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A TALE OF TWO STATES: EXPLAINING THE DIVERGENT OUTCOMES OF THE EU SOFT-TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN ALBANIA AND GEORGIA

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Abstract

Although the EU has recently shifted toward a more "geopolitical" approach, it has long relied on its normative and transformative soft power to drive political and economic reforms in aspiring member states. However, the success of this approach has varied considerably, particularly between the Western Balkan candidates and the states recently granted candidate status—Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. This article compares the EU's success in exercising soft power in Albania with its struggles in Georgia. The Albanian government has embraced both democratic and acquis-related conditionalities and has agreed with the European Commission on a roadmap to conclude negotiations by 2027, while Georgia's government has frozen its own path toward opening negotiations less than two years after receiving EU candidate status. Employing a comparative approach, the analysis examines factors such as government compliance, geopolitical contexts, and external influences, with a special focus on Russia's role in shaping anti-EU narratives in Georgia. The article argues that strong public support, compliance with EU conditionalities, and the lack of a compelling geopolitical alternative explain the EU's success in Albania. In Georgia, by contrast, strong public backing has not translated into progress: selective or outright non-compliance, the influence of Russian hard and sharp power, and elite-driven Euroscepticism have weakened the EU's leverage.

Keywords: *EU Soft Power, EU Transformative Power, EU Geopolitical Power, Enlargement, Albania, Georgia.*

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Introduction

Despite a recent shift toward a more "geopolitical Europe," the EU has long relied on its normative and transformative power—namely, Europeanization through conditionality—to drive political and economic reforms in long-aspiring member states, including Albania and Georgia. This shift toward a "geopolitical Europe" was announced in late 2019 by the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who, in outlining a "geopolitical Commission," emphasized the EU's need to engage in the language and logic of power politics—military, economic, and geostrategic. Such a shift runs counter to the long-held views of the "EU's place in the world," as a normative, soft power that "overcame the legacy of power politics that had brought war and conflict to Europe."[1] This transformation has been present in EU debates at least since 2013, when the notion of "European strategic autonomy" began to take shape. It gained greater visibility amid the "polycrisis"[2] of the 2020s: the crisis of economic globalization, the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the uncertainties surrounding the US presence in Europe. In this articulation, the claim has been made that "Europeans cannot afford to avoid the pressing question of their capacity to act, not just in their immediate neighborhood, but also on a global stage, increasingly pressurized by US-China tensions."[3] Yet this shift has already revealed important limitations, particularly in the context of Russia's illegal and brutal war in Ukraine, where "divided geographies of Europeans' support for continued military assistance to Ukraine" have emerged. As this geopolitical turn is increasingly presented as the "only alternative," it has simultaneously created space for illiberal political forces within the EU to expand their discursive influence.[4]

Thus, while the effects of such a shift are yet to be manifested, the epistemic community studying the EU, as well as the EU's actors and institutions, continues to see the EU as a civilian, normative power that exercises its soft power through attraction[5] and persuasion[6] in international affairs, and its transformative power

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[1] Stephan Lehne, "How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age," *Carnegie Europe* (February 2020): 1–2.

[2] Eric Helleiner, "Economic Globalization's Polycrisis," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2024): 1–9.

[3] Tara Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 65, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820.

[4] Luiza Bialasiewicz, "What's 'Left' for a 'Geopolitical Europe'," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48 (2023): 826, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12636.

[5] Kristian L. Nielsen, "EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectation Gap," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 9, no. 5 (2013): 723, https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v9i5.479.

[6] Anna Michalski, "The EU as a Soft Power: The Force of Persuasion," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 124.

primarily through the enlargement policy. Indeed, the EU has come to exert its attraction (stability, prosperity, security, personal freedoms, open market and society) as well as transformative power, "Europeanisation through conditionality,"[7] by requiring political, legal, and economic reforms from aspiring polities and societies seeking to "join [its] powerful and rich regional club."[8]

The EU's normative and transformative soft power was at play in one of its largest eastward expansions, when ten new member states—primarily from Central and Eastern Europe, plus Cyprus and Malta—joined in 2004, followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. The outcomes of this expansion revealed both the strengths and limitations of the EU's approach. While accession anchored democratic transitions and ensured continued alignment with EU laws and policies, the Union's appeal began to fade once accession dates were secured. Questions persisted about the long-term sustainability of political and economic reforms, and the EU often struggled to maintain consistency and credibility in applying conditionality. The Union also proved ill-equipped to resolve bilateral disputes among new member states. Moreover, enlargement tended to function as an elite-driven foreign policy process rather than a societal one.[9] These dynamics, although largely successful in integrating new members, ultimately diminished the EU's attractiveness in the eyes of many of these states.

The EU's appeal as a normative and transformative power continued for other long-aspiring countries such as Albania and Georgia. This persistence is notable given the events of 2013, when Russia employed both sharp and hard power to obstruct Armenia and Ukraine from signing Association Agreements with the EU—pressure that redirected Armenia toward the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and in Ukraine triggered the Maidan Revolution, followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of a proxy war in the country's east. Nevertheless, the 2013–2014 events marked the end of "the EU's monopoly on transformative power,"[10] while, as noted earlier, the polycrisis of the 2020s, including Russia's war in Ukraine, gave rise to the notion of "geopolitical Europe." Indeed, the EU has continued to exercise its soft and transformative power in Albania, particularly after the two sides signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2006, after which Albania was granted EU candidate status in 2014, with accession negotiations launched in July 2022. A similar dynamic is visible in Georgia, which

[7] Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanisation through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[8] Heather Grabbe, "Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52 (2014): 40.
[9] Grabbe, "Six Lessons," 43–44.
[10] Grabbe, "Six Lessons," 44.

signed the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 and received EU candidate status in December 2023.

This article compares the EU's achievements in its exercise of soft (normative and transformative) power in Albania with its struggles in Georgia. The vast scholarship on the EU's exercise and effectiveness of its soft (normative and transformative) power has not compared these cases, nor has it examined them from the perspective of how domestic and external factors shape the membership trajectories of aspiring states. It explores why Albania continues to embrace the EU's soft power, exercised through its "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities, and why it has agreed with the European Commission to conclude negotiations by 2027. Meanwhile, Georgia's path toward opening accession talks has been halted by its government's actions less than two years after receiving EU candidate status. Employing a comparison of contrasts approach,[11] the analysis examines factors such as government compliance, geopolitical contexts, and broader external influences, placing special emphasis on Russia's role in constructing anti-EU discourse in Georgia.

Evidence from the two cases indicates that the EU retains substantial leverage in Albania, where public endorsement and consistent governmental alignment with conditionality create favorable conditions for progress. In Georgia, the combination of policy backsliding, elite skepticism, and Russia's geopolitical pressure undermines the EU's transformative capacity despite strong societal support. The article concludes by situating these outcomes within the wider landscape of enlargement challenges.

