



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

South Caucasus

BLACK SEA SECURITY

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ANALYSIS

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus
4. T. Choveldize Street, 0108
Tbilisi, Georgia

 [/freiheit.org/South-Caucasus](https://freiheit.org/South-Caucasus)

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Date

March 2026

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Abstract

This policy paper is authored by Marika Mikiashvili and Leonie Nienhaus, fellows of the Black Sea Security Conference organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus in Sofia (November 2025). It examines the evolving geopolitical significance of the Black Sea region, embedded in the wider European security context. For that reason, the paper focuses on the EU defence and strategic autonomy, with particular attention to the Readiness 2030 plan as a key instrument for enhancing preparedness and strategic autonomy. The paper then assesses the EU's emerging Black Sea Security Strategy, highlighting both its ambitions and its limitations. Seeing hybrid resilience and election integrity as an integral part of European security – especially given recent subversion practices in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia – the paper dedicates a chapter to hybrid threats and election interference. Finally, the paper discusses the EU's enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans and Associated Trio – Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, arguing that enlargement remains a crucial geopolitical tool for stabilising the wider Black Sea region, from the Black Sea's eastern frontier to the other enlargement cluster in the Three Seas Initiative region. Overall, the paper contends that for the EU to be taken seriously as a security actor, it must demonstrate sustained political commitment and coherence between its security, defence, and enlargement policies. The analysis reflects the state of affairs as of late 2025.

Keywords:

#Hybridthreats #NATO #SouthCaucasus

Table of contents

6	
1.1	Introduction 6
1.2	Readiness 2030 6
2.	The Black Sea as a Test Case for European Defence 7
2.1	Introduction 7
2.2	The Black Sea Security Strategy and Its Challenges 7
2.3	What about Türkiye? 8
2.4	Recommendations 8
3.	Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Election Interference as a European Security Challenge 9
3.1	Introduction 9
3.2	Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Moldova 9
3.3	Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Georgia 10
3.4	Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Romania 11
3.5	Conclusion 12
4.	Strategic recommendations for the European Union 12
4.1	recommendations 12
4.2	EU Enlargement as a Geopolitical Imperative 12
5.	The Western Balkans: From Thessaloniki Promise to Prolonged Stagnation 13
5.1	Introduction 13
5.2	Albania 13
5.3	Montenegro 14
5.4	North Macedonia 14
5.5	Bosnia and Herzegovina 14
5.6	Kosovo 15
5.7	Serbia 15
6.	Beyond Association: the EU's Recalibrated Enlargement Approach to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia 15
6.1	Introduction 15
6.2	Ukraine 16
6.3	Moldova 17
6.4	Georgia 17
6.5	Conclusion 18
7.	Recommendations for the European Union 18
	Bibliography 20

1. European Defence and Strategic Autonomy

By Leonie Nienhaus

1.1 Introduction

Since 2016, the European Union has taken measurable steps to deepen defence cooperation between its member states. Instruments such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) can be seen as a reflection of a growing recognition that Europe must be better equipped to contribute to its own security. Not only as part of NATO, but also in certain circumstances, as a more autonomous security actor. Although these mechanisms have not fundamentally changed Europe's approach to defence, they have laid the groundwork to more institutionalised forms of cooperation.

However, it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that made it obvious that European defence is an urgent necessity – a so called 'Zeitenwende' according to former German chancellor Olaf Scholz. In fact, Russia's war has exposed the fragility of Europe's defence-industrial base, its limited stockpiles, and its inability to quickly scale up production. Since then, pressure to build a more sovereign European defence capability has intensified. European threat assessments now converge around a two-to-five-year window in which Russia could pose (besides its ongoing hybrid threat) a military threat to European NATO member states. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) predicts that Russia could attack the Baltic States by 2027 (2025, p.25). This assessment must be taken even more serious considering Russia's large-scale incursions into European airspace since September 2025 and ongoing acts of infrastructure sabotage by Russia, such as the November 2025 explosion that destroyed a key railway line in Poland used to transport aid to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Trump's return to power revived fundamental questions about the reliability of the US security umbrella, especially given his demand that allies assume a much greater share of responsibility for their own defence. In response, NATO member states have taken unprecedented steps. At the NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025, allies committed to invest 3.5% of GDP in core defence spending and 1.5% in defence-related expenditure by 2035. At the national level, Germany's decision in March 2025 to reform its constitutional 'debt brake' to enable sustained defence investment marked a historic shift in German security policy.

Parallel to NATO efforts, the EU launched new initiatives to support defence capability development. Most notably, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed the ReArm Europe Plan, later renamed Readiness 2030,

aiming to mobilise up to 800 billion EUR in defence-related funding through a combination of fiscal flexibility, loans, and industrial support.

1.2 Readiness 2030

Despite these developments, Europe's progress remains modest when compared to Russia's level of militarisation. According to IISS estimates, Russia's military spending amounts to approximately 7.5% of GDP, compared to an average of around 2% among European NATO members (2025, p. 80). Moreover, this figure likely underestimates Russia's true war effort, as significant costs are increasingly shifted to regional authorities and other non-transparent channels.

At the same time, despite Europe's effort to 'rearm' itself, Readiness 2030 faces structural and political constraints that limit its practical impact. Given that EU budget rules prevent a formal increase in defence spending at the EU level before 2028, the Commission is forced to rely on indirect mechanisms that encourage member states to increase their national defence budgets instead of providing centralised funding.

An obstacle in that regard is the design of the National Escape Clause (NEC), which permits temporary exemption from EU fiscal rules for defence spending but requires countries to return to strict debt limits after four years. This has discouraged highly indebted states from participating (11 member states, including Italy, chose not to activate the clause). As a result, actual fiscal flexibility is significantly lower than the announced 650 billion EUR, with estimates closer to 390 billion EUR (IISS, 2025, p. 84). Finally, long-term funding remains uncertain. While expectation is that defence spending will rise, the actual scale and durability are unclear. This is particularly true given that the negotiations on the 2028-2034 multiannual financial framework (MFF) are likely to be politically contested.

Another critical point when it comes to creating the EU as a military powerhouse is further incentivising and strengthening the defence procurement among member states. The benefits of joint procurement are well established: expansion of market size, increased competition, reduction of costs through economies of scale, and creation of stronger incentives for innovation – an urgent necessity in a period marked by strategic uncertainty and the EU's continued overreliance on the United States. Despite these advantages, defence procurement in the EU remains highly fragmented. Member states continue to operate across 27 national systems, with defence contracting overwhelmingly conducted at the national level, which in turn makes interoperability difficult and raises costs, while ultimately weakening Europe's collective ability to respond to security challenges rapidly.

Recognising these shortcomings, the EU has taken steps to promote common procurement in recent years. In 2023,

the EU adopted the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), allocating €310 million to incentivise joint defence purchases by member states. In the same year, the European Commission presented the European Defence Industry Strategy (EDIS), which sets the objective that at least 40% of defence procurement should be conducted jointly by 2030 (Council of the EU, 2023). More recently, the SAFE (Security Action for Europe), which provides up to 150 billion EUR in EU-backed loans to member states, provided that at least two countries jointly procure defence equipment. The scope of cooperation is widened by the fact that it includes the participation of EFTA/EEA countries and Ukraine.

