



## **New Regional Alignment in the Post-Soviet Space: The EU as an Active Player in the Eastern Partnership Countries (The Case of Georgia)**

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### **Abstract**

This article debates how the interests, objectives, strategy, and policy of the European Union (EU) towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership have changed over time through the case study of Georgia. It explains the essence of Europeanization and integration processes in this region, as well as the new role that the EU plays in the post-Soviet region. The research examines how Georgia's status gradually changed from that of a recipient of EU humanitarian aid to that of an EU candidate country. In the analysis, various official EU documents that subsequently became guides for the formation of the EU policy about the Eastern Partnership countries are examined. Attention is also drawn to the contradictory geographical identity of individual Eastern Partnership countries, most notably in the South Caucasus region, with Georgia as a key example. The analysis demonstrates how war became the main variable influencing the fundamental revision of the EU policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries, and examples include the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022. Finally, the article looks at how, in both cases, war became a trigger for the development of new geopolitical projects and concepts on the part of the EU.

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## Introduction

For many years, the European Union (EU) has used its soft power in the complex region of post-Soviet Eastern Europe but defiantly refused to play the role of an active geopolitical player. However, gradually, its role in the region began to grow. Russia's war on Ukraine became a factor that radically changed not only the policy of the EU but also of leading EU member countries. The EU's approach to this region has changed over time. After a long period of neglect, followed by cooperation through the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership, a further unexpected rapprochement began in 2022. The EU has long-term interests in the post-Soviet space, which have guided the EU decision-makers towards an accelerated integration.

This study explores the key concepts and tools that the EU has developed to strengthen its transformative power and geopolitical role in the region. An examination of one of these Eastern partners, Georgia, moved from being an ordinary neighbour of Europe to becoming a candidate for membership. Following the introduction, the article details the methodology and provides a background overview of the research. The analysis is organized around five concepts that have driven EU policy toward Georgia in the period from 1992 until the present: indifference, neighbourhood, soft power via partnership, "great Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi" (*Agenda.ge* 2022), and "four-speed Europe" (Costa et al. 2023). This is followed by the conclusion.

## Methodology and Background

The research focuses on the case of Georgia, but examples from other Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries serve as a tool to demonstrate the broader picture. After identifying the key concepts underlying EU policy towards Georgia and other Eastern partners, the analysis divides EU policy towards Georgia and the region into specific phases and examines each stage separately. The study examines what goals EU policy pursued in all specific periods and what instruments it used to realize its interests. The focus is mainly on the EU's soft power and transformative influence. However, the growing geopolitical interest of the EU in the region is the main factor that partially displaces such traditional EU instruments. As Liik (2017) argues, there has always been a belief in Russia that "Europe is trying to spread its norms and values in the EaP region with the aim of expanding its sphere of influence at the expense of Moscow's." Qualitative content analysis has been used to explore the evolution of EU policy towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership, with a focus on the examination of official statements and positions of high-ranking EU officials, as well as leaders of certain influential EU countries, such as Germany and France. The article analyzes official EU documents related to such EU programs and initiatives as the EU Eastern Neighbourhood policy, the Eastern Partnership program, the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, and several contemporary policy papers developed in 2023 by EU experts. The research presented here examines the path of Georgia in the process of rapprochement with Europe and later with the EU from the 1990s to 2024.

The role of the EU as an active player in the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, has been analyzed from various perspectives, with the concepts of Europeanization (Bauer et al. 2007; Börzel 2010, Börzel and Pamuk 2011; Börzel and Risse 2016) and the EU's transformative power (Börzel 2009) being widely applied. The literature uses a variety of concepts to describe the role of the EU as a regional player in the post-Soviet region (Ehrke 2007). Regarding Georgia, the concept of indifference has been used to describe the EU's initial policy (Coppieters 1998), while official documents have referred to Georgia as a neighbour of wider Europe (Commission of the European Communities 2003) and the EU (European Union 2016). A significant place in the literature is devoted to the study of the EU Eastern Partnership Program (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2023; Chedia 2010, 2015; Habets 2014; Longhurst and Nies 2009; Paul and Ciolan 2021). The EU's soft power has been

emphasized (Gahler 2021), along with the phenomenon of the irreversibility of the “return to Europe” by post-Soviet countries and the EU’s responsibility to integrate former communist states into European structures (Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig 2010). DeBardeleben (2021) described EU policy toward the Eastern Partnership countries as “bold ambitions in a troubled region.”

Among the reasons for the EU’s cautious policy towards the post-Soviet region, including Georgia, the importance of Russia’s opposition to closer relations between Georgia and the EU has been highlighted (Haukkala and Moshes 2004; Longhurst and Nies 2009, Przetacznik and Russell 2021). Other sources mention doubts also about Georgia’s geographical affiliation with the European continent (UN 2023). However, later references describe Georgia as a European country (Barroso 2014; Council of the European Union 2014; European Commission 2022a), and official EU documents highlight the importance of potential members, including Georgia, adopting common European values as a prerequisite for joining the EU, emphasizing the need to strengthen democratic institutions and implement specific reforms (Borrell 2023; European Commission 2022b). Even before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some scholars had already emphasized “increasing multipolarity and geopolitical competition,” pointing to the “strategic importance” of the Eastern Partnership for the EU and calling the Eastern neighbours “natural allies for the EU” (Gherasimov 2020, 8). Following Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, several new studies and policy documents emerged outlining various views, strategies, and approaches for the future possible enlargement of the EU to include some of the EaP countries, including Georgia (Borrell 2023; Drozdiak et al. 2023; Scholz 2022). They argue for the necessity and irreversibility of EU enlargement as well as the importance of rethinking the role of the EU as an active geopolitical player in the post-Soviet region (Costa et al. 2023). Some studies draw attention to the enormous financial resources that it will cost EU members to bring nine new countries from the Eastern Partnership and the Balkans into the EU (Foy 2023), with one author calling Georgia a “terrible dilemma for Europe” (Genté 2023, 1). Many agree that the New Geopolitical Situation is accelerating the expansion of the EU and “**enlargement is a geopolitical project for Europe**” (Várhelyi 2023a). Some authors argue that after Russia invaded Ukraine, the European Union suddenly discovered geopolitics and the EU started “redrawing its mental map” (De Waal 2022). To explore the new regional alignment in the post-Soviet space by analyzing the growing role of the EU as an active player in the Eastern Partnership countries, five main concepts are introduced: indifference, neighbourhood, soft power via partnership, “great Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi”(Agenda.ge 2022) and “four-speed Europe” (Costa et al. 2023).