Europe and the EU's Historical Appeal in Albania and Georgia

The rationale for comparing the effectiveness of the EU's soft power in Albania and Georgia rests not only on the fact that both states and societies entered the process of EU integration, even if the Georgian Dream (GD) government's decision in November 2024 to suspend Georgia's EU accession process until the end of 2028 that, together with the fraudulent parliamentary elections of October 2024,[12] now marks a sharp divergence between the two cases. It also rests on the historical yet cautious appeal and attraction that the historical concept of Europe has exercised over Albanian and Georgian political and intellectual elites since the late nineteenth century. A similar understanding of Europe as "a triadic entity" held sway

[11] Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
[12] Irakli Sirbiladze, "How to Help Georgia out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis," *GMF Transatlantic Foundation*, Policy Brief (June 2025): 3, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Sirbiladze%20-%20Georgia%20-%20brief.pdf.

for most of these societies' modern era. This included a geopolitical Europe "associated with continental, big power politics and their occasional arbitrariness over the fate of these nation-states," Europe as "the embodiment of progress—a reservoir of knowledge for present and future political and socio-economic alternatives, which Georgians and Albanians could draw on for building their future and yet finding them continuously elusive," and a "civilizational and cultural veil—the epitome of the most cherished ancient and modern civilization, culture and identity with its Christian roots and liberal values constantly in opposition to the East's 'Oriental traits.'"[13]

At the same time, historically and comparatively, Europe's appeal, in its triadic dimensions, was contingent upon the political dynamics affecting an ever-changing (geo)political Europe, as well as the shifting political and socio-economic circumstances in the two societies.

During the late nineteenth century and the years leading up to the First World War, Albanian and Georgian national movements entered a formative phase, shifting from their positions within the Ottoman and Russian empires toward the pursuit of independent statehood. In this context, Europe held a particular allure as the embodiment of "the future" in political, ideological, and cultural terms—an orientation these emerging societies actively sought to emulate. The (geo)political Europe of the era was defined by six rival Great Powers stretching across the Eurasian landmass: Great Britain, France, and Germany—highly industrialized states with extensive colonial domains, especially the first two[14] —alongside Italy, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian and Ottoman empires.

For both Albanian and Georgian intellectuals, this geopolitical Europe determined the political future of their small nations, meaning that "tying together of the respective national projects [of independence] with European imperial geopolitical structures, would be from the outset fragile enterprises."[15] As such, in the period leading to the establishment of respective nation-states—Albania in 1912 and Georgia in 1918—discourses of hope and distrust toward the Great Powers of Europe prevailed in both contexts.[16] In this same timeframe, the appeal of "Europe as the embodiment of progress," along with the desire to emulate European modernities and ideologies (liberalism, socialism, Marxism),[17] as well as "different political

[13] Adrian Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe: Albanian and Georgian Discourses on Europe, 1878-2008* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), ix–x.
[14] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London: Abacus, 1987), 10.
[15] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 28.
[16] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 37.
[17] Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colours: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4–49; Sommerville Story, ed. *The Memoirs of Ismail Kemal Bey* (London: Constable and Company, 1920), 172–73.

and economic ideas and projects that had already made a mark on the societies of advanced European states such as Britain, France, and later imperial Germany and Italy," remained strong and were actively contested within Georgian and Albanian settings.[18]

Meanwhile, the appeal of Europe in its civilizational dimension, past and present, stimulated the reconstruction of Europe in its "civilizational and cultural veil" as an "entanglement of the finest and layers of the past—Greco-Roman antiquity, the Byzantine and Christian heritages… the Enlightenment… [and] its modern mentalities and development in literature and fine arts," and prompted intense reflections on whether Georgianness and Albanianness, and thus their respective national identities, were firmly part of such a European civilizational space. Indeed, Europe's cultural magnetism became so pronounced among intellectual elites that, while many located their national identities and cultural developments firmly within a "Western," European framework, others insisted on preserving historical "Eastern" influences, with some even proposing an "'in-between' civilizational positioning" for their respective national cultures.[19]

In the interwar period, when the fragilely (re)established nation-states of Georgia and Albania succumbed to occupations, respectively, by Bolshevik Russia and Fascist Italy, the perception of geopolitical Europe was that of an entity comprised of imperial states, which, despite participating in a new supranational body, the League of Nations, did little to alleviate anxieties about national territorial integrity and survival of small states.[20] The appeal of Europe's multiple political and socio-economic projects and modernities—Europe as a torchbearer of progress—took divergent domestic forms: in Georgia, it was reflected in the social-democratic project, and in Albania in a liberal-democratic endeavor, both ultimately constrained by the imposition of Bolshevik-Leninist and Fascist modernities by their respective occupying powers. At the same time, Europe's soft power—its civilizational and cultural heritage, values, and artistic canon—was refracted differently across the two contexts. In Sovietized Georgia, it was interpreted through the narrative of the "Decline of the West," giving way to a new cultural horizon grounded in "*ex oriente lux*,"[21] that is, a Soviet cultural space.[22] In interwar Albania, it came to

[18] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 46.
[19] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 56.
[20] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 73.
[21] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 95–100.
[22] I. Mitsishvili, ed., *Pikrebi Sakartveloze* (Tbilisi: Gamomtsemloba "Intelekti," 2006), 70–71.

symbolize a quest to anchor national identity firmly in the "Occident" while purging what was perceived as the "Oriental within."[23]

Although Europe's multidimensional appeal fluctuated throughout the interwar period, the destruction wrought by the Second World War, together with the emergence of the Cold War order, fostered a similar attitude in socialist Albania and Soviet Georgia, where political Europe came to be viewed as weakened and unappealing. This was a divided Europe, held under the influence of two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet it sought to distinguish itself from the two through the European Community, composed of former imperial powers. Europe's loss of luster as a geopolitical entity was also reflected in the contestation of its role as a torchbearer of progress and as a source of politico-ideological alternatives. In this context, Soviet Marxist–Leninist ideology—already fully entrenched in Soviet Georgia—was embraced by socialist Albania and promoted as a superior alternative to Western European liberal, social-democratic, and capitalist modernities.

Although Western Europe's institutional frameworks and its liberal and social democratic ideologies were dismissed in both contexts until the mid-1980s, the Soviet Marxist model was nevertheless interpreted by political authorities and intellectuals in Soviet Georgia and socialist Albania as an expression of Europe's wider modernity.[24] At the same time, the quest to embed national identities within Western and European civilizational and cultural space and "roots," particularly underscoring commonalities and contributions in the Greco-Roman and Renaissance periods, shaped historical and literary knowledge production in late Soviet Georgia and socialist Albania.[25]

Albanian and Georgian historical and often timid attractions to Europe in its triadic dimensions were heightened and compounded by challenging political and socio-economic realities in post-socialist Albania and post-Soviet independent Georgia, together with a transformed Europe and the West increasingly associated with the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions. The Europe of the EU, with its institutions, transformative power, and processes of Europeanization, came to attract Al-

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[23] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 100; Gjergj Fishta, *Illumination: Analysis, Polemics, Chronicles* (Tirana: GEER, 2000), 61, in Albanian: [Gjergj Fishta, *Përndritje: Analiza, Polemika, Kronika* (Tiranë: GEER, 2000)], 61.