Another step into the right direction can be seen in the presentation by the Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the 'Military Mobility Package', which foresees the EU wide military mobility area to allow rapid transfer of troops and military equipment across the EU (European Commission, 2025b). With current clearance times being weeks to months, the proposed time of 3 days in peacetime and 6 hours in an emergency would directly benefit common procurement.

Nevertheless, structural challenges persist. A key issue is the strong home bias in national defence procurement. A study by the ECIPE shows that around three-quarters of defence contracts listed on the EU's Tenders Electronic Daily (TED) platform are awarded to domestic firms, with countries with the biggest defence industries in the EU, such as Germany, allocating nearly all contracts to national suppliers (Guinea et al., 2025). While progress in common procurement is being made through initiatives such as SAFE, a more ambitious and coordinated approach is required to overcome home-bias and to work toward a more closely connected European defence procurement.

2. The Black Sea as a Test Case for European Defence

By Leonie Nienhaus

2.1 Introduction

The Black Sea region is a region that ultimately tests European defence capabilities: it occupies a central yet often underestimated position in the European security architecture. Geographically, it acts as a bridge between Europe, the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. Strategically, it forms an important part of the so-called Middle Corridor, which connects Europe with energy resources, important raw materials, and rare minerals of Central Asia, while at the same time reducing dependence on transit routes through Russia. In addition, the region is crucial for energy transport,

Ukrainian grain exports, and the functioning of important digital connectivity infrastructure. Security in the Black Sea region is thus not only a regional concern, but also a prerequisite for Europe's overall economic resilience and strategic connectivity. Beyond its economic importance, the Black Sea represents 'the unsolved puzzle of the future European security architecture' (Kutelia, 2025). It lies at the intersection of several lines of conflict: between NATO and non-NATO actors, EU and non-EU states, and competing regional and global powers. All this makes the Black Sea a testing ground for European defence readiness.

Despite this growing strategic importance, the European Union has long lacked a coherent approach to the Black Sea region. For much of the last decade, it was treated as peripheral, addressed primarily through economic cooperation and neighbourhood instruments rather than through a strategic and targeted approach, such as that adopted for the Baltic Sea and Danube regions between 2009 and 2010.

While Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a first warning sign, only the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked the turning point, which transformed the Black Sea from a 'peripheral zone' into a critical front line for European security. Therefore, the adoption of the EU Security Strategy for the Black Sea Region on 28 May 2025 represents an important but long-overdue step towards strengthening the Union's presence in the region.

2.2 The Black Sea Security Strategy and Its Challenges

The strategy is based on three core pillars:

- Improving security and resilience, including through the establishment of a Black Sea maritime security centre to improve coordination and situational awareness.
- Promoting prosperity and economic growth by strengthening regional connectivity, particularly in the areas of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure.
- Promoting environmental protection and sustainability, with a focus on mine clearance, building climate resilience, and developing a sustainable blue economy (European Commission, 2025a).

The strategy also identifies a group of key regional partners: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, with which the EU seeks to deepen cooperation. In addition, Romania and Bulgaria, as EU Member States and NATO members, together with Türkiye, play a central role in ensuring regional security and development. Moreover, the strategy is aligned with and complements existing EU initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Global Gateway strategy, and the broader EU enlargement process (European Commission, 2025a).

However, the new approach toward the region has shortcomings in several key areas, all of which might significantly weaken the EU's ability to translate political declarations into actual, practical measures that would

strengthen security in the Black Sea region. The strategy lacks a detailed action plan, a clear implementation timetable, and a specific financial framework. As for the latter, although the strategy aims to mobilise investment in line with the Global Gateway strategy and Team Europe, no specific funds have been allocated for its implementation. Instead, the implementation depends on the next MFF.

Most critically, the strategy largely avoids addressing hard security questions. While it recognises the importance of the maritime domain and proposes a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub, it remains vague about the hub's implementation, does not clarify mechanisms for addressing the ongoing Russian threat, and fails to clarify its relationship with existing NATO command structures. The latter reflects a deeper dilemma: the division of responsibilities between the EU and NATO. NATO remains the guarantor of collective defence, while the EU has traditionally focused on political, economic, and institutional engagement. Although a 2023 joint statement signalled increased cooperation – including on cybersecurity – a fully integrated EU-NATO strategy for the Black Sea remains elusive. Given the Black Sea's location, synergy between the EU and NATO is essential, as instability can quickly spread beyond the region. Lastly, the strategy aims to strengthen partnerships with a wide range of regional actors that have divergent security interests and foreign policy orientations. However, this diversity makes a uniform approach impractical and underscores the need for differentiated engagement. Türkiye represents a particularly important case in this regard.

2.3 What about Türkiye?

Türkiye can be seen as one of the key regional actors in the Black Sea region. While not a part of the EU, it has been a member of NATO for over 70 years and hosts important NATO facilities, such as in Izmir and Kürecik, and offers strategic reach across the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Moreover, the Turkish defence industry has developed into a significant provider of capabilities. Its drones, naval platforms, and missile systems has made the country an important player in the field of security (Adar et al., 2025). Furthermore, Ankara remains indispensable for security in the Black Sea through its control of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles under the *Montreux Convention*. Despite that, the country has been excluded from the consultations on the Black Sea Strategy. Moreover, although Türkiye maintains extensive bilateral defence relations with individual EU member states, the EU has failed to develop a coherent framework for engaging with Türkiye at the EU level in defence and security cooperation.

This was further highlighted by Türkiye's failed attempt to join the EU's 150 billion EUR defence loan mechanism, SAFE (Voudouri, 2025). Ankara submitted its application in July 2025, but EU officials acknowledged early on that it would likely face vetoes from Greece and Cyprus, as well as objections from France. As a result, the Commission never forwarded the application to member states for approval.

Seeking closer ties with the country does have its

obstacles. Türkiye has played a dual role: supporting Ukraine militarily, facilitating the Black Sea Grain Initiative in 2022, and acting as a mediator, while simultaneously maintaining economic ties with Russia, keeping its airspace open, and enabling Moscow's access to global markets. Meanwhile, internally the country is drifting further into authoritarianism, with the Erdoğan led government suppressing any kind of dissent. A process which has been largely ignored by the EU.

Despite its ambiguous role, Türkiye's strategic relevance cannot be underestimated. Thus, if Europe is serious about strengthening security in the Black Sea, it must develop alternative frameworks to engage the country pragmatically, outside formal EU membership structures but beyond ad hoc cooperation. Without such engagement, the EU will fail to integrate a key regional security actor, and its Black Sea strategy risks remaining weak.

2.4 Recommendations

Narrowing the common procurement focus to a limited set of non-sensitive defence items

To accelerate joint procurement and market integration, EU member states should prioritise cross-border tenders for non-sensitive defence items, such as ammunition, transport, and fuel. Focusing cooperation in these areas could potentially help to reduce home bias, accelerate delivery, and incentivize enhancing procurement among member states for sensitive defence items, too.

Updating the EU's Black Sea Security Strategy

While the Black Sea Security Strategy is an essential step toward a greater EU presence in the region, its shortcomings and uncertainties (such as the lack of detailed action plan, a clear implementation timetable, and financial framework) must be addressed as soon as possible.

