides made in bilateral relations during the Georgian Dream administration, Russia's entrenched position as an occupying force remains deeply ingrained in Georgia's political consciousness. As noted by Sartania (2021), while the objective of the national movement in the 1990s centered on the restoration of independence, contemporary discourse emphasizes the imperative of safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty. The ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia

is perceived as an existential threat, underscoring Georgia's steadfast aspirations for integration into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Saakashvili era undoubtedly facilitated closer diplomatic relations between Georgia and Europe as well as the United States. However, it is equally undeniable that this period failed to achieve the anticipated democratic progress. Despite the emergence of anti-democratic trends towards the end of Saakashvili's presidency, a significant development occurred with the peaceful transfer of power during the 2012 elections, representing the first instance of such a transition in the nation's history. It is essential to recognize that, following independence, each successive leader in Georgia assumed office in opposition to their predecessor, inevitably facing legitimacy challenges over time.

With the Georgian Dream at the helm of the country since 2012, Georgia's political evolution has entered its concluding stage, which continues to unfold. Throughout this phase, Georgia embarked on an extensive process of European Union-oriented reforms, as stipulated by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Association Agreement. Key transformations during this period include the shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system of governance, facilitated by substantial constitutional amendments, the implementation of a proportional electoral system, and the introduction of legal frameworks aimed at protecting the rights and welfare of marginalized minority populations in Georgia.

However, despite notable progress in democratic and political spheres, the persistence of anti-democratic tendencies within Georgian politics remains a significant concern, evident in both ruling and opposition circles. In the Georgian context, the prevalence of patron-client networks, known as clans, underscores this issue. These clans coalesce around influential leaders and adapt to changes in their power dynamics and economic standing. Operating as closed entities, they aim to circumvent legal scrutiny and exploit state institutions for collective gain. Many analysts argue that the

ties between Georgian political parties and distinct societal segments are often weak, serving primarily as vehicles to further the narrow interests of specific factions. It is suggested that these parties pursue parliamentary representation primarily for personal gain, advocating for particular business interests and manipulating legislative mechanisms to their advantage. This strategic manipulation of processes conveys to constituents that the party genuinely represents their interests and to Western nations that Georgia functions as a democratic entity.

In the last thirty years, Georgia has experienced substantial changes in its governmental structure, moving from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. This evolution involved four constitutional reforms that collectively molded Georgia into a conventional parliamentary-style nation. These reforms were intricately tied to political developments, and it is noteworthy that most political factions in present-day Georgia endorse the establishment of a parliamentary republic. The EU has been significantly involved in the reforms that transitioned the country from a robust presidential system to a more pluralistic parliamentary system, even though these changes have not yet resulted in any kind of coalition for the government.

Beyond the political, economic, military, and soft powers wielded by individual member states, the EU exercises considerable influence through powers delegated to it by its member countries, contributing to an exceptionally significant and extensive political, economic, and soft power domain. The EU obviously has a wide variety of foreign policy tools to promote European norms, values, and standards in its nearby neighbourhood. In the case of Georgia, it appears that the EU initially viewed the South Caucasus region as a whole without making distinctions. However, as Armenia and Azerbaijan failed to demonstrate the required commitment to the EU's conditionality-based neighborhood policies, primarily due to security and territorial disputes, Georgia emerged as the country most receptive to EU integration. Indeed, the EU's neighborhood policies and instruments are fraught with inherent challenges and

uncertainties, and their success is not assured in every context or domain. Consequently, aside from adopting a tailored approach for each country, the EU must proactively and reactively adjust its norms and policy practices to accommodate each region's evolving realities, expectations, or demands accordingly. The role of the EU as an external actor in political transformation is not static or predetermined; instead, it is dynamic and contingent. Therefore, the EU is obligated to consistently redefine its identity, interests, and values, as well as its capabilities, strategies, and tools, along with its relations, interactions, and influences. It has to learn from its successful and unsuccessful experiences, from its partners, allies, and competitors, and from its norms, policies, and practices.

The European Union's engagement with Georgia, spanning over three decades, has solidified the EU as a prominent actor in the country's development. The relationship gained significant momentum following the Rose Revolution, with Georgia actively participating in the European Neighborhood Policy and undergoing political transformation with EU assistance. The EU acknowledged Georgia's distinctiveness within the South Caucasus region, leading to its inclusion in the Eastern Partnership alongside Moldova and Ukraine. Over the past three decades, the EU's role in Georgia, especially after the 2008 war, has been pivotal. The EU's involvement in ceasefire facilitation and ongoing monitoring through the EUMM has enhanced its credibility as a reliable partner. Various initiatives like the Eastern Partnership, Association Agreement, Visa Liberalization Action Plan, and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area have driven not only structural reforms but also accelerated political and economic integration. Moreover, these initiatives have promoted social integration by fostering interpersonal connections.