[24] I. Gamrekeli and I. Tsintsadze, "Herbert Markuze – Kapitalizmis Meabdjre," *Sakartvelos Komunisti*, no. 1 (1972): 49–53; Zurab Kakabadze, *Philosophiuri Saubrebi* (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1998), 82; Mehmet Shehu, "On the Implementation of Tasks Regarding the Further Revolutionization of Our School," *The Voice of the People*, April 12, 1968, 2, in Albanian: [Mehmet Shehu, "Për Zbatimin e Detyrave në Lidhje me Revolucionarizimin e Mëtejshm të Shkollës Sonë," *Zëri i Popullit*, 12 Prill 1968, 2].

[25] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 108–52.

banian and Georgian political and intellectual elites as well as their societies at large. This attraction was often articulated as a "return to Europe" and moving "closer to Europe." [26] To a large extent, such an appeal toward "new Europe," distinct from the old one, reflected a shift from a geopolitical Europe dominated by Great Powers driven by the "spirit of conquest" to a "peaceful community of nations." The member states of the EU were prosperous within this reconfigured geopolitical space, and thus, slogans such as "we want Albania to be like Europe" and "I am Georgian, therefore I am European" emerged and resonated widely.[27]

Europe's earlier appeal as a reservoir and torchbearer of multiple modernities and visions of progress also gained renewed strength after the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist and Stalinist alternative in both societies. It was now expressed as an attraction to the EU's liberal democratic and social or market-oriented economic models, institutions, and transformative power, embodied in its integration and enlargement processes. In both societies, broad popular support began to emerge for joining the EU as the "only alternative" for progress by agreeing to undergo the EU's transformative processes of integration, provided that this new Europe greenlighted their aspirations in its enlargement policy and seriously committed to it, and that their respective political elites also committed to such processes.[28]

In the sections that follow, the analysis explains why, despite similarly strong public support in both societies, the EU's soft and transformative power has lost its appeal among the governing elite in Georgia but not in Albania. Europe's third dimension, understood as the realm of "the West" and of European civilization with its layered Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, and modern legacies, also became embedded in the construction of a European identity required for EU integration. Although this resonated with Albanian and Georgian intellectual circles, it also prompted intense post-socialist debates about the "European" nature of Albanianness and Georgianness.[29]

The Ineffectiveness of the EU's Soft/Transformative Power in Georgia

Despite this enduring historical appeal of Europe and a growing, strong public support for Georgia's EU integration—especially since the mid-2000s,[30] to the extent

[26] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 153.
[27] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 154–61.
[28] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 168–79.
[29] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 179–184.
[30] One of the earliest polls conducted in 2009 found that 79% of Georgians would vote for Georgia's EU integration, whereas about 85% of them declared that getting closer with the EU was either "a very important" or "quite important" priority. See Ketevan Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality: Selective Compliance in Georgia's Hybrid Regimes," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 3 (2016): 421, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1154138.

that the GD government in its second term codified the country's aspiration to integrate into European and Euro-Atlantic structures in the Constitution in 2017[31]—the EU has struggled and has yet to succeed in exerting its soft (transformative) power in post-socialist Georgia. This has been evident both during the period when Georgia engaged with the EU through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) frameworks, where Europeanization without the "carrot" of membership functioned as a form of "conditionality-lite,"[32] and after Georgia obtained EU candidate status in December 2023, which was then followed by the GD government's unprecedented decision to suspend the accession process until the end of 2028.[33]

Such apparent ineffectiveness of the EU's value-based transformative power in Georgia stems from two main factors. First is the role of domestic actors—primarily governing elites seeking to retain power, whose political incentives have led to selective or outright non-compliance with parts of the EU's conditionality. Second is the role and influence of geopolitical and ideological alternatives: the absence of a security umbrella, combined with Russia's continued military presence in the "occupied territories" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has pushed Georgia's foreign policy from EU alignment toward a balancing strategy. Additionally, segments of society became more susceptible to anti-Western and anti-EU discourses, mainly generated in Russia and amplified by influential domestic actors such as the Georgian Orthodox Church and small right-wing parliamentary and non-parliamentary groupings.

Domestic Factor(s) – from Selective Compliance to Non-Compliance

The EU's transformative power has proven to be ineffective, especially in the implementation of its fundamental principles (political criteria), that is, "democratic" conditionality: ensuring stable institutions that guarantee democracy, upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and safeguarding the rights of minorities. This is because these principles have clashed with the interests of governing parties in Georgia. This has been the case primarily because both the United National Movement (UNM) and Georgian Dream (GD) governments, each characterized as hybrid[34] and illiberal[35] in nature, have sought to retain power by distorting the play-

[31] Sandro Tabatadze and Nika Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," *Southeast and Black Sea Studies*, (2025): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2473171.
[32] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 411.
[33] Sirbiladze, "How to Help Georgia out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis," 3.
[34] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 409.

ing field through the use of state resources, the media, and the legal system to their advantage.

Such ineffectiveness is captured in the growing Europeanization scholarship with a focus on the EU's conditionality compliance of candidate and non-candidate countries. In this scholarship, which assesses whether and how states adopt EU political, economic and legal criteria, rules, directives and norms into their domestic spheres, a distinction is made between the adoption of "democratic" conditionality, i.e., meaning the fundamental principles of the EU, and "acquis" conditionality, as in coming into regulatory alignment with the EU's internal market[36] or a "political approach" versus "management approach" to compliance. [37]

The ineffectiveness of the EU's conditionality in Georgia, and the country's shift from selective compliance to non-compliance, can be traced back to the period of Mikheil Saakashvili's UNM governments. Although Saakashvili placed EU integration at the centre of his foreign policy, Georgia's cooperation with the EU took place within the ENP, which offered no membership perspective. What the UNM administration valued most was the Association Agreement, which promised visa liberalization and a deep and comprehensive free trade arrangement.

During his two administrations, a pattern of "cherry-picking… selective compliance" emerged, whereby the government was able to "dodge" adopting reforms falling under "democratic" conditionality to preserve an uneven political playing field, while agreeing to implement measures within the "acquis" conditionality, such as visa liberalization, which were popular domestically and therefore electorally advantageous.[38]

In the context of the ENP and EaP frameworks, where financial assistance programs and the prospect of signing the AA served as the EU's "carrots," the corresponding "sticks," namely the EU's conditionality, required the Georgian government to implement democratic reforms. Thus, Saakashvili's administration was expected to comply with the obligation to conduct free and fair elections. Within the ENP, and specifically through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, the EU assessed between 2007 and 2013 the extent to which Saakash-

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[35] Malkhaz Toria, "Georgia's Turn toward Illiberalism and the 'Uses and Abuses' of History," *Democracy Seminar*, October 22, 2024, https://democracyseminar.newschool.org/essays/georgias-turn-toward-illiberalism-and-the-uses-and-abuses-of-history/.

[36] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 411–412.