Developing a pragmatic security engagement framework with Türkiye

Given Türkiye's strategic role in the Black Sea, the EU should establish a structured but informal security dialogue focused on maritime security and defence cooperation. Such engagement would allow the EU to benefit from Türkiye's capabilities and regional leverage

3. Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Election Interference as a European Security Challenge

By Marika Mikiashvili

3.1 Introduction

Hybrid warfare poses as great a threat to the future of Europe and the prosperity of future generations as a conventional arms race or outright confrontation. While the consequences of democratic subversion are seemingly less acute and often less visible to make headlines, its poison trenches deep enough to rot the roots of a free society. And as such, successfully countering hybrid threats is akin to achieving herd immunity against a disease.

Resilience to hybrid threats is an integral part of European security, defence, and even its defensibility. Resilience prevents mass demoralization and state capture by unreliable allies who could withdraw support and surrender.

State capture and institutional behaviour against the will of the people is a current dystopian development in Georgia. The country is on its way to becoming a one-party dictatorship as alerted in the October 2025 PACE resolution 2624, a country that had become an EU membership candidate just two years prior. A hybrid takeover lies at the cornerstone of this development. Similar risks were seen in Moldova and Romania in 2024 and 2025. Potential elections complications in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Serbia, as well as possible Russian meddling in Armenia, are expected in 2026. The Armenian government even asked for the EU's pre-election assistance similar to Moldova (CIVILNET, 2025). All these hybrid attacks culminate in one phenomenon: elections.

To be factually correct, hybrid threats are not limited to Russia. Other actors, such as China, have advanced soft power and economic carrots and sticks in Europe, especially the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe (Bonomi, 2025). One could also reasonably argue that autocratic tendencies within Europe, as seen in Hungary, Serbia, or Slovakia, are a hybrid threat in their own right, and are largely domestic in origin. Few could disagree, however, that the hybrid ecosystem does not fall under a single umbrella, and that Russia is not the only power benefiting from it through masterful capitalization and amplification. Now that Russia poses an open military and terrorist threat to Europe, all other subversive actors are rallying behind Russia as allies.

In the 2000s and 2010s limbo of geopolitical thought, one could all too often hear the blissfully unaware assumption that Russia was a receding power that posed no real threat to the West (Borger, 2014). Those Europeans who were painfully aware of the near-default of states bordering Russia – the Baltics, Finland, Georgia, Ukraine – have always known that Russia's main threat lies precisely in its overall backwardness compared to Western Europe and the United States. Determined to avenge its perceived national humiliation resulting from the collapse of the USSR, Russia struck in places that flew under Europe's radar, despite knowing its economic and military inferiority compared to NATO (Crowley, 2016).

Russia thus proceeded with what it knows – and does – best: demoralize and destabilize the opponent's population, create a crisis, and normalize your desired new normal – the process described by the KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov. Its main tools in achieving all this are, as they always have been, corruption, systemic individualized blackmail, propaganda, and informational overwhelm to create mass confusion and a loss of institutional trust (U.S. Mission Russia, 2024).

It's no accident that Russia named 'mass consciousness' as 'strategic infrastructure' as early as in its 2000 National Security Concept, as pointed out by Bulgaria's former Defence Minister Todor Tagarev at the 2025 Black Sea Security Conference in Sofia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine isn't just transactional either – it's deeply ideological, rooted in the vehement refusal that Ukrainian identity could exist at all (Dickinson, 2025). Therefore, it remains a looming question whether peace is attainable even if Ukraine makes concessions. And this further intertwines hybrid resilience with European security and defence.

3.2 Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Moldova

Moldova became a major target of Russian election interference in 2024 and 2025: during presidential elections, the concurrent constitutional referendum on EU membership, and then again during parliamentary elections. Russia has always had multiple actors at its disposal in Moldova, and it must have been confident of still overseeing the country when it suddenly greenlit the departure of universally disliked oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc in 2019 – a move that was hailed as a rare example of Russia's constructiveness in the region and the alignment of its position with that of the EU and the US (Solovyov, 2019). However, things did not go as Moscow had hoped for, and Moldova suddenly slipped away from Russian influence under Maia Sandu's presidency. Russia thus put considerable efforts into regaining the helm of Moldova through election interference.

Russian meddling in Moldova has included vote-buying and financial manipulation, disinformation campaigns (including deep fake videos of Maia Sandu), political

influence operations aimed at weakening pro-EU forces and boosting pro-Russian actors, cyberattacks such as DDoS attacks targeting election infrastructure, fake bomb threats at diaspora polling stations, and mass transportation of voters from Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Transnistria (Gvineria, 2025). All of this aimed to swing voters within Moldova or at least confuse them through undermining trust in the election process and intimidate the pro-Western diaspora into not voting.

The core of the interference effort was a large-scale vote-buying scheme (Gvineria, 2025): According to Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), Ilan Shor, leader of the pro-Russian Victory bloc, served as the primary executor of this operation. Using sanctioned Russian banks such as Promsvyazbank, over 39 million USD was channelled to more than 138,000 Moldovan citizens, mostly via virtual accounts. The mechanism focused on vulnerable populations by offering them direct cash incentives.

The EU countered these threats through overt political support of Maia Sandu and the Government of Moldova, public condemnation and exposure of the Russian interference, technical and operational support to Moldova such as hybrid & cyber assistance and election security & monitoring, funding large-scale campaigns to counter Russian propaganda, and explaining the benefits of the EU integration to Moldovans, empowering civil society, and targeting malign actors with sanctions (Sandu, 2025).

Alva Finn, the Executive Director of ELF, stated at the 2025 Black Sea Security Conference in Sofia that the EU had realized it could not afford a Georgian scenario in Moldova and acted on that knowledge.

3.3 Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Georgia

In contrast to Moldova, in Georgia, the authorities themselves interfered with the elections.

The Georgian Dream has been in power since 2012. It's the party of a Russian-made oligarch and the only billionaire in Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili. Back then, Georgia was hailed for the first peaceful transfer of power through elections, a rare development in the region. Ivanishvili filled the opposition vacuum amid growing unpopularity of then-incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was criticized for a poor human rights record and perceived recklessness towards Russia (Russia plays games with Georgia, 2019). Ivanishvili promised to deliver on Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic dream and simultaneously ameliorate relations with Russia (Russia plays games with Georgia, 2019). In the context of the geopolitical limbo of the 2010s, Obama's disengagement from the region, and little Western European enthusiasm to begin with, it was tempting for many Georgians to assume that unilateral improvement of relations with Russia was possible.

Since it's impossible to govern Georgia while explicitly opposing the country's European integration, the Georgian Dream party has projected a strong pro-EU stance, while capturing the state entirely in less than a decade. Notably, NATO has been completely absent from their agenda in recent years. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the window of opportunity that Ukraine's heroic fight created in terms of European integration, the Georgian Dream did everything in their power to sabotage the process, but they also tried to put the blame on the European Union (Khidasheli, 2025). The EU still gave Georgia the candidate status in December 2023 and left no room for further propaganda. Thus, after having rigged the 2024 Parliamentary elections profoundly, Georgian Dream apparently felt confident enough to announce a halt to Georgia's EU integration (technically only until 2028, but essentially permanently) (Shandra, 2024). That triggered large-scale popular protests, crackdown, torture of demonstrators, and smaller-scale daily protests for more than a year now. Moreover, BBC journalistic investigation into the November-December 2024 crackdowns suggests the usage of a chemical agent against peaceful protesters. Georgian protesters request international investigation amid the Georgian Dream's summoning of the BBC interviewees – having previously jailed one of them on unrelated trumped-up charges – and launching investigation on 'selling out national interests to a foreign organization' (OCCRP, 2025).

