

TARTU UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Nikita Hakijainen

EUROPEANIZATION AND DOMESTIC INCENTIVES: THE CASE OF THE
ASSOCIATION TRIO

MA thesis

Supervisor: Piret Ehin, PhD

Tartu 2025

Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of the thesis: 26960

Nikita Hakijainen, 19.05.2025

Abstract

As global geopolitical competition continues to escalate, the European Union's transformative power has become an increasingly important tool of influence in its neighborhood. This transformative capacity is primarily exercised through the process of accession Europeanization—specifically, accession Europeanization—whereby candidate countries are expected to align their institutions, norms, values, and practices with those of the EU. In recent years, however, the accession process has produced a dual dynamic: while some states have made significant progress, others have exhibited signs of de-Europeanization. This divergence raises a critical question: what determines the success or failure of accession Europeanization? This thesis investigated the relationship between the effectiveness of accession Europeanization and the domestic incentives of national governments. It conducted a comparative analysis of the Association Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – states with similar EU aspirations and regional contexts but markedly different accession Europeanization outcomes. The thesis has found a strong correlation between the strength of domestic incentives and the success of accession Europeanization, thus contributing to the broader theoretical understanding of the accession process. The findings also identified practical challenges that can undermine reform efforts despite EU conditionality. Based on these insights, the thesis argued for a more context-sensitive approach by the EU, one that engages a wider array of domestic actors beyond central governments. Such an approach may improve the resilience and effectiveness of accession Europeanization in future candidate states.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	7
2. Theoretical framework.....	10
2.1 Concept of Europeanization	10
2.2 Accession Europeanization	12
2.3 Drivers and obstacles of Europeanization.....	15
2.4 Domestic incentives and their effect on Europeanization.....	17
3. Research design, data and methods	23
3.1 Research design.....	23
3.2 Case selection.....	24
3.3 Data and methods	27
4. Empirical Analysis.....	32
4.1 The case of Ukraine.....	32
4.1.1 Accession Europeanization in Ukraine.....	32
4.1.2 Domestic incentives of the Ukrainian government (2019-2024)	36
4.2 The case of Moldova.....	45
4.2.1 Accession Europeanization in Moldova.....	45
4.2.2 Domestic incentives of the Moldovan government (2021-2024).....	49
4.3 The case of Georgia.....	60
4.3.1 Accession Europeanization in Georgia.....	60
4.3.2 Domestic incentives of the Georgian government (2016-2024)	68
4.4 Cases comparison.....	80
5. Conclusion	85

List of Tables

Table 1 Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as most similar systems.....	27
Table 2 Results of the analysis.....	81

List of Figures

Figure 1 Arrow diagram.....	24
Figure 2 Accession Europeanization indicators.....	28
Figure 3 Domestic incentives indicators.....	29
Figure 4 Trends in perceptions of EU influence on Ukraine	37
Figure 5 Trends in perceptions of Russia influence on Ukraine.....	38
Figure 6 Public support for EU and Russia-led Customs Union accession in Ukraine.....	39
Figure 7 Salience of democracy in Ukraine.....	41
Figure 8 EU-Ukraine trade in goods.....	42
Figure 9 Ukraine-Russia trade in goods.....	44
Figure 10 Perceptions of the EU as the most important partner for Moldova.....	50
Figure 11 Perceptions of Russia as the most important partner for Moldova	51
Figure 12 Attitudes towards EU in Moldova.....	52
Figure 13 Public support for EU accession in Moldova.....	53
Figure 14 Perception of Russia as a threat in Moldova	55
Figure 15 EU-Moldova trade in goods	57
Figure 16 Moldova-Russia trade in goods	58
Figure 17 Public attitudes towards EU in Georgia	69
Figure 18 Perceptions of national security threats in Georgia.....	70
Figure 19 Public support for EU accession in Georgia.....	71
Figure 20 Perceptions of government’s efforts to ensure EU membership.....	74
Figure 21 Perception of Georgia as a democracy	75
Figure 22 EU-Georgia trade in goods.....	76
Figure 23 Georgia-Russia trade in goods.....	77

1. Introduction

The outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has profoundly reshaped the global political landscape. The invasion has intensified global polarization and accelerated the erosion of the post-Cold War, rules-based international order. Yet, amid this turmoil, there has been an unexpected revitalization of the European Union's (EU) enlargement agenda. The war acted as a catalyst, pulling Europe out of its prolonged "enlargement fatigue" and injecting new momentum into the EU's engagement with aspiring member states. Notably, the Western Balkans and the Association Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – have made significant strides towards EU accession. In 2022, Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted official candidate status, followed by Georgia in 2023. Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova began in 2023, and Bosnia and Herzegovina followed suit in 2024. However, this positive trend conceals a paradox: while Ukraine and Moldova steadily advanced, Georgia started to fall behind. Despite sharing similar pre-war trajectories, Georgia's accession process has stalled, with relations between Tbilisi and Brussels growing increasingly strained. Today, Georgia's EU candidacy is effectively frozen, raising pressing questions about the causes of this divergence. This puzzling development, especially in the context of the Association Trio's shared aspirations and comparable challenges, forms the foundation of this thesis.

This research focuses on the concept of accession Europeanization, defined as the process through which non-EU countries aspiring to join the Union adopt EU norms, rules, and practices. The significance of this phenomenon was particularly evident during and after the 2004 EU enlargement. However, as enlargement fatigue set in, the EU's reluctance to pursue further expansion, combined with reform stagnation in certain candidate states (such as Turkey), led to growing skepticism about the effectiveness of accession Europeanization. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has seemingly reversed this trend, placing enlargement back at the forefront of the EU's strategic agenda. One might reasonably expect that all candidate countries, especially those directly threatened by Russian aggression, would intensify their Europeanization efforts. Yet, Georgia's case defies this assumption. While Ukraine and Moldova have embraced the EU trajectory, Georgia's progress has faltered. This discrepancy prompts the central research

question of this thesis: why does the extent of accession Europeanization vary, even among countries with seemingly similar contexts? The working hypothesis proposes that domestic incentives play a decisive role: the stronger the alignment between a government's domestic incentives and EU expectations, the greater the extent of Europeanization.

Addressing this puzzle holds both scholarly and practical significance. From a policy perspective, identifying the factors that either facilitate or hinder accession Europeanization is crucial for enhancing the EU's transformative influence, particularly in a time of rising authoritarianism and intensifying geopolitical competition with Russia and China. Russia's invasion has pushed the EU to adopt a more geopolitical stance, recognizing the strategic necessity of promoting democracy and stability in its neighborhood. The effectiveness of the EU's transformative power is thus a critical instrument in countering authoritarian influences and fostering resilient, democratic states. Academically, this research aims to enrich the study of accession Europeanization by deepening the understanding of how domestic political incentives shape the trajectory of candidate states. While scholars like Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (2012) have explored this relationship, the post-2022 geopolitical context demands renewed analysis. This thesis aspires to contribute to that gap, testing and expanding theoretical frameworks that have not yet been systematically applied to the current enlargement wave. In doing so, it seeks to offer insights not only into the academic discourse on Europeanization but also into the practical challenges of EU enlargement in an era of renewed geopolitical urgency.

The thesis is structured into three main sections. The first chapter lays the theoretical groundwork by introducing the concept of Europeanization and, more specifically, accession Europeanization as a key variable of this study. It also examines the various factors that can accelerate or impede this process, with a particular focus on the role of domestic incentives. This chapter will review existing literature and summarize previous findings on the relationship between domestic political dynamics and accession Europeanization. The second section outlines the methodological approach, detailing the research design and case selection criteria. The core of the thesis consists of three empirical chapters, each dedicated to a case study – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – examining both the degree of Europeanization achieved and the alignment of each government's domestic incentives with EU expectations. A comparative chapter will follow, synthesizing findings across the three cases to identify broader patterns and divergences. Finally, the thesis

concludes with reflections on the results, offering policy recommendations and avenues for future research. By systematically comparing these three cases, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of why broadly similar countries can experience sharply different outcomes on their paths toward EU accession.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins the research and aims to clarify the key concepts guiding the analysis. It begins with a general overview of the concept of Europeanization, outlining its various dimensions and relevance within the context of EU-third country relations. This is followed by a focused discussion of accession Europeanization, a specific form of Europeanization that occurs in the context of EU enlargement. The chapter then introduces the theory of political survival, which serves as a lens for understanding the domestic incentives influencing reform processes in the selected cases. Finally, the chapter establishes the conceptual link between accession Europeanization and domestic incentives, arguing that domestic incentives shape the extent to which governments engage with and implement EU-aligned reforms. In doing so, the chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

2.1 Concept of Europeanization

Before delving into the specific concept of accession Europeanization, it is essential to first clarify the broader notion of Europeanization itself. Despite its frequent use in academic literature, Europeanization remains an elusive concept without a universally accepted definition. At its core, it refers to the process by which a nation-state undergoes transformation to become more aligned with the European Union's institutional and normative framework. Johan P. Olsen (2002, 923-924) identifies several interpretations of Europeanization, including the geographical expansion of the EU and the development of EU-level institutions. However, the most prominent and widely accepted understanding focuses on the domestic changes prompted by the evolution of EU institutions, policies, and identities (Olsen, 2002, 932). In a similar vein, Claudio M. Radaelli (2003, 29-30) defines Europeanization as:

“Processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, identities, political structures and public policies”

Both scholars emphasize that Europeanization originates at the EU level and subsequently permeates domestic settings, reshaping both formal institutions and informal practices. In sum, Europeanization can be understood as a dynamic, multi-layered process through which domestic structures evolve under the influence of EU-generated norms, policies, and institutional practices.

Europeanization manifests across a wide spectrum of domestic arenas, encompassing not only institutional reforms but also shifts in policy practices and societal norms. Radaelli (2003, 35-36) usefully categorizes these changes into three primary domains. The first is the transformation of domestic structures, which encompasses both political and legal frameworks, including governmental institutions, intergovernmental relations, and the legal system, as well as structures of political representation such as party systems and interest group dynamics (Radaelli, 2003, 36). The second domain concerns public policy, wherein the influence of the EU can lead to the adoption of more pluralistic, consensus-oriented approaches among domestic actors, as well as shifts in policy instruments and resource allocation (Radaelli, 2003, 36). The third and perhaps most profound domain involves cognitive and normative structures – the underlying discourses, values, norms, and identities that shape political life (Radaelli, 2003, 36). Radaelli (2003) emphasizes that Europeanization extends beyond formal institutions to deeply embedded societal beliefs and practices. Johan P. Olsen (2002, 935) reinforces this view, highlighting the transformative potential of Europeanization to reshape not only policy frameworks but also national identities and collective understandings. Together, these perspectives illustrate the comprehensive nature of Europeanization: it is not confined to surface-level adaptations but permeates the very fabric of domestic political and social life, fostering alignment with EU norms across both formal and informal domains.

For Europeanization to take place, a fundamental prerequisite is the existence of divergence, or “misfit”, between domestic systems and EU-level expectations. As Tanja A. Börzel (2003, 5) argues, Europeanization is contingent upon this misalignment: without a gap between domestic and EU structures, there is no impetus for change. Moreover, the greater the misfit, the stronger the adaptational pressure exerted by the EU on the member state (Börzel, 2003, 6). Börzel (2003) distinguishes between two types of misfit. The first, policy misfit, refers to discrepancies between EU regulations and domestic policies, often manifesting as compliance deficits (Börzel, 2003, 6). This gap can generate pressure on national institutions to revise policies in line with EU standards

(Börzel, 2003, 6). The second, institutional misfit, concerns the ways EU engagement can alter domestic power dynamics – for instance, by empowering central authorities at the expense of regional actors, thus reshaping the internal balance of power (Börzel, 2003, 6). Such institutional shifts may extend beyond formal governance structures to influence national identities and the relationships among domestic stakeholders (Börzel, 2003, 6). In this way, misfit not only triggers Europeanization but also shapes its trajectory and depth. Without such discrepancies, the EU's influence would be redundant, as domestic systems would already align with its norms and structures, leaving no space or need for transformative change.

While the presence of a misfit is a necessary condition for Europeanization, it does not predetermine the extent or success of domestic transformation. The outcomes of Europeanization can range from active resistance to profound integration, depending on domestic responses to EU pressures. Tanja A. Börzel (2003, 15) identifies five potential trajectories. The most adverse outcome is retrenchment, where adaptational pressure paradoxically deepens domestic resistance, increasing rather than decreasing the misfit. Inertia represents another negative scenario, where domestic actors stall or resist change altogether (Börzel, 2003, 15; Radaelli, 2003, 37). In contrast, absorption involves the superficial adoption of EU rules without altering deeper domestic structures, resulting in only minimal Europeanization (Börzel, 2003, 15). Accommodation signifies a moderate outcome, whereby domestic institutions adjust to EU norms but retain much of their original character (Börzel, 2003, 15; Radaelli, 2003, 37). Finally, the most transformative scenario is transformation, in which deep, systemic changes occur, fundamentally reconfiguring domestic structures, policies, and normative frameworks to align with EU standards (Börzel, 2003, 15; Radaelli, 2003, 37). These diverse outcomes highlight that while EU influence is significant, domestic factors – such as political will, institutional capacity, and societal support – ultimately shape the depth and durability of Europeanization. Therefore, understanding these variations is crucial for both scholars and policymakers seeking to assess or promote EU-driven transformations.

2.2 Accession Europeanization

The phenomenon of Europeanization extends beyond the borders of the European Union, influencing not only its member states but also those aspiring to join the Union, a process referred to as accession Europeanization. As Frank Schimmelfennig (2015, 5-6) observes, although early

research on Europeanization focused primarily on member states, scholarly attention has since expanded to include non-member states. Initial studies examined so-called "quasi-member states," such as Switzerland and Norway, but the scope has grown to encompass all candidate countries seeking EU membership (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 5). While Schimmelfennig (2015) has also questioned whether Europeanization might extend to non-European countries, this thesis focuses exclusively on the Europeanization of candidate states – accession Europeanization. Fundamentally, accession Europeanization operates under similar principles to ordinary Europeanization, encouraging candidate states to align their political structures, norms, and values with those of the EU. A key distinction, however, lies in its exclusivity to countries that voluntarily seek membership. The most prominent example is the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, which experienced significant EU-driven transformations even prior to their accession in 2004 (Grabbe, 2011, 1013). These transformations were evident in public policy reforms and evolving intergovernmental relations, aligning with EU standards. As previously discussed, these domains are central to Europeanization processes. Importantly, accession Europeanization also introduces the element of conditionality, distinguishing it further from ordinary Europeanization (Grabbe, 2002, 3).

At its core, conditionality operates as a strategic incentive system, often described as a “carrot-and-stick” approach employed by the EU toward candidate states. Through this mechanism, the EU offers rewards for compliance with its demands and withholds benefits when conditions are unmet (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 8). These conditions require candidate countries to adopt EU rules, norms, and values, with incentives ranging from financial and technical assistance to eventual full membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 4). Crucially, candidate states retain the sovereign choice to either comply or not, as the EU’s leverage remains non-coercive; non-compliance merely results in the withholding of benefits rather than punitive enforcement (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 4). Thus, conditionality remains a relatively soft policy tool, relying on the attractiveness of rewards rather than mandatory compliance. Today, the Copenhagen criteria formalize this process, setting out specific accession requirements, including the establishment of a functioning democracy, a market economy, and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (Grabbe, 2011, 1015). Unlike ordinary Europeanization, where member states are legally bound to comply with EU directives and face formal sanctions for failure, candidate countries engage in a voluntary process of alignment. Compliance not only advances their

accession prospects but also initiates Europeanization well before formal membership is secured. Nonetheless, the non-coercive nature of conditionality remains a defining feature, setting accession Europeanization apart from its original counterpart.

While conditionality forms the backbone of accession Europeanization, it operates through several distinct mechanisms that enhance the EU's influence over candidate states. One of the most critical is gatekeeping, wherein the EU controls the pace and progression of accession negotiations, withholding advancement from states that fail to meet required benchmarks (Grabbe, 2011, 1020). This tactic serves as a form of political pressure, effectively incentivizing policy changes through the implicit threat of stalled accession (Grabbe, 2011, 1020). Equally important is benchmarking and monitoring, a process by which the EU continuously assesses candidates' progress and ranks them accordingly (Grabbe, 2002, 10). This not only establishes clear expectations but also promotes competition among candidates and highlights models of best practice (Grabbe, 2002, 10). Additional mechanisms include the provision of models and financial aid (Grabbe, 2002, 9-10). By supplying institutional templates and policy frameworks, the EU offers candidates practical guidance for reform, while financial and technical assistance bolster their capacity to implement necessary changes (Grabbe, 2002, 9-10). Finally, advisory support and twinning programs facilitate direct knowledge transfer, with EU officials providing on-the-ground guidance to promote cognitive convergence (Grabbe, 2002, 11). Collectively, these mechanisms reinforce the EU's soft power, enabling it to shape candidate countries' reforms through a combination of incentives, guidance, and peer benchmarking.

Beyond conditionality, socialization plays a pivotal role in accession Europeanization by fostering normative alignment between candidate states and the EU. Whereas conditionality follows the logic of consequences – rewarding compliance and penalizing deviation – socialization operates according to the logic of appropriateness (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 6-7). Under this framework, candidate states internalize EU norms and values not merely for material gain but because they come to view them as legitimate and desirable (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 7). Socialization emphasizes mutual learning and identity formation, encouraging candidate states to see themselves as part of the European community (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 7). Rather than relying solely on tangible incentives, the EU fosters shared understandings of appropriate governance practices and institutional standards (Schimmelfennig, 2015, 9). This is particularly effective in situations of

uncertainty, where candidate states seek reliable models for political and economic development. The experience of the CEE countries illustrates this dynamic well; their post-communist transitions created a fertile ground for embracing EU norms as both legitimate and aspirational (Grabbe, 2011, 1014). Socialization thus complements conditionality by embedding EU values more deeply within domestic political cultures, enhancing the sustainability of reforms beyond the moment of accession.

2.3 Drivers and obstacles of Europeanization

Success or failure in the process of Europeanization is never solely predetermined by the existence of a misfit between EU requirements and domestic structures. As discussed earlier, a significant misfit is generally a prerequisite for Europeanization to occur, as it creates the adaptational pressure necessary to trigger change. However, the magnitude of this misfit alone does not determine the outcome. Multiple factors, both institutional and political, interact to either facilitate or hinder Europeanization. For instance, even under intense adaptational pressure, states may fail to implement necessary reforms if multiple veto points are embedded within their policy-making architecture (Börzel, 2003, 9). These veto points empower a variety of domestic actors with divergent interests, and the greater the dispersion of this power, the more difficult it becomes to form a "winning coalition" capable of enacting the required reforms (Börzel, 2003, 9). Conversely, the presence of supportive institutional structures can significantly enhance Europeanization. Facilitating institutions provide domestic actors with essential material and ideational resources that help drive domestic change (Börzel, 2003, 9). Additionally, norm entrepreneurs play a crucial role by promoting new norms through processes of persuasion and social learning (Börzel, 2003, 11). A cooperative political culture further strengthens this dynamic by mitigating the obstructive effects of dispersed veto points and helping distribute the adaptational costs more equitably, thereby compensating potential "losers" of the reform process (Börzel, 2003, 11-12). Finally, timing is also critical: Europeanization tends to progress more smoothly when reforms are already underway at the domestic level (Radaelli, 2003, 47-48).

When considering accession Europeanization, while many of the aforementioned factors remain relevant, this process is also shaped by a set of unique dynamics, primarily related to the mechanism of conditionality. Conditionality represents a key distinction between accession and ordinary Europeanization, introducing additional factors exclusive to the accession

Europeanization context. Since EU conditionality operates on the principle of rewards and sanctions, the magnitude of the offered incentives plays a significant role: larger, more tangible rewards tend to increase the likelihood of compliance and successful reform (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 5). Equally important is the determinacy of conditions – candidate countries are more likely to prioritize reforms when EU expectations are explicit and unambiguous (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 5). Furthermore, the credibility of the EU’s commitments, both in terms of granting promised rewards and enforcing penalties, directly influences the success of accession Europeanization, with diminished credibility undermining the process (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 5). A significant external challenge arises from “cross-conditionality,” wherein alternative international actors offer comparable rewards coupled with less demanding conditions, potentially diverting candidate states from alignment with EU standards (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019, 6). These factors specific to accession Europeanization underscore how external incentives and clarity of expectations are essential in steering candidate states toward EU membership goals.

However, the success of accession Europeanization cannot be explained solely through the actions or strategies of the EU; domestic factors play an equally decisive role in shaping outcomes. While the previous discussion focused largely on the EU's leverage, domestic contexts can either complement or obstruct Europeanization efforts. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2019, 6) emphasize that domestic costs, both material and political, associated with implementing EU conditions are critical variables outside of Brussels' control. Börzel (2011) elaborates on this by highlighting several domestic factors that influence the trajectory of accession Europeanization. Foremost among these is state capacity: states with weak administrative or institutional capacities, or limited statehood altogether, are less able to comply with EU demands (Börzel, 2011, 11; Börzel & Risse, 2012, 201). The nature of the political regime also matters. While democratic states generally manage reforms more effectively, autocracies might paradoxically encounter fewer obstacles when enforcing compliance, as their leaders can implement changes unilaterally, although they may also resist reforms that threaten their hold on power (Börzel, 2011, 11). Power asymmetries further shape the process: candidate states possessing strategic resources can negotiate more effectively or resist EU pressures (Börzel, 2011, 11). Lastly, Börzel and Risse (2012, 198) argue that domestic incentives, which will be explored in the following chapter, are instrumental in determining whether domestic actors perceive alignment with EU norms as

beneficial. Together, these domestic dynamics demonstrate that successful accession Europeanization hinges not only on EU strategies but also on the internal capacities, interests, and power structures of candidate states.

2.4 Domestic incentives and their effect on Europeanization

The theory of domestic incentives, while underdeveloped in its original formulation, closely aligns with the more elaborated theory of political survival. Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (2012) briefly introduce domestic incentives in the context of Europeanization but do not provide a thorough conceptual framework. However, the connection to political survival theory, as developed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2005), offers a more detailed lens through which domestic incentives can be understood. Political survival theory posits that leaders prioritize maintaining their hold on power, shaping policy decisions to ensure continued support from their essential backers (de Mesquita et al., 2005). This motivation is not confined to a specific era or regime type – whether democratic or authoritarian, leaders must secure the loyalty of those who sustain them in power (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 22-24). Even well-intentioned leaders aiming to improve society cannot implement their vision without first ensuring political longevity (De Mesquita, et al., 2005, 10). As such, political survival becomes a fundamental driver of policy, where decisions are shaped not solely by ideological or normative goals but by the need to retain office. Domestic incentives, when viewed through this lens, are essentially expressions of political survival strategies. They inform how actors engage with external pressures, like those from the European Union, filtering them through internal political calculations, thus directly influencing the scope and direction of accession Europeanization process.