### Concepts Underlying the EU’s Policy Toward the Eastern Neighbourhood

Five main concepts are utilized in this analysis of the EU’s policy toward the Eastern neighbourhood from the 1990s to 2024: indifference, neighbourhood, soft power via partnership, “great Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi” (Agenda.ge 2022), and “four-speed Europe” (Costa et al. 2023). The analysis charts the progression through stages of development of EU policy based on these five concepts. These different key concepts that the EU has applied over the years towards its EU Eastern neighbours have been based mainly on two main theories: the EU’s soft power and transformative power. The theory of soft power developed by Joseph Nye (1990) is based on the ability of a state (international actor) to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye 1990). In discussing the capabilities of the EU, some scholars point to the presence of sources of soft power (Nitoiu and Sus 2018). It is worth noting the attempt of some scholars to differentiate the phenomenon of soft power and transformative power. These scholars argue that the EU usually applies soft power to third countries by promoting its norms, while transformative power is applied to countries that want to join the EU (Dimitrova et al. 2016). Heather Grabbe (2006) also discusses transformative power in the context of a tool for future EU membership, using the example

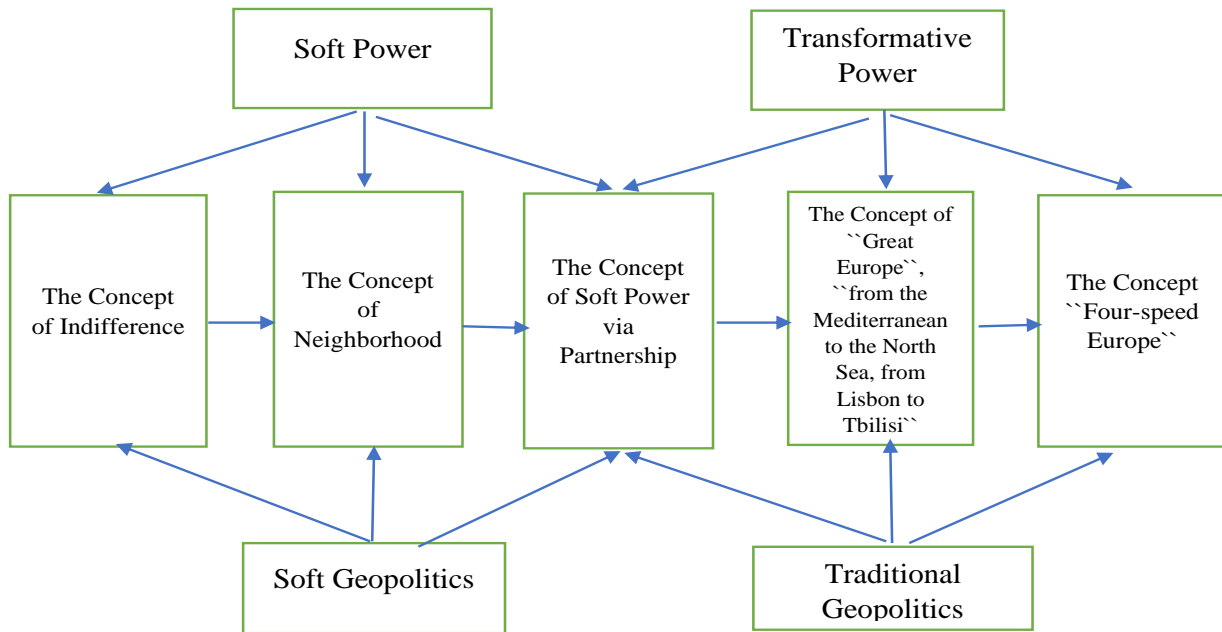
of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Instead of soft power or transformative power, Manners discusses the concept of normative power in the context of the former communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe. Manners (2002) points to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights as basic norms that the EU promoted in these countries and thus contributed to their transformation.

Some scholars argue that “[t]he EU as such initially mostly adopted a soft-power approach towards Georgia, focussing its engagement on the promotion of good governance and democratisation, as well as the development of economic relations” (Deen, Zweers and Linder 2023, 38). When discussing the effectiveness of the EU’s soft power in Georgia, some scholars link this issue to the prospect of EU membership; for example, Amanda Paul (2015) argued that for many years, the lack of prospect of EU membership undermined the EU’s effectiveness in promoting democracy in the region.

In the case of Georgia, theories of soft power and transformative power partially merge into one. Tanja Börzel (2009) discusses the early stage of Georgia’s (and other Caucasus countries’) cooperation with the EU not in the context of soft power but in the context of transformative power and calls the EU a promoter of good governance in Georgia and other Eastern neighbours. As Judith Kelly (2006) argues, even before the launch of the Eastern Partnership Programme, in the framework of ENP to promote reform agenda, the European Commission used an “adapted enlargement template” of its former accession policy with regard to the Central and Eastern Europe countries.

In discussions about the EU’s use of soft power and its transformative power, two doctrines have emerged: soft and traditional geopolitics. Some authors (Nitoiu and Sus 2018) point to the presence of a soft version of geopolitics in the EU approaches, which, in their opinion, differs from traditional geopolitics: for example, on the one hand, the EU for many years did not recognize the presence of geopolitical interest in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, on the other hand, it was still involved in “geopolitical competition” with Russia through the use of its soft power (Deen, Zweers and Loon 2021). A high level of normative, cultural, and economic attractiveness served as a kind of soft geopolitical instrument to strengthen its influence in this region (Nitoiu and Sus 2018). The traditional geopolitical approach marks 2015 as the year when the EU openly declared its geopolitical interest in relation to its Eastern neighbours (Deen, Zweers, and Loon 2021).