Georgian Dream captured all Georgian institutions completely in just over a decade (NYU Law Rule of Law Lab, 2025). Factors that enabled it to do so include: mixed-member proportional parliamentary elections, a hyper-centralized state administration where municipalities depend completely on the central government, Bidzina Ivanishvili's insane wealth ratio to Georgia's GDP (35% per Radio Liberty's 2015 study), and mass assumption, in public, political class, and foreign partners alike, that it was impossible to ever bring Georgia back into the Russian orbit, thereby downgrading attention to the actual process of silent state capture (Billionaires and GDP, n.d.).

Some believe that state capture is the way for Georgian Dream to retain power and perpetuate corruption, while others are convinced that Ivanishvili, once the largest individual stakeholder of Gazprom, had been instructed to do so from the beginning by the Kremlin. Two things are clear. First: the final outcome would be the same, no matter how quickly or slowly Georgia converges with Russia. Second – and this is the most important point – Russia understands that Georgian Dream is its very last foothold in Georgia. This is because Russia has almost completely lost its social, cultural, and political influence inside the country. This situation differs greatly from what Russia experienced in Moldova in 2019, when it felt it still had enough future leverage to support the removal of the deeply unpopular Plahotniuc.

And this brings us to the 2024 Parliamentary elections. After a season of mass protests and crackdowns amid the Foreign Agents Law adoption process (commonly dubbed 'the Russian Law'), stakes were high and existential for

Russia as well as for Georgian Dream itself.

In addition to the well-known practices of elections manipulation in the pre-election period, such as vote-buying and the use of threats and incentives (enabled by the Georgian state's extensive knowledge of its citizens), the 2024 elections stood out as sophisticated, electronically assisted special election operation that rigged the results on election day. 300,000 votes, or about 14% of the entire votes cast, were later found to be abnormal (Gender Deviation Analysis Points To 300,000 Fraudulent Votes in Elections, 2024), (Shandra, 2024). The main components of this multi-element scheme were mass ID fraud – voting on behalf of hundreds of thousands of unregistered Georgians abroad, multiple voting on the ground, meddling with the opposition-trained elections observers, and ballot transparency – the ballots leaked on the other side and the choice was visible to those Central Election Commission personnel that helped people insert the ballots into the counting machine (Chikhladze, 2025). Ballot transparency is constitutionally prohibited in Georgia and for a good reason, as it intimidates vulnerable groups, such as the public sector workforce, into voting for the incumbent. Absenteeism is not an option amid the mass bussing of the people. Normally, electronic voting systems (registration and counting machines) are tested gradually and on a large scale before becoming a national pilot, but not in Georgia. The Smartmatic machines, which have proven to be problematic internationally, could not prevent multiple voting. This was because the registration machines at polling stations were not connected to one another and could not detect multiple registration of the same voter IDs (Zetter, 2025).

'Land capture and state capture in Georgia and Ukraine: the two scenarios have been alternating,' – Batu Kutelia, former Georgian Deputy Defence Minister and former Georgian Ambassador to the United States underlined at the 2025 Black Sea Security Conference in Sofia.

'From Georgia's experience, the worst to be asked from Kyiv are elections. What Russia did not achieve through war; it'll try to achieve through hybrid war, propaganda, oligarchic ruler, and electoral manipulation. Georgia still is resisting. Don't put Ukraine under such threat!' – Salome Zourabichvili, widely perceived as legitimate President of Georgia, wrote on X on December 9, 2025.

Georgia thus currently remains a textbook example of a Trojan horse state subversion and a cautionary tale. However, it is very easy to again make Georgia a success story, if only the unyielding people of Georgia get a little more external support on their quest for free and fair parliamentary elections through targeted sanctions, further regime isolation, and aid to independent media and CSOs.

3.4 Russian interference in European elections in 2024 and 2025 - Romania

Romania's November 2024 Presidential election was

marred by what the Romanian authorities described as complex Russian interference (Popescu-Zamfir, 2025). According to Romania's intelligence services, a coordinated influence campaign catapulted an otherwise obscure Călin Georgescu into the second round of the presidential race. The numbers are jaw-dropping, as by early November 2024, Georgescu's rating was just under 1%, whereas on election day, November 24, he received 22.9% of votes. Social media platforms, especially TikTok, Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram, were the main channels of the assault amplified by thousands of coordinated accounts. Messages boosting Georgescu were pro-Russian or isolationist, which, in the current geopolitical reality, as an indirect way to implement essentially pro-Russian policies (Paun, 2024). The social media content, bots, and troll farms fuelled social division and aimed to push Romanians into polarization. After all, a key objective of a hybrid assault is not just to sway public opinion, but to confuse and disengage the population as truth becomes harder to uncover, and to erode their trust in democratic institutions and electoral process.

Romanian agencies also reported tens of thousands of attempted cyberattacks against election infrastructure, which they attributed to the broader interference effort.

Due to credible evidence that the electoral process was significantly undermined by foreign meddling and irregular campaign influences, Romania's Constitutional Court resorted to the unprecedented measure of annulling the entire Presidential election in December 2024.

Romanian authorities feared further Russian interference in the rerun of the Presidential elections in early 2025: viral fake news on Telegram and other networks falsely claimed foreign troops were involved in the election, clearly aiming at creating confusion and distrust, while possibly also hoping to fuel 'sovereigntist' narratives that aligned with the isolationist candidate, George Simion (Ross & Popoviciu, 2025). Romania's foreign, interior, and defence ministries jointly denounced these disinformation waves as characteristic of Russian influence activity.

Elected President Nicușor Dan, as well as Romania's judicial and intelligence authorities believe that the elections were merely one piece of a puzzle in Russia's long-term subversion plans for Romania to dismantle its democracy and shift the country away from its firm geopolitical stance in support of the EU, NATO, and Ukraine (Henley, 2025).

In short, Romanian political leaders and security officials overall view Russia's influence operations in 2024–2025 as part of a significant long-term hybrid threat, involving a combination of cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and social media manipulation that undermined the fairness and integrity of the country's electoral processes.

3.5 Conclusion

Unlike conventional military threats, hybrid warfare

achieves its objectives gradually and often invisibly, exploiting institutional weaknesses, lack of media literacy, elite and public vulnerability to corruption, as well as other social vulnerabilities such as pre-existent polarization. Yet the medium-to-long-term impact of hybrid warfare can be just as destabilizing, leading to state capture, strategic paralysis, and long-term geopolitical realignment away from the EU. 'A fortress breaks from within.'

Hybrid threats and, in particular, election interference proved to be one of the most acute and systemic security challenges that faced the European Union in 2024 and 2025. It will most likely continue to be the case in 2026 and beyond, with upcoming Serbian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Armenian elections being the most notable candidates for concern.

As the cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Romania demonstrate, elections have become a primary battlefield where external actors, chiefly Russia, and externally boosted local actors seek to alter outcomes, and to erode public trust in democratic processes, polarize societies, and dismantle the European project from within.