No leader retains power without the sustained support of a “winning coalition” or in other words selectorate, those individuals or groups who ensure the leader's political survival. This concept, central to selectorate theory, emphasizes that maintaining the loyalty of key supporters is indispensable (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 10). The nature of this coalition varies: in democracies, it often takes the form of a broad electorate, while in autocracies, it might consist of military elites, oligarchs, or party loyalists. Regardless of its composition, loyalty is maintained through the strategic distribution of benefits (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 440). These benefits must be substantial enough to outweigh those potentially offered by political rivals (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 440).

Emotional or ideological affinity also plays a role, supporters gravitate toward leaders with whom they share cultural, political, or personal identification (De Mesquita, et al., 2005, 454). If opponents offer greater perceived affinity or benefits, loyalty can shift (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 454). In democratic systems, this balancing act is particularly challenging due to the inherent skepticism and high expectations of voters (Kane, Patapan, 2012, 30). Democracies, while based on leadership, remain ideologically rooted in equality and individual freedom, making trust in leaders more fragile (Kane, Patapan, 2012, 30). Thus, political survival is not simply about wielding power but managing complex, often competing, coalitions of support. These dynamics are crucial in understanding how domestic incentives interact with external pressures, particularly in the context of accession Europeanization.

Economic performance plays a crucial role in political survival. Leaders facing economic crises often find themselves unable to maintain the level of benefit provision necessary to secure the loyalty of their selectorate. Since resources are finite, economic downturns can quickly undermine a leader's capacity to deliver goods, services, or other advantages to supporters (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 40). Even if the selectorate lacks complete information about the macroeconomic situation, they can infer a leader's competence based on the level and consistency of distributed benefits (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 448). An economic crisis may signal mismanagement or weakness, prompting supporters to withdraw their backing or seek alternatives. This risk is particularly acute in democracies, where leaders are subject to regular electoral competition and cannot as easily conceal economic decline (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 450). Moreover, leaders in democracies typically lack the personal control over state resources that autocrats might wield to reward loyalists during crises (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 450). Thus, economic instability often leads to political instability. Leaders may look externally for assistance, which creates a key opening for accession Europeanization. EU membership and the promise of economic integration can serve as both a resource strategy and a legitimation tool. Leaders facing economic pressure may align with EU conditionalities not out of normative commitment but as a means to stabilize their base and secure political survival.

External threats such as foreign intervention also pose serious risks to political survival. Even when a leader enjoys domestic stability, military aggression from external actors can topple regimes, as seen in the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein. However,

leaders facing external threats may choose to trade sovereignty for protection or resources. Some accept foreign patronage to maintain internal stability, even at the cost of autonomy (Savage, 2020, 32). Examples include Viktor Yanukovich, who accepted substantial financial support from Russia during his presidential campaign, effectively compromising Ukraine's sovereignty (Savage, 2020, 32). Similar dynamics occurred in Georgia under Shevardnadze and in Belarus under Lukashenka, where leaders aligned with stronger external actor to neutralize domestic challenges (Savage, 2020, 32). These cases reveal how foreign support, often viewed as subjugation, can actually function as a strategy for political survival. Leaders are not always passive recipients of external aggression; they may also initiate conflict. In some contexts, wars - particularly successful ones - can bolster a leader's legitimacy. Political survival theory differentiates between territorial and political war aims: the former seeks resources or symbolic value, while the latter aims to reshape a rival's regime (de Mesquita et al., 2005, 627-651). Victory in such conflicts can yield material and symbolic benefits that reinforce a leader's position. Thus, external threats and opportunities alike influence how domestic incentives shape political behavior and can interact with Europeanization efforts.

These various threats to political survival - economic crises, external aggression, or selectorate's disloyalty - illustrate how domestic incentives influence a leader's receptivity to Europeanization. Börzel and Risse (2012, 199) argue that domestic actors are central to successful Europeanization: without their willingness and capacity to implement reforms, the EU's influence remains limited. Importantly, these same domestic actors may use Europeanization instrumentally to reinforce their legitimacy (Börzel, Risse, 2012, 199; Börzel, Soyaltin, 2012, 12). By adopting EU-aligned reforms or leveraging the promise of accession, leaders can justify unpopular policies, disarm opposition, or secure elite and public support (Börzel, Risse, 2012; Börzel, Soyaltin, 2012). While benefits are often material, they can also be ideological or symbolic. For instance, when leaders campaign on EU integration, the public may perceive accession itself as the primary benefit. Failure to deliver progress toward EU membership could lead to a legitimacy crisis. In this context, accession Europeanization becomes both a means and an end: it provides leaders with resources, legitimacy, and external validation, while simultaneously demanding compliance with EU norms. The interdependence between domestic incentives and EU-driven reform processes explains why

accession Europeanization succeeds in some cases but not others. Political will, rooted in survival calculus, remains a decisive factor.

In addition to legitimacy and policy alignment, EU membership offers leaders tangible economic and security benefits that can support political survival. Financial aid, trade integration, and access to the EU's single market can help avert or mitigate economic crises. Leaders in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, capitalized on these benefits to stabilize their economies and secure public support (Maliszewska, 2004, 7). However, these rewards are conditional, requiring alignment with EU norms and policies, thus triggering accession Europeanization. This symbiosis allows domestic actors to use the EU to serve their interests while advancing the Union's transformative agenda. Yet, not all leaders embrace this path. In cases where deeper EU ties risk alienating economically or politically vital partners, leaders may opt out. Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead of pursuing EU integration exemplifies this logic. The calculus is straightforward: when the cost of Europeanization outweighs its benefits, leaders act accordingly. Domestic incentives, therefore, not only drive accession Europeanization but also determine its limits. This highlights the contextual and contingent nature of the process, shaped by strategic decisions rooted in political survival.

Security considerations further complicate the relationship between domestic incentives and Europeanization. While the EU offers economic and normative power, its military capabilities are limited. Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union outlines a mutual defense clause, but it lacks the operational strength of NATO. Nonetheless, some leaders have pursued EU membership as part of a broader security strategy. The Baltic states, for example, regarded EU accession as a crucial element of their national defense posture (Piotrowski, 2018, 66). Conversely, when EU alignment provokes security threats from other actors, leaders may reconsider. A prominent case is Viktor Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU following intense pressure from Russia. Fear of retaliation can outweigh the perceived security or legitimacy benefits of integration. Thus, security, as both a threat and a benefit, interacts with domestic incentives in complex ways, influencing leaders' decisions about Europeanization. These decisions are not always ideological; they are strategic, shaped by leaders' evaluations of how external alignments affect their hold on power.

A compelling example of the dynamic interplay between domestic incentives and accession Europeanization is Turkey's trajectory from Europeanization to de-Europeanization. Following its recognition as an official EU candidate in 1999, Turkey came under significant adaptational pressure, prompting a period of rapid accession-related reforms (Börzel & Soyaltin, 2012, 13). The prospect of EU membership also bolstered pro-reform and pro-European actors, most notably the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), which secured a decisive electoral victory in 2002 on a pro-EU platform, succeeding a more Eurosceptic coalition (Yilmaz, 2016, 89). The EU's endorsement lent the AKP substantial legitimacy, enabling it to overcome skepticism about its Islamist background and push through key reforms, despite opposition from entrenched veto players (Börzel & Soyaltin, 2012, 13; Yilmaz, 2016, 93). While the 1999-2004 period of Europeanization can largely be attributed to strong conditionality and adaptational pressure, the post-2005 phase highlights the growing importance of domestic incentives. After 2005, the EU's signals regarding Turkey's membership prospects became increasingly ambiguous, undermining the credibility of conditionality and weakening the EU's leverage (Yilmaz, 2016, 90). Nonetheless, accession Europeanization persisted, albeit selectively, because the AKP's political legitimacy continued to hinge on a pro-European and reformist narrative (Yilmaz, 2016, 91-93). As Börzel and Soyaltin (2012, 16) argue, post-2005 reforms were driven more by the AKP's domestic incentives to consolidate power than by EU incentives, demonstrating that accession Europeanization is most effective when domestic incentives align with EU demands.

As the AKP government's domestic incentives shifted away from alignment with the European Union, the process of accession Europeanization began to stagnate and eventually gave way to de-Europeanization. Until 2011, the AKP maintained a strategy of selective Europeanization, driven by the need to retain political legitimacy through a reformist agenda (Yilmaz, 2016, 94). During the 2011-2014 period, although some selective reforms continued and the AKP won an absolute majority in the 2011 elections, its legitimacy was no longer rooted in the promise of EU membership, but rather in its own narrative of democratic reform (Yilmaz, 2016, 94). Simultaneously, the first signs of de-Europeanization emerged, such as the failed 2012 attempt to restrict abortion and increasing constraints on freedom of the press and expression (Yilmaz, 2016, 94-95). These shifts became possible because the AKP no longer required EU support to legitimize its rule; secularist forces had been significantly weakened, removing a key source of domestic

opposition (Yilmaz, 2016, 97). This allowed the government to gradually reverse earlier reforms, initiating a clear de-Europeanization trajectory (Yilmaz, 2016, p. 97). Over time, this process accelerated, culminating in the AKP's authoritarian turn. Today, it is difficult to reconcile the party's current stance with its earlier pro-EU posture. The Turkish case thus illustrates how the alignment, or lack thereof, between domestic incentives and EU demands can significantly shape the trajectory of accession Europeanization.

In sum, the Turkish experience reveals that domestic incentives are a decisive factor in the success or failure of accession Europeanization. Although declining EU credibility might have contributed to Turkey's turn away from reform, the primary driver of de-Europeanization was the AKP's changing political strategy. Early in its rule, the party's Islamist roots created a legitimacy gap in secular Turkey. EU-aligned reforms helped fill that gap, weakening secular institutions under the guise of democratization. Once this objective was achieved, and the secular opposition was marginalized, the AKP no longer needed the EU to justify its rule. This shift illustrates the instrumental use of Europeanization by domestic actors seeking political survival. The Turkish case thus highlights both the power and the limitations of EU conditionality: it is most effective when it aligns with domestic agendas. Similar patterns might be expected to be observed in other countries, such as Georgia, where initial alignment with EU demands has weakened in recent years. Differences between Georgia and Ukraine and Moldova may be partially explained by divergent domestic incentives. Ultimately, accession Europeanization is not a linear or exclusively externally imposed process, it is deeply embedded in the strategic choices of domestic political actors.

3. Research design, data and methods

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the thesis. Its primary aim is to clarify the rationale behind the selection of cases, as well as the data sources and analytical methods employed in the study in order to ensure transparency and replicability. The chapter begins with a justification of the case selection, demonstrating why Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were chosen as the focus of analysis. It then proceeds to explain the operationalization and measurement of the dependent and independent variables, detailing the indicators used to assess both accession Europeanization and domestic incentives. Finally, the chapter presents the data sources used for empirical analysis, specifying the types of documents, datasets, and polling instruments that inform the research.

3.1 Research design

Figure 1 presents an arrow diagram designed to illustrate the relationship between the independent and dependent variables of this thesis. The dependent variable is accession Europeanization, operationalized through three key indicators: democracy, rule of law, and market economy. The independent variable is domestic incentives, measured by three components: support from the selectorate, economic interdependence, and perceptions of external threats. The central hypothesis of this thesis is that alignment between a government's domestic incentives and the European Union increases the likelihood of successful accession Europeanization. Conversely, misalignment between domestic incentives and the EU will hinder the process, potentially leading to stagnation or even de-Europeanization. The greater the alignment, the greater the chances for successful accession Europeanization to occur. The purpose of this thesis is to test this hypothesis through a comparative analysis of the Association Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – by examining how each state's domestic incentives have either facilitated or obstructed progress in accession Europeanization. It is expected that countries where the government's domestic incentives are aligned with EU norms will demonstrate more substantial progress in democratic reforms, legal alignment, and economic liberalization. In contrast, in cases where domestic incentives diverge from the EU, the accession process is likely to falter or regress.

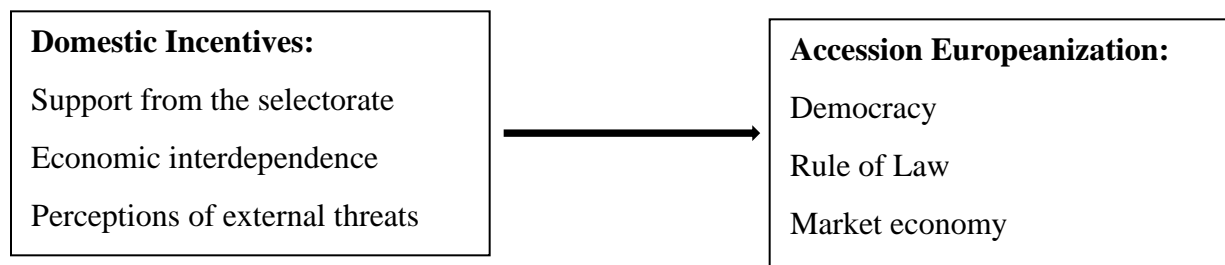


Figure 1 Arrow diagram

3.2 Case selection

This research employs a cross-case comparison based on the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) framework. MSSD involves selecting cases that are similar in many respects but differ in one crucial factor that leads to divergent outcomes (Meckstroth, 1975, 132-133). The cases selected for this analysis are Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – collectively referred to as the Association Trio. These states were chosen due to their broadly similar paths of Europeanization, shared post-Soviet historical legacies, and comparable institutional relationships with the European Union. Despite these similarities, recent developments in Georgia diverge significantly from the trajectories observed in Ukraine and Moldova. All three countries share a common history of Soviet occupation, followed by declarations of independence in 1991. This common background not only influences their post-Soviet political identities but also exposes them to similar international biases and structural challenges. Furthermore, each of the three has been recognized as a partially free regime and is frequently described as among the most democratic post-Soviet states, excluding the Baltic countries (Way, 2022, 131). Thus, they constitute ideal cases for MSSD-based comparison: highly similar in background, regime type, and international integration paths, yet with notable divergence in political outcomes – particularly in Georgia’s recent illiberal turn.

Another common feature among the three countries is the presence of unresolved territorial conflicts, which significantly affect their political development and foreign policy orientations. Ukraine has been engaged in armed conflict with Russia since 2014, initially through the annexation of Crimea and the support of separatist forces in Donbas, escalating into a full-scale

invasion in 2022. Moldova experienced an armed conflict between 1990 and 1992 over the breakaway region of Transnistria, which remains outside the central government's control and continues to host Russian military forces in defiance of Moldova's sovereignty. Georgia similarly endured violent conflicts with Russian-backed separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in the early 1990s and again during the 2008 war with Russia. These regions remain effectively under Russian control, serving as platforms for continued influence and disruption. The enduring presence of these frozen or active conflicts undermines state sovereignty and shapes the domestic political discourse in all three countries. As such, territorial integrity remains a key issue for the Association Trio, further reinforcing their similarity as cases grappling with external aggression and internal fragmentation, factors that simultaneously hinder and propel their EU integration agendas.

In terms of institutional engagement with the European Union, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have followed remarkably parallel trajectories. All three joined the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) at its inception in 2009 and have been consistently characterized as the EaP's "avant-garde" states (Sydoruk & Tyshchenko, 2018, 213-214). On 27 June 2014, each of them signed an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, followed by swift ratification processes (Petrov, 2016, 153). These agreements are comprehensive in scope, encompassing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), convergence in foreign and security policy, and cooperation on justice, freedom, and security (Petrov, 2016, 153-155). Importantly, the AAs also contain stringent conditionality clauses, requiring alignment with EU standards in areas such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law (Petrov, 2016, 156). Thus, their formal relationships with the EU are not only long-standing but also substantive, involving both incentives and constraints. These shared institutional arrangements further justify their selection for comparative analysis, as they have been subject to equivalent external incentives and expectations. However, the variation in how each state responds to these incentives, particularly in light of their domestic political dynamics, offers a valuable opportunity to understand the mechanisms of accession Europeanization.

The timeframe of this research spans from 2016 to 2024, with minor variations across cases depending on the onset of single-party rule. The uniform end date of 2024 reflects the latest available data at the time of writing. For Ukraine, the research period begins in 2019, when Volodymyr Zelensky and his Servant of the People (SoP) party secured both the presidency and

an absolute parliamentary majority. Moldova's relevant period begins in 2021, marked by the electoral victory of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), led by Maia Sandu, which obtained a parliamentary majority after Sandu had won the presidency the previous year. In Georgia, the timeframe is 2016-2024, covering the continued dominance of the Georgian Dream (GD) party, which secured absolute majorities in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. This temporal framing allows the research to assess the relationship between government composition and reform progress under both AA and candidate state frameworks. The use of a uniform criterion, uninterrupted single-party rule, ensures analytical consistency while capturing the variation in reform trajectories and political will among the cases. It also allows for a more precise understanding of how domestic incentives mediate the implementation of EU-aligned reforms in each country.

Although all three governing parties can be classified as populist to varying degrees, there are important distinctions in their ideological orientation and reform agendas. Ukraine's Servant of the People party, led by Zelensky, emerged as a valence populist force, eschewing traditional left-right categorizations in favor of an anti-corruption and anti-elite message (Yanchenko & Zulianello, 2024, 272-273). Its platform emphasized a clear break with the political past and championed modernization and reform (Place, 2020). Similarly, Moldova's PAS, under Maia Sandu, ran on a message of anti-corruption and institutional renewal, framing its campaign as a battle between "good people" and a "corrupt elite" (Moisé, 2021, 13). The party is broadly pro-European and liberal-reformist in orientation, distinguishing it from more ideologically ambiguous or nationalist forms of populism (Moisé, 2021, 16-17). In contrast, Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, while initially a center-left party aligned with the Party of European Socialists, has increasingly embraced nativist and anti-liberal rhetoric (Gordadze, 2024). According to Gordadze (2024), the party has undergone a transformation into a far-right, obscurantist populist movement. This ideological divergence is central to understanding the recent democratic backsliding in Georgia, which contrasts sharply with the reformist trajectories of Ukraine and Moldova. Therefore, while populism is a common feature among the three cases, only in Ukraine and Moldova has it been coupled with a genuine commitment to liberal reform and EU integration.

Table 1 Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as most similar systems

	Recent history	Territories outside of government's control	Time in active war	Eastern Partnership	Association agreement effective since...	Domestic incentives of the government	Accession Europeanization
Ukraine	Post-soviet	20% (including Crimea and parts of some Southern and Eastern oblasts)	2014-...	Member	2017	EU alignment (2019-2024)	High
Moldova	Post-soviet	Transnistria	1990-1992	Member	2016	EU alignment (2021-2024)	Medium
Georgia	Post-soviet	Abkhazia, South Ossetia	1991-1993 2008	Member	2016	EU alignment (2016-2021); No EU alignment (2022-2024)	Medium (2016-2021); De-Europeanization (2022-2024)

3.3 Data and methods

Accession Europeanization in this thesis is assessed through three main indicators, two of which are further divided into sub-indicators. These indicators are inspired by the Copenhagen Criteria, which evaluate a candidate country's commitment to democracy, a functioning market economy, and the capacity to adopt and implement the EU's *acquis communautaire*. However, since this research also focuses on the period before the selected states received official candidate status, the *acquis* criterion is replaced with a detailed examination of the rule of law. During this pre-candidacy period, democracy and the market economy were constantly assessed under the Association Agreements (AAs). The European Commission officially conducted these assessments on an annual basis. However, there was no comprehensive evaluation of *acquis* alignment. In contrast, rule of law assessments remained consistent throughout the entire period. The democracy indicator is broken down into five sub-indicators: elections, human rights, media freedom, civil society, and public administration. The rule of law is divided into three sub-

indicators: judiciary reform, anti-corruption efforts, and the fight against organized crime. The degree of accession Europeanization will be determined by identifying relevant reforms in these areas. The evaluation will consider not only the number and depth of these reforms but also the European Union's reactions to them, which is expressed in qualitative way. This approach ensures a nuanced understanding of how closely each state aligned itself with EU norms and values during the years under review.

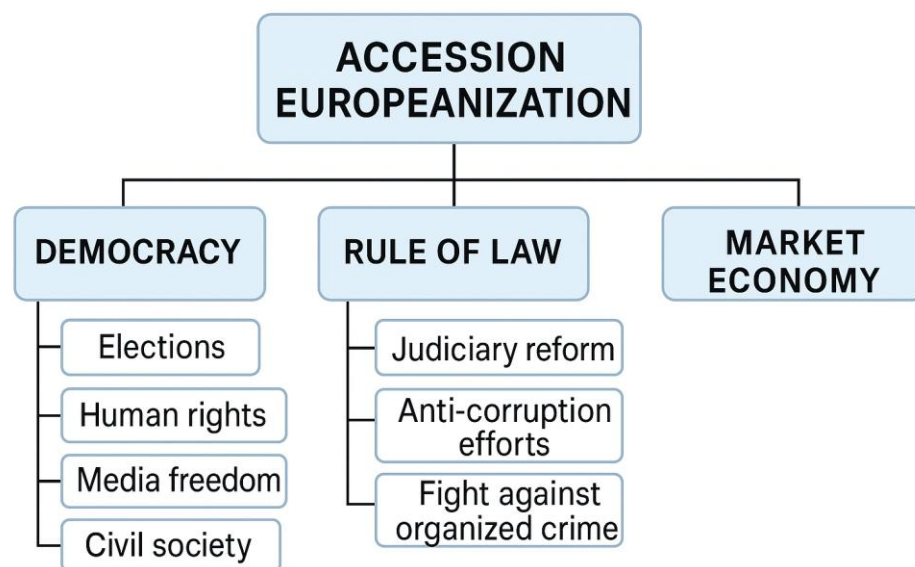


Figure 2 Accession Europeanization indicators

Domestic incentives will also be evaluated using three core indicators: support from the selectorate, economic interdependence, and external threat perception. As outlined in the theoretical chapter, these factors shape the domestic incentives of all governments. Given that all three cases – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – are classified as hybrid or partly free regimes, the selectorate in each case will be understood as the general electorate. Consequently, public opinion polling will serve as the main data source for measuring popular support for EU accession. High levels of support for EU integration and positive attitudes towards the EU are interpreted as generating incentives for governments to pursue EU-aligned reforms. Secondly, the degree of trade interdependence with the EU will be analyzed to determine whether economic considerations encourage closer integration. A higher reliance on EU trade suggests stronger domestic incentives for aligning with EU norms. Finally, government perceptions of external threats will be examined

through official communications and policy documents. Whether these threats reinforce or undermine EU alignment depends on how governments interpret them. If the EU is perceived as a security partner, then external threats, especially those originating from Russia, can reinforce pro-EU incentives. Given Russia's longstanding interference in the region, all three indicators - public attitudes toward Russia, trade ties with Russia, and official threat perceptions - will be included to assess the countervailing influence of Russian pressure on domestic incentives.