**Figure 1: Concepts, Theories and Doctrines Used by the EU Towards Georgia and Other Eastern Partnership Countries**



#### *The Concept of Indifference (1990s-2003)*

During this time period, the EU demonstrated indifference to Georgia's problems; this stage has been referred to as the marginalization of Georgia by the EU (Coppieters 1998). The concept of indifference was most reflected in the non-intervention of the EU and European countries in the ethno-political conflict in Georgia in the 1990s, which was provoked by Russia. The EU largely refrained from taking a position on the bloodshed on Georgian territory. The EU was more concerned about armed conflicts in the Balkans, meanwhile, the turmoil in the Caucasus and, in particular, Georgia was a secondary issue for the EU (Coppieters 1998) and was generally absent from the foreign policy agenda of the European Community. Among the probable reasons for the EU's indifference towards Georgia may have been a desire not to anger Russia, which was echoed in the following sentiment: "Brussels and some member states do not wish to upset by interfering too openly in Moscow's 'near abroad'" (Börzel 2010, 18, citing Baun, 2007). The second main reason for indifference was that Europe did not perceive Georgia as part of the continent (Coppieters 1998).

In the 1990s, the EU developed the "Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, which was intended for the former Soviet republics (with the exception of the three Baltic countries) and Mongolia. This program included countries geographically belonging to the European continent as well as countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan). At this time, the EU perceived the countries of the Caucasus as transcontinental countries and treated Georgia in the same way as the countries of Central Asia. The purpose of this program was to assist these countries in democratization and economic transformation by providing know-how and grant financing to support projects in a variety of fields, including energy, transport, and telecommunications infrastructures, nuclear safety, the environment, food production, processing and distribution, and social services and education (European Commission 1992). The

program evolved into a mechanism for the development of economic and political ties between the EU and these countries. Within the framework of this program, Georgia received less financial assistance than the countries of Central Asia (Coppieters 1998), which emphasized the indifference of the European Community towards Georgia. Europe did not provide any European projects for Georgia; Georgia was treated based on the general concept of a regional approach. Georgia perceived itself as a European country, but the EU perceived Georgia as part of a separate region.

In 1999, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Georgia and the EU came into force. This agreement was the main instrument of the EU for following its interests in different countries, including the countries of the South Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The same Partnership and Cooperation Agreement came into force a year earlier (1998) in the case of Ukraine and Moldova. As for Belarus, although the EU signed the same agreement in 1995, the ratification process was frozen due to the authoritarian regime in Belarus. These EU agreements with the former USSR republics were almost identical and contained general principles, political dialogue, trade, legislative, economic and cultural cooperation, cooperation on the prevention of illegal activities, and cooperation on matters relating to democracy and human rights. The content of these agreements showed that the EU acted as a kind of normative power and tried to use the agreements to Europeanize these countries through the export and implementation of democratic values, human rights, the rule of law, fair elections, freedom of speech, among other principles (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia 1996). However, the analysis of the agreement with Georgia showed that the EU did not have a clear external political course toward Georgia (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia 1996).

In contrast to the EU concept of indifference, Georgia developed its own concept: “I am Georgian and therefore I am European!” Discussions about Georgia’s civilizational affiliation with Europe began immediately after the collapse of the USSR and its restoration of independence. In the second half of the 1990s, such discussions became more intense against the backdrop of Georgia’s desire to join the Council of Europe. Georgia’s potential membership in the Council of Europe was entirely separate from the prospect of joining the EU—at that time, the idea of EU membership for Georgia was not even a consideration. Rather, for both Georgia and Europe, the issue related to a possible revision of the borders of Europe.

In 1996, Georgia was granted “special guest status” by the Council of Europe. That same year, Georgia made an official application for membership. Heated discussions about whether Georgia should be admitted to the Council of Europe continued for another couple of years. In 1998, during his official visit to the South Caucasus states, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Daniel Tarshis, concluded: “Because of its historical and cultural ties, the Caucasus and its population belong to the European family” (Chedia 2010, 23). In 1999, Georgia was the first South Caucasus country to join the Council of Europe; this was, in fact, the first institutional recognition of Georgia and the Caucasus region as part of Europe’s cultural and political sphere. The phrase “I am Georgian and therefore I am European!” was proclaimed by the chairman of the Georgian parliament during the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session in which Georgia was admitted as a member. This phrase marked the beginning of the process of Georgia returning to the European family and was the first step in strengthening its image as a European nation.

#### *The Concept of Neighbourhood (2004-2008)*

The EU’s approach of indifference was replaced by the concept of neighbourhood, embodied in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This new concept included strengthening the EU’s soft power in neighbouring countries. The main objective of the ENP was “to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged Union and its neighbours” (Magen 2006, 391). At that time, many already believed that the ability of the EU to expand had reached its limit, and to achieve stability, security and prosperity in neighbouring countries, it was necessary to develop an alternative project.

The European Neighborhood Policy was developed in 2003 and included countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, and Tunisia, as well as post-communist European countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus (Commission of the European Communities 2003). In the first stage, the countries of the South Caucasus were not included in the program. However, in 2003, the EU demonstrated interest in these countries by introducing a new position—an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus. It was only in 2004 that the EU decided to include the three South Caucasus countries in this neighbourhood program. At that time, some believed that the inclusion of the South Caucasus countries in this project was facilitated by the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003. The Rose Revolution contributed to the rapprochement of Georgia with the EU, as far as the pro-European aspirations of the country were broadly recognized (Edwards 2008).