[37] Michel V. Anderlini, "Implementation is the Hardest Word: Explaining Georgia's (Non)-Compliance with the European Union Acquis," *Problems of Post*-Communism, 71, no. 5 (2024): 446–447, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2245546; see also Tanja Börzel, *Why Non-Compliance: The Politics of Law in the European Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[38] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality."

vili's government advanced democratic power sharing, undertook media reforms, and strengthened the rule of law.

Under the EaP framework, the stakes for democratic progress increased[39], reinforcing the need to comply with "democratic" conditionality. And yet in the ensuing ENP progress reports, between 2007 and 2013, assessing Saakashvili administrations' compliance in terms of the use of state administrative resources, access to media, and access to law, it became clear that they repeatedly sought to "manipulate control over state agencies, and resources to skew the political playing field… [demonstrating] their power seeking strategies and their ultimate reluctance to genuinely comply with EU democratic norms."[40] Some formal compliance with "democratic" conditionality nonetheless occurred, partly because the country depended on foreign assistance and because the EU would "occasionally" apply "strict conditionality." This occasional compliance was also facilitated by the UNM's concern for its international image. However, even in this context, compliance was "subverted" and would "rarely translate into sustained patterns of compliance." Thus, while Saakashvili's administrations agreed to adopt certain regulations, they attempted to insert provisions that would prevent these reforms from functioning as intended.[41]

Where Saakashvili administrations "genuinely" complied was with regard "acquis" conditionality, as about the process of visa facilitation and liberalization, cooperation in border security with the EU's agency for external border security (FRONTEX) and illegal immigration, Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of terrorism framework in terms of adopting and harmonizing Georgian legislative framework as well as in cooperating with EU agencies and implementing norms and measures. The reason Saakashvili's administrations complied with the EU's "acquis" conditionality was twofold: they expected it to generate strong popular backing, amid widespread "EU-phoric" sentiment, and the reforms themselves "did not encroach on the political playing field." Indeed, facilitating visa liberalization for Georgian citizens would make them even more popular, thereby incentivizing them to implement such EU norms and rules.[42]

This pattern of selective compliance, verging on non-compliance, continued with the GD administrations, culminating in that latter's full non-compliance by 2023. The Georgian Dream (GD) Party, led by billionaire and Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power in 2012 after the Saakashvili administration's defeat, which was due to "systematically violating human rights, the rule of law, and

[39] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 422–423.
[40] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 430.
[41] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 430.
[42] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 431–34.

property-related issues."[43] It pledged to continue Georgia's Europeanization process.

The GD governments enjoyed the carrots of compliance with the EU's "acquis" conditionality, namely the materialization of the AA that also included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), signed in 2014. The AA came into effect in 2017, along with 90-day visa-free travel for Georgian citizens to the EU. Moreover, it vowed to commit to Georgia's EU path, despite the absence of a clear EU-approved roadmap to membership, by amending the country's constitution to add an article that rendered European and Euro-Atlantic integration a constitutional obligation for the government and society.[44] And yet, the pattern of selective compliance and non-compliance continued concerning both "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities. Regarding the latter, particularly the EU's "twinning projects"—pairing EU institutions (ministries and agencies) with Georgian counterparts to exchange best practices, impart administrative knowledge, and enhance capacities in accordance with the EU acquis—implementation encountered reluctance and opposition from the government and other political actors.[45]

Indeed, while some compliance concerning the "acquis" conditionality was still manifested, complete non-compliance on "democratic" conditionality, specifically, implementing electoral and judicial reforms, became apparent soon after Georgia was granted visa liberalization in 2017. An incident in 2019 in which a Russian Duma MP took the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, as an inter-parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy was taking place in Tbilisi, triggered mass protests in the capital. It put directly into question the GD's European path.[46] In fact, the GD had a program to normalize relations with Russia. However, the context of the outcomes and societal reactions to the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the continued "borderization," in which Russia constructs barbed wire and other barriers along the administrative borderline of South Ossetia, and the majority of Georgians' viewing Russia as an occupier, hampered such a plan.[47] Most notably,

[43] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games," 5.
[44] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games," 5.
[45] Projects which in Georgia consisted of ascertaining compliance of civil aviation, customs, gender equality, judicial training, meteorology and standards, research and innovation, auditing, energy regulation and spatial planning, aside from most of them are being affected from the instability caused by high level staff turnover in public administration because many top-level bureaucrats are affiliated with the ruling elite, compliance in areas pertaining respectively, to "acquis" conditionality, energy regulation, and "democratic" conditionality, advancing gender equality. See Anderlini, "Implementation Is the Hardest Word," 456.
[46] Lia Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement: Has Georgia 'Got Lost' on its Way to European Integration?" *Journal of European Integration*, 46, no. 3 (2024): 398, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2278072.
[47] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 6.

the GD government did not heed public and opposition demands to implement electoral and judicial reforms required under the EU's democratic conditionality.[48] This led opposition parties to reject the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections due to the GD's heavy use of administrative resources. The political deadlock was resolved in 2021 when the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, mediated an agreement between the GD and the opposition, allowing parliamentary activity to resume.[49]

But the GD governments' non-compliance with the EU "democratic" conditionality became especially visible in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. The GD government refused to align with the EU on imposing sanctions on Russia, and decided "to pursue 'non-irritation politics' toward its northern neighbor."[50] Although the war accelerated the EU's shift toward a "geopolitical Europe" and opened a genuine path to membership for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in 2022, Georgia, unlike the other two, was granted candidate status only in 2023. This status was granted, even though the consecutive GD governments did not comply with most of the twelve "democracy" conditionality recommendations that the EU demanded before granting it.[51] These developments, coupled with the passing of the Law on Transparency on Foreign Influence and the Law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors, sparked massive nationwide protests, which the EU deemed as "going against EU core principles and values"[52] and "undermining the fundamental rights of Georgian people."[53] After the October 2024 parliamentary elections — rejected by opposition parties, civil society groups, and the EU — the GD suspended the country's progress toward EU membership.

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[48] Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement," 398.
[49] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 6.
[50] Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement".
[51] Such recommendations for compliance included: fighting disinformation and foreign information manipulation, improving Georgia's alignment with the EU CFSP, ensuring a free and fair competitive electoral process, completing and implementing a holistic and effective judicial reform, and improving the current action plan to implement a multi-sectoral, systemic approach to de-oligarchization. See Malkhaz Nakashidze, "Georgia's Progress in Implementation of Fundamentals of the EU Accession Process," *EUI, RSC, Working Paper* 48 (2024), 8, https://hdl.handle.net/1814/77383.
[52] European Commission, "Statement on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," *European Commission*, May 28, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_2945.
[53] European Union External Action, "Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Legislative Package on 'Family Values and Protection of Minors,'" *EEAS*, September 4, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-legislative-package-family-values-and-protection-minors_en.