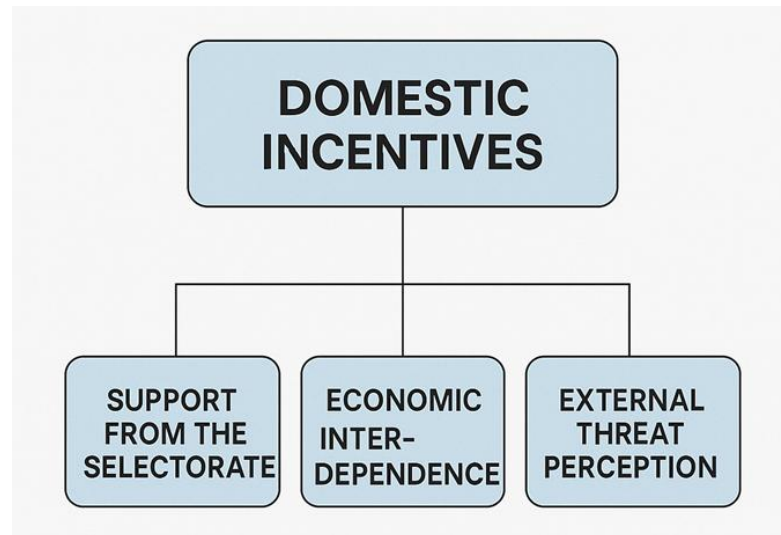


Figure 3 Domestic incentives indicators

The measurement of accession Europeanization relies on official, publicly available documents issued by the European Commission. The most relevant sources are the Association Implementation Reports and the European Commission Opinions and Reports on Candidate Countries (European Commission, 2016-2024). The former are used to assess progress before a country attains candidate status, while the latter apply once candidacy is granted. These documents are published annually and provide comprehensive evaluations of each country's progress on democracy, the rule of law, and market economy reforms. This means that those documents cover the whole timeframe for each individual case. Crucially, they also offer insight into the EU's official reactions to national reforms, making them a key indicator of how closely domestic changes align with EU expectations. The reports are detailed and systematic, enabling a consistent cross-case comparison over time. The assessments presented in those documents are done in clearly qualitative way, with no or very little use of quantitative data. Their use in this thesis allows for both qualitative and comparative assessments, ensuring analytical rigor and objectivity.

Moreover, the structure of these documents mirrors the sub-indicators used in this study, allowing for direct extraction and comparison of relevant information. As such, these Commission reports serve not only as primary sources for evaluating reform progress but also as reliable proxies for EU approval or disapproval, which is central to assessing the degree of accession Europeanization.

To evaluate domestic incentives, three types of data sources will be employed. First, public opinion polls will be analyzed to capture popular attitudes toward the EU, Russia, and relevant international issues. For Ukraine and Georgia, this thesis will rely on annual surveys conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which employ robust methodologies, including face-to-face and telephone interviews, with samples typically ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 respondents (NDI, 2016-2024). These polls are especially useful when they distinguish between general public opinion and the preferences of ruling party supporters. In the case of Moldova, where NDI data is unavailable, surveys by the Center for Insights in Survey Research will be used, with samples of approximately 1,000 to 2,000 respondents (CISR, 2021-2024). Second, economic interdependence will be measured using trade data. For trade with the EU, official statistics from the Directorate-General for Trade will be used; for trade with Russia, data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) will be analyzed (OEC, 2025). This will help assess the extent to which economic ties influence alignment choices. Finally, national security strategies will be studied to understand how governments perceive external threats. In cases where official documents are unavailable, public statements and policy communications will serve as proxies for governmental threat perception.

The indicators and data outlined above will be used to test the central hypothesis of this thesis: that the alignment of a government's domestic incentives with the European Union significantly influences the success or failure of the accession Europeanization process. Specifically, the hypothesis posits that states with populations that strongly support the EU and accession, a high degree of economic dependence on the EU, and perceptions of the EU as a source of security are more likely to have governments whose domestic incentives are aligned with EU norms and demands. This alignment is expected to result in successful accession Europeanization, marked by substantial democratization, the strengthening of the rule of law, and the liberalization of the market economy. Conversely, misalignment of domestic incentives is likely to lead to stagnation or even reversal of the Europeanization process. Such misalignment may occur when public

support for the EU is weak or when there is significant support for alternative alignments – in the context of this thesis, toward Russia. It may also arise from low levels of trade dependence on the EU, coupled with high dependence on alternative partners, or from perceptions of the EU as an external threat. In such cases, the outcome is expected to be the stagnation or backsliding of reforms related to democracy, rule of law, and market economy, core components of accession Europeanization.

4. Empirical Analysis

This chapter presents the core empirical analysis of the thesis. It examines each of the three selected cases – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – followed by a comparative assessment. The analysis of each case is divided into two main sections: the first focuses on accession Europeanization, while the second examines the domestic incentives driving governmental behavior. The primary objective of this chapter is to assess the extent of accession Europeanization in each case and to evaluate the domestic incentives behind the reform trajectories observed. Through this dual analysis, the chapter aims to test the hypothesized relationship between the two central variables – accession Europeanization and domestic incentives – and to determine whether a link exists between them.

4.1 The case of Ukraine

4.1.1 Accession Europeanization in Ukraine

Starting with developments in the democratic field before 2022, EU evaluations demonstrate that Ukraine made tangible progress, despite persisting challenges. The 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as the 2020 local elections, were all deemed free and fair by the European Commission, although some irregularities were noted, particularly in the parliamentary and local elections (EC(a), 2019, 3; EC(a), 2020, 4). A key milestone was the adoption of a new Electoral Code in 2019, praised by the EU for expanding voting rights to internally displaced persons (IDPs), enhancing gender representation, and improving accessibility for people with disabilities (EC(a), 2020, 4). Ukraine continued refining its electoral framework and adopted a law on national referenda in 2021 (EC(a), 2022, 3). In terms of human rights, Ukraine made progress by criminalizing domestic violence, improving the rights of IDPs, and passing a 2021 law on Indigenous peoples, however, serious gaps remained, such as poor treatment of Roma communities and the failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention and the Rome Statute of the ICC (EC(a), 2019, 5; EC(a), 2020, 6; EC(a), 2022, 4-5). The media landscape was broadly free, but threats against journalists and outdated audio-visual legislation were recurring issues (EC(a), 2019, 5; EC(a), 2020, 6; EC(a), 2022, 5). On a more positive note, the EU consistently acknowledged active civil

society engagement, decentralization reforms, progress in public administration reform, and a strong record in digital transformation (EC(a), 2019, 3, 5-6; EC(a), 2020, 4, 7; EC(a), 2022, 5-6).

In the field of rule of law, Ukraine also achieved considerable progress, though not without setbacks. Most notably, Ukraine intensified its anti-corruption efforts. The establishment of the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC) in 2019, alongside the work of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), created a robust institutional triad that steadily built a successful record of prosecuting high-level corruption (EC(a), 2019, 8-9; EC(a), 2020, 9; EC(a), 2022, 8). The 2021 amendment to NABU's legal framework improved the agency's independence by introducing a transparent mechanism for appointing its director (EC(a), 2022, 8). Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine (CCU) obstructed some key anti-corruption laws, underlining the urgent need for judicial reform, an area where parliamentary efforts fell short before 2022 (EC(a), 2019, 9; EC(a), 2020, 11; EC(a), 2022, 8). Ukraine pursued judicial reforms, including two key laws passed in 2021 and the adoption of whistleblower protection legislation (EC(a), 2019, 10; EC(a), 2022, 8). Significant developments were also seen in the fight against organized crime, with a new law adopted in 2020 and a follow-up law in 2021 clarifying the powers of law enforcement agencies (EC(a), 2022, 9). The 2020 Law on Intelligence Services introduced much-needed civilian oversight (EC(a), 2020, 12), representing a marked improvement from earlier years when legal gaps were frequently criticized by the EU (EC(a), 2019, 11; EC(a), 2020, 12).

In terms of economic alignment, Ukraine took several important steps toward bringing its policies closer to EU standards, though results were mixed. Positive developments included alignment with EU customs regulations and the deregulation of outdated economic practices (EC(a), 2019, 13). The long-awaited land market reform in 2020, which lifted the ban on farmland sales, was a significant breakthrough (EC(a), 2020, 15). Ukraine also made progress in strengthening its system of geographical indications, advancing small-scale privatization, and drafting legislation for better governance of state-owned enterprises (EC(a), 2020, 17; EC(a), 2022, 10-12). The EU noted gradual improvements in public procurement and intellectual property rights (EC(a), 2020, 19), and Ukraine introduced policies on waste management and genetically modified organisms that aligned with EU directives (EC(a), 2020, 21; EC(a), 2022, 10). However, the implementation of consumer protection and labor reforms lagged, as did reforms in capital markets (EC(a), 2019, 14;

EC(a), 2022, 12). Moreover, the EU repeatedly criticized Ukraine's ongoing ban on unprocessed timber exports, viewing it as incompatible with free-market principles (EC(a), 2019, 16). Overall, Ukraine showed a commitment to market-oriented reforms, but gaps in implementation and protectionist measures undermined its progress in this area.

Despite the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has maintained a remarkable pace of reforms, defying expectations of stagnation. In the realm of democracy, although elections could not be held due to martial law, efforts to improve the electoral system persisted (EC(a), 2023, 12; EC(a), 2024, 22). Human rights protections also remained robust. In 2022, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention, a major milestone, and made notable progress in implementing its 2021-2023 human rights strategy (EC(a), 2023, 39). Legislative improvements included updates to laws on torture prevention, antisemitism, and hate speech (EC(a), 2023, 40, 42, 47). Ukraine also advanced toward ratification of the Rome Statute and overhauled its legislation on national minorities, establishing the Council of National Minorities in 2023 (EC(a), 2024, 36, 42-43). While the situation of the Roma population remained problematic, the introduction of a Roma integration action plan with allocated funding marked progress (EC(a), 2024, 43). Media freedom remained broadly respected despite wartime pressures (EC(a), 2023, 43; EC(a), 2024, 39). While the EU criticized the 2022 consolidation of national television into a single broadcast for expanding government control, the adoption of a roadmap in 2024 aimed at restoring pluralistic and independent media addressed this concern (EC(a), 2023, 44; EC(a), 2024, 39). Transparency in public governance was reduced under martial law, but steps to restore it post-war have been initiated, including the reinstatement of NACP oversight over party finances in 2023 (EC(a), 2024, 23). Civil society remained resilient and actively engaged throughout the wartime period (EC(a), 2023, 15; EC(a), 2024, 24).

Among all sectors, the rule of law has seen the most substantial wartime progress, especially in judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts. The Constitutional Court of Ukraine (CCU) reform, long viewed as a bottleneck, was initiated just prior to the full-scale invasion and advanced significantly with follow-up amendments in 2023 (EC(a), 2023, 21). Parallel to this, the restructuring of two key judicial bodies, the High Council of Justice (HCJ) and the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ), was implemented (EC(a), 2023, 20). These efforts were complemented by improvements in the legal framework for judicial appointments and the

adoption of measures to enhance court efficiency in 2023 (EC(a), 2024, 32). The High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC) maintained its operational capacity and continued building an increasingly robust case record despite wartime challenges (EC(a), 2023, 32; EC(a), 2024, 34). Further progress included the establishment of a unified whistleblower portal by the NACP and the adoption of a lobbying regulation law in 2024 (EC(a), 2024, 35-36). However, the implementation of the so-called oligarch law, enacted in 2022, has faced persistent obstacles (EC(a), 2023, 37). In terms of organized crime, Ukraine updated its anti-money laundering legislation and adopted a law enforcement reform plan (EC(a), 2024, 44). Nonetheless, structural issues remain, including the absence of a comprehensive civilian firearms law and a permanent national coordination body on organized crime (EC(a), 2024, 44-45). These mixed results suggest that while progress has continued, deeper structural challenges persist in this domain.

In the economic field, Ukraine has sustained its orientation toward EU-aligned reforms despite war-induced distortions. The conflict has necessitated a more active role for the state in managing the economy, but this has not entirely halted liberalization efforts (EC(a), 2023, 76; EC(a), 2024, 55). In 2022, legislation simplifying small-scale privatizations was passed, followed by a 2023 law that resumed large-scale privatizations after years of delay (EC(a), 2023, 76). These moves were reinforced by the reintroduction of market principles in 2023 and the adoption of a comprehensive economic reform roadmap for 2024-2027 (EC(a), 2024, 51-52). Another major milestone was the passage of the 2024 law on the corporate governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aligning Ukraine's legal framework more closely with OECD Guidelines (EC(a), 2024, 55). These steps underscore Ukraine's continued ambition to deepen its market economy, despite ongoing war-related challenges. That said, the war has also resulted in increased government intervention, complicating the reform environment (EC(a), 2023, 76; EC(a), 2024, 55). While some areas such as consumer protection and capital market reforms remain underdeveloped, Ukraine's demonstrated commitment to economic transformation amid the crisis reflects a high level of policy resilience and alignment with EU expectations.

Overall, Ukraine has demonstrated significant progress in implementing reforms both prior to and during the period of Russia's full-scale invasion. Despite the immense challenges posed by the war, the country continued advancing its reform agenda across key sectors. Notably, Ukraine reformed its Electoral Code, introduced robust anti-corruption mechanisms, strengthened its legal

framework to combat organized crime, and undertook substantial judicial reforms. In parallel, it also aligned its economic policies more closely with EU standards, including through privatization initiatives, improved corporate governance of state-owned enterprises, and the adoption of comprehensive economic reform strategies. Crucially, these reforms were not only adopted in times of peace but were also sustained and, in some cases, accelerated during wartime, a testament to the country's strategic commitment to European integration. In particular, the reform of the Constitutional Court and continued anti-corruption efforts during wartime highlight Ukraine's determination to meet EU standards. Taken together, the range and continuity of reforms in the fields of democracy, rule of law, and market economy clearly demonstrate that Ukraine has undergone a high level of accession Europeanization between 2019 and 2024. This process reflects Ukraine's growing alignment with EU norms, values, and institutional frameworks, positioning it as a credible candidate for future membership.

4.1.2 Domestic incentives of the Ukrainian government (2019-2024)

In the period prior to the 2022 full-scale invasion, Ukrainian public opinion toward the European Union was positive. Polling data indicates that Ukrainians not only recognized the EU's influence on the country but generally viewed it favorably. In 2019, 31% of respondents believed that the EU had a strong influence on Ukraine, while an additional 44% believed it had at least some influence (NDI(a), 2019, 33). Importantly, 50% of respondents assessed this influence as positive, compared to only 21% who viewed it negatively; the remaining respondents were either undecided or saw the EU's influence as neutral (NDI(a), 2019, 33). By 2021, although overall perceptions of the EU's influence remained high, 34% said it had a lot of influence and 44% some influence, attitudes toward this influence had shifted (NDI(a), 2021). The proportion of respondents who viewed the EU's influence positively declined to 28%, while negative views also fell slightly to 19% (NDI(a), 2021). Notably, the number of respondents who perceived the EU's influence as neutral increased significantly to 44% (NDI(a), 2021). When asked whether closer ties with the EU posed a threat to Ukraine, the majority rejected this idea, with 58% in 2019 and 52% in 2021 answering negatively (NDI(a), 2019, 29; NDI(a), 2021). These figures suggest that, despite some fluctuation in attitudes, Ukrainians continued to see the EU as an influential and largely beneficial partner.

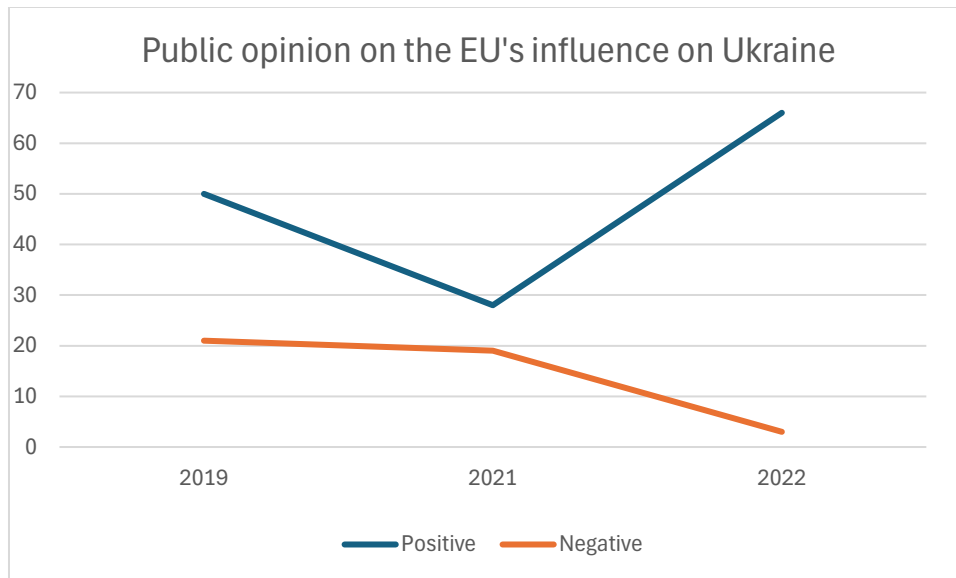


Figure 4 Trends in perceptions of EU influence on Ukraine

Source: NDI(a), 2019; NDI(a), 2021; NDI(a), 2022

In contrast to generally positive views of the EU, Ukrainian public opinion toward Russia in the pre-2022 period was predominantly negative, which is unsurprising given Russia’s annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in Donbas. While Ukrainians acknowledged Russia’s influence, they overwhelmingly viewed it unfavorably. In 2019, 48% of respondents stated that Russia had a lot of influence on Ukraine’s future, with an additional 32% saying it had some influence (NDI(a), 2019, 33). However, 73% of respondents described this influence as negative, while only 6% considered it positive (NDI(a), 2019, 33). This pattern persisted in 2021: 77% still believed Russia had a lot or some influence, but 70% viewed that influence negatively and only 4% positively (NDI(a), 2021). When asked about threat perceptions, Ukrainians again showed strong concern about Russia. In 2019, 82% saw Russian military aggression as either a big (58%) or somewhat of a threat (24%), while 28% considered moving closer to Russia a big threat and another 29% saw it as somewhat of a threat (NDI(a), 2019, 29). Although 29% did not see closer ties with Russia as threatening, this likely reflects more pro-Russian sentiment in the eastern and southern regions. By 2021, perceptions had hardened: 60% saw Russian military aggression as a big threat and 24% as a moderate threat, while 36% considered closer ties a big threat and 27% a moderate one (NDI(a), 2021). These results highlight that while Russia’s influence was widely recognized, it was overwhelmingly perceived as hostile.

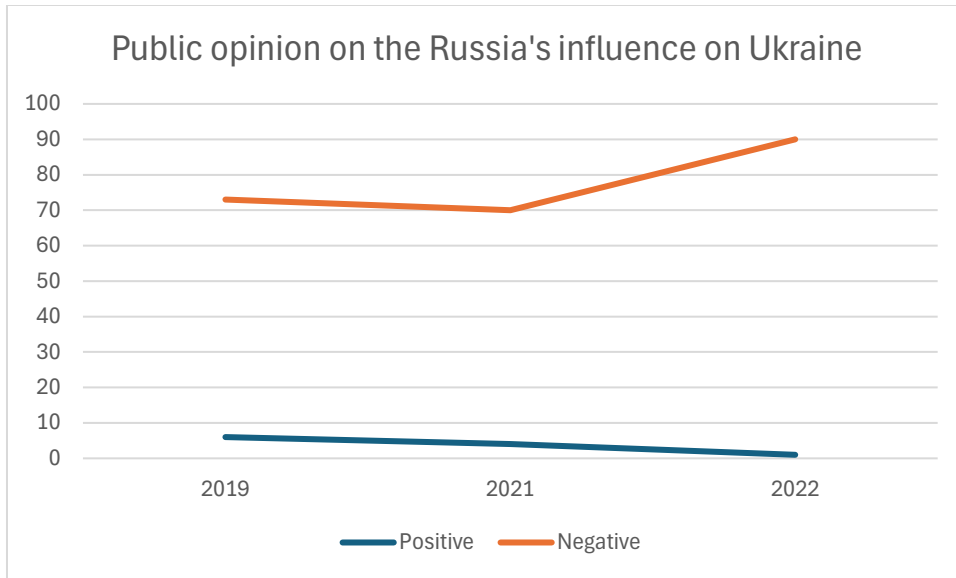


Figure 5 Trends in perceptions of Russia influence on Ukraine

Source: NDI(a), 2019; NDI(a), 2021; NDI(a), 2022

When it comes to the salience of EU accession in the pre-2022 period, public opinion polls present a somewhat mixed picture. Although EU membership was not among the most pressing concerns for Ukrainians compared to domestic issues, the population consistently demonstrated a strong willingness to join the Union and a clear preference for the EU over the Russian-led Customs Union. In 2020, 50% of respondents considered EU accession important for themselves and their families, while 30% regarded it as unimportant (NDI(a), 2020). Although 50% is a significant proportion, it pales in comparison to issues like healthcare, prices, and employment, each of which ranked above 90% (NDI(a), 2020). A similar pattern emerged in 2021, with EU accession ranked well below economic and social concerns in issue salience (NDI(a), 2021). Nevertheless, support for EU membership remained robust. In 2019, about 60% of Ukrainians expressed a desire to join the EU, with roughly 50% believing accession could occur by 2030 (NDI(a), 2019, 30). By 2021, willingness to join remained at around 60%, though the percentage expecting accession by 2030 dropped to about 40% (NDI(a), 2021). Regional variation persisted: support was highest in the western (83%) and central/northern (62%) regions, and lowest in the south (39%) and east (37%) (NDI(a), 2019, 31). Meanwhile, support for joining the Russian Customs Union remained low, at just 20% in 2019 and 12% in 2021 (NDI(a), 2019, 30; NDI(a), 2021). These trends underscore a clear national preference for EU integration despite varying levels of issue salience.

