



#IEE60

# CARTE BLANCHE

Réflexion collective '60 ans en 6000 signes' dans le cadre du soixantième anniversaire de l'IEE-ULB

En 2024, l'Institut d'études européennes de l'ULB (IEE-ULB) a soixante ans ! Pour scander cette année anniversaire et très « européenne », il convie ses membres à réfléchir à des questions fondatrices de l'intégration européenne en 1964 et toujours d'actualité en 2024. Dans une forme courte et accessible, nos chercheurs proposent un portrait en mosaïque de l'Europe, entre continuités et mutations. Les auteurs sont libres de leurs propos qui ne représentent pas une position officielle de l'IEE-ULB.

## UE's Balancing Act: Geopolitics and Democracy in the Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policy

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*EU's approach in the Neighbourhood and Enlargement policies balances democracy promotion with geopolitical considerations. Moldova's political developments and Georgia's reforms, amidst high geopolitical competition, illustrate the EU's evolving strategy, tying candidate status to democratic reforms. The upcoming 2024 elections in Georgia will test both Georgia's commitment to democratic values and the EU's balancing act between geopolitical objectives and democracy promotion amidst growing regional tensions.*

*L'approche de l'UE dans les politiques de voisinage et d'élargissement équilibre la promotion de la démocratie avec les considérations géopolitiques. Les développements politiques en Moldavie et les réformes en Géorgie, dans un contexte de haute compétition géopolitique, illustrent la stratégie évolutive de l'UE, liant le statut de candidat aux réformes démocratiques. Les élections à venir en 2024 en Géorgie testeront à la fois l'engagement de la Géorgie envers les valeurs démocratiques et l'équilibre délicat de l'UE entre ses objectifs géopolitiques et la promotion de la démocratie, dans un contexte de tensions régionales croissantes.*

The European Union has persistently sought to balance geopolitical considerations with the promotion of democratic values through its Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Designed to bring stability and progress to the region, the ENP aimed to foster the development of a ring of well-governed countries around the EU. While democracy promotion was always central, the geopolitical undertones of the policy were often less discussed and focused on the conflict prevention in the region. To achieve these goals, the EU introduced Association Agreements (AAs), Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), and visa liberalisation as incentives to encourage political reform.

Moldova's experience between 2010 and 2015 illustrates the tensions inherent in this dual approach. Initially lauded as a democratic front-runner, Moldova received substantial EU financial support only for it to become evident that deep-seated corruption was widespread. The disappearance of a billion dollars from Moldovan banks in 2014 exposed the superficial features of formalistic reforms. This development underscored the difficulty of maintaining democratic principles while providing unconditional support to pro-EU coalitions. In response, the EU developed more targeted negative conditionality mechanisms. The effective application of stringent conditionality after 2015 in Moldova, supported the emergence of a new, reform-oriented, pro-EU government in Moldova, aiming to diminish oligarchic influence.

Georgia presents a more recent case study for the effective application of such targeted conditionality in the context of high geopolitical competition. The geopolitical backdrop shifted dramatically with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Initially, the EU's approach in the region relied on institutional and diplomatic measures to counter Russian influence. The EU aimed to promote regional stability, democratisation, and economic cooperation while avoiding the increased geopolitical pressures observed since 2014. After the full-scale invasion, the EU found itself compelled to shift from mitigation to active engagement in geopolitical competition. This new reality posed challenges to the EU's policy-making processes and capacity for decisive action in foreign affairs.



The EU's engagement with Georgia and Moldova under the ENP, and recently under the EU enlargement track, underscores the complex relationship between geopolitical competition and democracy promotion in the region. The EU has implemented a more targeted conditionality approach in Georgia in the last five years, tying candidate status to meeting nine distilled criteria from an initial twelve political priorities linked to the membership perspective. These criteria focus on human rights, the free operation of civil society and media, depolarisation, countering disinformation, free and fair electoral competition, as well as improved mechanisms for ensuring the independence of judicial and anti-corruption institutions. The EU's insistence on these points provides an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to democratic values even as geopolitical tensions mount.

The decision to grant candidate status to Georgia, conditional on promoting these nine key political priorities, reflects the EU's evolving strategy. Georgia's strategic location and EU aspirations among the population increased the pressure on EU officials to open the membership perspective, even if significant challenges in building democratic institutions remained. This move reaffirms the EU's boundaries in a landscape increasingly defined by geopolitical competition, while underscoring the need for a nuanced approach to democratisation processes. Specifically, the EU faces key challenges in enforcing effective conditionality on democratic rules and institutions, often involving the suspension of economic and political incentives highly valued by domestic political elites. After receiving positive signals for candidate status in December 2023, the Georgian government introduced significant steps for democratic subversion. As in Moldova in 2014 and other Eastern European states, the EU faces a reversal of key democratic measures once positive incentives have been provided.

Tensions have been magnified since April 2024 by Georgia's recent adoption of a foreign agents' law, which mimics Russia's approach for the effective control and suppression of civil society organisations critical of the government. Despite significant protests and criticism from the international community, the Georgian government defended the bill as a step towards strengthening national sovereignty. This situation highlights the complex interaction between geopolitical considerations and democratic principles, illustrating how domestic politics increasingly intertwine with geopolitical competition and polarising narratives about national sovereignty and independent development.

The upcoming elections in October will be a litmus test both for Georgia's democratic future and the EU's efforts to balance its geopolitical objectives with its commitment to democracy. On the one hand, the 2024 elections will reveal whether Georgia's political actors are willing to defend their institutionally and politically entrenched positions at the expense of democratic values, amidst growing polarisation and geopolitical competition. On the other hand, there are growing indications that the election can pose significant challenges for the EU's balancing act between democracy protection and geopolitical competition, where reaching a consensual decision among EU members remains a considerable challenge for exerting influence in the region.