External Factor(s), Shifting Geopolitical Contexts: Impressing Geopolitical Alternative(s)

Another reason, aside from such domestic factor(s), as to why the EU's soft (transformative) power has stumbled in post-socialist Georgia are external factor(s) and shifting geopolitical contexts, more specifically the presence and influence of Russia in the South Caucasus and its war in Ukraine. Russia's influence in Georgia has been expressed not only through its direct use of hard power, most visibly in the 2008 Russia–Georgia war—which effectively obstructed Georgia's pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration and resulted in the continued presence of Russian military bases in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—but also through more indirect methods. Moscow has also exercised its "sharp power," hence heightening societal polarization and eroding confidence in democratic institutions.[54] Additionally, Russia has employed hybrid warfare, exposing Georgia to a "mix of conventional, economic, cyber, psychological, and diplomatic means of conducting war," and thereby deepening the country's strategic vulnerabilities.[55]

Certainly, throughout most of the post-socialist era, the appeal of Russia's soft power in Georgia was not comparable to that of Europe and subsequently the EU. Historically, Georgian political and intellectual perspectives on Russia, in both its imperial form and its existence as the Soviet Union, have reflected a tense dichotomy. Russia has been viewed as a state that exercised both hard and soft power, "an empire of conquest and of civilization." Such a perception became especially skewed during Saakashvili's presidency, whereby the Russian state, lacking an overt soft power appeal, was experienced as exercising its hard power, as an "empire of conquest." This was especially evident during the ethnopolitical wars of the early 1990s and 2008. Nevertheless, while an undercurrent during the Saakashvili period, the emphasis of historical affinity with Orthodox Russia as the defender of Georgian civilization, not only from "its historical civilizational enemies [Ottoman and Persian empires]" but also from "heretical" modern European civilization, gained traction in Georgian public discourse.[56]

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[54] The "piercing, and penetration" of the political and information environment of targeted country, either through open interference in foreign elections or by exploiting existing conflicts in the society. See Christophor Walker, "What Is 'Sharp' Power," *Journal of Democracy*, 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 12, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0041.

[55] Kornely Kakachia and Shota Kakabadze, "Beyond Cyber and Disinformation: Russian Hybrid Warfare Tactics in Georgia," in *Russian Warfare and Influence: States in the Intersection between East and West*, ed. Nicklas Nilsson and Mikael Weissmann (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 131.

[56] Adrian Brisku, "Empires of Conquest and Civilization in Georgian Political and Intellectual Discourses since Late Nineteenth Century," *Intersections.EEJSP*, 2, no. 2 (2016), 32.

Already in the early years of the GD administration, when the EU's integration perspective for Georgia was still unclear, anti-Europe, anti-West, and anti-EU narratives became more pronounced, offering an alternative to the EU's soft/transformative power. A 2014 poll showed a three-percentage-point decline in support for EU membership, falling from 68 percent in November 2013 to 65 percent in April 2014. During the same period, support for the Russian-led Eurasian Union rose by five percentage points, increasing from 11 percent in November 2013 to 16 percent in April 2014. Small, Eurosceptic groups in the country, through the narrative of "Civilization. Choice. Peace," began to appeal to all those "forces of pro-Russian apologias, anti-Western Conservatism, and religious conservatism" and began to "converge." Meanwhile, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), which plays a defining role in the national (and nationalist) discourse, began to preach to its flock of a West and Europe that is "de-nationalized, sinful space that threatens Georgia's national uniqueness, and traditions with obliteration," views and narratives "largely determined by its ties with the Russian clerical space."[57] Russia has used these cultural affinities as components of both its sharp power and its hybrid warfare tactics. Within Russia, this strategic approach has been conceptualized as "paleoconservatism," which refers to the politicization of culture and its deployment as an instrument in an ongoing civilizational struggle.

In the Georgian context, this approach was designed to influence what Russia views as Georgia's "ideological and information domain." Such instrumentalization sought to counter the West by promoting narratives that Europe had abandoned its true values of Christianity and conservatism.[58] It also aimed to strengthen pro-Russian, non-parliamentary opposition groups in Georgia, including Alt-Info, Georgia March, and Georgian Idea, and to reinforce Eurosceptic sentiment within the Georgian Dream party and in successive Georgian governments.[59]

Russia's war in Ukraine, with the geopolitical shift it brought about, placing Georgia as a frontline state in the "EU's periphery, in a precarious position that threatens [its] security and stability,"[60] played "a pivotal role in reshaping Georgia's foreign policy stances, leading to a polarization of the political elite". With the war ongoing, the GD government became openly Eurosceptic in 2023. This was manifested with the implementation of the Foreign Agent Law, a law similar

[57] Brisku, "Empires of Conquest," 43.
[58] Kakachia and Shota Kakabadze, "Beyond Cyber and Disinformation," 134.
[59] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 12.
[60] Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze, and Shota Kakabadze, "Transactional Hedging versus Value-Based Hedging: How Small Frontline States Balance between European Integration and Russian Influence," *European Security* 33, no. 4 (2024): 594–614, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2388638.

to a Russian law, counter to some of the EU fundamental rights, and by not aligning with the EU's CFSP in sanctioning Russia. On the latter, the GD government received praise from the Kremlin for "not joining the sanctions or for not opening a second front despite great pressure."[61] In fact, as some Georgian IR scholars have pointed out, as the EU shifted toward a more "geopolitical Europe," thus "tough-en[ing] its foreign policy stance and made its enlargement and neighbourhood policies more security-oriented," and with a Georgia as a "weak state," vulnerable to the Kremlin's pressure, lacking a security umbrella from NATO, maintaining economic ties with it and with its "ruling elite… focused on the preservation of power domestically," led to a GD foreign policy that sought to do away with a "value-based foreign policy as demanded by the EU… [and] diversifying relations externally as necessary, even away from the EU."[62]

The Effectiveness of the EU's Soft/Transformative Power in Albania

While the EU emerges as a "geopolitical actor," especially after the Russian war in Ukraine, Albania, in need of the EU to build its post-socialist society, has already regarded the EU as a "geopolitical ally" since the 1990s. This aligns with Albania's historical view of Europe as a geopolitical arena composed of great powers that shape the nation-state's present and future. As a result, the European Union was not only a club to join. It also represented the essential post-socialist ally that, together with the USA, constituted the Albanian governments' indisputable "Euro-Atlantic integration" axis in foreign policy. In fact, the "Euro-Atlantic process" has always represented a "basic consensus"[63] among all the political parties, which have always agreed on these "traditional cooperation shafts."[64] As noted above, and as other Albanian scholars confirm, after the 1990s, Europe in Albania became closely associated with the European Union, and the two terms have been used interchangeably ever since. Europe functioned as a "signifier that stood for democracy, freedom, equality, economic development, justice, enjoyment, and about every-

[61] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 12–13.
[62] Kakachia et al., "Transactional Hedging versus Value-Based Hedging," 595.
[63] Harilla Goga, *Albania Amidst Today's International Developments* (Tiranë: Dituria, 1999), 30–31. In Albanian: [Harilla Goga, *Shqipëria mes Zhvillimeve të Sotme Ndërkombëtare* (Tiranë: Dituria, 1999), 30–31].
[64] Agim Nesho, *The Overlapping Axes of Albanian Foreign Policy: For an Active Policy of the 21st Century* (Tiranë: UET PRESS, 2013), 99. In Albanian: [Agim Nesho, *Boshtet e Mbivendosura të Politikës së Jashtme Shqiptare: Për Një Politikë Aktive të Shek. XXI* (Tiranë: UET PRESS, 2013), 99].

thing that socialism had failed to provide."[65] Unlike the Georgian case, Albania has not developed any anti-European movement, nor has any political party adopted a Eurosceptic or anti-European discourse. There are only a few isolated critiques of European integration made by individual intellectuals or journalists in public debates. The "Atlantic" part of this axis dropped after Albania joined NATO in 2009, making the "European Integration" a mantra in the country's political discourse.