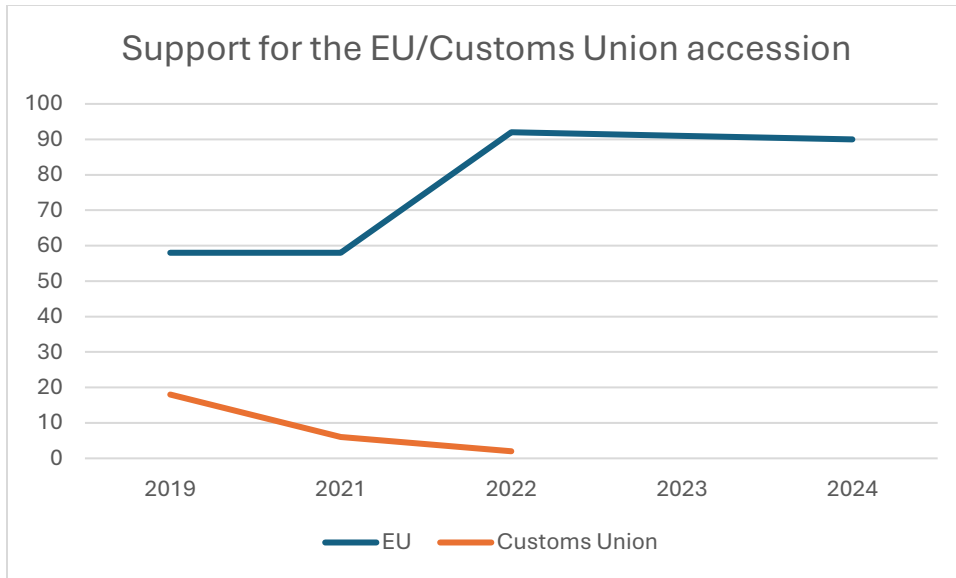


Figure 6 Public support for EU and Russia-led Customs Union accession in Ukraine

Source: NDI(a), 2019; NDI(a), 2021; NDI(a), 2022; NDI(a) 2023; NDI(a), 2024

The outbreak of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a dramatic shift in public opinion, marked by a sharp rise in positive attitudes toward the EU and a near-total collapse in favorable views of Russia. A crisis of such magnitude was bound to alter public perceptions, and polling data confirms this shift. According to the 2022 NDI poll, 78% of Ukrainians believed the EU had either a lot (50%) or some (28%) influence on Ukraine’s future, with an overwhelming 66% viewing this influence as positive and only 3% as negative (NDI(a), 2022). This reflects a significant increase in positive sentiment compared to both 2019 and especially 2021. In stark contrast, only 37% of respondents stated that Russia had any influence, 26% said “a lot” and 11% “some”, while a striking 90% evaluated that influence negatively and just 1% positively (NDI(a), 2022). These numbers reflect a complete collapse in Ukrainians’ perception of Russia, which had already been deteriorating since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas. Moreover, Ukrainians have demonstrated a consistent unwillingness to compromise on EU aspirations. In 2022, 2023, and 2024, approximately 70% of respondents rejected the idea of renouncing EU membership in exchange for peace, with around 55% considering it completely unacceptable and another 20% viewing it as somewhat unacceptable (NDI(a), 2022; NDI(a), 2023; NDI(a), 2024). These findings underscore both the rise in pro-EU sentiment and the entrenched rejection of Russia following the invasion.

Similar trends are evident in Ukrainians' preferences regarding membership in international organizations. Just as positive attitudes toward the EU increased and perceptions of Russia declined following the full-scale invasion, the willingness to join the EU surged, while already limited support for joining the Russian-led Customs Union virtually disappeared. From 2022 to 2024, approximately 90% of Ukrainians consistently expressed a desire to join the EU, a sharp increase compared to pre-2022 levels (NDI(a), 2022; NDI(a), 2023; NDI(a), 2024). Expectations of actual accession also rose significantly, with 80-90% of respondents believing that Ukraine will eventually become a member (NDI(a), 2022; NDI(a), 2023; NDI(a), 2024). Notably, the stark regional disparities that characterized earlier polls have largely vanished. Whereas southern and eastern regions had previously shown significantly lower levels of support, by 2022, support across all regions converged: 89% in the south and east compared to slightly over 90% in the west and central/northern regions (NDI(a), 2022). Meanwhile, support for joining the Customs Union collapsed. In 2022, only 3% of respondents favored this option, down from already low pre-war levels (NDI(a), 2022). These results reinforce the conclusions of the previous paragraph. The full-scale invasion not only failed to weaken Ukraine's European aspirations, it significantly strengthened them, leading to unprecedented levels of national unity on the issue and rendering support for closer ties with Russia virtually nonexistent.

In addition to holding a positive opinion of the EU and demonstrating a strong willingness to join the Union, Ukrainians have consistently expressed overwhelming support for the democratization of their country. While their pro-EU stance has been well documented, public opinion data also shows that Ukrainians are deeply committed to democratic values and reform. Even before the full-scale invasion, a clear majority, approximately 80% nationwide, agreed that it was important for Ukraine to become a fully functioning democracy, with minimal regional variation between western, central/northern, southern, and eastern parts of the country (NDI(a), 2019, 10; NDI(a), 2020; NDI(a), 2021). Unlike attitudes toward EU accession, which previously showed some regional disparities, support for democratization has remained consistently high across all regions. Following Russia's invasion in 2022, the importance of this issue increased further: over 90% of respondents in 2022, 2023, and 2024 affirmed the importance of Ukraine becoming a fully functioning democracy (NDI(a), 2022, 10; NDI(a), 2023; NDI(a), 2024). Additionally, reform-oriented expectations of political parties have remained extremely high. In both 2019 and 2021,

92% of respondents stated that they expected political parties to propose reforms (NDI(a), 2019, 37; NDI(a), 2021). These findings indicate that Ukrainian citizens not only support EU accession but also favor the democratic reforms required for membership. This significantly lowers the adaptational costs associated with EU-driven reforms and creates strong domestic incentives for any Ukrainian government to pursue accession-related democratization.

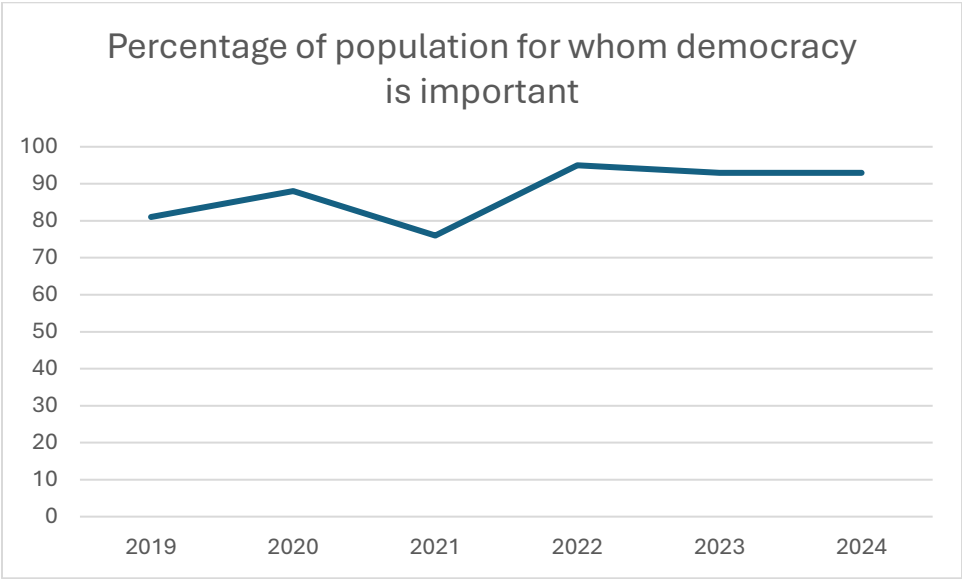


Figure 7 Salience of democracy in Ukraine

Source: NDI(a), 2019; NDI(a), 2020; NDI(a), 2021; NDI(a), 2022; NDI(a) 2023; NDI(a), 2024

Moving on to the economic dimension, it is undeniable that the EU is Ukraine’s most important trading partner. Trade in goods between the two illustrates deep economic dependence. In 2019, Ukraine exported goods worth approximately €19 billion to the EU while importing around €24 billion (EC DG(a) Trade, 2024, 3). These figures declined to €16 billion in exports and €23 billion in imports in 2020, largely due to the global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (EC DG(a) Trade, 2024, 3). However, trade rebounded strongly in 2021, with Ukrainian exports to the EU rising to €24 billion and imports increasing to over €28 billion (EC DG(a) Trade, 2024, 3). Notably, despite the pandemic-related decline in trade volume in 2020, the EU’s share in Ukraine’s total foreign trade actually increased to 40.7%, up from 40.1% in 2019 (Mission of Ukraine to the EU, 2021). This highlights the EU’s enduring role as Ukraine’s primary economic partner. Regarding the composition of trade, Ukraine primarily exports raw materials, food and drink products, and various manufactured goods, while it imports significant quantities of

machinery and chemicals from the EU (Eurostat, 2022, 9). Given the scale and structure of this trade relationship, particularly the reliance on EU-supplied machinery and chemicals, it would be extremely difficult for Ukraine to find viable alternatives. This makes continued integration with the EU market not only beneficial but economically essential for Ukraine.

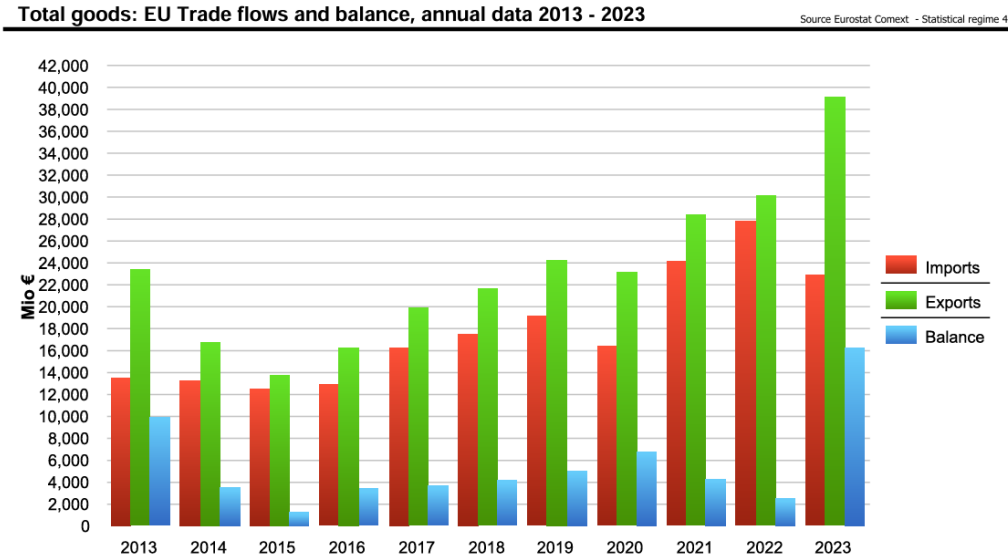


Figure 8 EU-Ukraine trade in goods

Source: European Commission Directorate-General for Trade(a), 2024

Contrary to what might be expected, Russia’s full-scale invasion did not cause a decline in trade between Ukraine and the EU, quite the opposite. In 2022, Ukraine’s exports to the EU rose to nearly €28 billion, while imports from the EU reached approximately €30 billion (EC DG(a) Trade, 2024, 3). Although Ukrainian exports declined to about €23 billion in 2023, imports from the EU surged to €39 billion in the same year (EC DG(a) Trade, 2024, 3). According to Eurostat data, this trend continued into 2024, with exports decreasing at a slower pace and imports rising slightly. These figures underscore the growing significance of the EU as an economic lifeline for Ukraine during wartime. However, the EU-Ukraine economic relationship extends beyond trade. A central component is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), part of the broader Association Agreement (AA), which grants Ukraine enhanced access to the EU’s single market (Mission of Ukraine to the European Union, 2021). This agreement facilitates deeper economic integration and regulatory alignment, fostering long-term structural benefits for Ukraine. Furthermore, the accession Europeanization process is accompanied by tangible incentives such

as financial aid, technical assistance, and increased access to EU programs and funding mechanisms. All of this makes the EU not only Ukraine's largest trading partner, but also its most important strategic economic ally. The deepening of this relationship during wartime reinforces Ukraine's economic dependency on, and alignment with, the European Union.

In comparison to EU-Ukraine trade, Ukraine's trade with Russia was relatively marginal even before the 2022 full-scale invasion, which subsequently caused its near-total collapse. While EU-Ukraine trade was consistently worth tens of billions of euros and showed a general upward trend, Ukraine's trade with Russia was much smaller in scale. According to Figure 6, in 2019 Ukraine exported goods worth only \$3.82 billion to Russia and imported \$7 billion. These figures declined in 2020 to \$2.95 billion and \$6.3 billion respectively but recovered slightly in 2021 to \$3.61 billion in exports and \$8.14 billion in imports, likely a temporary rebound following the COVID-19 disruption. However, in 2022, trade collapsed to \$493 million in exports and \$1.39 billion in imports. Although official data for 2023 and 2024 is unavailable, it is reasonable to assume that, due to the ongoing war, trade between Ukraine and Russia remains virtually nonexistent. Prior to the war, Ukraine mainly imported mineral fuels and oils from Russia, while exporting iron, inorganic chemicals, and, to a lesser extent, machinery (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). This trade structure further reflects a lack of deep or mutually beneficial economic integration. It is clear that even before the full-scale invasion, trade with Russia played a limited role in Ukraine's economy and pales in comparison to the immense value of EU-Ukraine trade and access to the EU single market. Moreover, deeper economic ties with Russia, such as through the Customs Union, pose significant risks to state sovereignty, as illustrated by the case of Belarus.



Figure 9 Ukraine-Russia trade in goods

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025

Regarding the Ukrainian government’s perception of external threats, it is evident that even in the pre-2022 war period, Russia was viewed as the principal threat, a logical stance given the ongoing war since 2014. Simultaneously, the EU was increasingly seen as a strategic counterbalance to Russian aggression. The 2020 National Security Strategy of Ukraine, established by presidential decree, explicitly identifies Russia as a threat, particularly in light of its occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020). More relevant for this study, however, is the clear direction Ukraine adopted in response to this threat. Rather than seeking accommodation with Russia by distancing itself from the West, Ukraine firmly committed to a “strategic course” toward deeper integration with the European Union and eventual EU membership (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020). Importantly, the strategy also emphasized the need for compliance with the conditions set by the EU, effectively elevating alignment with EU norms and reforms to a matter of national security (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020). This framing suggests that the Ukrainian leadership viewed accession not merely as a political or economic goal, but as essential for safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity. Given the full-scale invasion that followed in 2022, it is reasonable to assume that this orientation has only intensified. In sum, Russia’s threats have served to strengthen, rather than weaken, Ukraine’s commitment to EU integration.

The analysis in this chapter shows that Ukraine's government's domestic incentives are strongly aligned with EU integration. First, the Ukrainian selectorate clearly views EU membership as a significant benefit, with high expectations for the government to steer the country toward closer ties with the EU. In contrast, the Russian alternative is overwhelmingly unpopular. Any government attempting to align Ukraine with Russia, rather than the EU, would risk political self-destruction, as evidenced by the downfall of Yanukovich's administration. Additionally, Ukrainians have consistently expressed a strong desire for democratic reforms, which aligns with the EU's accession conditions and the broader accession Europeanization process. Economically, Ukraine's stability, crucial for maintaining the loyalty of its selectorate, is heavily reliant on the EU. The EU's significant share of Ukraine's foreign trade, along with the economic benefits tied to EU accession, underscores the importance of maintaining and deepening these ties. Conversely, any potential setbacks from the EU scaling back support or withholding benefits would have severe consequences. Finally, in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion, and even before it, Ukraine's government has framed EU integration as a matter of national security, as outlined in the 2020 National Security Strategy. Taken together, these factors make clear that Ukraine's domestic incentives are firmly aligned with the EU, increasing the likelihood of successful accession Europeanization.

4.2 The case of Moldova

4.2.1 Accession Europeanization in Moldova

Considering that the incumbent government in Moldova assumed power shortly before the 2022 full-scale war in Ukraine, there is limited material to analyze from the pre-war period. The current administration, led by the PAS, won a parliamentary majority in July 2021, following the 2020 election of a PAS-affiliated president (EC(a), 2021, 1; EC(b), 2022, 4). Both elections were considered generally free and fair, but concerns remained over campaign financing, media bias, and the neutrality of the Central Election Commission (EC(a), 2021, 1; EC(b), 2022, 4). Prior to PAS's ascent, the EU had criticized the lack of progress in the rule of law and anti-corruption efforts under the previous government (EC(a), 2021, 23). Upon taking office, the PAS-led administration launched reforms aimed at addressing these concerns, particularly through changes in judicial selection procedures, restructuring key institutions, and promoting transparency. One

of its early priorities was electoral reform. The adoption of a new Electoral Code in 2022, followed by amendments in 2023, addressed many EU concerns (EC(b), 2023, 11). Reforms included stricter rules on campaign financing, improved voting abroad, and enhanced impartiality of the CEC (EC(b), 2023, 11-12). However, 2023 amendments introducing disqualification criteria for candidates drew criticism over their democratic legitimacy (EC(b), 2023, 12). Although introduced in response to Russian interference, these measures risked undermining Moldova's democratic credibility. Still, the 2023 local elections were assessed as mostly free and fair by the EU (EC(b), 2024, 21), and further steps were taken in 2024 to improve voting integrity and punish electoral bribery (EC(b), 2024, 21).

Progress was also visible in other democratic indicators, especially civil society and public governance. In 2022, amendments improved financing for civil society organizations (CSOs), while a 2023 law recognized CSOs' role in local development (EC(b), 2023, 16). In the same year, Moldova adopted national strategies for public administration reform and public finance management, alongside legislation enhancing institutional independence, democratic accountability, and access to public information (EC(b), 2023, 15). A separate law on voluntary amalgamation of local governments was also passed, advancing decentralization (EC(b), 2023, 18). However, gaps remained in the area of human rights. Moldova did not join the Convention on Enforced Disappearance and continued to face challenges in torture prevention and hate speech regulation and although 2022 amendments to the Criminal Code addressed hate crimes, hate speech itself was not criminalized (EC(b), 2023, 31-32, 34). Roma communities faced persistent discrimination, prompting the adoption of support programs, but implementation remained inconsistent (EC(b), 2023, 44; EC(b), 2024, 41). Media freedom generally improved, with journalists operating without direct state interference, nonetheless, isolated cases of intimidation and structural problems in Gagauzia persisted (EC(b), 2023, 35; EC(b), 2024, 36). Amendments to the Audiovisual Media Services Code in 2023 were seen as positive but insufficient, and the EU urged further steps to strengthen the media environment (EC(b), 2024, 36). Overall, while Moldova made commendable advances in civil society development and governance, further progress is needed to consolidate human rights protections and ensure media independence.

Judicial reforms represent one of the most significant areas of advancement between 2021 and 2024. Moldova adopted legislation in 2022 to improve judicial selection and vetting, followed by

reforms in 2023 aimed at enhancing the performance evaluation of magistrates and prosecutors (EC(b), 2022, 6; EC(b), 2023, 23). These included new procedures for vetting appellate judges and high-level prosecutors and restructuring the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJ) in line with EU standards (EC(b), 2023, 24). The 2024 amendments to the Law on the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) revised criteria for selecting its leadership and strengthened institutional efficiency, although the EU continued to note deficiencies in transparency (EC(b), 2024, 28-29). These reforms were complemented by changes to the Law on the Prosecution Service, though further adjustments are still needed to align fully with the EU acquis. Despite these remaining gaps, the judicial reforms significantly strengthened the independence and professionalism of the judiciary, addressing long-standing EU concerns. The consistent attention to judicial restructuring across multiple years reflects Moldova's prioritization of the rule of law in its European integration agenda. The introduction of merit-based selection and evaluation mechanisms not only enhanced domestic accountability but also signaled to Brussels that Moldova is serious about depoliticizing its judiciary. These efforts mark an important shift away from the politicized judicial environment that had long characterized the pre-2021 period.

Moldova also made considerable strides in anti-corruption and organized crime prevention. The EU commended progress in international cooperation and in improving the country's anti-corruption record (EC(b), 2023, 27; EC(b), 2024, 30). In 2022, Moldova passed laws allowing trials in absentia, expanded asset confiscation rules, and increased transparency of agencies managing seized property (EC(b), 2023, 29-30). Reforms also addressed political financing and whistleblower protections. In 2023, Moldova introduced a de-oligarchization action plan and clarified institutional competencies among anti-corruption bodies (EC(b), 2023, 29-30; EC(b), 2024, 31). Despite these gains, lobbying remains unregulated, a critical shortfall in the anti-corruption framework (EC(b), 2023, 30). In the fight against organized crime, Moldova achieved notable progress through regional cooperation and legislative reforms. A national program to prevent crime was adopted in 2022, followed by a 2023 strategy on combating human trafficking aligned with EU norms (EC(b), 2023, 49; EC(b), 2024, 42). In 2024, Moldova expanded the list of banned firearms and ammunition to improve public safety (EC(b), 2024, 42). While not all reforms are fully in line with EU standards, Moldova's proactive legal adjustments and increased international collaboration underscore its intent to combat entrenched criminal networks. The

country's gradual but consistent progress in anti-corruption and crime prevention represents an essential dimension of its accession Europeanization, reflecting both internal political will and responsiveness to EU recommendations.

While Moldova demonstrated substantial progress in democratic and legal reforms, economic reforms have lagged behind, particularly under the pressure of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although the government showed commitment to structural transformation, the EU noted that reforms have slowed, especially in liberalizing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and enhancing competition (EC(b), 2023, 57). The presence of SOEs continues to distort market competition, and while Moldova adopted strategies to reduce their number, implementation has been limited (EC(b), 2023, 60-61; EC(b), 2024, 52). The war led to the suspension of privatization efforts and to a further expansion of state control through mergers of SOEs with private entities in road construction (EC(b), 2023, 61; EC(b), 2024, 52). These developments raised EU concerns over the direction of Moldova's market reforms. On a more positive note, reforms in the financial sector began in 2024, particularly in enhancing the independence and governance of the National Bank of Moldova (EC(b), 2024, 52). However, broader economic reforms, including market liberalization, SME support, and regulatory improvements, remain underdeveloped compared to judicial or anti-corruption reforms. This uneven progress suggests that while Moldova has embraced many of the institutional and legal norms of the EU, its transition to a fully functioning market economy has been slower and more fragile.