The EU's engagement in Moldova shows that proactive, coordinated, and politically unambiguous action can make a decisive difference. In contrast, Georgia illustrates the high cost of delayed recognition of hybrid state capture and the danger of assuming democratic irreversibility. Romania's case further underlines that the maintenance of democracy is a constant battle – even as a state is already in the EU and NATO.

Georgian, Moldovan, and Romanian cases confirm that hybrid resilience must be treated not as isolated national or institutional issues, but as a core pillar of European security and defence.

4. Strategic recommendations for the European Union

4.1 recommendations

1. The European Union must stop perceiving itself as a 'soft power' actor in a cooperation-based system of international relations and must establish itself as a pole of power.

2. The EU should develop and invest in top-down and grassroots bottom-up experience sharing in election interference and democratic resilience. Democracy, Inc. is very much needed against Autocracy, Inc., which loses no time and resources to learn from each other and often adapt faster than democracies even identify threats.

This should be part of an institutionalized and expanded assistance programme in election security.

This includes pre-election hybrid risk assessments, robust monitoring of campaign finance and vote-buying, cyber defence for electoral infrastructure, and rapid-response teams to counter disinformation during election periods.

Such support should be offered proactively, not reactively, and extended to both candidate countries and member states.

3. Deriving from the first recommendation, the European Union should stop seeing Georgia as an isolated case and as a Russo-Georgian conflict only and should place the Georgian struggle in a broader geopolitical landscape where the Russia-Iran-China axis and the European Union naturally oppose each other. This is particularly relevant because Georgia has repeatedly been Russia's first testing ground of its subversive efforts: separatist territories, instigated civil wars, military invasion, and electoral takeover.

4. The EU should strengthen its sanctions toolkit against hybrid enablers. Targeted sanctions against oligarchs, corrupt officials, and disinformation operatives involved in election interference should be deployed more swiftly and consistently.

5. Greater investment is needed in independent media, civil society organizations, and media literacy campaigns as they are at the frontline of hybrid assaults and represent the cornerstone of democratic resilience.

This recommendation also includes the timely extension of aid to the financially suffocated and (il)legally and physically repressed Georgian civil society and independent media that keep the resistance going – not least so because as the laboratory and testing ground of hybrid interference, Georgia's potential fall could have a domino effect in autocratic contamination among enlargement and member states alike.

6. Finally, the EU could significantly diminish operational room for hybrid attacks that thrive in public confusion by a clear and consistent doctrine against state capture – communicating conditionality and rewarding democratic reform in tangible ways that restore public trust in the EU's transformative power.

4.2 EU Enlargement as a Geopolitical Imperative

After more than fifteen years of stagnation, EU enlargement has finally regained momentum. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has transformed enlargement from a largely technocratic process into a central pillar of European security. A shift that is reflected in the latest enlargement package, which frames enlargement as both a 'political priority and a geopolitical investment' (European

Commission, 2025b). Indeed, enlargement is a crucial part of the EU's renewed attempt to strengthen its security and deter actors such as China and Russia.

However, progress across candidate countries remains uneven. While states such as Moldova, Ukraine, Albania, and Montenegro have advanced rapidly, the accession process has stalled or reversed in others, most notably Georgia and Serbia. At the same time, enlargement is not only constrained solely by shortcomings in the candidate countries. The European Union itself faces unresolved internal impediments, such as the question of institutional readiness, the efficiency of decision-making, particularly in view of the veto rights of individual member states, and the lack of sufficiently credible instruments to combat democratic backsliding within the Union itself. All of these undermine the credibility of the enlargement process.

To make enlargement a genuine geopolitical instrument, these internal challenges must be addressed alongside reforms in the accession countries. Otherwise, there is a risk that the new momentum will remain largely rhetorical and fail to bring about real transformation.

5. The Western Balkans: From Thessaloniki Promise to Prolonged Stagnation

By Leonie Nienhaus

5.1 Introduction

The EU's approach towards the Western Balkans was formalised at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, where enlargement was presented as the principal instrument for democratisation and stabilisation. This strategy drew on the EU's earlier enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, followed by the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and rested on the assumption that gradual integration would foster democratic reform and institutional convergence.

However, over time, momentum for enlargement weakened. The EU faced a succession of political and economic crises, resulting in limited political will to further enlarge, coupled with persistent reform deficits across the region. In this context, several Western Balkan political systems evolved into 'stabilocracies': governments that formally endorsed EU integration while consolidating power domestically and portraying themselves as guarantors of regional stability (Bieber, 2017). These developments were largely tolerated by the EU in favour of short-term stability, contributing to prolonged stagnation and democratic backsliding, particularly in Serbia. As a result, public trust in the EU declined, and the prolonged

status of the Western Balkans in the accession 'waiting room' raised questions about the EU's genuine commitment to welcome new members.

Following Croatia's accession in 2013, enlargement was further deprioritised. Only Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine triggered a broader geopolitical reassessment at the EU's Southern flank and restored enlargement to the EU's strategic agenda. Since then, the EU has sought to signal renewed engagement with the region, for instance, through the launch of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

However, the trajectory of accession to the EU varies across candidate or applicant countries: while Montenegro and Albania are expected to conclude accession negotiations by 2026 and 2027, respectively, North Macedonia's progress has stalled due to Bulgaria's demands for constitutional changes, and limited progress on key EU fundamentals continues to hamper the accession process. Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to struggle with persistent institutional dysfunction and slow reform implementation. Serbia, whose accession process is stagnated, has experienced a significant setback in democratic governance in recent years, raising serious concerns about the credibility of its accession process. Lastly, Kosovo's application for membership, submitted in December 2022, remains blocked due to a lack of recognition by EU Member States (Cyprus, Romania, Greece, Slovakia, and Spain), not to mention its ongoing disputes with Serbia.

5.2 Albania

Albania is widely regarded as the success story among EU candidate countries. Having been a candidate since 2014, the accession negotiations with the EU started in 2022 and accelerated significantly in 2025, with the country opening up all six negotiation clusters. Moreover, the country stands out among other candidates for demonstrating both strong governmental commitment to EU accession and high levels of public support. According to surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 92 percent of Albanian citizens would vote in favour of EU membership (IRI, 2024). Albania is also an important security partner to the EU. Albania's NATO membership since 2009 has ensured a high degree of alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy, a process that was further reinforced by initiatives such as the 2024 Security and Defence Partnership dialogue. Whether Albania will ultimately complete accession negotiations by 2027 and accede to the European Union around 2030 remains uncertain, as the country must first implement reforms in key areas, including the functioning of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, and fundamental rights.

5.3 Montenegro

Montenegro, second bright child, is furthest along in the accession process. After declaring independence from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, the country

applied for EU membership in 2008, with negotiations beginning in 2012. After eight years of accession negotiations, all 33 chapters have been screened, with seven provisionally closed. According to Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, the country aims to conclude accession negotiations by the end of 2026, making it the frontrunner among the region's aspirants (Walker & Grobe, 2025). However, the recent Enlargement Report states that further progress depends on sustained reforms, particularly concerning the rule of law, including the functioning of the judiciary and the appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court (European Commission, 2025). Adding to this, domestic politics remain volatile, and recent Chinese-backed infrastructure projects have raised concerns in Brussels (Walker & Grobe, 2025). Nevertheless, the overall assessment remains positive. Thus, together with Albania, Montenegro's potential accession to the EU could restore credibility to the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans.