Domestic Factor(s): Willing and Imposed Compliance

Albania saw itself as a committed state on the path toward the European Union, especially after 2003, with the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans. An intensive relationship between Albania and the EU began in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which started in 1999. This relationship deepened with the official SAA negotiations between the EU and Albania in January 2003, a process completed on 12 June 2006. That step "effectively move[d] Albania on to an accession track,"[66] elevating it to the "third Western Balkan state to sign the SAA."[67]

After a two-year interval, the SAA entered into force on 1 April 2009, marking a new, more advanced stage of relations between Albania and the EU. After Albania entered NATO in April 2009, the European Commission announced in October 2012 the opening of the process leading to Albania's application for candidate-country status, coinciding with the centenary of Albania's independence as a state. In this atmosphere, the EU Progress Report of November 2012, which highlighted some of the aspects of the country's compliance with both "democratic and "acquis" conditionality criteria, was perceived in a celebrative mood by the Albanian government of the time. An Italian scholar described the phase after the Commission's progress report as the beginning of "the next hundred years of Albania."[68] Another milestone in Albania's progress toward European Union integration was the European Council's decision in June 2014 to grant the country candidate status.

In July 2016, with the initiative of the governing Socialist Party, keen to enhance the prospects of EU integration, hence, increase the country's compliance

[65] Bledi Kajsiu, "Albanian Democratization between Europeanisation and Neoliberalism," in *Albania in the Next Ten Years. Envisioning the Future,* ed. Albert Rakipi (Tiranë: AIIS. 2012), 29.
[66] John O'Brennan and Esmeralda Gassie, "From Stabilization to Consolidation: Albanian State Capacity and Adaptation to European Union Rules," *Journal of Balkans and Near East Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2009): 61–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950902724448.
[67] Dorian Jano, *The Europeanization of the Western Balkans* (Saarbrucken: VDM, 2010).
[68] Emanuela C. Del Re, "The Future of Albania between Migrations and European Strategies," *Current Politics and Economics of Europe,* 24, no. 1/2 (2013): 23.

with the EU's conditionalities, the Albanian Parliament unanimously adopted a comprehensive justice reform, though also under the push of the EU and the US representatives in Albania. This reform, which baptized the EU as a "reformative power"[69] in the country, was to pave the way for the opening of Albania's accession negotiations in a shorter time. Seen as major efforts on the Albanian side, the steps taken to finalize SPAK (Special Prosecution Office) and BKH (National Bureau of Investigation), institutions designed to investigate high-level political corruption and organized crime and essential for implementing justice reform in line with the European Union's "democratic conditionality" criteria, were scheduled to be completed by late 2019 and early 2020.

Yet, despite these efforts and the European Commission's assessment that Albania had complied with the set criteria, the European Council twice, in 2018 and 2019, postponed its decision to open access negotiations with Tirana. Both such postponements were caused by France's veto in the European Council, which, among other aspects, used it to stop the illegal migration of Albanian citizens into the country. Nevertheless, in March 2020, the Council finally approved the opening of accession negotiations with Albania. Bulgaria's veto in 2021, directed to North Macedonia and indirectly involving Albania, however, also postponed the ensuing start of the Intergovernmental Conference between the Commission and the Albanian government. Such halts came to be perceived as "unjust." Nevertheless, after this "arresting phase" of European Integration (2018-2021), the Albanian society's view of the EU did not change substantially, suggesting that the EU's soft (transformative) power still enjoyed strong appeal in the country. In a BiEPAG opinion poll of November 2021,[70] 94% of Albanian respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Are you in favor of your country joining the EU?" By placing responsibility for delays on their own government rather than on the European Union, the public demonstrated that the EU still possessed high legitimacy and strong normative influence within Albania.[71]

Albania's negotiations with the EU finally started in July 2022, a development likely influenced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and by the EU's "geopolitical turn," which framed enlargement policy as a geopolitical necessity. Since then, Albania has opened 24 chapters in 11 months, with the current government

[69] Klodiana Beshku and Orjana Mullisis, "The European Union as a Reforming Power in the Western Balkans: The Case of Albania," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 2, (2018), https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/121/112.

[70] BiEPAG, "Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU Integration," BiEPAG, November 8, 2021, https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/.

[71] Klodiana Beshku, "The EU as an Actor of Normative Power in the Western Balkans After 2018: The Case of Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2023-0013.

aiming to close all chapters by 2027 and to become part of the EU by 2030. The EU's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, praised Albania's "ambitious" two-year target for completing membership negotiations and encouraged the country's political parties to support the difficult reforms required.[72]

As in the case of Georgia, where partial compliance was also evidenced in "acquis conditionality," experts have expressed concern about the sustainability of Albania's progress towards the EU,[73] while scholars have noted "sectoral contestation" toward the EU in Albania,[74] in line with the "fake, impartial and imposed compliance."[75] Nonetheless, the governing SP as well as the opposition parties, including the main DP, remain committed to the country's EU path, fully aligning its foreign policy with the EU's CFSP, as all the latest EU Reports on Albania state.[76] In parallel, one of the EU's "democratic conditionality" instruments, the Justice Reform, seen as partially imposed, began to yield results in the vetting of hundreds of judges and the prosecution of several high-level politicians between 2023 and 2025, who were alleged to have abused their office and committed corruption.

External Factor(s), Shifting Geopolitical Contexts: Unimpressive Geopolitical Alternatives

With an increasing influence over the last decades of other powers such as China, Russia, Türkiye, and Gulf countries in the Western Balkans,[77] Albanian govern-

[72] Gavin Blackburn, "Kallas Warns Albania of Complex Reforms but Says Its Future Is in the EU," *Euronews*, April 8, 2025. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/08/kallas-warns-albania-of-complex-reforms-but-says-its-future-is-in-the-eu.

[73] "Albania's Progress in Accession Talks Can't Mask the EU's 'Acrobatics' on the Rule of Law," *The New Union Post*, June 3, 2024. https://newunionpost.eu/2025/06/03/albania-eu-accession-negotiations-rama/.

[74] Lisian Roseni "Contesting EU Labour Norms in Albania: Between Compliance and Structural Constrains," in New Dynamics of Contestation in EU-Western Balkans Relations Adapting to Protracted Accession Processes under Conditions of Intensified Geopolitical Rivalry, ed. Doris Wydra, Klodiana Beshku, and Klaudia Koxha (Palgrave: forthcoming 2026).

[75] Gergana Noutcheva, "Fake, Partial and Imposed Compliance: The Limits of the EU's Normative Power in the Western Balkans," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, no. 7 (2009): 1065–1084, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903226872.