In conclusion, Moldova's reform trajectory between 2021 and 2024 reflects a mixed but overall positive example of accession Europeanization. The government responded rapidly to EU concerns across multiple areas of democracy and the rule of law, initiating electoral reforms, strengthening judicial institutions, and enhancing anti-corruption measures. These reforms were often implemented with clear reference to EU standards, demonstrating both political will and institutional responsiveness. However, certain areas, such as hate speech regulation and lobbying legislation, remain problematic, while the pace of economic reform has been notably slower. The asymmetry between legal-institutional and market reforms underscores the difficulties of advancing liberalization amid external threats and domestic vulnerabilities. Moldova's experience illustrates how democratic consolidation can progress even under the shadow of war and external interference, but also how economic transformation requires long-term planning and stability. The

mixed nature of reforms justifies classifying Moldova's accession Europeanization in this period as moderate in intensity.

4.2.2 Domestic incentives of the Moldovan government (2021-2024)

One year before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine Moldova's population showed that it views the EU positively and expressed willingness to join the Union. The 2021 poll showed that the majority of Moldova's population views relations between their country and the EU as positive, with 17% believing that relations are very good and another 56% believing that relations are somewhat good (CISR, 2021, 49). Only 1% of all respondents argued that EU-Moldova relations are very bad and 9% said they are somewhat bad (CISR, 2021, 49). In addition to that, when asked to choose the most important economic and political partner for Moldova 66% and 60% respectively answered that the EU is the most important, putting the EU in first place overall (CISR, 2021, 50). These results show the positive attitude Moldovans have towards the EU, as well as the strong belief that the EU is both an important economic and political partner. In regard to the question about the EU accession, 38% of respondents showed strong support for joining the Union with an additional 26% expressing that they somewhat support it, bringing a total of those in favor to 64% (CISR, 2021, 52). Out of 29% of those who opposed joining the Union, 16% were strongly opposed with the remaining being somewhat opposed (CISR, 2021, 52). As one can conclude based on this data Moldovans don't just view the EU positively and recognize it as the most important partner for their country but also express a strong desire to join the Union.

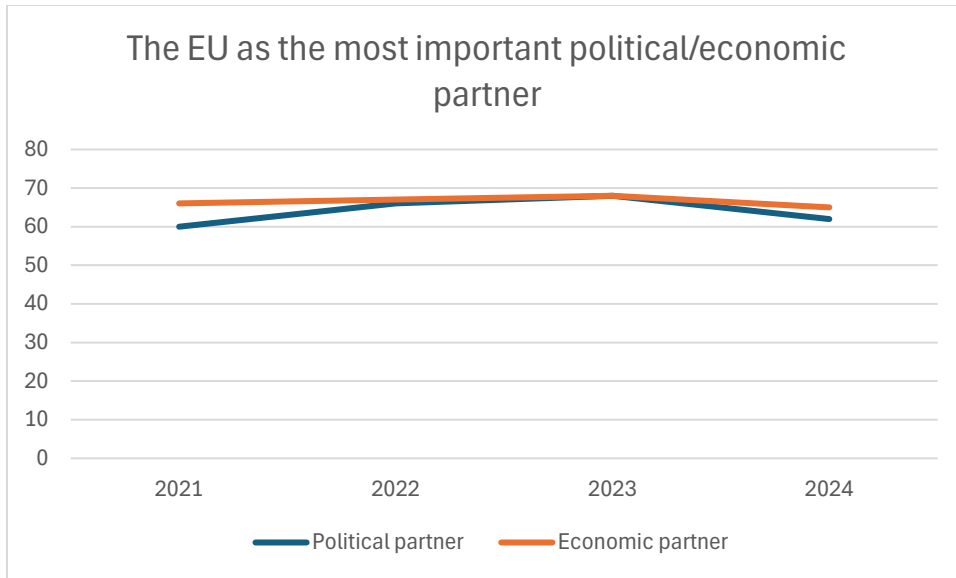


Figure 10 Perceptions of the EU as the most important partner for Moldova

Source: CISR, 2021; CISR, 2022; CISR, 2023; CISR, 2024

In Moldova’s case, positive attitudes toward the EU and support for EU membership do not automatically translate into widespread rejection of Russia as an alternative partner. When asked to evaluate Moldova’s relations with Russia, the population appeared nearly evenly split. According to the 2021 poll, 7% of respondents viewed Moldova-Russia relations as very good and 6% as very bad. The more significant divergence was found in the “somewhat” categories, with 31% describing relations as somewhat good and 42% as somewhat bad (CISR, 2021, 49). Altogether, 38% viewed relations with Russia as rather good, while 48% considered them rather bad, indicating a slight overall tilt toward a negative perception. Nevertheless, Moldovans showed no ambiguity about Russia’s importance as a partner. In the same survey, 65% identified Russia as Moldova’s most important economic partner, just one percentage point behind the EU, while 57% saw Russia as the key political partner, again second only to the EU (CISR, 2021, 50). Notably, the 2021 poll was also the only instance in which Moldovans were asked about their attitude toward joining the Russian-led Customs Union. Nearly half (49%) of respondents expressed support, including 22% who strongly favored the idea (CISR, 2021, 53). Among those opposed, 17% were strongly against, 18% somewhat against, and another 17% were undecided (CISR, 2021, 53). Overall, in the year preceding the 2022 war in Ukraine, Moldovans remained

divided in their views on Russia, acknowledging its strategic importance while leaning slightly toward a more negative evaluation of bilateral relations.

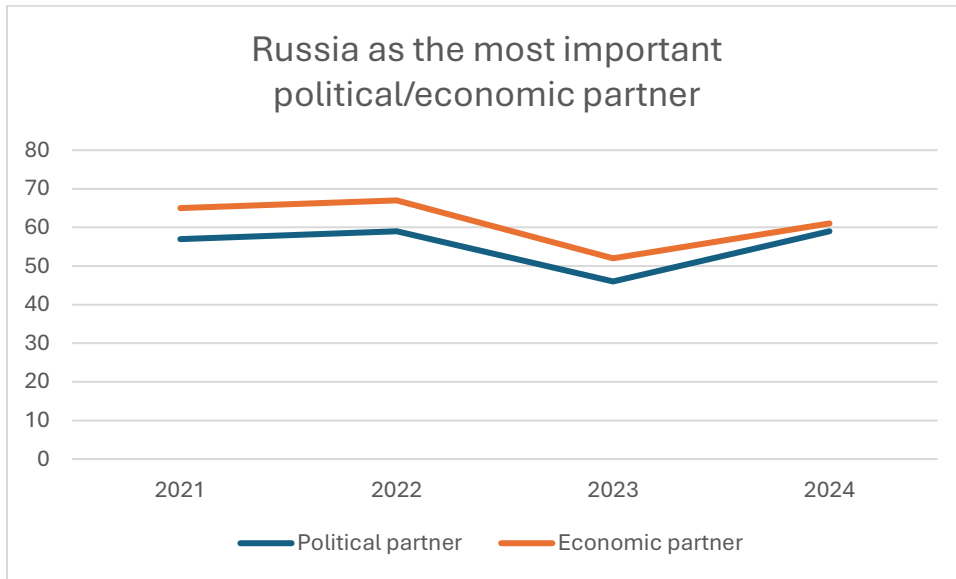


Figure 11 Perceptions of Russia as the most important partner for Moldova

Source: CISR, 2021; CISR, 2022; CISR, 2023; CISR, 2024

The war in Ukraine has not significantly altered the Moldovan population’s attitudes toward the European Union, although some indicators have shown a noticeable positive trend. The most substantial shift has been in how Moldovans perceive their country’s bilateral relations with the EU. The proportion of respondents who viewed these relations as “very good” increased from 31% in 2022 to 42% in 2023, reaching a peak of 49% in 2024 (CISR, 2022, 42; CISR, 2023, 51; CISR, 2024, 56). This growth primarily came from respondents who had previously described the relations as “somewhat good,” while the share of those with a negative view remained relatively stable at around 10% (CISR, 2022, 42; CISR, 2023, 51; CISR, 2024, 56). Meanwhile, in 2023 and 2024, respondents were also asked about their opinion of the EU as an institution. While 66% expressed a positive view in 2023, this declined to 56% in 2024, with negative perceptions rising from 29% to 41% (CISR, 2023, 31; CISR, 2024, 28). Regarding the EU’s importance as Moldova’s main partner, little change occurred. The EU consistently remained the top choice economically (around 67%) and politically, with the latter indicator rising to 67% in 2023 before dipping slightly to 62% in 2024 (CISR, 2022, 44; CISR, 2023, 53, 55; CISR, 2024, 58, 60). Overall, while

perceptions of EU-Moldova relations have grown more positive, broader attitudes toward the EU have remained relatively stable, indicating a sustained but not significantly deepened alignment.

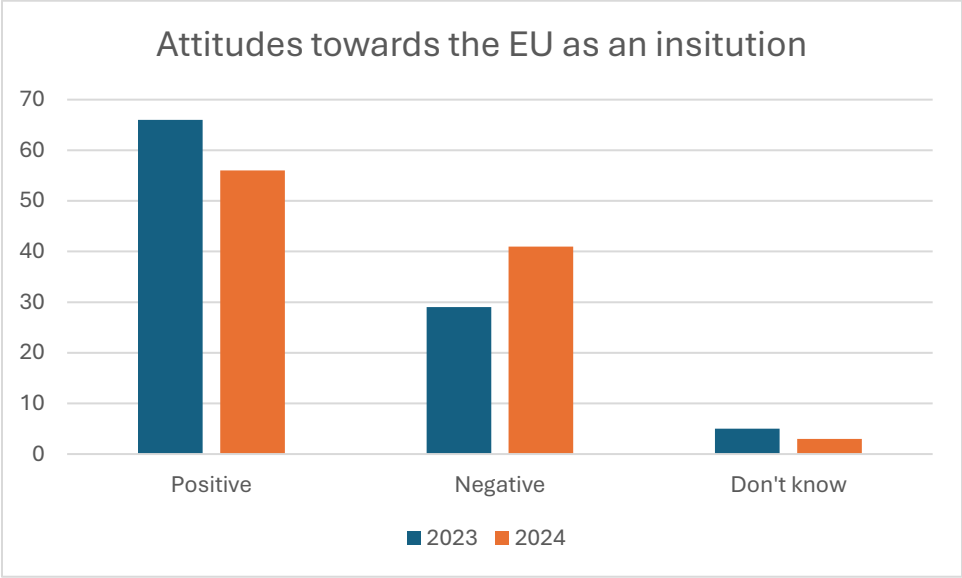


Figure 12 Attitudes towards EU in Moldova

Source: CISR, 2023, 31; CISR, 2024, 28

The desire for EU accession in Moldova initially remained stable following the outbreak of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine; however, by 2024, on the eve of the EU referendum, public support declined significantly. In both 2022 and 2023, support for joining the EU held steady at 63%, with 36% expressing strong support for accession (CISR, 2022, 46; CISR, 2023, 57). Opposition during this period also remained consistent, with approximately 35% against the idea, including around 20% who were strongly opposed (CISR, 2022, 46; CISR, 2023, 57). This relative stability shifted markedly in 2024 in the context of the referendum on including EU accession as a constitutional goal. Support for accession dropped to 48%, while opposition rose to 40% (CISR, 2024, 63). The results of the referendum were even more evenly split, with 50.46% voting in favor and 49.54% against the proposed constitutional amendment (Rainsford, Gozzi, 2024). This sharp decline in support suggests growing skepticism or ambivalence toward EU integration. Importantly, the referendum campaign was accompanied by significant Russian interference, which likely influenced public opinion and the final vote outcome. Despite this, a slim majority remained in favor of EU accession. The 2024 referendum and its closely contested outcome may

reflect increasing political polarization within Moldovan society, dividing those who favor alignment with the EU and those who support closer ties with Russia.

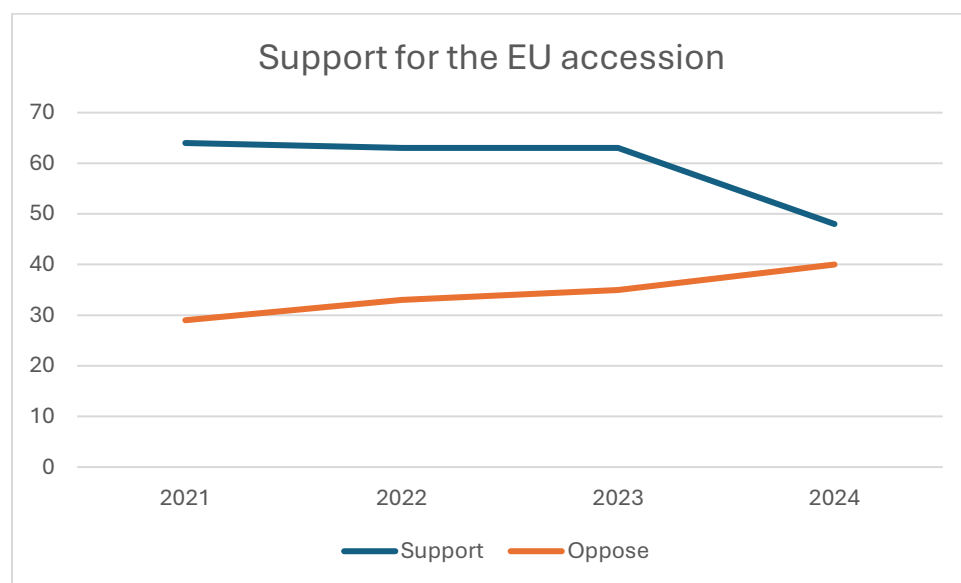


Figure 13 Public support for EU accession in Moldova

Source: CISR, 2021; CISR, 2022; CISR, 2023; CISR, 2024

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly worsened Moldovans' perception of Moldova-Russia relations, though the perception of Russia's importance as an economic and political partner has remained relatively high. In 2021, the public was somewhat divided on the quality of bilateral relations, with a 10% gap favoring negative views. Following the invasion, however, negative perceptions increased sharply. In 2022, 68% of respondents viewed relations as bad, including 33% who considered them very bad (CISR, 2022, 42). This negative trend persisted in subsequent years: over 70% rated the relationship negatively in both 2023 and 2024, with 30% and 36% respectively viewing it as very bad (CISR, 2023, 51; CISR, 2024, 56). Meanwhile, around 30% continued to view the relationship positively throughout the 2022-2024 period (CISR, 2022, 42; CISR, 2023, 51; CISR, 2024, 56). Despite deteriorating political sentiment, Russia's perceived importance as a partner remained considerable. In 2022, 67% identified Russia as Moldova's most important economic partner, on par with the EU (CISR, 2022, 44). While these numbers declined in 2023, to 52% for economic importance and 46% for political importance, placing Russia behind Romania, the EU, and Ukraine, the perception rebounded in 2024. That year, 61% identified Russia as a key economic partner and 59% as a political partner, ranking it third after Romania

and the EU (CISR, 2024, 58, 60). In sum, while Moldovans' perception of bilateral relations with Russia has markedly worsened, the view of Russia as a significant partner has persisted, albeit at a somewhat diminished level.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a majority of Moldova's population came to view Russia as a threat, though a significant portion of the public still does not share this perception. In 2022, 61% of respondents identified Russia as a threat to Moldova (CISR, 2022, 50). However, views within this majority varied: 17% saw Russia as a small threat, 17% as a moderate threat, and only 27% as a great threat (CISR, 2022, 50). This internal division persisted in the following years, with the overall percentage of those who viewed Russia as a threat remaining stable at around 60% (CISR, 2023, 61; CISR, 2024, 66). Simultaneously, approximately 35% of respondents consistently stated that they do not view Russia as a threat at all (CISR, 2022, 50; CISR, 2023, 61; CISR, 2024, 66). These results highlight the persistent societal division over the perception of Russia's threat, with only a minority identifying the threat as severe. Moreover, when asked who best guarantees Moldova's national security, around 13% consistently selected Russia, with the number peaking at 15% in 2024 (CISR, 2022, 49; CISR, 2023, 60; CISR, 2024, 65). While this is a relatively small share, it is not insignificant, especially when compared with the EU's 20% and considering Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine (CISR, 2022, 49; CISR, 2023, 60; CISR, 2024, 65). Notably, neutrality remains the most favored security arrangement, consistently supported by over 60% of respondents (CISR, 2022, 49; CISR, 2023, 60; CISR, 2024, 65). Overall, these results reflect a deeply divided society in which perceptions of threat and security align along complex and sometimes contradictory lines.

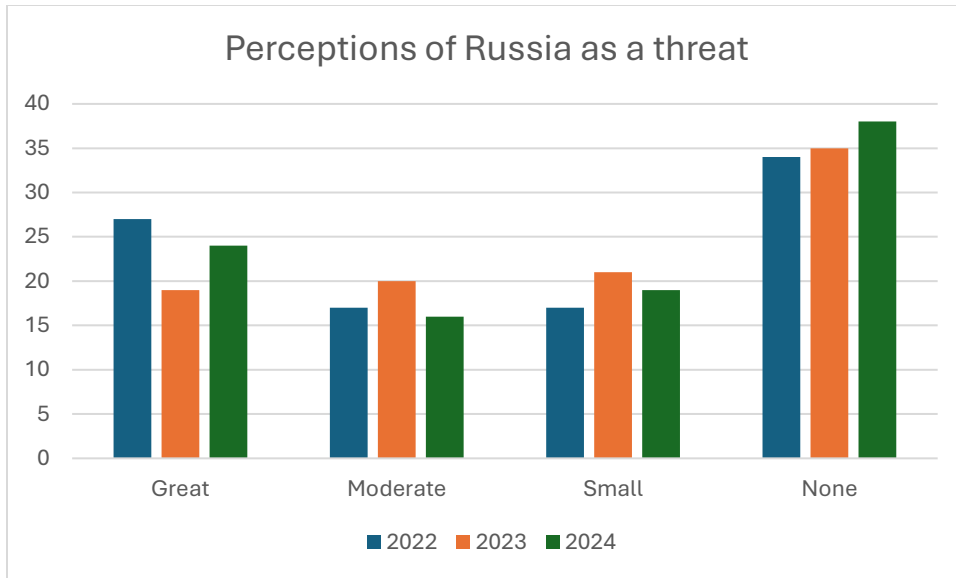


Figure 14 Perception of Russia as a threat in Moldova

Source: CISR, 2022, 50; CISR, 2023, 61; CISR, 2024, 66

Moldovans' views on democratic reforms appear to be as divided as their opinions on the country's international orientation. Unfortunately, only the 2021 CISR poll included questions directly related to democracy, limiting the analysis to that year. When asked whether democracy is the best form of government, a relative majority (42%) responded affirmatively, while 38% disagreed (CISR, 2021, 46). Of those, 23% believed that other forms of government can be just as good, and 15% thought that some alternative forms are even better (CISR, 2021, 46). These figures suggest a deeply divided society, with no overwhelming consensus on the normative value of democracy, a pattern consistent with broader divisions in Moldovan public opinion. Meanwhile, a stronger consensus emerges around the need for reform. According to the same poll, 55% of respondents supported deep structural and systemic reforms, while another 23% favored more gradual changes that would preserve the existing order (CISR, 2021, 47). Only 16% opposed reforms altogether, advocating for the protection of society from those seeking change (CISR, 2021, 47). These results indicate a widespread desire for transformation, although the nature of the desired reforms remains contested. The discrepancy between support for reforms and divided views on democracy suggests that not all those seeking change necessarily envision a democratic direction. Given the strong alignment of foreign policy preferences along pro-EU and pro-Russia lines, it is reasonable to assume that attitudes toward democratic reform may similarly divide, with pro-European segments

favoring democratization and more conservative or pro-Russian groups leaning toward preserving or even strengthening the existing power structures.

In the economic sphere, the European Union stands out as Moldova's most important trading partner and its main source of investment. The trade relationship between the EU and Moldova is not only vital for Moldova's economy but has also shown consistent growth over recent years. In 2021, Moldova exported goods worth €1.8 billion to the EU and imported €3.2 billion. Both figures increased in 2022, with exports rising to €2.6 billion and imports to €4.7 billion. Although Moldova's exports to the EU slightly decreased to €2.4 billion in 2023, imports continued to grow, reaching €4.8 billion. That year, the EU accounted for 53.7% of Moldova's total trade and an even more significant 65.4% of its total exports (EC DG(b) Trade, 2024).. Moldova's imports from the EU primarily consisted of machinery, chemicals, and transport equipment, critical sectors for economic development (EC DG(b) Trade, 2024). These figures highlight the EU's central role in Moldova's economic stability, as any disruption in trade relations would likely have severe consequences, both in terms of volume and the strategic nature of traded goods. Furthermore, the EU is also Moldova's largest investor, having mobilized €1.6 billion for Moldova-related projects since 2021, along with an additional €430 million in non-repayable grants for the 2021-2024 period (EC DG(b) Trade, 2024). In light of these figures, the EU's economic significance to Moldova is evident, not only as a trade partner and investor, but also through increased access to the EU's single market, which offers long-term benefits and deepens Moldova's economic interdependence with the Union.