Before the Rose Revolution, the process of Europeanization was mainly one-sided and was expressed by the export of democratic values and reforms by the EU. Georgia most likely was a passive contributor to the ideas of Europeanization and did not make any effort to use internal resources to accelerate Europeanization, although the pull towards the EU was always present. After the revolution, Europeanization in Georgia increasingly became a two-way process. Post-2003, the official political course was the complete Europeanization of the country. A reflection of this new Georgian policy was the establishment (in 2004) by the Georgian government—the position of State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia). However, for the leadership of Georgia, rapprochement with the EU without the prospect of membership was not very attractive (Chedia 2015, 9). The Georgian leadership at the time even named 2010 as the probable year for Georgia's accession to the EU (Chedia 2010, 24). However, in 2010, Börzel (1) argued that “neighbours of Europe do not have a membership perspective, at least not in the foreseeable future.”

After the Rose Revolution, significant progress was made to bring Georgia and the EU closer. After 2003, a noticeable rebranding of Georgia as a European country began. For example, the country altered its state symbols by restoring the historical flag of the Georgian kingdom, commonly known as the five-cross flag, as the official state flag. The image of crosses on the flag clearly emphasized, on the one hand, the Christian identity of Georgia, and on the other, it was described by authorities as a promotional banner of Georgia belonging to the European civilization (Chedia 2009, 171). Georgia paid special attention not only to the harmonization of its legislation with the EU or close integration into the economic and political structures of the EU but also to its inclusion in the cultural or educational space of the EU (Chedia 2010, 24).

The presence of African and Asian countries as participants in the EU Neighborhood Policy directly indicated that this project was not conceived as an EU integration project, and it could not become a tool for possible EU membership for Georgia. It meant that the EU perceived the countries of Africa and Asia as neighbours of the European continent and, at the same time, as neighbours of the EU but not as prospective members. Although Ukraine and Moldova were perceived as parts of the European continent, they were considered neighbours of the EU. As for Georgia and the South Caucasus region, the controversial perception of their geographical position gave rise to an ambiguous and vague concept of these neighbours' status. It is noteworthy that in 2007, Germany proposed to introduce an ENP Eastern Dimension (Kurpas and Riecke 2007, 45–46; Rinnert 2011, 9). This was the first unsuccessful attempt at a differentiated approach to the EU's Eastern neighbours because France opposed this idea (Rinnert 2011, 9). In the same year (2007), the EU launched the EU Black Sea Synergy (European Commission 2007), which was “the first attempt by the EU to design a regional policy for Eastern neighbours” (Rinnert 2011, 9). Some scholars argued that some countries, especially Georgia, considered the Black Sea synergy as “a potential driving force of further EU integration” (Rinnert 2011, 9). Georgia's interest in advancing this geographical perspective grew even stronger following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU, with Georgia arguing that “any identification with the South Caucasus would damage the country's chances of getting closer to the

EU” (Chedia 2022, 65). The inclusion of Georgia in the ENP was viewed by both EU officials and Georgian politicians as progress toward closer ties with the EU, but not as an acknowledgment of Georgia’s potential EU membership. Participation in the ENP did not completely resolve the issue of recognition of the European identity of Georgia and the Caucasus region. The persistent policy of the Georgian ruling elite of knocking at the door of the EU had nevertheless begun to bear fruit.

In August 2008, for the first time, the EU appeared as an active geopolitical player in the Caucasus region during Russia’s attack on Georgia. France, which held the EU presidency at the time, took the lead in the mediation process. If, for many years, the EU had refrained from active political intervention in this region, the Russo-Georgian War provided the impetus for the strengthening of the EU as a significant geopolitical actor in the Caucasus region. French President Nicolas Sarkozy successfully mediated a ceasefire agreement with Moscow, known as the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreement (The Government of Georgia 2008). To comply with the terms of the ceasefire, Brussels sent an unarmed civilian monitoring mission to Georgia in 2008, a few weeks after the war. The deployment of 300 ceasefire monitors to Georgia in 2008 was assessed as a “larger and more politically challenging” EU operation (Vasconcelos 2010, 22). Moreover, this made it possible for the EU to believe in its strength as a geopolitical player in this region; as Vasconcelos (2010, 22) argued, “the political determination of EU Member States can translate into a mission that makes a difference on the ground.” To this day, EU observers remain in Georgia along the line of occupation.

#### *The Concept of Soft Power via Partnership (2009-2022)*

One of the main results of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was the EU Eastern Partnership program (EaP) developed on the initiative of Poland and Sweden. Longhurst and Nies (2009, 9) argued that this war “provided the EU with a strong impulse to move ahead with the EaP.” In 2009, the EU signed the Eastern Partnership Treaty with six post-Soviet states (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus). According to José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission in 2008, the Eastern Partnership program merely demonstrated the “soft power” of the European Union in this complex region (Chedia 2015). In Georgia, great hopes were placed on this program as, in comparison with the ENP, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program was perceived as a window of opportunity for integration with the EU. However, the EU did not perceive the EaP as an instrument for future EU membership of post-Soviet countries. The EaP was initially a product of the EU’s concept of “ever closer partnerships” (Habets 2014, 129) with the Eastern Partnership countries. Habets (2014, 129) called this program an “alternative to membership” and pointed out that “offering the prospect of membership may not be possible due to the lack of political will on the EU side.” By launching this program, the EU then partially satisfied Georgia’s ambitions, establishing it as a close partner. The EaP was an eclectic formation since it included six countries of the former USSR, which differed both in their foreign policy directions and their internal state structure and political regimes. Longhurst and Nies (2009, 12) argued that “the EaP group of states present an array of challenges for the EU and enjoy different types of relations with Brussels.” Georgia was the country among them that most clearly expressed Euro-Atlantic aspirations, persistently seeking EU membership, referred to as a “beacon of liberty” (*Guardian* 2005). In general, the attitudes of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova towards the EU and its membership were described as “fundamentally positive” (Longhurst and Nies 2009, 12). Two EaP states—Armenia and Belarus—might be classified as “less pro-European” and Russia’s dependent countries (Longhurst and Nies 2009, 12). Azerbaijan’s stance toward the EU was characterized as “positive neutrality” (Longhurst and Nies 2009, 12), while Belarus remained an authoritarian country close to Russia. The inclusion of Georgia in the EaP partially ensured the strengthening of its European identity and geographic affiliation to the European continent. In the communiqué on the EaP, participating countries were designated as “EU partners in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus” (Commission of the European Communities 2008); meaning that, at that time, the EU still did not call Georgia a country of Eastern Europe.