The signing of agreements between the EU and Georgia does not ensure comprehensive implementation of all provisions or guarantee success across all areas. Recent years have revealed a mixed picture of EU-Georgia relations, with both

achievements and challenges. Not all EU initiatives have been immediately successful or advantageous for Georgia, as seen in the case of the DCFTA. Despite economic reforms, Georgia's foreign trade with the EU has not reached the desired levels, with trade with the EU's economic competitors remaining significant for the Georgian economy.

Georgia's aspiration for EU membership, especially in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict, has intensified its relationship dynamics with the EU. The process of Georgia's candidacy for EU membership has gained significant attention, serving as a barometer for the state of relations and the progress of Georgia's European integration. Issues previously less emphasized have come to the forefront through the EU Commission's twelve recommendations, highlighting the importance of the Georgian political elite's dedication to addressing these concerns. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia's extended pre-candidacy process has revealed the risk of some political elites diverging from the EU path. Despite meeting only three criteria, Georgia was granted candidate country status by the EU in December 2023, deferring consideration of the remaining nine issues. However, the EU's inability to persuade Georgian officials to enact tangible reforms on these outstanding matters, despite the extended pre-candidacy process, has underscored the limitations of its soft power despite its perceived effectiveness as a foreign actor in Georgia.

While there is broad consensus among the Georgian populace, civil society groups, and political leaders regarding the country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, it is crucial to differentiate between establishing a political association with the EU through ENP frameworks and the distinct process of becoming a member. The latter necessitates significant and practically applicable reforms, which the Georgian governing elite currently hesitates to pursue for various reasons. Future domestic political developments and the duration until the start of membership negotiations may shed light on Georgia's path to EU membership. Although the membership process will

extend over several years, challenges faced by Georgia before candidacy may manifest differently in the coming years, potentially leading to enlargement fatigue among both the political elite and the public. This aspect of the EU membership trajectory requires careful consideration.

The evident contributions and assistance extended by the EU to Georgia over the years are clearly visible. A noteworthy emphasis should be placed on the ability of the Georgian public and governing elite to fulfill the expectations set by the EU throughout this course. This assistance encompasses various sectors, including parliament, judiciary, media, and civil society. Efforts have been prioritized to enhance media freedom and expression, monitor elections, and protect human rights, particularly for vulnerable groups. Through these endeavors, the EU has significantly contributed to Georgia's ongoing political, economic, and social transformation since its independence.

Looking ahead, Georgia's journey toward EU membership will increasingly involve intergovernmental processes, necessitating close attention to interactions with the EU Parliament and specific member states. Thus, it is crucial for Georgia to heed the warnings issued by the EU Parliament and certain EU member states in a timely manner to facilitate the smooth and robust progression of membership negotiations. Nevertheless, the escalating prominence of these issues in recent years underscores their significant implications for the European Union's (EU) influence within the nation. Despite Georgia's persistent endeavors towards EU integration post-Rose Revolution, its elevated status as a privileged partner, and eventual attainment of candidate status, the EU's inability to sway the Georgian political elite on numerous fronts underscores the constraints of its political leverage.

In recent years, Georgia has experienced increasing political polarization, marked by a deep divide between the government and opposition. This polarization has hindered consensus on crucial issues like human rights and freedoms, leading to hostile

rhetoric, parliamentary boycotts, and judicial disputes. Opposition figures face legal challenges, and journalists linked to the opposition encounter pressure, exacerbating the divide. This polarization undermines democratic principles within the country and could potentially pose a significant barrier to Georgia's EU membership aspirations. The urgency of addressing political polarization in Georgia is paramount, with the responsibility primarily resting on the government. However, it is conceivable that the ruling party perceives polarization as beneficial, given the fractured nature of the opposition, which poses minimal electoral threat. Recent legislative actions and the government's stance towards the opposition and presidency raise doubts about efforts to reduce polarization. The opposition must realize that inflexibility harms democracy and national reputation and should seize opportunities for compromise, such as the Michel Agreement. Decreasing political polarization can improve judicial matters, media freedom, and election-related tensions. In this context, reducing polarization in the country might also help improve relations with the Baltic States, Poland, and Ukraine, which have warmer relations with the opposition in Georgia, enabling Georgia to garner more support for its accession negotiations.

It is evident that the issue of media independence and the ability of media members to do their jobs freely without fear of being persecuted will be an essential issue in the upcoming process leading to the opening of membership negotiations. Addressing the polarization within the media sphere and alleviating the constraints faced by opposition outlets stemming from declining advertising revenues is important. Furthermore, imposing limitations on the revenue streams of media entities or categorizing them, along with NGOs, as foreign agents due to their receipt of donations from the EU and Western sources contradicts Georgia's EU aspirations. Henceforth, it is imperative for the Georgian political leadership to prioritize the promotion of media pluralism as a means to demonstrate their dedication to the process of European integration.