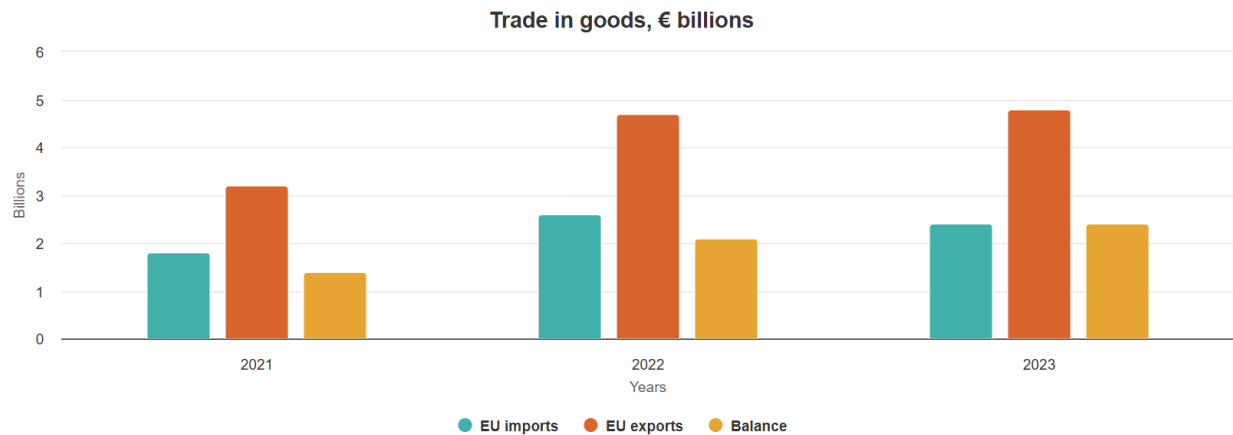


Figure 15 EU-Moldova trade in goods

Source: Trade and Economic Security, 2024

Moldova's trade with Russia is significantly less important than its trade with the European Union, particularly following the collapse of energy imports from Russia. Even before the disruption, trade volumes with Russia were relatively modest. In 2021, Moldova exported goods worth \$335 million to Russia and imported \$1.1 billion in return. While exports declined to \$190 million in 2022, imports increased slightly to \$1.15 billion. By 2023, exports continued to fall, reaching just \$144 million, but the most striking development was the sharp drop in imports to \$322 million. This collapse is largely attributed to the steep decline in energy imports, which had accounted for a substantial portion of Moldova's trade with Russia. In 2022, energy imports from Russia totaled \$787 million, but by 2023, this figure had plummeted to just \$105 million (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). These figures clearly illustrate that Moldova's trade with Russia is far less significant than its trade with the EU, both in terms of total volume and strategic value. While Russia had previously played a major role as an energy supplier, that role has dramatically diminished. Therefore, despite public opinion surveys indicating that many Moldovans still view Russia as an important economic partner, nearly on par with the EU, the actual trade data tells a different story. Russia's role in Moldova's economy is marginal when compared to the EU, especially following the energy trade collapse, further reinforcing the EU's position as Moldova's primary and most influential economic partner.



Figure 16 Moldova-Russia trade in goods

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025

When it comes to national security, Moldova’s incumbent government clearly identifies Russia as the primary threat to the country and its institutions, while elevating EU accession to a matter of national security. Moldova’s 2023 National Security Strategy (NSS) does not hesitate to present Russia as a major danger, citing its expansionist ambitions-evident in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine-and its use of hybrid warfare tactics such as election interference and energy blackmail to exert political and economic influence over Moldova (NSS, 2023, 2-3). The continued illegal presence of Russian military forces in the breakaway region of Transnistria is also highlighted, with the document explicitly referring to “the Russian Federation and its proxies” as “the most dangerous and persistent source of threat” to the country (NSS, 2023, 12-13). This demonstrates the Moldovan government’s clear understanding of the multifaceted threat posed by Russia, encompassing both conventional military risks and non-military subversion. In stark contrast, EU integration is framed as a key national security objective (NSS, 2023, 8). The EU is described as “one of the fundamental pillars of security on the European continent,” and Moldova’s aspirations for accession are linked not only to modernization and economic development but also to the need for comprehensive security (NSS, 2023, 5). The strategy emphasizes the importance of integrating Moldova into the EU’s defense architecture and aligning its economic and energy legislation with EU standards as vital steps to enhance national security (NSS, 2023, 17-21). In this way, EU

accession is portrayed as a strategic counterbalance to the threat posed by Russia, and a matter of national security.

Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that the domestic incentives of Moldova's incumbent government are fully aligned with EU, thus driving the process of accession Europeanization. From the perspective of delivering benefits to its selectorate, Moldova's government is highly incentivized to push forward with democratic reforms and EU integration. While it could be argued that, unlike in Ukraine, support for these objectives is not universal in Moldova, this does not significantly diminish the government's incentives. In fact, opposing EU accession and democratic reforms would be political suicide for Moldova's leadership, much as it would be for Ukraine's. Although Moldova is divided between pro-EU/pro-democracy and pro-Russia/status-quo camps, the government's survival depends not on universal loyalty, but on retaining the support of the coalition that brought it to power. The current government has positioned itself as pro-EU and reformist, and its voter base expects it to deliver on promises of democratic reform and EU accession. These objectives are vital benefits that the government must provide to maintain its mandate. A failure to meet these expectations could result in a significant loss of support, with the pro-EU/pro-reform electorate potentially shifting to another party, either securing that party's rise to power or splitting the vote and allowing pro-Russian/status-quo parties to gain influence. Therefore, the government is politically motivated to uphold its commitments to EU integration and democratic reforms.

In terms of economic stability and national security, the current government's domestic incentives are also aligned with the EU. The EU plays an undeniable role in Moldova's economic stability, and the economic benefits of further integration provide a strong incentive for the government to continue with EU-aligned reforms. It is important to note that Russia, as the main energy provider, once held economic leverage over Moldova, which it used to pressure the government. However, with support from the EU, Moldova's government managed to withstand this pressure, effectively diminishing Russia's economic influence. Today, it is clear that Moldova stands to lose far more from a breakdown in relations with the EU than with Russia. Additionally, the current government has elevated EU accession to a matter of national security, signaling that, in the face of Russian aggression, the government has chosen to strengthen its ties with the EU rather than back down to appease Russia. As a result, complying with the EU's conditions has become a necessity for the

government. In conclusion, the Moldovan government's domestic incentives are firmly aligned with the EU, creating a strong foundation for successful accession Europeanization.

4.3 The case of Georgia

4.3.1 Accession Europeanization in Georgia

In the pre-2022 war period, elections in Georgia were generally in line with EU standards, and significant electoral reforms were being introduced. The EU appeared largely content with the conduct of elections and the trajectory of reforms. The 2016 parliamentary elections were described as “competitive and well-administered, generally respecting fundamental freedoms,” although some irregularities were noted (EC, 2016, 3). The 2017 local elections and 2018 presidential elections received similar assessments, free and fair overall, but increasingly marked by irregularities, which in 2018 were more serious in nature (EC, 2017, 3; EC(b), 2019, 2). The 2020 parliamentary elections followed the same pattern: generally free and fair, but accompanied by a growing list of shortcomings (EC(b), 2021, 3). Thus, while elections continued to meet basic democratic standards, the EU noted a steady increase in procedural and structural issues. A landmark moment was the adoption of Georgia's new constitution in 2017, finalized with amendments in 2018 (EC, 2017, 2-3; EC(b), 2019, 2). This included the transition to fully proportional parliamentary elections by 2024 and the abolition of direct presidential elections. Although a failed attempt to accelerate the reform in 2020 raised concerns, the 2020 electoral reform package, introduced to address flaws in the 2018 elections, was positively evaluated by the EU, despite not addressing all recommendations (EC(b), 2021, 3). Overall, these developments suggest that Georgia's electoral system was gradually aligning with EU norms, even as certain issues persisted.

Georgia made meaningful progress in aligning its human rights framework with EU standards during the 2016-2021 period. The EU's assessments were generally positive, highlighting both legislative and policy improvements. In 2017, Georgia ratified the Istanbul Convention, and continued implementing strategies for minority rights and eliminating child marriages (EC, 2017, 3-4). The year before, the Prosecutor's Office issued guidelines on combating hate crimes, marking an institutional step forward (EC, 2016, 3). In 2019, amendments to the Labor Code improved

protections against sexual harassment in both public spaces and workplaces (EC(b), 2020, 4). Further amendments in 2020 expanded protections to include paid maternity leave, rights for pregnant women, and stronger anti-discrimination provisions (EC(b), 2021, 4). In parallel, reforms to the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination improved enforcement mechanisms, and the adoption of the Child's Rights Code marked another milestone in strengthening rights protections (EC(b), 2020, 4). However, the EU continued to voice concerns about anti-LGBTQ discrimination, indicating that while the legal framework had advanced, practical implementation and societal attitudes still lagged behind (EC(b), 2020, 4). Overall, the trajectory was clearly positive, and the reforms brought Georgia's human rights legislation closer to EU expectations, but remaining gaps—particularly in the treatment of vulnerable groups—showed the need for further efforts.

Between 2016 and 2021, indicators related to democracy beyond elections also saw incremental improvements, although some areas stagnated. The media landscape was consistently described by the EU as free, pluralistic, and competitive, but also highly polarized (EC, 2016, 3; EC, 2017, 4; EC(b), 2019, 3; EC(b), 2021, 4). A 2020 amendment to the Law on Broadcasting introduced new provisions to protect minors from harmful content, but it was controversial and challenged in the Constitutional Court (EC(b), 2021, 4). Civil society was regarded as active, yet lacked a formal mechanism for structured engagement with the government (EC(b), 2020, 3; EC(b), 2021, 4). This shortcoming was acknowledged in 2020, when the EU called for further strengthening of such mechanisms (EC(b), 2020, 3; EC(b), 2021, 4). Public administration reform was one of the more dynamic areas of progress. Building on a foundation laid in 2015, the government adopted a 2019-2020 action plan and introduced secondary legislation that enhanced the Civil Service Law and mandated Regulatory Impact Assessments for specific legislation and amended the Law on Public Service (LPS), all of which was praised by the EU as a milestone (EC(b), 2020, 5; EC(b), 2021, 6). In summary, while media freedom and civil society engagement showed limited change, public administration reforms represented a notable stride toward aligning with EU governance standards.

Judicial reform in Georgia was a central focus of Europeanization efforts between 2016 and 2021. The third wave of judicial reform in 2016 introduced various amendments, yet failed to address critical issues such as the probationary period for judges (EC, 2017, 5). That year also saw the introduction of the Juvenile Justice Code, whose implementation continued into 2017 with some

gaps (EC, 2017, 5). In 2017, the government adopted Georgia's first comprehensive Judiciary Strategy and Action Plan, along with a prosecutorial strategy that introduced a new ethics code and prosecutor appraisal system (EC, 2017, 5; EC(b), 2019, 6). The fourth wave of reform followed in 2018 and included provisions to abolish the judicial probation period by 2025 (EC(b), 2019, 6). In December 2019, further amendments improved the functioning of the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), requiring it to justify all decisions (EC(b), 2020, 7). Prosecutorial reforms in 2019 and 2020 aimed to separate the roles of investigators and prosecutors, an effort that the EU welcomed (EC(b), 2021, 8). Additionally, 2020 reforms to the process of nominating Supreme Court judges were considered a step forward, although transparency issues remained (EC(b), 2021, 7). Overall, the EU viewed these reforms as progress, but emphasized that they did not fully resolve fundamental issues of judicial independence.

The EU regarded Georgia's anti-corruption efforts during the 2016-2021 period as broadly positive, albeit with some critical gaps. Georgia was consistently praised for its implementation of national anti-corruption strategies and related reforms (EC, 2017, 4; EC(b), 2019, 3; EC(b), 2020, 7). In 2017, the government revised its Anti-Corruption Action Plan for 2017-2018 and introduced a monitoring system for asset declarations by public officials (EC, 2017, 4). A year later, the Chief Prosecutor's Office designated its European Integration Unit as the national Asset Recovery Office. The following year saw the adoption of a new 2019-2020 action plan (EC(b), 2019, 3; EC(b), 2020, 7). Nevertheless, the 2021 report reflected growing concern. Although a handbook on risk assessment methodology for ministries and Legal Entities of Public Law (LEPLs) was adopted, the government failed to establish an independent Anti-Corruption Agency (EC(b), 2021, 8). Additionally, relevant legislation was delayed, and suspicious campaign donations ahead of elections raised alarm (EC(b), 2021, 8). These issues undermined previous achievements and cast doubt on the government's political will to tackle high-level corruption. Therefore, while Georgia made visible progress in improving anti-corruption mechanisms and received positive evaluations, the absence of structural guarantees and unresolved transparency issues left a mixed overall impression.

Georgia's efforts to combat organized crime showed clear progress between 2016 and 2021, receiving positive evaluations from the EU without major criticism. In 2017, the government adopted a new National Strategy on Combating Organized Crime for 2017-2020, accompanied by

a detailed Action Plan (EC, 2017, 6). The strategy emphasized the fight against “thieves in law,” drug trafficking, and cybercrime, and introduced analysis-based and community policing approaches (EC, 2017, 6). Legislative changes followed, including amendments to the Criminal Code, the Code of Administrative Offenses, and the Law on Drugs (EC, 2017, 6). In 2018, Georgia established the National Drug Situation Monitoring Centre, although it was not yet fully operational (EC(b), 2019, 7). The same year also saw amendments to the Organic Law on the National Bank, strengthening measures against money laundering and financial terrorism, notably by expanding the bank’s licensing powers (EC(b), 2019, 7). A 2019 police reform further improved law enforcement capacity and organizational structure (EC(b), 2020, 7). Unlike in the area of anti-corruption, the EU did not highlight any serious shortcomings in Georgia’s fight against organized crime. This consistent progress suggests that the Georgian government was committed to aligning its crime-fighting institutions and practices with EU norms, and that this area of reform was among the most effective in the pre-war period.

Georgia made steady progress in economic reforms between 2016 and 2021, particularly in harmonizing with EU standards. One of the most successful areas was support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The government adopted a comprehensive SME strategy in 2016 and continued its implementation throughout the period (EC, 2016, 8; EC, 2017, 11; EC(b), 2019, 12; EC(b), 2020, 11; EC(b), 2021, 11). Efforts also included adopting a new company law in line with EU directives, continuing tax legislation harmonization, and strengthening the intellectual property rights (IPR) framework to meet EU demands (EC(b), 2019, 11-12; EC(b), 2020, 12; EC(b), 2021, 14). The government worked to enhance the regulatory and supervisory functions of the National Bank of Georgia and introduced a certification program for internal auditors, alongside the implementation of internal audit systems in all ministries (EC, 2017, 12; EC(b), 2020, 10-11; EC(b), 2021, 12). Customs modernization was also prioritized, culminating in the adoption of a new Customs Code during this period (EC(b), 2020, 13). While these reforms brought Georgia’s economic governance closer to EU norms, the EU did express concern over the absence of a consolidated consumer protection framework, suggesting that further institutional development was needed in this area (EC(b), 2021, 11). Overall, Georgia’s economic reforms demonstrated consistent alignment with EU integration goals and contributed to strengthening the country’s institutional and regulatory capacity.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia's electoral reform process initially stalled and then began to experience significant backsliding. Prior to the war, Georgian elections were generally considered free and fair, despite some irregularities. However, the 2022 amendments to Georgia's Electoral Code signaled a troubling shift (EC(c), 2023, 13). These amendments, which were only partially aligned with the EU's recommendations, failed to address many longstanding issues within the electoral system (EC(c), 2023, 13). Furthermore, in 2023, the government introduced reforms that reversed previous agreements regarding the Central Election Commission (CEC), increasing the parliament's control over the body, with governing party holding an absolute majority in the legislature (EC(c), 2023, 13). By 2024, the situation had deteriorated further, with the government adopting amendments that directly contradicted the EU's recommendations. The EU assessed these amendments as inadequate in addressing the previous issues (EC(c), 2024, 27-28). As a result, the 2024 parliamentary elections were harshly criticized by the EU, which for the first time did not deem them free and fair (EC(c), 2024, 27-28). This marked a clear and visible backsliding in Georgia's electoral process, with the government's amendments to the Electoral Code being the primary cause of this regression.

Human rights indicators in Georgia have similarly worsened since 2022, highlighting the broader trend of democratic backsliding. The rights of LGBTQ individuals have been continuously ignored by the government, despite multiple action plans during the 2022-2024 period, none of which adequately addressed the deteriorating situation faced by LGBTQ people (EC(c), 2023, 29; EC(c), 2024, 38). Beyond LGBTQ rights, the 2023 national strategy for human rights made only limited progress, neglecting several key issues (EC(c), 2023, 30-31). In 2022, the government attempted to introduce amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code that would have significantly expanded the use of covert investigative measures, however, these amendments were vetoed by the president and criticized by the EU (EC(c), 2023, 33). Both the 2023 and 2024 EU reports noted the continued lack of political representation for minorities and their limited access to quality education (EC(c), 2023, 40; EC(c), 2024, 46). Additionally, in 2023, amendments to the laws regarding freedom of assembly were passed, introducing the potential for arbitrary restrictions on this right (EC(c), 2023, 36). These developments reflect a clear deterioration of human rights protections in Georgia, with government actions directly contributing to this regression.

At the same time, civil society and media freedom in Georgia have faced increasing restrictions. In 2022, the EU still described the environment for civil society as largely enabling, however, by 2023, the EU highlighted the growing number of attacks and hostile rhetoric undermined this environment, with the so-called “foreign agents law” becoming a major threat to civil society (EC(c), 2022, 6; EC(c), 2023, 16). This law failed to pass in 2023 due to public protests, but by 2024, it was adopted, severely restricting the activities of civil society organizations and leading to a sharp increase in attacks against them (EC(c), 2024, 29). The media landscape also worsened, as Georgia’s once-pluralistic media became increasingly polarized, with growing instances of attacks and intimidation of journalists (EC(c), 2022, 10; EC(c), 2023, 34; EC(c), 2024, 41-42). In addition to the “foreign agents law,” and the “Family Values and Protection of Minors” law, already severely restricting media freedom, the amendments to the Law on Broadcasting gave the Communications Commission the authority to intervene in cases of hate speech, terrorism incitement, and obscenity, raising concerns about potential misuse of these powers (EC(c), 2023, 35; EC(c), 2024, 42). The EU voiced concerns about the potential abuse of these new powers as well (EC(c), 2023, 35), making it evident that civil society and independent media are increasingly under attack by the government.

Unlike other areas of Georgia’s democratic development, public administration reforms have been less affected by the country’s overall democratic decline. Despite the negative trends in other sectors, the government has maintained a focus on decentralization reforms in local government, in line with the 2021-2024 Government Programme (EC(c), 2022, 6; EC(c), 2023, 17-18). Additionally, significant progress was made in public finance management (PFM) in 2023, with the adoption of a new public administration reform (PAR) strategy (EC(c), 2023, 17-18). In 2024, the government continued implementing its previous strategies, with PFM remaining a strong area of progress (EC(c), 2024, 30-31). Nevertheless, the EU raised concerns about the lack of accountability in Georgia’s public administration, noting that many institutions are not covered by public service legislation, and citizens’ right to good administration varies significantly across different institutions (EC(c), 2023, 19). The enforcement of access to public information remains inconsistent (EC(c), 2023, 19). While Georgia’s public administration has seen positive developments, especially in PFM, these advances are insufficient to counterbalance the broader

democratic backsliding driven by government actions. In sum, public administration reforms show some progress, but they are inadequate in addressing the overall decline in democratic governance.

Georgia's judiciary has not experienced as much backsliding as democratic indicators, though it has shown little, if any, improvement in recent years. Previous judicial reforms made some progress, addressing issues in the judiciary, but key concerns remained unresolved. From 2022 to 2024, reforms stagnated, with many of the unresolved issues persisting. The EU acknowledged the legislative framework as generally satisfactory for maintaining the rule of law but expressed concern over certain developments that ran counter to its recommendations (EC(c), 2022, 7). The main issue centered around the practice of judicial appointments, which had not been updated in line with EU recommendations, leading to questions about the legitimacy of new appointments (EC(c), 2022, 7; EC(c), 2024, 33). In 2023, amendments to the Law on Common Courts were adopted, but they only addressed one of the EU's key recommendations, leaving many others unaddressed (EC(c), 2023, 21). Follow-up amendments in 2024 failed to address crucial issues, even reversing one previous improvement related to stricter qualification requirements for Supreme Court judges (EC(c), 2024, 32). As a result, the judiciary has largely stagnated, with no major improvements, although it has not seen the same level of deterioration as other democratic institutions.

The fight against corruption in Georgia has also largely stagnated, with some legislation introduced but little real impact. Georgia has maintained a steady track record in addressing corruption, although progress in tackling high-level corruption remained weak (EC(c), 2024, 36). The establishment of the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in 2022 was a notable development, but questions about the organization's independence arose almost immediately (EC(c), 2023, 26-27). In 2024, amendments to the ACB were introduced to address some recommendations, but they failed to resolve key issues, particularly those concerning the independence of the organization (EC(c), 2024, 37). The government's attempt to pass de-oligarchization legislation in 2022 was criticized by the EU as ineffective, leading to the adoption of an action plan that aligned better with EU recommendations (EC(c), 2023, 27). However, despite progress on the action plan in 2024, it was too unambitious to effect meaningful change (EC(c), 2024, 37). While some positive developments occurred, such as the expansion of the asset declaration regime to include all prosecutors, amendments to the tax code in 2024 raised concerns about potential risks of money

laundering, as they did not align with best international practices (EC(c), 2024, 37-38). Overall, corruption reforms have seen little tangible improvement, with some legislation being introduced but with limited or questionable effects.

The fight against crime in Georgia has made minimal progress, with some efforts to align the country's legal framework with EU standards. In 2022, amendments were adopted to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism, aligning with EU directives, but these measures were not sufficient to fully harmonize Georgia's legislation with EU requirements (EC(c), 2023, 44). Furthermore, the EU already raised concerns about the potential for money laundering due to other legislation introduced in 2024, which could undermine Georgia's compliance with international standards. On a more positive note, amendments to the Law on Weapons and related regulations were adopted, yielding more positive results, and the government presented the 2023-2024 action plan and a report on money laundering and terrorism financing risks in Georgia (EC(c), 2023, 43-44). Overall, while the EU acknowledged some progress in Georgia's fight against organized crime, it remains clear that the country's legal framework is not fully aligned with EU standards (EC(c), 2024, 47). As a result, while Georgia has made some headway in addressing organized crime, the country's overall progress remains limited, with few new legislative measures introduced and existing concerns about money laundering persisting.

Despite the government's official commitment to free-market reforms, progress has stagnated, and questions have arisen about the independence of the central bank. The EU has recognized Georgia's official commitment to economic reforms, particularly in 2022 and 2023, but by 2024, stagnation in the reform process was evident (EC(c), 2022, 12; EC(c), 2023, 55; EC(c), 2024, 54). The state's footprint in the economy has remained modest, and support programs for SMEs continued, the regulatory environment for business was described as "overall liberalized," with some issues remaining unresolved (EC(c), 2022, 12; EC(c), 2023, 58; EC(c), 2024, 57). However, progress on State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) reform stalled, and the government's 2023 amendments raised concerns about the independence of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG). These amendments weakened the NBG's institutional independence and raised alarms as the government failed to appoint a permanent governor of the NBG since May 2023 (EC(c), 2023, 55; EC(c), 2024, 55, 58). While Georgia's economic framework is still somewhat aligned with free-market principles due to past achievements, the lack of new reforms and the questionable

legislation affecting the NBG have raised concerns. Thus, despite the country's continued commitment to free-market reforms, stagnation and setbacks are evident in the post-2022 period.