Russia, which considered itself the owner of the post-Soviet space, considered the EaP a potential danger to its interests in the region. In 2010, Russia formed the Eurasian Customs Union and, in 2012, the Single Economic Space. Wolczuk, Dragneva, and Wallace (2022) argue that this was “partly spurred by the EU Eastern Partnership Policy (EaP).” Russian propaganda presented the EaP as “an ‘anti-Russian’ and ‘postcolonial’ tool used by the EU for alleged interference in internal affairs of the post-Soviet countries” (East Stratcom Task Force 2021). Some Western commentators see the EU using the EaP to compete with Russia in the shared neighbourhood. For example, Milsovovich (2021, 10) argued that “the EaP reflect[s] a European decision to compete with Russia in the region and refute the notion of a Russian zone of privileged interest.” However, at the same time, José Manuel Barroso maintained that the EaP was not intended to create new spheres of influence and draw new dividing lines in Europe (Chedia 2015).

The EaP has proven to be a useful tool, especially for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, the three participating countries that were able to sign an Association Agreement as well as free trade agreements with the EU, which later introduced a visa-free regime for these countries. Georgia signed the Association Agreement and a free trade agreement in 2014, while a visa-free regime with the EU was introduced in 2017. These steps were a major achievement for Georgia, as it became an associated country, and its citizens were able to freely enter the Schengen area. In the Association Agreement, Georgia is mentioned as an “Eastern European country” (Council of the European Union 2014, 5). Despite some skepticism about the effectiveness of the program, it is because of the Eastern Partnership that Georgia has become a close partner of the EU, as stated by EU officials: “For me, Georgia is not only an important partner of the EU. When I say Georgia, I mean ‘freedom’, when I say Georgia, I mean ‘pride’, when I say Georgia, I mean ‘courage’” (Tusk 2019). It is noteworthy that in 2016, the EU presented its new global strategy where Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries were given a small place in the corner of a large hall along with regions such as the Western Balkans, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and Africa (European Union 2016). The purpose of this strategy was to protect the interests of the EU as a global player and did not in any way reflect the European aspirations of Georgia and other EaP countries.

However, before Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU countries ruled out any possibility of future membership of Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova. In 2019, France submitted a discussion paper, which stated that “the partnership is based on economic and political cooperation,” but excludes “all prospects or all mechanisms of EU integration or membership” (Jozwiak 2020). In this regard, some sources even indicated that France “doesn’t want to do anything in the neighborhood that would potentially upset Moscow” (Jozwiak 2020). This confirms the opinion that some influential EU member states, such as France, even in 2020 supported the idea of a kind of buffer zone in the form of Eastern Partnership countries. This once again emphasizes that throughout the history of the EU’s relations with its Eastern partners such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, one of the main variables has been the Russian factor and its interests in the region. Russia has always considered the EaP region “as belonging to its sphere of influence” (*Der Spiegel* 2009). Western European members of the EU have tried for many years not to irritate Russia and refrained from deepening relations with these countries by offering a membership perspective.

The EaP, most of all, demonstrated the EU’s ambivalent foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries. While Western European countries continued to defend their skeptical views about EaP countries, a bloc of countries from the former communist bloc (the Visegrad countries, led by Poland and the Baltic states) boldly advocated for Georgia’s rapprochement with the EU. This bloc of Euro optimists actively supported the formation of an even smaller group of countries that distinguished themselves by their desire to accelerate the pace of EU membership (Makszimov 2021, 15). Among the six EaP countries, only Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova advanced in the EU rapprochement process. In 2021, these three nations formed the so-called “Associated Trio” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2021). This Trio was created similarly to the Visegrad Four and the Council of the

Baltic Sea countries. The European Commission expected “associated countries to lead by example” (Makszimov 2021, 16). In response to concerns of some Western European EU members, Ukraine assured the EU that “the Trio cooperation should be seen as complementary to the Eastern Partnership and ‘will not aim at replacing the existing issues’” (Przetacznik and Russell 2021, 5).

Thanks to the EaP, the EU and its institutions have become important players in Georgia’s domestic politics, which was shown by the level of Europeanization of the country. The involvement of European politicians in the internal political life of Georgia has reached an unprecedented scale that indicates the growing influence of the EU as a regional or even global player in the post-Soviet region, in particular in Georgia. Members of the European Parliament began to comment on internal political events in Georgia almost on a daily basis. For example, members of the European Parliament, Viola von Cramon, Markéta Gregorová, Andrius Kubilius, Rasa Juknevičienė, and others have been very active in the political life of Georgia in recent years and often commented on the country’s internal political issues on Georgian television or in such social platforms as X (formerly Twitter). Such an intense involvement of European politicians has already included Georgia in the common intra-European political space.

At the early stage of Georgia’s independence, for the EU, this small South Caucasus country was just a distant periphery (Coppeters 1998), in which the EU showed little interest. Gradually, the EU became an active player in Georgian domestic politics. For example, the EU Council President Charles Michel got involved in finding a solution to the political crisis that arose after the October 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia. Michel sent his representative several times and personally visited Georgia twice to mediate between the authorities and the opposition. His mission ended on April 19, 2020, with the signing of an agreement according to which the opposition stopped boycotting the work of the parliament. Such an unprecedented intervention by a high-ranking European leader delineates the outlines of the European perspective on Georgia.

