



Opinion paper

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Opinion Paper #4

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Understanding Georgia's Migration Cooperation with the EU

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Understanding Georgia's Migration Cooperation with the EU

Introduction

Migration remains one of the central concerns of the European Union's external action, shaping how it engages with neighbouring countries. This cooperation depends not only on how closely third countries align with EU migration norms, standards, and policies, but also on how they interpret, adapt to, and implement the EU's expectations. Yet this alignment is rarely straightforward. Many neighbouring countries face political, institutional, or socio-economic constraints that limit their capacity or willingness to fully comply with the EU's migration agenda. These uneven patterns highlight the limits of a one-size-fits-all approach and suggest the need for more flexible, context-aware strategies.

Within this broader landscape, much of the EU's migration cooperation has been driven by urgency, particularly in response to irregular transit, border management, and the externalisation of asylum procedures. Countries like Türkiye, Libya, and Tunisia tend to dominate this discussion, often framed through the lens of crisis response and containment. Georgia, however, presents a notable counterexample. As a visa-free country and recent EU candidate, with no major migration-related pressures or bargaining leverage, Georgia's cooperation has been driven by political aspiration rather than crisis or coercion.

Georgia challenges some of the traditional assumptions about why and how countries comply with EU migration governance. Unlike more securitised cases, Georgia operates in a relatively stable and low-leverage context, where the EU's conditionality tools are still present, but their effectiveness is less clear. This article draws on original qualitative research, including policy analysis and interviews with Georgian diplomats, EU officials, and international organisations conducted between 2023 and 2024. It examines how and why Georgia's alignment has evolved, focusing in particular on the post-2017 period, exploring why compliance began to slow after the achievement of visa liberalisation, and what this reveals about the limits of conditionality as a tool of Europeanisation in non-crisis contexts.

Why Compliance Slows: Incentives, Institutions, and Instability

In Georgia, the EU's conditionality mechanism was effective during the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan period, when the promise of visa liberalisation provided concrete incentives. However, since Georgia's candidacy was officially recognised in 2023, the conditionality dynamic has weakened significantly. There is no clear accession timeline, and the EU's migration-related benchmarks have become increasingly technical, ambiguous, or politically sensitive. In this context, four factors help explain Georgia's pattern of selective compliance.

First, the absence of credible EU incentives has clearly undermined reform momentum. Once visa-free travel was granted, the perceived benefits of further alignment largely disappeared. Without phased or short-term goals linked to tangible outcomes, Georgia's motivation to pursue costly administrative and political reforms has waned. It can be understood that the momentum was gone, so when Georgia was politically willing to move forward with the EU in 2017, the EU was not present with enough incentives or clear guidance. This shows that political will on the Georgian side was present, but not effectively matched by EU engagement. And when Georgia received candidate status in 2023, the situation was reversed, the EU showed more engagement, but Georgia no longer had the political will

to continue or enhance reforms. This points to a classic problem in EU conditionality: without a credible 'carrot', reforms tend to stall, especially when they involve significant domestic political costs.

Second, institutional capacity gaps remain a major challenge. While Georgia has made progress in adopting necessary legislation, implementation lags behind. Reintegration services for returnees are inconsistently funded and under-utilised; coordination between ministries is uneven; and migration priorities are not embedded consistently across all government levels. All these are mentioned in different reports produced by the EU or IOM.

Third, Georgia's domestic political volatility has negatively affected compliance. Democratic backsliding, polarisation, and increasing instrumentalisation of foreign policy have shifted attention and political capital away from migration reform. The reintroduction of the "foreign agent law" in 2024 further damaged trust with the EU, reducing Georgia's credibility as a committed partner. This shows how domestic politics can directly impact international cooperation, especially when reforms are politically sensitive or contested internally. The link between democratic standards and migration policy compliance becomes clear here, as backsliding undermines both trust and reform momentum.

Finally, Georgia's geopolitical ambiguity continues to constrain full alignment with EU migration policies. Its engagement with non-EU countries, most notably Russia and China, complicates its foreign policy positioning and dilutes its commitment to European norms. Recent developments, such as the bilateral visa liberalisation agreement with China and the April 2025 decree, initially interpreted as easing entry for citizens of 17 countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ghana, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Yemen, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) have triggered concern in Brussels regarding Georgia's adherence to Schengen-aligned standards. Although the latter was later clarified by the Interior Ministry as a regulatory tightening, the episode revealed gaps in policy communication and coherence. These developments reflect Georgia's broader strategic hedging, where migration policy is shaped less by long-term EU alignment and more by short-term geopolitical considerations.

The Limits of EU Governance Tools

Georgia's case illustrates the limitations of EU external governance when applied in contexts where conditionality lacks weight. It works best when rewards are tangible, priorities are clearly set, benchmarks are transparent, and domestic political will aligns with external expectations. In Georgia's case, all three pillars have weakened, and on top of that, enhancing compliance and EU integration is no longer a political priority.

Moreover, the dominant securitisation paradigm in EU migration studies, emphasising control, crisis, and containment, fails to explain Georgia's trajectory. This analysis explicitly uses Europeanisation and conditionality as the analytical lens, arguing that in non-crisis contexts like Georgia, convergence is driven not by fear or bargaining (securitisation), but by political vision and administrative feasibility. As such, Georgia does not simply fall outside the dominant model, it actively challenges its assumptions.

The compliance seen during VLAP was the product of a unique alignment of incentives and domestic ambition. Today, that window has narrowed. EU conditionality has become less effective, domestic ownership has weakened, and the complexity of implementing EU-aligned reforms has increased.

Rethinking EU Migration Governance in the Eastern Neighbourhood

For the EU, Georgia's experience underscores the need to review conditionality. The enlargement toolbox, rooted in earlier rounds of accession, cannot be copy-pasted onto current candidate and neighbourhood states. Conditionality must be phased, realistic, and politically sensitive. Furthermore, EU migration governance must extend beyond return and border control to include labour mobility, fundamental rights, and long-term reintegration support.

For Georgia, this means recognising that visa-free access alone is not the endpoint of Europeanisation. Migration policy must be embedded into national development planning, supported by adequate institutional structures and consistent political leadership. Mixed signals, such as diverging visa policies with strategic competitors, undermine the credibility of Georgia's EU path.

Conclusion

Georgia remains a willing but constrained partner. Its case highlights the fragility of convergence in the absence of credible, short-term incentives and sustained domestic commitment. But it also offers lessons for the EU: that influence depends not just on conditionality and European aspirations, but on context, credibility, and co-ownership.

As the EU continues to develop its external governance strategies in the migration domain, it must treat Georgia not just as a recipient of norms, but as a mirror, one that reflects the limits of its own assumptions and the need for a more adaptive, differentiated, and partnership-based approach.

Note: This article is based on research conducted by the author as part of a Master's thesis at the College of Europe.

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