Georgia's transition from visible accession Europeanization to stagnation and instances of de-Europeanization reflects a marked shift in its reform trajectory. The period from 2016 to 2021 saw substantial progress, with reforms in governance and the rule of law aligning Georgia with EU standards, placing the country on a medium level of Europeanization. However, the post-2022 period has seen a reversal, particularly in the domains of rule of law and market economy reforms, with clear signs of de-Europeanization. Democracy-related indicators, with the exception of public administration, have experienced rapid regression. Election quality has deteriorated to the point where the EU no longer recognizes them as free and fair. Civil society and media freedoms are increasingly under attack, while human rights violations, particularly related to LGBTQ rights and minority representation, continue to be ignored by the government. Given these developments, it is unsurprising that Georgia's EU candidate status has been effectively frozen, just one year after receiving it. The stark contrast between Georgia's progress on the one hand and Ukraine's and Moldova's progress on the other had post-2022 raises important questions about the reasons for this divergence, especially considering that before 2022, Georgia's trajectory aligned closely with that of Ukraine and Moldova, both of which have seen significant reform progress in recent years.

4.3.2 Domestic incentives of the Georgian government (2016-2024)

Before 2022, Georgians exhibited a strong positive attitude toward the EU. This preference for a pro-EU path is clearly reflected in national polls. In 2016, when asked about the type of foreign policy their country should pursue, the majority of Georgians (66%) supported a pro-Western foreign policy (NDI, 2016). Notably, only 14% favored a fully pro-Western stance, while the remaining 52% supported a pro-Western policy that also maintained good relations with Russia (NDI, 2016). In 2019, a more direct question regarding attitudes towards the EU was posed, and the results showed that 55% of Georgians held a positive view of the Union, with 21% expressing a very positive attitude (NDI(b), 2019, 17). Just 8% had a negative view, with only 2% indicating a very negative stance, while a significant portion (33%) remained neutral (NDI(b), 2019, 17). These polls suggest that, in the pre-2022 period, Georgians generally held a positive attitude toward the EU, with very few expressing strong negative views. The preference for a pro-Western,

and by extension pro-EU, foreign policy was clear, although a majority of Georgians still favored maintaining good relations with Russia.

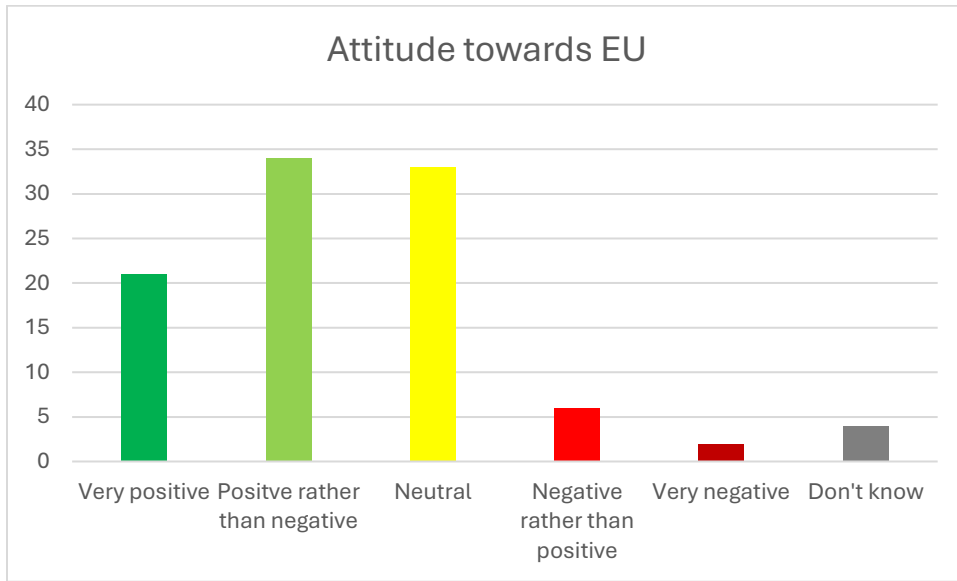


Figure 17 Public attitudes towards EU in Georgia

Source: NDI(b), 2019, 17

Although some findings in the previous paragraph may imply that Georgians hold a degree of positive sentiment toward Russia, this is not supported by broader public opinion. While many respondents expressed a preference for maintaining good relations with Russia as part of Georgia’s foreign policy, this does not translate into a favorable view of Russia itself. In the 2016 survey, only 5% of respondents supported a fully pro-Russian foreign policy, with an additional 16% favoring a pro-Russian orientation alongside good relations with the EU (NDI, 2016). More importantly, the majority of Georgians consistently viewed Russia and its actions as a major threat. In 2017, 63% identified Russia as the greatest threat to Georgia, with Turkey a distant second at just 6% (NDI, 2017). Russian activities such as military aggression and propaganda were regarded as the most serious national security risks. A combined 60% of respondents saw Russian actions as significant threats, with 34% citing military aggression specifically (NDI, 2017). These concerns remained prevalent in 2019, with 52% still viewing Russian activities as a threat, and 31% continuing to cite military aggression as the primary concern (NDI(b), 2019, 44). Regarding Russia’s influence on Georgia’s economy, politics, and security, approximately 45% of respondents rated the impact as negative, while around 32% saw no impact, and fewer than 10%

viewed it as positive, except in economic terms, where 12% viewed it positively (NDI(b), 2019, 45). These results confirm that between 2016 and 2021, Georgians overwhelmingly perceived Russia as a primary threat.

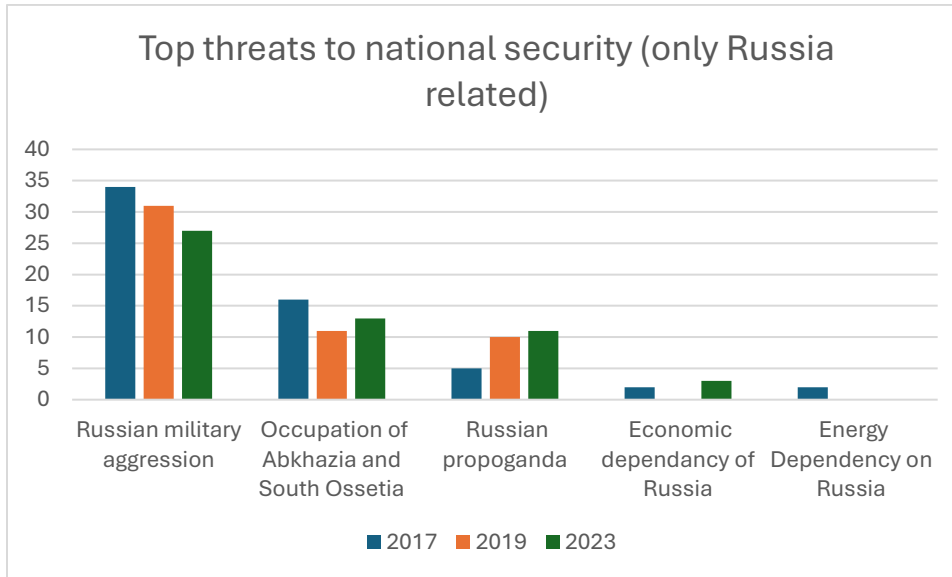


Figure 18 Perceptions of national security threats in Georgia

Source: NDI, 2017; NDI(b), 2019, 44; NDI(c), 2023, 81

Georgians have consistently expressed overwhelming support for EU accession, demonstrating a clear preference for the Union over Russian alternatives. From 2016 to 2021, a steady majority of around 80% supported Georgia’s accession to the EU, with the lowest recorded support at 72% in 2016 and the highest at 83% in both 2018 and 2021 (NDI, 2016; NDI, 2017; NDI, 2018; NDI(b), 2019, 7; NDI(b), 2021, 18). This strong backing for EU integration is even more pronounced when compared to the Russian alternative. In 2016, 53% of Georgians believed their country would benefit more from European integration, while 29% preferred abandoning the EU in favor of a closer relationship with Russia (NDI, 2016). By 2017, the gap widened significantly, with 65% supporting EU accession and only 21% in favor of joining the Russian-led Eurasian Union (NDI, 2017). Although the same question was not posed between 2018 and 2021, the consistent rise in support for EU accession during these years suggests that the preference for the EU has likely remained, if not grown even stronger. In sum, while framing the decision in terms of the Russian alternative may slightly reduce support, EU accession has remained the dominant preference for a solid majority of Georgians.

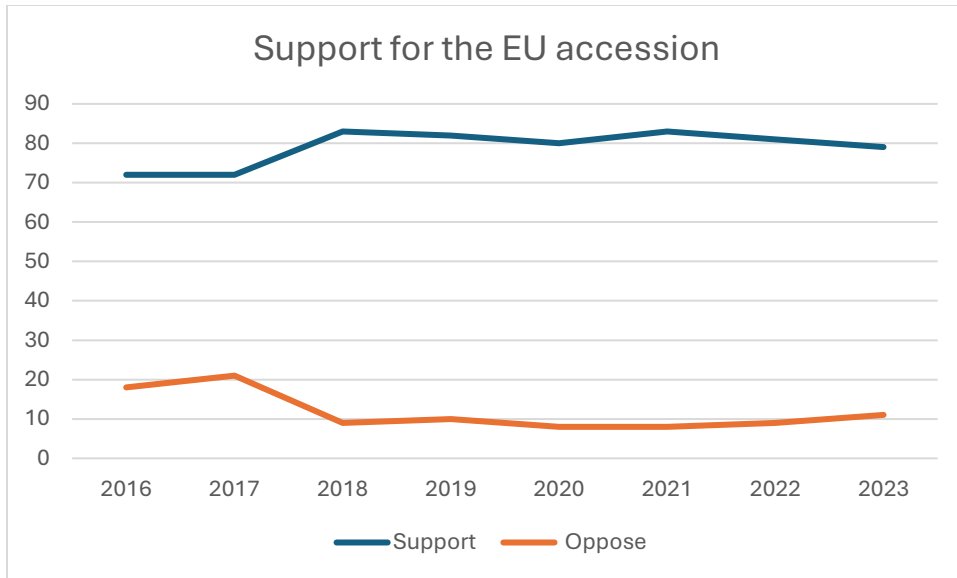


Figure 19 Public support for EU accession in Georgia

Source: NDI(c), 2023

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly boosted positive attitudes towards the EU among Georgians. Prior to the war, Georgia’s population already held favorable views of the Union, as shown earlier. However, the 2022 Russian invasion made those attitudes even more positive. In 2023, 52% of Georgians selected the EU as the country with which Georgia should have the closest political and economic cooperation, a sharp increase from just 29% for political cooperation and 30% for economic cooperation in February 2022 (NDI(b), 2023, 44, 47). These numbers climbed further, with 60% favoring the EU for political cooperation and 59% for economic cooperation in 2023 (NDI(c), 2023, 83, 86). Additionally, when asked about their foreign policy preference, 47% of Georgians supported a fully pro-Western stance in 2022 (NDI(c), 2023, 79). Although this number slightly decreased to 37% in 2023, it still surpassed the 2016 figure (NDI(c), 2023, 79). Meanwhile, the percentage of those favoring a pro-Western foreign policy with good relations with Russia rose from 31% in 2022 to 36% in 2023 (NDI(c), 2023, 79). Combined, the total support for some form of pro-Western foreign policy stood at 78% in 2022 and 73% in 2023, compared to 66% in 2016 (NDI, 2016; NDI(c), 2023, 79). This data clearly shows that Georgians not only maintain a highly positive view of the EU but also see it as their most preferable political and economic partner, reinforcing the widespread support for the Union.

Compared to the overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the EU, Georgian public opinion toward Russia has remained largely negative. Even prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgians consistently viewed Russia as a primary threat, and the unprovoked aggression only deepened this perception. In 2022, 80% of respondents expressed a negative view of the Russian government, while only 13% held a favorable opinion (NDI(b), 2022, 84). Furthermore, a large majority of Georgians placed direct blame for the war in Ukraine on either Russia (54%) or Putin personally (25%), totaling 79% (NDI(b), 2022, 76). Russia's appeal as a political or economic partner has also declined. In 2023, only 12% of respondents selected Russia as Georgia's preferred political partner, down from 24% in February 2022. Similarly, only 16% favored economic cooperation with Russia, down from 29% (NDI(b), 2023, 44, 47). While these numbers recovered slightly later in 2023 to 20% for political and 25% for economic cooperation, they remained below pre-invasion levels and significantly lower than support for the EU (NDI(c), 2023, 83, 86). Additionally, support for a fully pro-Russian foreign policy dropped from 26% in 2016 to just 10% in 2023 (NDI, 2016; NDI(c), 2023, 79). Finally, 54% of Georgians identified Russian-related activities as the primary national security threat in 2023, a slight increase from 52% in 2019 (NDI(b), 2019, 44; NDI(c), 2023, 81). Overall, Georgian attitudes toward Russia remained firmly negative, despite a modest rebound in some indicators.

Support for EU accession in Georgia has remained consistently high, while backing for Russian alternatives has significantly declined. Although support for EU membership has not seen a dramatic increase since 2022, it is important to note that public support was already overwhelming prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In both 2022 and 2023, approximately 80% of Georgians supported EU accession, 81% and 79%, respectively (NDI(b), 2022, 69; NDI(c), 2023, 90). Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents who believed that Georgia would benefit more from integration with the EU rose to 66% in 2023, while only 11% argued that Georgia should abandon EU aspirations in favor of closer ties with Russia (NDI(c), 2023, 94). Furthermore, the perception of the EU as a guarantor of national security has grown significantly. In 2023, 29% of respondents identified EU accession as the best means of ensuring Georgia's security, an increase from just 11% in 2019, making it the most popular option, even ahead of NATO (NDI(c), 2023, 82). In summary, while the overall level of support for EU accession has remained steady at a very high level, the relative appeal of the EU has increased due to the sharp decline in support for Russian

alternatives. Moreover, the growing belief that EU membership is the most effective way to ensure national security indicates a deepening strategic alignment with the West in the post-2022 period.

Important and relevant insights can be drawn from public opinion regarding the Georgian government's performance on the path to EU accession, particularly given the sharp divide between supporters of the ruling party and the rest of the population. As established in the previous chapter, the period under analysis witnessed not only a slowdown in accession Europeanization but also several instances of de-Europeanization, contributing to a notable deterioration in EU-Georgia relations. In this context, it is pertinent to examine how the Georgian public, in light of its consistently strong support for EU membership, perceives the government's efforts. According to a 2022 poll, 38% of respondents believed the government was not doing enough to ensure EU accession, while an additional 18% felt that it was doing nothing at all (NDI(b), 2022, 73). Only 30% believed the government was doing enough (NDI(b), 2022, 73). The 2023 survey confirmed and deepened this trend. While 36% said the government's efforts were insufficient and 16% claimed it was doing nothing, 29% believed the government was doing enough (NDI(b), 2023, 53; NDI(c), 2023, 91). Crucially, this latter group was largely composed of Georgian Dream supporters (NDI(b), 2023, 53; NDI(c), 2023, 91). Among them, 67% said the government was doing enough, compared to only 16% who disagreed, and just 3% who said the government had done nothing (NDI(b), 2023, 53). In contrast, 68% of opposition supporters and 59% of non-affiliated respondents expressed dissatisfaction (NDI(b), 2023, 53). This partisan divide highlights the need to account for domestic political polarization when assessing the government's domestic incentives in pursuing EU integration, an issue addressed in greater depth later in this chapter.

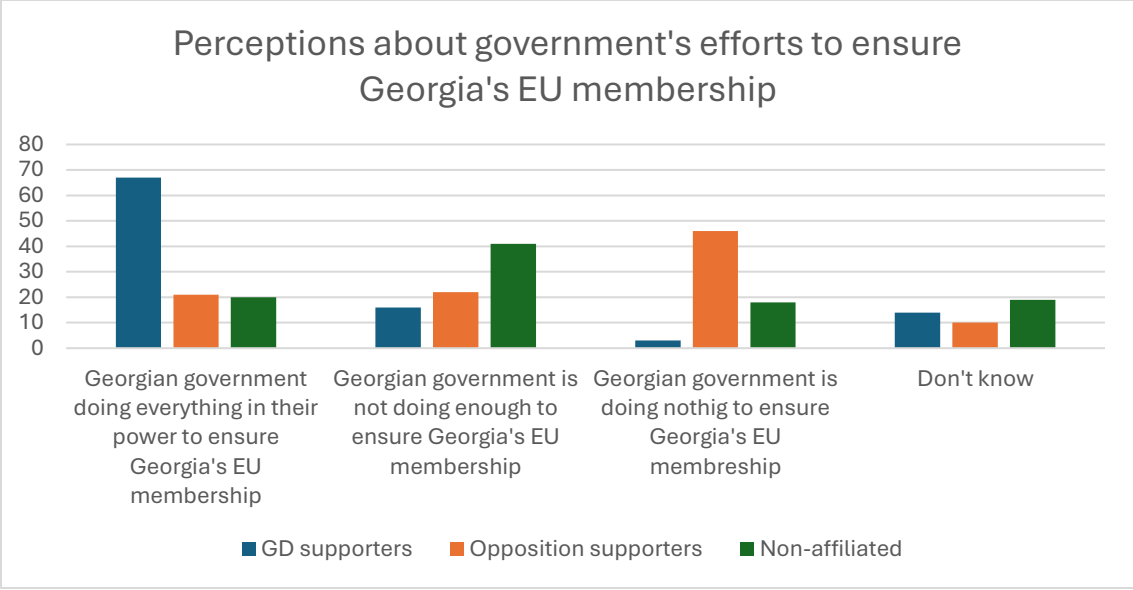


Figure 20 Perceptions of government’s efforts to ensure EU membership

Source: NDI(b), 2023, 53

Democracy remains a core value for the Georgian population, although a significant portion does not believe that Georgia is currently a functioning democracy. Once again, there is a clear divide between supporters of the ruling party and the rest of the public. Support for democracy is nearly as overwhelming as support for EU accession. In 2018, 92% of respondents said that democracy was important to them, with 59% stating it was “very important.” (NDI(b), 2021, 23). While the overall figure remained unchanged in 2021, the percentage of those who considered it “very important” declined to 49% (NDI(b), 2021, 23). Despite this strong normative support for democracy, many Georgians questioned its existence in practice. In 2021, 50% of respondents did not believe Georgia was a democracy, while 39% believed it was (NDI(b), 2021, 24). By 2023, perceptions had improved slightly, with 46% viewing Georgia as a democracy and 44% disagreeing (NDI(c), 2023, 9). However, this aggregate figure masks significant partisan differences. In 2021, 70% of Georgian Dream supporters believed the country was a democracy, compared to just 22% who disagreed (NDI(b), 2021, 25). By contrast, 74% of opposition supporters and 55% of non-affiliated respondents stated that Georgia was not a democracy (NDI(b), 2021, 25). In 2023, belief in Georgia’s democratic status rose to 75% among Georgian Dream supporters, while 60% of opposition supporters and 48% of non-affiliates continued to

disagree (NDI(c), 2023, 10). These findings demonstrate that while democratic ideals are widely embraced, political polarization strongly influences public perceptions of democratic reality.

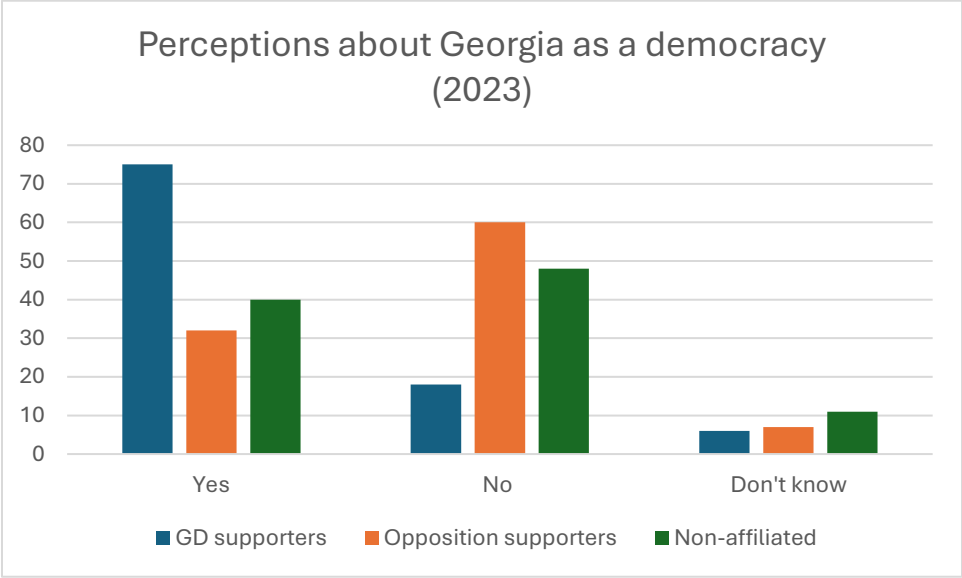


Figure 21 Perception of Georgia as a democracy

Source: NDI(c), 2023, 10

Georgia’s trade with the EU is substantial and steadily growing, but the country is not as economically dependent on the EU as other members of the Association Trio. Trade volumes between Georgia and the EU have increased significantly in recent years, primarily driven by a rise in imports from the EU. In 2016, Georgia exported goods worth €491 million to the EU and imported €1.8 billion (EC DG(c), 2024, 3). By 2023, exports had grown to €752 million, while imports had doubled to €3.6 billion (EC DG(c), 2024, 3). The only major decline in EU imports occurred in 2020, likely due to COVID-19-related disruptions (EC DG(c), 2024, 3). Although Georgian exports to the EU have increased significantly since 2016, they declined from a peak of €1 billion in 2022 (EC DG(c), 2024, 3). Georgia’s main imports from the EU include mineral products, machinery and appliances, and transport equipment, while its exports primarily consist of mineral products, chemical goods, and textiles¹. Despite the EU being Georgia’s largest trading partner, its overall share in Georgia’s foreign trade remains moderate, amounting to 20.9%¹. In addition to trade, the EU is a significant provider of financial assistance. However, due to concerns

¹ https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/georgia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20main,%E2%82%AC4.36%20billion%20in%202023

over democratic backsliding, Georgia risks losing access to €120 million in EU funding (Reuters, 2024). In sum, while economic relations with the EU are important and growing, Georgia's economy is not overwhelmingly dependent on the EU, especially when compared to Ukraine or Moldova.