5.4 North Macedonia

North Macedonia, a candidate country since 2005, formally launched EU accession negotiations in 2022, following years of blockage due to the name dispute with Greece, which was resolved through the Prespa Agreement in 2018. Despite this breakthrough, the accession process has remained constrained by a bilateral dispute with Bulgaria. Under the 2022 French proposal, the Bulgarian veto was lifted on the condition that North Macedonia amend its constitution to recognise the Bulgarian minority, guarantee its protection, and address concerns related to historical interpretation and anti-Bulgarian rhetoric. The proposal was initially accepted by the Macedonian government, enabling the formal opening of negotiations nearly two decades after candidate status was granted. However, by the end of 2025, progress has stalled again, with the government led by Hristijan Mickoski questioning the legitimacy of the required constitutional amendments, stating that these changes would not be implemented without tangible fulfilment of Bulgaria's demands (Stoimenova, 2025). Nevertheless, the constitutional amendments remain a formal EU requirement for opening the first negotiation cluster, alongside continued progress on the rule of law, judicial reform, and anti-corruption measures (European Commission, 2025b). On the positive side, North Macedonia is fully aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and has been a NATO member since 2020. If the constitutional issue with Bulgaria is resolved and reform efforts intensify, the accession process could move forward. Until then, North Macedonia's EU path remains effectively blocked.

5.5 Bosnia and Herzegovina

On December 15, 2025, marking the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the three-year war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, then EU High Representative Kaja Kallas and Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos issued a joint statement

reaffirming the EU's commitment to peace and security in the country while urging to remain on course toward EU membership (European Western Balkans, 2025). Although Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted EU candidate status in December 2022, it remains the most fragile and politically fragmented of the six Western Balkan aspirants. The European Commission's composite score assessing Bosnia's preparedness for EU membership increased only marginally, from 1.67 to 1.70, during the 2024-2025 period, on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) (Džihčić, 2025). This places Bosnia behind Kosovo, which scored 2.11, thus underscoring the country's persistent reform deficit (Džihčić, 2025). While Bosnia recently adopted a reform agenda required to unlock funds under the EU's Growth and Investment Plan, this has not translated into tangible progress, as key reforms remain stalled.

At the core of Bosnia's reform paralysis lies its post-war constitutional structure. The Dayton constitution grants extensive veto powers to the country's constituent peoples, thereby enabling political obstruction. The most significant challenge stems from the leadership of Republika Srpska. For years, former President Milorad Dodik pursued a sustained strategy of secessionist rhetoric, institutional obstruction, and increasingly confrontational anti-European discourse, while receiving political backing from Serbia and external support from actors such as Russia, Hungary, and Slovakia. Although Dodik formally stepped down in 2024 following the lifting of U.S. sanctions on him and his inner circle, his political influence has not diminished. It continues to be exercised informally through Republika Srpska's leadership, notably via Siniša Karan, whose contested election and close ties to the Serb nationalist SNSD party suggest continuity of deadlock rather than change.

Parallel to this, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH) has pursued its long-standing objective of ethno-territorial reconfiguration, advocating for the expansion of group-based rights for Croats and consolidating its political dominance in Croat-majority areas. This has further entrenched ethnic divisions and complicated efforts to advance inclusive, state-wide reforms (Džihčić, 2025).

Without a substantial increase in the EU's engagement, political pressure, and strategic commitment, the prospects for meaningful progress on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration remain limited. As the country approaches the 2026 general elections, there is a significant risk that stagnation will persist.

5.6 Kosovo

Despite applying for membership in 2022, Kosovo's EU accession process remains largely stalled. On Kosovo's side, the democratic and economic reforms required under the EU's conditionality framework are advancing only slowly. Beyond these reform-related challenges, several additional structural and political obstacles persist.

One major constraint is the continued non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by five EU member states: Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. As unanimity among member states is required for enlargement decisions, this lack of recognition effectively blocks Kosovo's advancement toward candidate status. Moreover, the punitive measures imposed by the EU in June 2023 in response to the escalation of tensions in North Kosovo constitute an additional challenge for the government (Bechev et al., 2025). These measures have not only suspended high-level visits by EU representatives but also have frozen projects under the Western Balkans investment framework and technical assistance which was financed through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance.

In addition, the EU expects Kosovo to demonstrate initial progress toward establishing the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM), a planned framework for grouping Serb-majority municipalities and granting them a degree of self-government. However, the EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia has effectively stalled, further constraining Kosovo's EU accession trajectory.

5.7 Serbia

Serbia is the most prominent example of the dynamics of a 'stabilocracy'. Since becoming an official EU candidate country in 2012, Serbia has opened 22 of 35 negotiation chapters, with only two provisionally closed. The European Commission 2025 report highlights deep political polarisation and continued stagnation in key areas, such as the rule of law. Besides that, media freedom, judicial independence, and the environment for civil society have further deteriorated. In parallel, government rhetoric towards the EU has grown increasingly confrontational.

The publication of the 2025 enlargement package also coincided with the first anniversary of the Novi Sad railway station roof collapse, an event that triggered the largest anti-government protests in Serbia in recent decades. Demonstrations have frequently been met with police repression and violence, which in turn further constrains civic space and reinforces existing trends of democratic backsliding. Public dissatisfaction with the government has since intensified (Kmezić, 2025).

Another issue regards Vucic's 'two-chair' foreign policy between the EU and Russia. Serbia has continued to refuse to align the country with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, notably by deciding not to impose sanctions on Russia, making it the only country among the Western Balkans candidates, together with BiH, not to do so. Moreover, Belgrade has repeatedly delayed substantial progress in the EU-facilitated dialogue with Kosovo, while the EU explicitly identifies both alignment and dialogue as preconditions for accession (European Commission, 2025c).

Throughout this period, the EU's response has remained cautious. Brussels has long been criticised for

downplaying democratic regression in Serbia, occasionally providing high-level political endorsement to President Vučić despite negative assessments from Serbian civil society representatives and international democracy indices. In fact, the EU-backed lithium agreement with the country in 2024 has reinforced perceptions that strategic and economic interests outweigh the Union's genuine interest in democracy, which, in turn, has further eroded trust in the EU among segments of the Serbian population (Grošelj, 2025).

Still, Serbia remains central to the EU's enlargement strategy, due to its geographic position, economic size, and influence in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, any development in Serbia directly affects the rest of the region. Nevertheless, for the EU, regaining credibility will require a more consistent and visible use of political conditionality. More political pressure towards the Serbian government is necessary and not only in the interest of Serbian citizens, but also of the EU itself, as continued ambiguity would risk strengthening the authoritarian governance and increasing influence from Russia and China, rather than facilitating any kind of democratic convergence.

6. Beyond Association: the EU's Recalibrated Enlargement Approach to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia

By Marika Mikiashvili

6.1 Introduction

As enlargement transformed from a technocratic process to a strategic instrument for security, resilience, and democratic consolidation, Brussels finally acknowledged the importance of filling the security vacuum in all Eastern Europe and completing European security architecture through the incorporation of the Association Trio (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) (European Commission, 2025b). The Association Trio dimension of the EU enlargement also overlaps with the Black Sea geostrategic dimension of European defence, since all three countries are Black Sea regional states, with Georgia securing its eastern flank and thus crowning the easternmost frontier of the European security architecture. Eastern Black Sea also serves as the access to the increasingly important eastern markets (such as Central Asia), making the EU's institutional anchoring in the region crucial.

The Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) signed by Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in 2014, never implied

eventual EU membership, unlike the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) offered to the Western Balkan states, and the prospect was treated as distant at best in Brussels (Emerson & Blockmans, 2021). Thus, the process of the EU enlargement into the Association Trio is likely the single most tangible proof of the EU's reassessment of threats and possible adversities against democracy within the EU and the recalibration of its geopolitical role in the EU's eastern neighbourhood after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Association Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements aimed to deepen political and economic ties with the Union by promoting regulatory approximation, market integration, and governance reforms, drawing on the EU's transformative power without offering a clear accession perspective. Despite differences in membership prospects between SAA and AA, and uneven progress among the Association Trio states in areas such as rule of law and anti-corruption reforms, the six Western Balkan states and the three Eastern European states were roughly equal in their performance in aggregate scores of political and economic criteria by 2021 – the Associated Trio scored above Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (Emerson & Blockmans, 2021).

However, the EU largely prioritized stability of governance and favoured slow incremental reform over political conditionality, largely because a slow pace fit the half-hearted engagement model the EU had implemented in the region in the geopolitical limbo of the 2010s (Emerson & Blockmans, 2021). This was in contrast to the rapid reform seen in Georgia at the beginning of 2000s. As a result, reform momentum fluctuated, malign and subversive actors – chiefly Russia – exploited the vacuum and geopolitical confusion to their benefit. In Georgia's cautionary tale case, Russia's hybrid efforts resulted in a complete state capture masked under a pro-EU rhetoric. And it flew completely under EU radar.

While European security and long-term democratic benefits of enlargement are clear, it has also exposed structural tensions within the enlargement process. The speed with which candidate status was awarded to the Association Trio contrasted with the EU's traditionally cautious, conditional approach, raising concerns about absorption capacity (such as due to Ukraine's size) and potentially eroding the Union with 'another Hungary' (most notably referring to Georgia under Georgian Dream) (Lehne, 2023), (Maghaldadze, 2023).

Each of the three countries faces common as well as unique political and institutional challenges. Ukraine's accession process runs in parallel with the full-scale war, putting extraordinary pressure on state capacity but also strengthening reform commitment and national unity. Moldova, regarded recently as a frontrunner among the three, has undergone significant judicial reform and anti-corruption reforms (Aloia & Brovdiy, 2025). However, the country remains vulnerable to economic fragility and external interference through hybrid threats such as

disinformation. Georgia is under a prolonged standoff between the overwhelmingly pro-EU public and autocratic takeover, forcing the European Commission's December 2025 report to call the country 'a candidate in name only' (Jozwiak, 2025). Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia is also notably absent from integration into the EU's free roaming area in January 2026 and the joining of the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).

6.2 Ukraine

Ukraine's EU accession path is that of integration through resilience and wartime transformation, an unprecedented trajectory. In a way, the tangible prospect of EU integration through passing milestones such as the candidate status in June 2022 and accession negotiations in December 2023 has been one of the key pillars of national survival and state-building. Russia's full-scale aggression succeeded in unifying Ukrainians in their drive for EU accession. The incentives were thus tremendous for the government to advance reforms in public administration, public procurement, judicial governance, digital governance, market regulation, and anti-corruption institutions (such as NABU and SAPO) which they implemented against the backdrop of extraordinary constraints (OECD, 2025).

In terms of limitations, Ukraine struggles with wartime and long-stemming structural challenges that complicate accession – as well as embolden Russia enablers in Europe. The long-term reconstruction requirements, massive fiscal needs, demographic decline, and the country's size and agricultural weight raise concerns about the EU's absorption capacity (Lehne, 2023). Ukraine would also need to deliver further results on rule of law reforms and curbing oligarchic influence, albeit the latter has already been weakened to a degree by war and sanctions (Skorkin, 2022).

Yet, Ukraine's integration prospects are also uniquely positive due to multiple factors, both in terms of ease of accession as well as the benefits to the European Union itself: an accelerated institutional capacity in wartime; efficient reform implementation; lower tolerance for corruption; a large population united around the European idea – and willing to sacrifice their lives for it – rejuvenating the European project; the sole military power tested in war against Europe's only immediate military adversary as well as the military industrial complex, both of which are essential for EU's strategic autonomy (Kuzmuk & Scarazzato, 2025); a large labour force; industrial capacity; raw materials and resources, etc. In short, thanks to a combination of democracy consolidation, acquis communautaire alignment, and economic and military potential, Ukraine could become a vital security provider for the EU, as opposed to a security consumer in a grey frontline.

Against the backdrop of the mutual benefits, the concerns with the EU absorption capacity could be solved by capacity management, safeguard mechanisms and

phased alignment. Ukraine's accession will redefine enlargement as a tool of geopolitical stabilization and democratic resilience, anchoring Ukraine firmly within the European security and political order and preventing its hybrid subversion amid a security vacuum.

6.3 Moldova

As of December 2025, Moldova's EU accession journey could be summed up as a reform momentum amid structural vulnerability.

Under President Maia Sandu's leadership, the country has been considered a frontrunner among the Association Trio (Moldova emerges as frontrunner for EU enlargement: what does it mean for South Caucasus?, 2025). Since receiving the EU candidate status in 2022, Moldova has made notable progress in alignment with the DCFTA and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The country implemented anti-corruption measures, vetting processes, and judicial reform, with a focus on curbing the influence of long-entrenched elite networks that systemically weakened institutions (Aloia & Brovdiy, 2025).

There are some obstacles on Moldova's EU integration path. Vulnerability to hybrid threats (disinformation, electoral interference, and Russian-linked corruption that could undermine democracy) is perhaps the most notable to avoid the Georgian scenario of state takeover. In addition, the country's small, weakly competitive economy and rather limited administrative capacity need improvement (Mantoiu, 2025). Finally, the Russian military presence upholding the Transnistria breakaway region and the crime and corruption imported from the region could be a security threat to the EU.

Positive prospects stem from the strong link between the political will of the Moldovan authorities and tangible institutional change, unlike more cosmetic reforms of previous periods. Moldova's geography and deep connections with Romania further make the country's EU integration feel like a matter of time and effort, not an 'if'. The country's small size and economy also makes the absorption capacity concern irrelevant. The scale of EU's financial, technical, and political support translates particularly well into reforms and good governance, again thanks to Moldova's modest needs compared to the EU's resources.

If sustained, Moldova could become an exemplary state for how credible conditionality and domestic ownership reinforce one another. However, long-term success depends on ensuring reform continuity despite electoral volatility, curbing disinformation and corruption, and translating the EU integration into visible socioeconomic benefits to a vulnerable population.

6.4 Georgia

Georgia has had the sharpest ups and downs among the

three countries. From the top reformer in the 2000s to barely short of a one-party dictatorship by the end of 2025, there's an overwhelmingly pro-EU society with a history of high reform capacity that is currently under a Russian-style state capture.