[76] European Commission, *Albania 2020 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020); European Commission, *Albania 2021 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2021); European Commission, *Albania 2022 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2022); European Commission, *Albania 2023 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2023); European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024); European Commission, *Albania 2025 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

[77] Prague Security Studies Institute, Albania amidst the External Actors' Influence. The Open Balkan initiative: A Russian Trojan Horse or a Faster Approach to Regional Cooperation? (June 2023), https://www.pssi.cz/publications/104-albania-amidst-the-external-actors-influence-the-open-balkan-initiative-a-russian-trojan-horse-or-a-faster-approach-to-regional-cooperation.

ments have maintained a multivector foreign policy.[78] They continued to advance relations with neighboring powers—Türkiye, Italy,[79] and Greece, while always prioritizing those with the EU and the US.

Indeed, Albania has consistently maintained a clear geopolitical orientation grounded in Western foreign policy alignment at both regional and international levels. It has seen itself as a committed actor on its path toward the EU and NATO membership, a perception that has been well received within EU diplomatic channels. Albania is a longtime US ally that joined NATO in April 2009. Following a carefully coordinated diplomatic effort, the country obtained a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2021–2022, marking its transition from a traditional "security receiver" to a "security provider."[80]

Despite this straightforward configuration in the European and global arenas, external influences from third states in Albania have been present in various ways; however, these influences have not reached a level that could offer a meaningful alternative to EU membership. Indeed, unlike Georgia, Russia's influence has not taken root in Albania for most of its modern history, except for its alliance with the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1961. Türkiye has historically been Albania's partner, and both countries are EU candidate countries at differing levels of EU negotiations.

Moreover, China and the Gulf Arab states have recently viewed Albania as geo-economically attractive, largely because of its EU membership prospects.[81] The limited rise in influence from China, Russia, and the Gulf States did not occur because Albania was seeking an alternative to the EU; rather, it resulted from the vacuum created by the EU's poly-crisis period (2008–2016), the US withdrawal from the region during the first Trump presidency (2017–2021), and the EU's hesitancy to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (2018–2020). It was during this EU's hesitancy period that Russia's Permanent Repre-

[78] Daniela Irrera, "Non-State Actors and Conflict Management in Proxy Wars," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of International Studies*, June 28, 2021. https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-641.

[79] *The (Geo)politics of Democracy in Albania (2025)*, Technical Report, EUI, RSC, Research Project Report, Global Governance Programme, Southeastern Europe, Country Report, no. 5 (2025), https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/78198.

[80] Dorian Jano, "Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider," in Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective, ed. Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová (London: Routledge, 2023), 63.

[81] Nazif Mandacı and Elona Rusi Karacalarlı, "Gulf Region and Western Balkans: A Current History of Interregional Relations," *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 19, no. 3 (2018): 491–514, https://doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.288136.

sentative to the EU,[82] aware of Albania's potential reaction, invited Albania and North Macedonia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU),[83] just one week after French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the start of EU accession talks for both states. In response, Albania's long-serving Prime Minister Edi Rama reiterated his country's intention to "marry the EU," describing it as a difficult but desired marriage.[84]

Indeed, the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1924 and a brief alliance during the Cold War have not alleviated the strained and diplomatically cold nature of Albanian-Russian relations. Linkages to Russia are not encouraged as "politically, Tirana is strongly geared to the West."[85] Albania's firm support for Kosovo's independence forms the core of its strategic alliance with the US, while Russia's backing of Serbia places Moscow in direct opposition to Albania on a central national security issue. The Albanian attitude toward Russia has been shaped by its consistent alignment with the EU's CFSP, which led to a further deterioration in relations with Russia following the war in Ukraine.

Since 2015, Albania has followed the EU and the US sanctions policies against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and has continued to do so after the aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Relations reached one of their lowest points in 2018, when the Albanian government expelled two Russian diplomats. This was taken in response to NATO's collective action principle. And, following similar moves in some EU capitals, a street near the Russian Embassy in Tirana was named "Free Ukraine" in April 2022.[86] There have been indications of Russian sharp-power activity in Albania, most notably allegations that Moscow financed the former Democratic Party (PD) leader, Lulzim Basha, during the 2021 parliamentary elections. To date, however, this remains an isolated case.[87]

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[82] European Western Balkans, "Russian Representative to EU invites N. Macedonia and Albania to join EEU instead," *European Western Balkans*, October 30, 2019, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/30/russian-representative-to-eu-invites-n-macedonia-and-albania-to-join-eeu-instead/.

[83] European Western Balkans, "Russian Representative to EU Invites N. Macedonia and Albania to Join EEU instead."

[84] Edi Rama, "We Are in Love with Europe" / Rama Convinced: They Do not have Time, but They Are Forced to Marry Us!" March 15, 2022. https://www.imalbania.com/kosova/we-are-in-love-with-europe-rama-convinced-they-do-not-have-time-but-they-are-forced-to-marry-us/.

[85] Enika Abazi, "Albania. New Geopolitics and Shifting Linkages," in *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge: London and New York, 2020), 170.

[86] "Albania Renames Street in Capital Tirana as Free Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 6, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/albania-renames-street-capital-tirana-free-ukraine-2022-03-06/.

[87] Alice Taylor, "Albanian Political Parties Spar over Russian Funding Allegations," *Euractiv*, September 12, 2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albanian-political-parties-spar-over-russian-funding-allegations/

An official note of the Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs describes Albanian-Russian relations as ones in which "the progress of bilateral relations has not undergone special developments, as it has been conditioned by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Albania has immediately condemned Russia's attacks, has applied the sanctions imposed by the European Union, and as a co-sponsor of Ukraine in the UN Security Council, has been in the foreground alongside partner countries, such as the USA, Great Britain, France, etc."[88]

While Türkiye's interests in Albania have always been driven, in part, by Türkiye's rivalry with Greece in the Western Balkans, Albania's interests in Türkiye are linked to its rivalry with Serbia and Russia's influence in Serbia. In this regard, Türkiye represents a crucial ally to Albania, as it helps preserve its security concerns through the balance of forces after the formation of two dominant axes of power in the region: the Russian-Greek-Serbian axis on one side and the American-Turkish-Albanian axis on the other.[89] Thus, Türkiye is considered the guarantor of external security,[90] which, on the other hand, does not hold back the country on its Euro-Atlantic path, for Türkiye is both a candidate country to the EU and a NATO member. Meanwhile, Albania maintains a partnership-oriented commerce collaboration with China, but the Chinese-Albanian relationship is not economically based on investments but on the exploitation of markets (petroleum and chromium) by China's side and wholesale and retail trade by Albania's side.[91] On the other hand, the relationship with China does not hinder the country's strong ties with the EU and the US, as China has no plans to replace the US alliance system with its own rival system in the region.[92]

Albania's effort to maintain geopolitical balance—while remaining anchored to the EU—was clearly illustrated by its vote on the United Nations General Assembly resolution of 12 September 2025. This resolution, initiated by France and Saudi Arabia, had the recognition of Palestine as a state at its very core, amid Israel's war in Gaza. It received 142 votes in favor, 10 against, and 12 abstentions,