*The Concept of “Great Europe, from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi” (2022-Present)*

The potential accession of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to the EU was perceived as a fantasy or a matter for many decades prior to 2022. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered the EU’s revolutionary turn in favour of eastward expansion. Ukraine decided to position itself as a defender of the Eastern flank of the EU from Russian aggression and put forward demands to speed up EU membership procedures. As a result, together with Ukraine, two other EaP countries, Moldova and Georgia, applied for EU membership in 2022. In the same year, the European Council decided to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova and recognized a European perspective for Georgia (Delegation of the EU to Georgia 2022).

The EU countries that had been against enlargement for many years suddenly turned into Euro optimists. For example, Germany and France, which had long resisted offering a membership perspective to EaP countries, emerged in 2022 as leading proponents of a new wave of EU expansion. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz put forward a completely new concept of a new vast Europe in which Georgia was included for the first time: Scholz stated, “We are the people of Europe and our voice must be heard throughout Europe, from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi and beyond” (*Agenda.ge* 2022). In 2023, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock referred to the “understanding of EU enlargement as a necessary geopolitical consequence of Russia’s war” (*Reuters* 2023). In an op-ed for *Foreign Affairs*, Olaf Scholz (2022) argued that “Putin wanted to divide Europe into zones of influence and to divide the world into blocs of great powers and vassal states. Instead, his war has served only to advance the EU.” In EU relations with post-Soviet countries, war has become one of the main political variables. The Russo-Georgian war urged the EU to accelerate the Eastern Partnership program, while the ongoing war in Ukraine led Europe to take steps toward welcoming its Eastern neighbours.

In 2022, European Council President Charles Michel stated that the EU should begin to build “a European geopolitical community” that would cover a wide area (Michel 2022). Involvement in such a group would not preclude full EU membership in the future, but the EU must now go beyond providing soft power support and become a security player in the region. The idea of a European geopolitical community, on the one hand, does not mean direct support for EU accession for Eastern Partnership countries, but on the other hand, it demonstrates the readiness of the current EU leadership to take bolder steps, including towards the Eastern Partnership countries. In 2023, during a visit to Georgia, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, argued that “there is no doubt for the EU that Georgia belongs to the European family” (2023).

If, for many years, there was no consensus in the EU on enlargement regarding the Eastern Partnership countries, since 2022, disagreements focused on specific dates and procedures for EU enlargement. In 2023, two contradictory EU strategies were developed regarding the possible enlargement of the EU to include some Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries. The author of the first approach is the European Council President Charles Michel, who argued that “enlargement is no longer a dream” and the bloc should be ready to accept new members in 2030 (Bayer 2023). In contrast to Michel’s strategy, which focused on the date, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasized that EU enlargement is a “merit-based process,” and candidate countries should only be allowed to join once they fulfill the EU’s entry criteria (Sorgi 2023). Von der Leyen contended that the European Commission is “not focused on a date, but focused on working very closely with candidate countries to get ready for joining the European Union” (Sorgi 2023).

These two different strategies also reflect the expectations of potential EU members, including Georgian leadership, who, from 2022, had hopes that due to the war in Ukraine and the changing geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe, the EU may turn a blind eye to the presence of weak democratic institutions in these countries (Chedia 2023). In Georgia, hopes have arisen that the EU can and should go against its principles by not taking into account democratic backsliding and speed up the procedures for eastward expansion, which would include Georgia (Chedia 2023). If previously many scholars argued that Georgia’s membership in the EU was useful only for Georgia, after 2022, a new narrative emerged among European experts, emphasizing that “it is in the EU’s interest to bring Georgia into the Western sphere. Leaving Georgia in geopolitical limbo would make it vulnerable to Russian exploitation” (Kuchenbecker 2023). Moreover, Georgian authorities even began to use geopolitical blackmail tools against the EU. In 2023, on the eve of the EU candidate status decision, Georgia signed a strategic partnership with China (Government of Georgia 2023). Despite the ongoing conflict with Russia and the absence of diplomatic relations, Georgia has intensified its trade and economic relations with Russia. With these steps, the Georgian authorities demonstrated that if Georgia’s EU membership slows down, Georgia could alternatively consider rapprochement with other geopolitical players. Researchers had previously warned about Russia’s “attempts to reassert itself as a global power by violating the international order on the EU’s doorstep” and argued that leaving EaP countries “as a buffer zone between Russia and the EU, with no clarity on their membership perspective, will alienate their citizens” (Gherasimov 2020, 8). In spite of this, Josep Borrell (2023) argued that “there are no shortcuts to EU accession. Neither for Georgia, nor anyone else. The enlargement process always follows clear criteria. It requires, for sure, hard work, political will and a clear commitment to the European Union’s values.” In 2023, some experts even proposed to the EU the idea of creating a European Democracy Fund—a support package for Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans “that would place democratic reform at the top of the enlargement agenda” (van der Staak 2023).

European Commission officials have never officially confirmed the connection between the EU’s geopolitical position and the decision on possible membership for Georgia. One member of the European Parliament, Nacho Sánchez Amor, commented on the European Council’s failure to grant Georgia EU candidate status in 2022, calling it a “geopolitical mistake” (*Agenda.ge* 2023). In 2022–

2023, various scenarios for the future expansion of the EU were proposed, envisioning the EU as a “union of 35 nations” (Börzel et al. 2023), a “union of 36 nations” (Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU 2023), or a “union 37 members” (Drozdiak et al. 2023). In these projects, the EU began to consider both the Balkan countries and the EaP countries.