Furthermore, alongside these challenges, issues within the judiciary system and its independence from political influence represent significant hurdles in Georgia's relations with the EU and Western nations. Recent politically motivated trials targeting opposition figures and the government's antagonistic stance towards former President Saakashvili not only tarnish the country's democratic reputation but also detrimentally impact bilateral ties with several European states. The close scrutiny by Western entities of ongoing cases suspected to be politically motivated and protests against judicial rulings underscores the complexity of this challenge in Georgia's path toward EU integration. The imposition of sanctions by the USA on certain Georgian judges for serious corruption further underscores the pressing need for substantial judicial reforms.

In recent years, one of the observed challenges in the integration process between the European Union (EU) and Georgia pertains to safeguarding vulnerable minorities. This delicate matter is closely monitored by both the EU and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Recent unfortunate occurrences highlight the potential of this issue to strain relations between the EU and Georgia. The escalating negative discourse concerning LGBTQ communities in certain European nations, coupled with authoritarian regimes and populist sentiments, may influence the narrative surrounding LGBTQ rights in Georgia. Concurrently, this issue presents both an avenue for demonstrating the Georgian political elite's dedication to European values and a potential stumbling block in their integration efforts.

Georgia's recent relations with the EU prompt an inquiry into the extent of the Georgian Dream leadership's dedication to European values and the reform agenda. As anticipated by neo-functionalist theory, local leaders often redirect their national loyalties towards European supranational organizations, perceiving them as superior venues for safeguarding and advancing their personal and national interests. This proposition holds partial merit for Georgia, especially in the aftermath of the Rose

Revolution and the August War. However, recent actions undertaken by the Georgian political elite, despite objections from EU officials and institutions, along with statements accusing the EU and the broader Western sphere of interfering with the nation's sovereignty, suggest a waning validity of this proposition within Georgia.

From the European Union's standpoint, it is evident that alongside adherence to EU standards and reforms, geopolitical considerations play a significant role in evaluations within the South Caucasus region, with particular emphasis on Georgia. Georgia stands out in this region as the sole enthusiastic EU partner. Positioned as both an associated partner and having achieved candidate status, Georgia serves as the EU's anchor in the region and potentially facilitates other countries' engagement with the EU. However, the precondition for this lies in Georgia's EU integration process transforming into a noteworthy success story.

There is a likelihood of heightened competition between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation across all three South Caucasus nations. Moreover, China's investments in Georgia are rising, positioning it as an economically dependable partner, particularly in significant infrastructure ventures. Moreover, empirical evidence underscores the considerable surge in commercial ties with Russia, particularly following the Ukrainian conflict; this trade has significantly bolstered the nation's economic growth figures in recent years. Despite being Georgia's primary external financial contributor, it is evident that the forthcoming years will witness heightened competition for the European Union (EU) in this regard. Within this framework, the economic prospects and financial mechanisms available to Georgia as a candidate nation through the EU may serve as a deterrent against other actors accruing excessive political and economic influence in Georgia.

Upon scrutinizing the challenges encountered in Georgian-EU relations thus far, it becomes evident that a significant obstacle lies in the commitment of the Georgian

political leadership to EU principles and values such as democracy, pluralism, inclusivity, and a culture of compromise. However, even if the Georgian political elite were to demonstrate unwavering dedication to these EU ideals in the coming years, the resolution of complex issues such as Georgia's territorial integrity and its evolving economic ties, particularly with Russia, cannot be expected to resolve automatically. Hence, the intricate geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus region and the potential for economic interests to impede Georgia's accession process remain salient concerns that demand attention.

In the framework of this study, the principal assumption under scrutiny was that, via the established mechanisms of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Georgia, the EU has wielded influence over Georgian political dynamics, encompassing both ruling and opposition factions, leveraging its external policy tools and soft power. However, contemporary challenges in the relations, such as political polarization, judicial issues, and constraints on media freedom and plurality, underscore the limitations of the EU's soft power in compelling the Georgian ruling elite to align with EU values and principles more closely. Nevertheless, the EU continues to possess significant political and economic sway over both governmental authorities and the general populace, mainly through the recently articulated European perspective offered to Georgia in addition to the privileged partner status of Georgia thanks to the Association Agreement.

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Interviews

- ❖ Interview with an Academic and Researcher based in Tbilisi, September 25, 2023.
- ❖ Interview with an Associate Professor of International Relations from Ilia State University, October 3, 2023.
- ❖ Interview with a European Studies Researcher based in Tbilisi, October 6, 2023.

- ❖ Interview with a Government Employee in Tbilisi, October 10, 2023.
- ❖ Interview with Associate Professor of Political Science in Tbilisi, December 7, 2023.
- ❖ Interview with a Senior Government Official, September 9, 2022.
- ❖ Interview with a Foreign Diplomat based in Tbilisi, March 7, 2023.
- ❖ Interview with a Director of an Academic Institute based in Tbilisi, April 16, 2024.