[88] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, "Bilateral Relations between Albania and Russia," August 22, 2022, https://punetejashtme.gov.al/en/newsroom/marredheniet-shqiperi-rusi/.
[89] Klodiana Beshku, "The Albanian Relationship with Greece and Turkey. Perception and Reality in the Framework of the Foreign Policy Partnership," *Research Paper for the Centre of Excellence*, Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2015.
[90] Përparim Xhaferi, "The Post-Ottoman Era: A Fresh Start for Bilateral Relations between Albania and Turkey?" *Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 9, no. 1 (2017): 42–62, https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol9.iss1.15173.
[91] Alice Ekman, *China and the Battle of Coalitions: The 'Circle of Friends' Vs the Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Paris: EUISS, 2022).
[92] Ekman, *China and the Battle of Coalitions*.

with Albania among those abstaining.[93] Despite recognizing Palestine in 1988, the Albanian government has consistently supported a two-state solution, as also stated by Prime Minister Rama during his visit to Israel in April 2025.[94] The abstention vote apparently was the only way not to hurt Israel's feelings, backed up by the US, and not to go against an EU member state initiative (France). Neither domestic pressure, including protests by Albania's predominantly Muslim population against the suffering in Gaza, nor its alliance with Türkiye, a vocal critic of Israel's actions, was sufficient to lead Albania to dissociate from its Western allies. Instead, the government opted for an abstention to preserve balance among its key alliances.

EU's Conditionalities Affecting the Differences between Georgia and Albania

The EU conditionalities have affected the divergences between Georgia and Albania by means of the EU being much later involved and less imposing in the former than in the latter.

Concerning the latter, the EU has exerted its conditionality also through the transformation of the enlargement policy toward the whole Western Balkans. In this direction, Albania's government has made every effort to respond to the EU conditionalities and its persistence with several reforms. Following the EU's repeated and persistent emphasis on the need for regional cooperation in the region since 1999, Albania has championed regional cooperation, taking the lead in numerous initiatives within the Berlin Process framework, with the latter started in 2014 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel as an attempt to rejuvenate the stalled integration process in the Western Balkans by encouraging regional cooperation, reconciliation, and connectivity.

Following the EU's call for the Western Balkans to prioritize the rule of law, Albania has undergone a comprehensive judicial reform since 2016. In its June 2018 decision, the European Council set out five priorities for Albania to advance its European integration, focusing on judicial reform, human rights protection, public administration reform, and combating corruption and organized crime.[95] They were met with a great effort by the Socialist governments, at least formally, to establish offices and institutions that responded to these requirements. When the Eu-

[93] "UN Overwhelmingly Endorses Two-State Solution Declaration that Condemns Hamas," *Reuters*, September 13, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-overwhelmingly-endorses-two-state-solution-declaration-that-condemns-hamas-2025-09-12/.
[94] "Rama in Israel: Albania Supports Two-State Solution, but not with Hamas," *Telegrafi*, April 7, 2025. https://telegrafi.com/en/Rama-in-Israel-Albania-supports-two-state-solution-but-not-Hamas/.
[95] Council of the European Union, *Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process: Council Conclusions*, June 26, 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf.

ropean Commission's New Methodology of February 2020 established that the first cluster—the Fundamentals, containing the Rule of Law and Human Rights chapters—would be opened first and closed last,[96] the Albanian government felt somewhat ready due to the judicial reform undertaken in 2016. When the access negotiation talks began in July 2022, the SPAK office was under construction, and the Judicial Reform had just begun to deliver its first results. The First Cluster was opened in July 2023, and between 2023 and November 2025, Albania opened all five Clusters, containing 33 negotiation chapters with the EU. SPAK and its prosecutors have managed to arrest some of the highest-level politicians in Albania over the last three years, which is the main reason why the November 2025 Commission Report[97] on Albania was concluded in more enthusiastic tones than previous ones.

Regarding the former, the EU appeared cautious and more distant. It offered Georgia a clear enlargement perspective only after Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine began, and it was also less assertive toward non-compliant Georgian governments in enforcing "democratic" conditionality. In its 2017-2020 and 2021-2027 association and enlargement agendas, the EU identified several direct key priorities for the country: strengthening democracy, the rule of law, judicial independence, human rights, and good governance, fighting corruption, as well as including connectivity and infrastructure, under the EU's Global Gateway Strategy.[98] Yet by 2023, the EU observed that Georgia had not met any of the key priorities related to its "democratic conditionality," raising serious concerns about political polarization and democratic backsliding.[99]

Amid the events of 2023 and 2024 and the ongoing popular protests in 2025, Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, in her address to the European Parliament on 4 November 2025, while presenting the Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package, described Georgia's political situation as "sharply deteriorated, with serious democratic backsliding never seen before in a candidate country. We saw a rapid erosion of the rule of law and severe restrictions on fundamental rights." Remarking on such severe non-compliances, the Commissioner proposed no other instru-

[96] European Commission, "Press Release, 'A More Credible, Dynamic, Predictable, and Political EU Accession Process - Commission Lays out its Proposals Brussels,'" *European Commission*, February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_20_181/IP_20_181_EN.pdf.

[97] European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report*, November 2025. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-8748-9058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf.

[98] European Union External Action, *EU and Georgia Adopt Revised Association Agenda*, November 21, 2017, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/35934_en?utm; Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, "The European Union and Georgia," *Delegation of the European Union to Georgia*, September 7, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?utm.

[99] Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, "The European Union and Georgia."

ments for compliance than simply urging the GD government "to reverse their course to respond to the citizens' demand for a European future." In fact, the only geopolitical mechanism left for the Commission to react to Georgia's divergence from the EU's transformative power was to acknowledge how de facto Georgia was no longer a Candidate country. As she put in her concluding sentence on Georgia, "following the last year's European Council's conclusions that the Georgian government's actions have led to a de facto halt of the pre-accession process, and in light of Georgia's continued backsliding on the fundamentals since then, the Commission considers Georgia a Candidate country in name only."[100]

Conclusion(s)

Clearly, over the last decades, the EU has been able to exercise its soft (transformative) power in Georgia and Albania. But with diverging outcomes. This becomes understandable, even though both polities and societies have historically been drawn to the idea of Europe and the EU, considering their respective interactions with EU institutions and their geopolitical positions. More specifically, such divergence has been manifested in the Albanian government's willingness and imposed compliance with "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities, as well as unimpressive geopolitical alternatives to European integration, and in the Georgian government's increased non-compliance and the impressive geopolitical alternatives surrounding the country. The EU's "geopolitical turn," also in its enlargement policy—though perhaps altering the EU's self-understanding as a soft (normative/transformative power)—appears to be rather belated for the two states. And it is such a belatedness that mostly explains Albania's recent acceleration and Georgia's recent stalling of their EU integration paths.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.
Ethical Standards
The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

[100] DMR News, "'Only a Unified Europe Can Stop Putin': EU Chief Marta Kos Issues Stark Warning to Russia," YouTube video, 1:15, November 4, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27R6Ns7HRrE.

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