



Commentary

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Commentary # 14

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Georgia's European Integration: Legislative Backsliding, Political Regression, Public Determination – Is There a Way Out?

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Georgia's European Integration: Legislative Backsliding, Political Regression, Public Determination – Is There a Way Out?

Georgia's European integration is now at one of its starkest inflexion points. Since the Georgian government's decision on 28 November 2024 to suspend efforts to open EU accession negotiations until 2028, Georgia has not only paused its EU trajectory, but it risks losing the very gains that came from its earlier commitments.

A year has passed as Georgian citizens have continuously taken to the streets, with the demand to return the country to its European path, release political detainees, and announce new parliamentary elections conducted under renewed legislation, broader international observation, and equal political conditions for all parties.

The political decision of 28 November will remain one of the most consequential moments in Georgia's modern history. The authorities did more than pause a policy track; they simply challenged a long-standing national consensus, generations will, supported by the constitution, foreign policy doctrine, and the overwhelming wish of the current Georgian population. A country once considered the most advanced among Eastern Partnership states suddenly re-emerged in the rhetoric of European policymakers as a "problem case" rather than a future member.

What followed throughout 2024-2025 was not a temporary slowdown, but a pattern of legislative and institutional terrorism - regression inconsistent with EU membership criteria under Articles 2 and 49 of the Treaty on European Union and Copenhagen political criteria. The adoption of laws and administrative practices restricts, among others, civil space, weakens independent governance, independent media, free and prospective education, and creates political loyalty. Main institutional structures signalled a turn away from democratic standards, transparency, and accountability, the very pillars of European integration.

This reversal is not just symbolic; it has actual political, social, and economic consequences, and the European Commission's own 2025 report paints a sobering picture.

According to the 2025 Enlargement Package, adopted by the European Commission on 4 November, Georgia is no longer viewed as a promising frontrunner. The Commission describes the country as a "candidate country in name only", a sharp indictment of its current path. The report argues that Georgia has suffered "serious democratic backsliding" over the past year, with fundamental rights, civic space, and the rule of law under severe pressure.

EU leaders have placed responsibility for this deterioration squarely on the Georgian authorities. In his remarks presenting the Enlargement Report in Tbilisi, EU Ambassador Paweł Herczyński characterised the findings as "devastating" for Georgia's European aspirations, pointing out that the country is now further from EU membership than when it was granted candidate status in 2023. He specifically warned that unless Tbilisi reverses course, the benefits Georgia once enjoyed, from lower roaming charges and access to EU funds, to the deepening of trade, could erode.

That warning is not empty rhetoric. The European Commission's enlargement communication makes it clear: the EU's doors are not closed entirely, but they are conditional. According to the Commission, Georgia must make resolute progress in restoring democratic institutions, halting repressive legislation, and protecting civic space, areas where it has recently regressed.

These criticisms are reinforced by the European Parliament, which adopted a resolution in mid-2025 deploring the "continuous democratic backsliding" by the Georgian government following the disputed October 2024 elections. The Parliament specifically condemned the "restrictive laws targeting activists, civil society and independent media," highlighting an alarming trend in institutional degradation.

On Tbilisi's side, a defensive statement was issued shortly after the Commission's report, accusing Brussels of bias and political speculation. According to it, the Commission's criticisms reflect a lack of understanding of Georgia's internal dynamics and disregard for its development trajectory. But such pushback hardly muffles the urgency of the EU's message: the accession process can only resume if Georgia reverses the course on democratic erosion.

From an analytical perspective, the Georgian government's recent behaviour reveals a deeper struggle: by publicly de-emphasising EU membership while still courting Russia's favour and weakening/abolishing European-aligned institutions, it risks undermining not just its European future, but the very foundations of the modern Georgian state.

If Georgia restored its European trajectory, the benefits would be substantial and multi-dimensional. First, preserving DCFTA implementation would secure access for Georgian exports to the EU Single Market, which remains a vital engine for economic growth and attraction of direct investments. Second, by safeguarding visa liberalisation, Georgia would maintain the free movement leverage that energises its youth, business, and civil society. Third, renewed EU trust could unlock additional financial instruments, such as pre-accession funds and infrastructure investments, critical for modernisation. Additionally, reintegration into the EU process would rebuild Georgia's geopolitical legitimacy, reaffirming its role as a committed democratic partner in a strategic region.

But achieving that requires more than technical fixes. It demands political will: a recommitment to democratic norms, judicial independence, and cross-party consensus on European integration. Brussels, for its part, must sustain both pressure and support, applying its conditionality while backing credible reformers within Georgia.

Considering the mentioned, let's concentrate shortly on the developments that took place during the last year, the year which can be called with the same success tragic – for Georgia's state and its development; cynic – when it comes to the current Georgian authority and its actions, and comic - when you assess all these, which in fact really difficult to be assessed, as it is far-far away from logic and perception of minded people.