The consolidation of power by Russian-made oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party crony elites happened amid EU's preference of stability over conditionality, which allowed state capture to proceed under a pro-European façade (Marikashvili, 2025). Such a façade further tricked the Georgian population into a naive assumption that Georgia could never be brought back into the Russian orbit (Mikiashvili, 2025).

Structural reasons behind the Georgian Dream's longevity have been a previously mixed-member Parliamentary representation that handed the incumbent a disproportionate power (similarly to Orbán and his Fidesz party in Hungary), a hyper-centralized state where municipalities have no agency whatsoever, and Ivanishvili's immense financial resources as the country's only oligarch – his assets were worth 35% of Georgia's GDP in 2015 (Scheppel, 2022), (Billionaires and GDP, n.d.).

As underlined above, the European Commission now characterizes Georgia as 'a candidate in name only.' This is the quite logical result of the rapid erosion of all institutions, largely contested and problematic 2024 Parliamentary elections that few believe to have reflected public will, the November 28, 2024 announcement of halting Georgia's EU integration ('until 2028') by Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, subsequent excessive use of force and systemic torture of non-violent pro-EU protesters (as assessed by local and international watchdogs), sweeping financial and legislative repression (including but not limited to the infamous Foreign Agents Law or 'Russian Law'), attacks on media and civil society organizations, and political prosecution of opponents (NYU Law Rule of Law Lab, 2025). The anti-EU stance of Georgia's authorities and the country's very low alignment with the EU CSDP in recent years could not have helped Georgia's EU integration either (Apakidze, 2024).

The Georgian Dream is also facing evidence of a possible use of an internationally prohibited chemical agent against peaceful pro-EU protesters in November-December 2024 (Hudson et al., 2025).

The key challenge lies thus not in capacity but in political will.

Nevertheless, Georgia's long-term prospects should not be dismissed. Public support for EU membership remains among the highest in the region, civil society has proven to be incredibly resilient despite a total crackdown, and the societal capacity to undergo reforms is visibly there once the top-down lack of political will is reversed.

Georgia's trajectory will ultimately test whether enlargement conditionality can reverse backsliding rather

than merely reward progress, but the EU needs to be crystal clear on its conditions and timeframes in order to push through the rampant propaganda atmosphere on the ground.

6.5 Conclusion

The renewed momentum of the EU enlargement is a direct consequence of the Union's reassessment of threats and possible adversities against democracy in the EU and recalibration of its own geopolitical role in the EU's eastern neighbourhood after Ukraine's refusal to surrender to Russia in 2022. Enlargement is no longer a technocratic checklist; democracy, freedom, and security are no longer taken for granted. It has finally been acknowledged that the existence of 'grey zones', accession limbo, and stabilocracies in Western Balkans and Eastern Europe undermine European security. Moreover, this was the first time that Brussels approached the Association Trio with an enlargement proposal similar to that of Western Balkans.

Thus, across both the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, enlargement now directly intersects with questions of war and peace, resilience against hybrid threats, and the EU's ability to act as a strategic power.

Currently, progress in the Western Balkan and Association Trio states remains highly uneven. In the Western Balkans, prolonged geopolitical confusion and stabilocratic governance have eroded trust in the EU's transformative power, most notably in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the Association Trio, the EU faces somewhat of an opposite risk: accelerated political decisions driven by geopolitical urgency and high public demand for EU integration, without sufficiently robust safeguards against democratic regression, as illustrated most vividly by Georgia. However, this is not to imply that the Western Balkans, or even many EU member states, are immune to democratic regression.

To successfully expand the EU while ensuring that its functionality and deepening are not disrupted – for example, by preventing another Hungary under Orbán – membership conditionality must be consistent and clearly communicated. Democratic backsliding should not be tolerated under the guise of stability and out of the deeply rooted drive to procrastinate responsibility. The EU should overcome some of its internal constraints. These measures would also ensure that the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region do not fall back into reform stagnation. Lots of these issues could be solved by adopting a qualified majority voting threshold within the EU as opposed to unanimity. Alternatively, the process of stripping chronically subversive members of their veto powers could be eased. A clear and measurable meritocratic, gradual accession roadmap could be introduced. Gradual sectoral accession could further alleviate the enlargement fatigue among some member state populations and concerns with the EU absorption capacity.

Widening and deepening the EU do not need to be opposite concepts, especially when recent history has proven repeatedly that an unfinished European puzzle has ripple effects on all Europeans.

7. Recommendations for the European Union

1. Restore credibility through strict and consistent conditionality

The EU must apply strict political conditionality and communicate it clearly to candidates, especially amid a malign propaganda climate that aims to discredit the EU. There shall be no further room for confusion that has exasperated multiple societies and enabled illiberal – or outright autocratic – governance.

2. Address internal EU constraints to enlargement

Institutional reform within the EU is essential. This includes considerations to adopt decisions through qualified majorities rather than unanimity, or at least the ability to strip chronically subversive members of veto rights, limiting the misuse of bilateral vetoes in accession processes, and adopting some form of gradual accession.

3. Adopt a clear, measurable, merit-based, gradual accession approach

Enlargement should be visibly merit-based. Countries such as Albania, Montenegro, Ukraine, and Moldova should benefit from accelerated integration steps, phased access to EU policies, and increased funding.

4. Consider models of 'partial membership' – a tangible phased integration beyond existing bureaucratic pre-accession steps.

A more politically branded and less behind-the-scenes bureaucratic phased integration could be expanded into the single market, EU programmes, and security frameworks. This would deliver visible socioeconomic benefits to populations and further incentivize them to accelerate remaining reforms, potentially decreasing the full accession timeframe significantly. This is particularly important in states where public support depends on concrete outcomes and fulfilled promises of accession, such as Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it could also serve as a further safeguard against democratic backsliding, such as in Serbia and Georgia.

5. Limit the power of bilateral disputes in accession process

While historical and constitutional issues cannot be ignored, the EU should prevent individual member states from permanently instrumentalising enlargement, as seen in the case of North Macedonia. Robust EU mediation and clear timelines are essential, as their absence leads to population disillusionment and opens doors for democratic subversion.

6. Strengthen tools against democratic erosion in candidate countries

The EU should invest more systematically in independent media, civil society, judicial independence, and anti-corruption bodies, while also improving its capacity to detect and counter state capture and hybrid interference early, as the Georgian case demonstrates.

This recommendation also implies rapid and comprehensive channels to salvage Georgian civil society and independent media.

In addition, the EU should come up with robust mechanisms of experience sharing between grassroots democratic actors on the frontlines of hybrid subversion and state capture, such as among Georgians, Serbs, Moldovans, Romanians, etc.

7. Lose tolerance for stabilocracies

In countries like Serbia, the EU should go beyond careful engagement and firmly indicate that strategic cooperation cannot replace adherence to democratic standards. Greater political pressure is essential to halt further authoritarian entrenchment and curb external influences.

8. Treat candidate states as pieces of the same puzzle – both in terms of security as well as societal liberties.

The fact that the Kremlin could at least temporarily flip Georgia above all countries signals that there should be a holistic approach that should raise an alert at the first signs of democratic regression in any candidate state. The EU as well as all other candidate states, should prepare for malign infiltration, such as through sharing grassroots experiences. Autocracy, Inc. is good at sharing autocratic experience, and it must be countered by a better democratic cohesion on grassroots and institutional levels alike.

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