### *The Concept of “Four-Speed Europe” (2023-Present)*

As an alternative approach to EU enlargement, initiated by Germany and France in 2023, a group of 12 European experts developed a plan for structural reform to prepare the EU for future expansion. The authors called themselves “the Group of Twelve” and issued a 60-page report entitled “Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century” (Costa et al. 2023). This vision of a future Europe is based on a new concept termed “four-speed Europe.” This plan is a synthesis of two different debates dominant in the EU, where emphasis is placed both on a specific date for possible EU enlargement and on the importance of meeting the necessary criteria for membership. Costa et al. (2023) pointed out that the EU must be ready for expansion by 2030 should candidates meet the necessary conditions, proposing the principle of a differentiated approach and the division of European states into four groups according to the level of integration and the desire for integration, acknowledging the possibility that in the future, some of the current member states may prefer looser forms of integration. The authors recommend envisioning the future of European integration as “four distinct tiers” (Costa et al. 2023, 10), each with a different balance of rights and obligations:

1. The inner circle: Internally, the members of the Eurozone and Schengen Area already participate in forms of deeper integration, with either permanent or temporary exemptions for the non-participating countries.
2. The EU: All current and future EU Member States are bound by the same political objectives.
3. Associate Members: A first outer tier could streamline the different forms of association with the EEA countries, Switzerland, or even the UK. Associate members would not be bound to ‘ever closer union’ and further integration, nor would they participate in deeper political integration in other policy areas such as justice, home affairs or EU citizenship.
4. The EPC: A second outer tier would not include any form of integration with binding EU law or specific rule of law requirements and would not allow access to the single market. Instead, it would focus on geopolitical convergence and political cooperation in such policy areas as security, energy, the environment, climate policy, etc.

The concept of “four-speed Europe” seems reminiscent of the concentric circles idea. This differentiated approach makes the future contours of an enlarged Europe even more unclear. This new concept still, in part, reflects old fears about the integration of some of the countries that have territorial conflicts. It was the war in Ukraine that became the main catalyst for accelerating the expansion of the EU, but the document talks about the problematic nature of EU membership for countries that have territorial conflicts with countries outside the EU. The ‘conflict resolution’ principle states that “[f]or security and stability reasons, countries with lasting military conflicts cannot join the EU. The same applies to countries with a territorial conflict with another candidate country or an EU Member State” (Costa et al. 2023, 44). All three countries (Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova) of the Eastern Partnership Trio program have a territorial conflict that involves Russia. Russia has occupied two regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region), maintains military control over Moldova’s Transnistria region, and is engaged in a prolonged war in Ukraine. This concept also involves the development of an alternative model to full EU membership. Ukraine objected to these EU plans immediately after the publication of the report entitled “Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century” (Lynch 2023). The EaP countries are seeking full membership rather than a secondary status in the EU in the form of surrogate membership.

In 2023, EU officials announced the main principles of the enlargement strategy regarding ten potential EU candidates, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kosovo. According to the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Affairs Oliver Varhelyi (2023b), before EU accession, these countries will be allowed to gradually integrate into the single market in the direction of the four freedoms of the European Union—freedom of movement of goods, capital, services, and people. It is noteworthy that these countries have already achieved these results in the process of rapprochement with the EU, and it can be inferred that such a statement by one of the EU leaders is largely declarative.

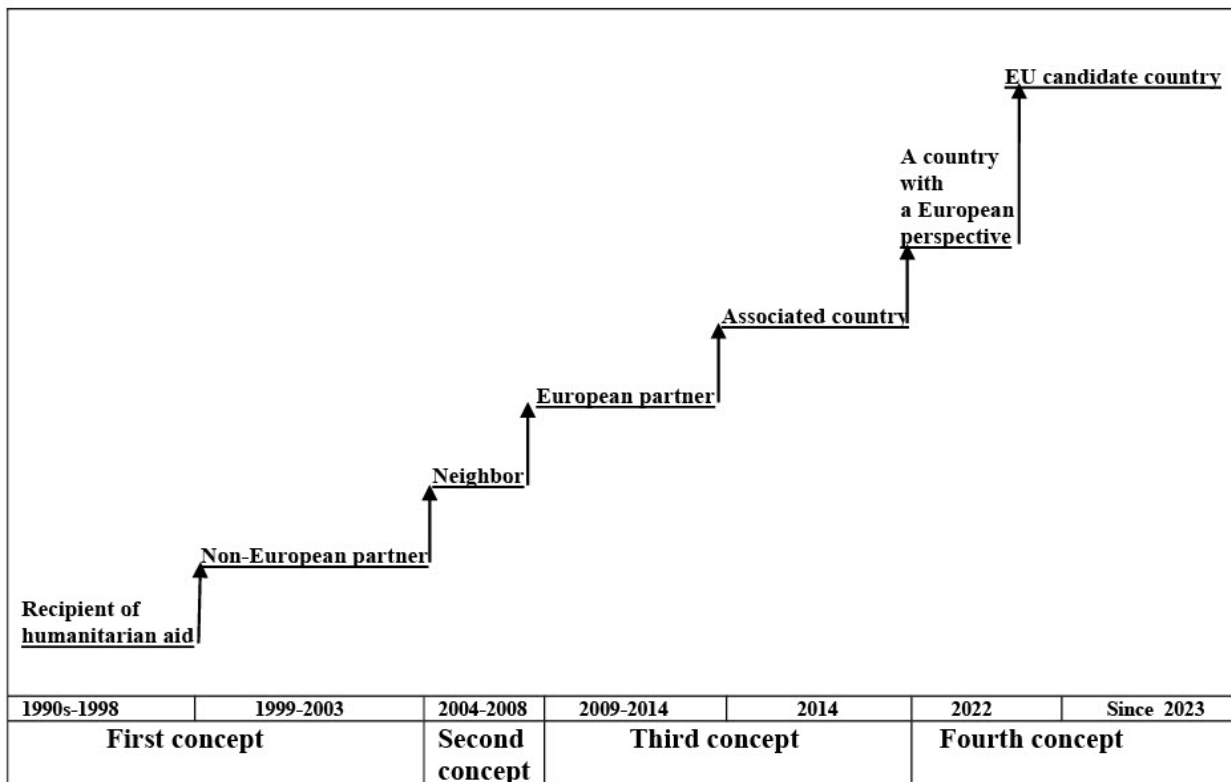
The EU is also aware that its increasing role as a geopolitical player and its plans for future expansion will come with a significant economic cost. In 2023, *The Financial Times* reported that an EU document prepared by the secretariat of the EU Council calculated the financial consequences of expanding the Union to include countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the six Western Balkan states. The cost of EU enlargement is estimated at 256.8 billion euros (EUR) (Foy 2023). According to the forecast, not only wealthy states such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands will be required to increase their budget contributions, but all other EU members as well (Foy 2023).