Throughout 2024–2025, Georgia adopted several laws, which directly contradict Georgia's EU commitments and triggered direct criticism from EU institutions, member states, human rights organisations, and Georgia's own professional community. These acts demonstrated conflict with Georgia's long-standing commitments under:

- EU-Georgia Association Agreement (2014);
- EU visa-liberalisation benchmarks (2017 and post-monitoring cycles);
- DCFTA regulatory convergence obligations;
- The Copenhagen political criteria;
- UN, CoE, and OSCE democratic standards.

Among the most problematic legal and policy developments can be mentioned:

1. The “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” (“foreign agents law”)
 - Targeting CSOs, media, academic and analytical institutions, this law mirrored Russian precedent. It contradicted European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case law and was judged incompatible with EU enlargement values.

2. "Sovereignty and Constitutional Security" legislative package
 - Adopted under emergency procedures, expanding government power without judicial or parliamentary oversight.
3. Amendments to public order and protest-related laws
 - Increasing penalties, enabling surveillance and administrative detention, and reducing freedom of assembly and expression.
4. Judiciary and prosecutorial appointments bypassing Venice Commission recommendations
 - Further entrenching political influence over the judiciary, contradicting EU recommendations explicitly calling for transparent, merit-based appointments.
5. Restrictions on academic autonomy and digital information space
 - Undermining academic freedom and cybersecurity cooperation frameworks established with NATO and EU.

These measures represent structural, not episodic, deviation from EU acquis alignment, and therefore signal to Brussels that the government is not committed to the transition required for membership.

All the legal initiatives reinforced the perception among partners that the Georgian authorities no longer see EU integration as a reform-driven transformation process, but rather as a transactional geopolitical choice negotiable on government terms. Unfortunately, this has produced three strategic consequences:

1. Collapse of political trust/political interaction between Tbilisi and Brussels;
2. Transformation of Georgia's image from reform leader to risk case;
3. Narrative and institutional divergence between state and society.

The domestic effect has been equally profound. Public opinion remains decisively pro-European, yet the state narrative increasingly frames EU integration as coercive, culturally incompatible, or a sovereignty threat. This discursive shift polarises society, undermines institutional loyalty, and challenges the professional state corps, including diplomats, who were trained, evaluated, and motivated according to EU/NATO-aligned objectives.

Now we have a legitimate question of whether there is any opportunity to restore credibility and be back on the European track. Georgia has several legal inconsistencies contradicting EU principles, among others, in four important domains:

1. Rule of law and judicial independence;
2. Freedom of association, media, education, digital space;
3. Checks and balances, constitutional oversight;
4. Foreign policy commitment credibility.

These inconsistencies undermine:

- Visa liberalisation trust;
- DCFTA market access conditions;
- European Commission monitoring frameworks;
- Makings of a stable, predictable investment environment.

Is there any opportunity to correct the latest actions and decisions of the Georgian government in the coming years? Let's list some, but they need a strong will and prospects for future development.

First is - immediate repeal or amendment of laws inconsistent with EU values (foreign agent law, sovereignty package, protest-related restrictions); the second - reinstatement of Venice Commission-aligned reform process, creating a binding legislative compliance mechanism; the third - political de-escalation pact with civil society, academia, and professional corps, including security guarantees for free expression; the fourth - Cross-party National European Agreement approved by parliament, immune from single-party revision; the fifth - Restoration of institutional independence, beginning with High Council of Justice, Prosecutor's Office, and media regulator; the sixth - expert-level re-engagement with EU institutions, focusing on *technical track continuity* regardless of political turbulence; and the last but not least - rehabilitation of diplomatic corps autonomy and guarantee of non-political career advancement rules.

Concluding, Georgia's European path has entered its most problematic phase in two decades. Yet, the strategic, social, economic, and identity-based logic of EU integration remains intact. History shows that political cycles can change, but national direction endures. The choice is no longer only *whether* Georgia joins the EU, but *whether it preserves the capacity to do so*. Georgia's EU integration is no longer just a matter of policy; it's a test of its political maturity and collective identity. The path forward will not be easy, but the price of failure, economic marginalisation, institutional erosion, and loss of international credibility, is too high. Reclaiming a European future may yet be possible, but only through bold reform, renewed consensus, and genuine alignment with the values that once made Georgia a model of pro-European progress.

Change requires courage. Delay will demand far more.

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Ambassador Janjalia is a career diplomat and expert in international affairs, economic strategy, and European integration. Over more than 26 years in the Georgian public service, he rose from intern to Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, leading diplomacy, EU integration processes, and strategic negotiations. He has represented Georgia in key international organisations, including the EU, UN, OSCE, GUAM, TRACECA and BSEC, and served as Ambassador to Latvia. His leadership helped shape major regional infrastructure and trade projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. He has also designed institutional capacity-building programmes for public authorities and civil society. Before joining public service, he worked in the private sector, adding a pragmatic and results-oriented approach to his diplomatic career.