On November 8, 2023, the European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package, which recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granting candidate status to Georgia (European Commission 2023a). On December 14, 2023, the European Council decided to grant candidate country status to Georgia (Council of the European Union 2023), marking the beginning of plans to implement its new geopolitical strategy aimed at advancing a new wave of enlargement. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared that “enlargement is ‘vital’ for the European Union’s future and comes with strong ‘economic and geopolitical logic’” (European Commission 2023b). Immediately after the announcement of the 2023 Enlargement Package, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that “the European Union isn’t hiding its intentions to restrain [Russia] in every possible way and push it out of Central Asia and the South Caucasus” (AFP 2023). Lavrov argued that “Russia has been ‘historically present there’ and is ‘not going to disappear’ (AFP 2023). In response to the EU’s integration strategies, Russia utilized its traditional strategy of disinformation, leveraging the presence of territorial conflicts in Moldova and Georgia to advance its objectives. Prominent Russian publications disseminated widespread disinformation, claiming that “the European Union may consider the option of accepting Moldova and Georgia into its membership partially, that is, without the territories of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (*Izvestia* 2023).

## Conclusion

The EU’s interests in the post-Soviet region have changed over time, and, accordingly, its geopolitical role has undergone an evolution. For many years, the EU avoided taking on an active geopolitical role, focusing instead on humanitarian efforts and employing soft power through cultural and educational initiatives. Over time, however, the EU gradually transformed into a competitive actor in the region. However, the ultimate outcome of the EU’s enhanced role in this region remains uncertain.

This article analyzed the developing nature of Georgia’s relations with the EU through five key concepts, each roughly corresponding to a distinct period. However, each concept is further divided into multiple stages, resulting in Georgia holding various statuses within each framework. The Rising Step Model demonstrates how Georgia successfully elevated its status in its relationship with the EU, progressing from a lower level to the highest level of engagement. In this model, each level corresponds to a new status (see Figure 2). The fifth concept is still under development and has not yet influenced Georgia’s specific status; its outcome is unlikely to become evident until after the conclusion of the war in Ukraine.

**Figure 2: The Rising Step Model Shows How Georgia Has Been Perceived by the EU for 30 Years**

The first three concepts describe developments roughly up to 2022. The first, “Indifference,” characterized the period from independence up until the Rose Revolution. The second period, captured by the concept of “Neighbourhood,” began in 2004 when Georgia became part of the European Neighbourhood Policy along with countries of northern Africa and some former Soviet republics. During this phase, Georgia positioned itself as a proponent of Europeanization, while the EU redefined Georgia’s status, transitioning it from merely a geographic neighbour of Europe to providing it with official EU neighbour status. The third concept, “Soft Power via Partnership,” started after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and applied right up until 2022. The EU began to realize its geopolitical role in the region and launched the Eastern Partnership Policy in 2009. During this period, Georgia and the EU signed an Association Agreement, in which Georgia is mentioned as an Eastern European country (Council of the European Union 2014, 5). The EU utilized its soft power to steer the partnership, albeit without offering the prospect of EU membership.

The final two concepts utilized in the article are the result of the 2022 full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine. They reflect the ambiguity of the current period and of the future, which remains indeterminate. According to the concept of “Great Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Lisbon to Tbilisi,” Georgia, along with Ukraine and Moldova, is recognized as part of Europe and has been acknowledged first as a potential and subsequently as an actual, EU candidate state. For the first time in the history of the EU, geopolitical considerations have come to the fore, while issues of democratic reform take a back seat. While Georgia experiences a regression in democratic practices, and Ukraine and Moldova grapple with widespread corruption, the EU continues to strive to maintain its influence amidst growing geopolitical pressure from Russia. Most recently, the concept of “four-speed Europe” has been put forth, as European leaders reflect on the future shape of the EU.

An analysis of these last two concepts shows that, on the one hand, the EU is looking for ways to strengthen its role in the region but is not fully ready to expand to include countries in the post-Soviet

space. However, an analysis of all previous EU concepts confirms that the success of any concept depends on whether it provides the prospect of membership in Eastern European countries, including Georgia. In the eyes of the Eastern Partnership countries, the strength of the EU lies not only in the attractiveness of its political and economic development model or its transformative strength but also in the prospect of membership.

During the entire post-communist period, the EU's policy towards Georgia was influenced by two main factors: the geographical remoteness of Georgia and the EU's desire to take into account Russia's interests in the region. Georgia's location had not changed, and while the EU did not initially consider Georgia as part of the European continent in the early 1990s, the growing significance of the region to the EU has since led to Georgia being recognized as part of Europe. As a result of the development of the last two concepts, the factor of Georgia's geographical distance from the EU has lost its relevance for the EU. If previously Georgia's geographic identity was the reason for the EU's indifference, currently this same geographic positioning is expected to play a central role in facilitating Georgia's integration into the EU. The second main factor (Russia), which prevented the rapprochement of Georgia and some other post-Soviet countries with the EU, has now, on the contrary, become the driving force behind the rapid expansion of the EU to the East. It may be more accurate to frame the discussion not in terms of the EU's growing interest in Georgia but rather as an increase in the EU's assertiveness and a deliberate disregard for Russia's interests in the region. Namely, Moscow's aggressive policy and intense geopolitical competition in the region between leading actors will increasingly push the EU to strengthen its ranks at the expense of countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and, in the future, even Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The EU factor as an active geopolitical player in the Eastern Partnership countries will increasingly grow, which, on the one hand, will benefit this region and, on the other hand, will strengthen the EU's capabilities in competition with other geopolitical players.

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