Total goods: EU Trade flows and balance, annual data 2013 - 2023

Source Eurostat Comext - Statistical regime 4

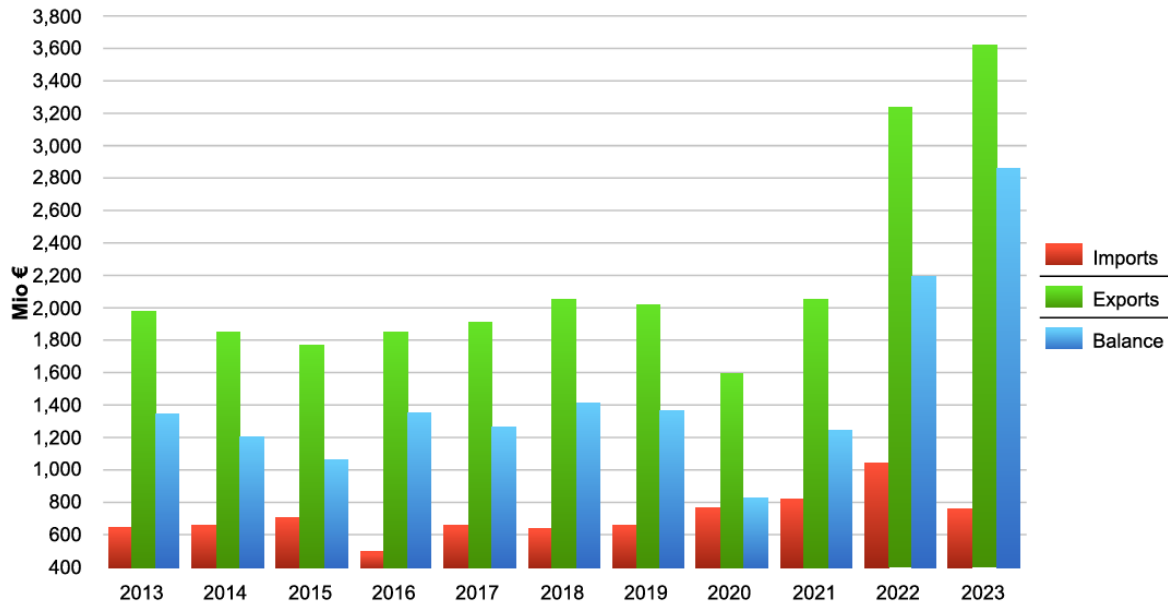


Figure 22 EU-Georgia trade in goods

Source: European Commission Directorate-General for Trade(b), 2024

While Georgia's trade with Russia is smaller than its trade with the EU, it remains significant and has continued to grow, even in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Between 2016 and 2023, Georgia's trade with Russia expanded considerably. In 2016, Georgian exports to Russia amounted to \$215 million, while imports stood at \$692 million. By 2023, exports had increased to \$657 million and imports reached \$1.74 billion. Georgia's exports to Russia were heavily concentrated in beverages, spirits, and vinegar, which accounted for 54.7% of total exports, whereas imports from Russia were dominated by oil and gas, comprising 44.5% of the total (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). Notably, energy imports from Russia grew sharply following the invasion of Ukraine: in 2021, oil and gas imports were valued at \$270 million (26.3% of total imports), but rose to \$839 million in 2022, making up 45.7% of all imports from Russia

(Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). While overall trade with Russia remains lower than with the EU, Russia ranked as Georgia’s third-largest trading partner in 2023, accounting for 11.1% of total trade¹. The sharp increase in energy imports in the same year as Russia’s aggression against Ukraine raises concerns about Georgia’s growing energy dependence on Russia. This trend stands in stark contrast to the efforts of the EU and other Association Trio states, which have sought to reduce their trade and energy ties with Russia in response to the invasion.

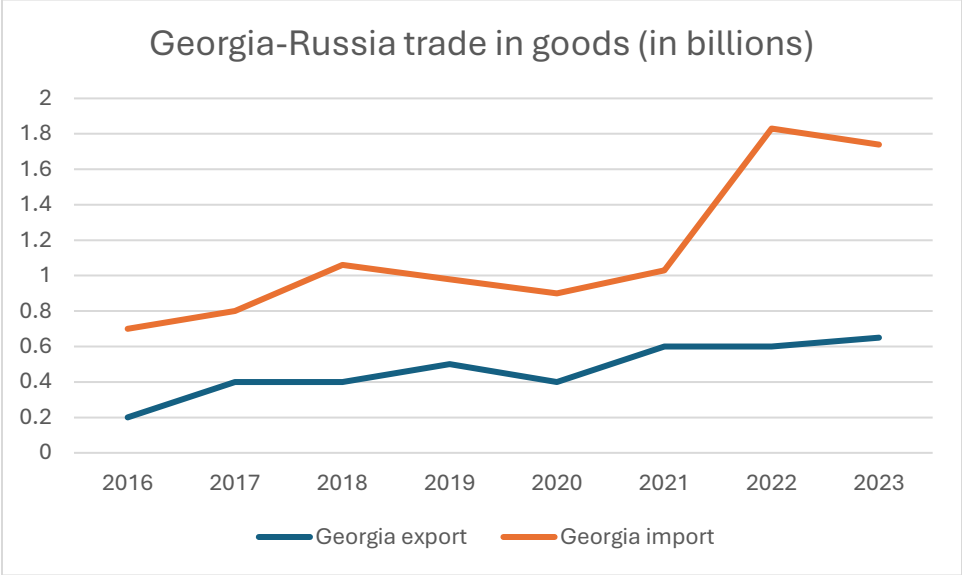


Figure 23 Georgia-Russia trade in goods

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025

Due to the absence of recent official documents outlining Georgia’s national security priorities, it is difficult to assess the government’s formal threat perceptions. The most recent national security strategy dates back to the pre-2016 period, and no equivalent document has been issued between 2016 and 2024. In this context, statements by high-ranking Georgian Dream party officials offer a limited, but revealing, insight into the government’s security narrative. Two key concepts dominate this discourse: the so-called “Global War Party” and the alleged push to open a “second front against Russia” (EDMO, 2024). These ideas have been repeatedly promoted by government and party representatives, including the Prime Minister, who has claimed that actors within the EU and the US, labelled as the “Global War Party”, are attempting to drag Georgia into a direct confrontation with Russia by opening a “second front” (IPN, 2024; IPN, 2025). The ruling party positions itself as the sole force capable of shielding Georgia from such a scenario (IPN, 2025).

Although the government has not clearly defined what the “Global War Party” is, the implications of this rhetoric are evidently anti-Western and anti-EU. While it is unlikely that officials genuinely believe these claims, such narratives appear to be strategically aimed at domestic audiences. Coupled with credible allegations of electoral manipulation, this suggests that the ruling party may perceive the EU as a traditional security threat, but as a political threat to its own survival, given the EU’s demands for democratic reforms that could undermine the party’s hold on power.

In the absence of any relevant official documents, it remains difficult to determine Georgian Dream’s perceptions of Russia, particularly given the party’s marked silence on the issue. Unlike its increasingly clear stance on the European Union, evident through public statements and the narratives advanced by party leaders, its position on Russia is far more ambiguous. The party’s 2024 election programme merely refers to a “pragmatic policy” toward Russia (OC Media, 2024), offering little insight into its actual strategic thinking. Consequently, one can only speculate whether Georgian Dream views Russia as an external threat or as a potential backer in its growing confrontation with the EU. On the one hand, Georgia’s historical experience with Russian aggression, including the 2008 war and continued support for separatist regions, suggests that the government may still perceive Russia as a threat, but avoids vocalizing this out of fear of provoking retaliation. On the other hand, given the deepening rift between Georgia and the EU, as well as Georgian Dream’s recent authoritarian turn – including the adoption of policies reminiscent of Russia’s, such as the controversial “foreign agents law” – it is plausible that the party views Moscow as a potential patron. In this scenario, silence is necessary to avoid further alienation of a domestic population already disillusioned by the government’s anti-democratic actions.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the Georgian government’s domestic incentives are not clearly aligned with the EU. Public attitudes toward the EU remain overwhelmingly positive, with strong support for both EU accession and democratic governance. On this basis alone, one might expect the government to pursue EU-oriented reforms in order to maintain electoral support. However, public opinion regarding the government’s track record complicates this assumption. The clear divide between Georgian Dream supporters and the rest of the population, opposition supporters and non-affiliates, raises questions about the government’s strategic motivations. A comparison with Moldova reveals important differences: while Moldova has also experienced polarization, the governing party there has benefited from leading the pro-reform, pro-EU camp,

which constituted a clear majority. In Georgia's case, however, the Georgian Dream party is supported by only 19% of the population according to 2023 polling, while non-affiliates comprise 47% and opposition supporters 13% (NDI(c), 2023, 73). This suggests that the government cannot secure electoral victory through its base alone. Given this, the government's de-Europeanizing actions, which have led to a deterioration in EU-Georgia relations, appear politically risky, even self-defeating. Although polling data for 2024 are unavailable, perhaps due to the "foreign agents' law", the emergence and persistence of mass protests indicate that a significant portion of the population, very likely a majority, disapprove of the government's actions and, by extension, of the government itself.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Georgian Dream government perceives further democratization, particularly as conditioned by the EU, as a threat to its political survival, with the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 possibly serving as a pivotal moment. Given the population's overwhelming support for democracy and EU accession, one might expect the government to pursue reforms aligned with these aspirations. Instead, the government has engaged in actions such as the alleged rigging of the 2024 elections and the adoption of controversial legislation, which suggest not only a disregard for democratic norms but also a fear of electoral defeat. A ruling party confident in its public support would have little incentive to undermine democratic processes. The risks taken by the government imply that it views both democratization and the EU, which actively promotes it, as existential threats. The anti-Western narratives advanced by Georgian Dream, including references to a so-called "Global War Party" and fears of opening a "second front against Russia," further reinforce this interpretation. These narratives, likely not genuinely believed by the party leadership, appear to serve a strategic purpose: gaining domestic legitimacy. In a political environment where both democracy and EU integration enjoy widespread public backing, rejecting them outright risks a severe legitimacy crisis. Thus, portraying the government as the only force capable of preventing war with Russia is likely an attempt to shift the public discourse and justify authoritarian measures. The implicit message is clear: removing Georgian Dream risks dragging the country into conflict instigated by Western actors.

It should now be evident that the current Georgian government perceives the EU, with its democratic conditions and normative expectations, as an external threat to its political survival,

with economic and security realities possibly acting as enablers of this perception. The analysis suggests that, in opinion of Georgian Dream, the process of EU accession and the associated demands for democratization pose a greater risk than widespread domestic protests and public dissatisfaction. Consequently, the government has opted to resist EU integration, even at the cost of angering its population. A key factor enabling this stance is Georgia's relatively lower economic dependency on trade with the EU compared to Ukraine and Moldova. While the EU remains Georgia's largest trading partner, the trade volume, constituting around one-fifth of Georgia's total trade, does not create overwhelming economic leverage, making it more politically feasible for the government to adopt confrontational positions. Security concerns may also play a role in shaping the government's calculus. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia is geographically isolated from the EU and shares no direct borders with member states, raising doubts about the EU's ability to provide rapid and effective support in the event of renewed Russian aggression. Whether grounded in genuine security assessments or used strategically to justify disengagement, such considerations could contribute to the government's increasing skepticism toward the EU. In sum, Georgia's current de-Europeanization appears to be driven by a misalignment of domestic incentives, rooted in the government's perception of the EU as a threat to its continued rule and shaped by both economic and geopolitical realities.

4.4 Cases comparison

As demonstrated by the case analyses, there is a significant discrepancy in the level of accession Europeanization among the Association Trio states. The evidence suggests that this variation is primarily driven by differences in the respective governments' domestic incentives. Table 2 presents a summary of the key findings of this analysis. It indicates that the most substantial divergence in domestic incentives arises from the Georgian government's perception of external threats. While there is also a notable difference in the degree of reliance on trade with the EU, as previously discussed, this factor functions more as a facilitating condition than a determining one. The following chapter offers a comparative analysis of the three Association Trio states, examining in greater detail their respective differences and commonalities.

Table 2 Results of the analysis

	Domestic incentives (public opinion)	Domestic incentives (trade)	Domestic incentives (external threats perception)	Accession Europeanization
Ukraine	Hight support for the EU alignment/No-support for Russia alignment	Hight reliance on EU trade/No reliance on Russia trade	EU as a security provider/Russia as a main threat	High level of accession Europeanization
Moldova	Majority support for the EU/Moderate support for Russia alignment	Hight reliance on EU trade/No reliance on Russia trade	EU as a security provider/Russia as a main threat	Medium level of accession Europeanization
Georgia	Hight support for the EU/ Low support for Russia alignment	Moderate reliance on EU trade/Moderate reliance on Russia trade	EU as a threat to the ruling party's political survival/Russia as a potential backer or an external threat	Stagnation and de-Europeanization

The divergence in accession Europeanization outcomes among the Association Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – is most evident in the domain of democratic development. Ukraine has shown the most significant progress, despite the extraordinary challenges posed by Russia’s full-scale invasion and the imposition of martial law. Contrary to expectations that such conditions would undermine democracy, Ukraine has deepened its commitment to democratic reforms and EU integration. Moldova, though progressing at a more moderate pace, has nonetheless remained firmly committed to democratic transformation amid persistent societal divisions and Russian interference. Importantly, the trajectory in both Ukraine and Moldova aligns with a broader commitment to European values. In stark contrast, Georgia has experienced considerable democratic backsliding. Although its pre-2022 progress was comparable, such as reforms to the Electoral Code, the post-2022 period has seen a sharp reversal, marked by de-Europeanization across democratic indicators. This shift highlights the volatility of democratic development in

fragile democracies and underscores the importance of sustained domestic alignment with EU norms. Among the three cases, Georgia stands out for having regressed from a position of relative parity to one of clear divergence. These contrasting trends point to the crucial role that domestic incentives play in sustaining or derailing accession Europeanization.

The trend observed in democratic development is mirrored in the area of rule of law, though with some variations. Ukraine has made the most notable strides in this area, implementing judicial and anti-corruption reforms that correspond with a high level of accession Europeanization. Moldova has made slower but steady progress, positioning itself at a medium level of alignment with EU rule of law standards. Georgia, once again, presents a more concerning trajectory. While notable reforms were initiated in the pre-2022 period, such as two major waves of judicial reform, these efforts have largely stalled since 2022. More troubling, specific developments, including the appointment of judges in defiance of EU recommendations, suggest a reversal rather than merely a pause in reforms. Though these instances are less severe than the democratic backsliding discussed earlier, they signal a broader erosion of Europeanization. Compared to Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia's stagnation and selective de-Europeanization set it apart as a negative outlier. These patterns reveal how domestic political choices, not merely external conditions, determine the success or failure of EU-aligned legal reform. Ultimately, the contrast between the Trio members once again reinforces the thesis that domestic incentives aligned with EU standards are essential for sustained progress in accession Europeanization, particularly in sensitive areas such as the rule of law.

In the economic dimension, the disparities between the Trio are less pronounced, though important differences persist. Ukraine has arguably implemented the most substantive reforms, especially considering the disruptions caused by the war. Despite the ongoing conflict, Ukraine has advanced privatization, improved transparency, and pursued energy sector reforms aligned with EU expectations. Moldova has made meaningful, albeit less ambitious, reforms, with the pace further hindered by regional instability. Georgia, meanwhile, began the process with the most liberalized economy due to earlier reforms under pre-2016 governments. This smaller initial misfit with EU norms reduced the scope for observable Europeanization, which helps explain the relatively modest progress in the pre-2022 period. However, this does not excuse the post-2022 de-Europeanization, such as weakening the independence of the National Bank of Georgia. Ukraine

and Moldova also experienced economic challenges and setbacks after 2022, but these were largely attributed to war-related disruptions. In Georgia's case, however, the changes appear politically motivated and part of a broader trend of democratic regression. While economic alignment has not been as volatile as in the political or legal domains, the data suggest Georgia's recent trajectory is distinct. This confirms that economic Europeanization, though less visibly divergent, is still shaped by the broader constellation of domestic incentives and political choices.

Across the Trio, public opinion remains overwhelmingly pro-EU and pro-democracy, forming a robust foundation for EU-aligned domestic incentives. In Ukraine and Georgia, support for EU accession is nearly universal, while in Moldova, it remains a majority view despite societal divisions. From a theoretical standpoint, such alignment should provide strong domestic incentives for governments to pursue EU accession and democratic reforms, since ignoring the will of the selectorate could amount to political suicide. This logic holds true in Ukraine and Moldova, where governments have embraced European integration as central to their political survival. In Georgia, however, this logic has been disrupted. The Georgian government has repeatedly acted against popular will, triggering mass protests and risking its political legitimacy. Evidence suggests that while the Georgian Dream party retains a loyal support base, this constituency is a minority and insufficient to guarantee electoral success. This raises serious questions about whether the electorate still functions as the selectorate or whether other actors, such as oligarchic interests, now hold that role. This misalignment between government action and public preference represents a fundamental break in the expected incentive structure and provides a critical explanation for Georgia's divergence in accession Europeanization outcomes. Future research should investigate the evolving nature of the selectorate in Georgia's political system.

Differences in economic dependency and perceptions of external threats further shape domestic incentives. For Ukraine and Moldova, the EU is their dominant trading partner, reinforcing a structural economic rationale for deepening EU integration. In Georgia, by contrast, the share of trade with the EU is significantly smaller, and trade with Russia has not only continued but grown since 2022. This makes the potential costs of EU disengagement comparatively lower for Georgia and weakens economic incentives for the government to align with EU standards. While not the root cause of misalignment, this economic configuration is an enabling condition that facilitates policy divergence. Even more decisive, however, are differences in threat perception. Ukraine and

Moldova both view Russia as an existential threat and frame EU accession as integral to national security, a perspective articulated in their official strategies and government discourse. Georgia, notably, has not produced any comparable document since 2016. Available evidence indicates a dramatic shift: rather than perceiving Russia as the primary threat, the Georgian government increasingly views the EU, and the liberal reforms it demands, as a threat to its own political survival. This realignment of threat perception is crucial to understanding Georgia's backsliding and represents a turning point in its Europeanization trajectory.

In conclusion, the comparison across the Association Trio demonstrates a strong correlation between domestic incentives and the success of accession Europeanization. Ukraine and Moldova have maintained domestic incentives that are strongly aligned with EU norms, resulting in sustained, if uneven, progress in accession Europeanization. Ukraine has achieved a high level of Europeanization despite unprecedented wartime challenges, while Moldova has made moderate but steady progress. Georgia initially followed a similar path but began to diverge following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This divergence coincided with a shift in the Georgian government's threat perception and a weakening of the EU's role in shaping domestic political survival. The result has been a decline in democratic and legal reforms and growing signs of de-Europeanization. The Georgian case illustrates how fragile the process of Europeanization can be when domestic incentives shift. Importantly, while public support for the EU remains high across all three countries, it is the government's perception of threats, and political survival that ultimately determines the trajectory of accession Europeanization. This reinforces the thesis's central argument: strong and consistent domestic incentives aligned with EU integration goals are essential for the success of accession Europeanization, especially in states with fragile democratic institutions.

5. Conclusion

This thesis had set out to examine the hypothesis that the alignment or misalignment of a government's domestic incentives with the European Union significantly influences the success of accession Europeanization. The results of the comparative analysis conducted across the Association Trio –Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – indicate a strong correlation between domestic incentives and success of accession Europeanization. Building on the theoretical foundation introduced by Börzel and Risse (2012), this study aimed to both test and expand her assumption beyond the Turkish case by exploring how similar dynamics unfold in other Eastern Partnership countries. The analysis found that Ukraine and Moldova, both of which demonstrated consistent EU-aligned domestic incentives – reflected in public opinion, economic interdependence with the EU, and external threat perceptions – experienced medium to high levels of accession Europeanization. In contrast, Georgia, which initially shared a comparable reform trajectory, witnessed a rapid reversal beginning in 2022. The shift in the ruling party's perception of the EU as a threat to its political survival led to a misalignment of domestic incentives, resulting in stagnation and even signs of de-Europeanization. This finding reinforced the argument that domestic political realities play a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of accession Europeanization, confirming the importance of domestic incentives in the success or failure of EU-driven reforms.

The primary objective of this thesis was to test the central hypothesis by analyzing the relationship between two core variables: accession Europeanization (the dependent variable) and domestic incentives (the independent variable). The hypothesis posited that the greater the alignment of a government's domestic incentives with the European Union, the higher the likelihood of successful accession Europeanization. Accession Europeanization was operationalized through three key indicators: democracy, rule of law, and market economy. Two of these, democracy and rule of law, were further broken down into sub-indicators. Democracy was assessed through elections, human rights, media freedom, civil society, and public administration, while rule of law was examined via judiciary reform, anti-corruption efforts, and the fight against organized crime. These indicators were analyzed using official documents published annually by the European Commission. The independent variable, domestic incentives, was also divided into three indicators: support from the electorate, economic interdependence, and perceptions of external

threats. These were assessed through data from public opinion polls, trade statistics, and either national security strategy documents or relevant public statements by ruling party officials. The underlying assumption was that when a government's domestic incentives are strongly aligned with EU expectations, meaningful progress in democratic reform, rule of law, and market liberalization, i.e. accession Europeanization, is likely to follow. Conversely, a misalignment was expected to result in stagnation or even reversal of the accession Europeanization process.

This thesis employed a cross-case comparative method using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). The selected cases were the Association Trio states – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – chosen due to their many relevant similarities but divergent outcomes. The central assumption was that this divergence could be explained by a key differentiating factor: the domestic incentives of each country's government. The three cases share numerous structural and historical similarities. All were formerly occupied by the Soviet Union and regained independence in 1991. Since then, each has faced military conflict with Russia, either through direct confrontation or via Russian-backed separatist movements – armed conflicts that continue to the present day. Politically, all three countries are widely recognized as hybrid regimes or partly free democracies. Moreover, they share a similar trajectory in their relations with the European Union: all joined the Eastern Partnership initiative and signed Association Agreements with the EU around the same time. Despite these similarities, the outcomes of their accession Europeanization efforts diverge notably. Ukraine and Moldova have shown more consistent progress, while Georgia has experienced stagnation or even regression in key areas. This thesis posits that these differing trajectories are primarily the result of varying domestic incentives. The research aimed to test this assumption, thereby contributing to a broader evaluation of the hypothesis that domestic alignment with the EU is a decisive factor in successful accession Europeanization.

The results of the analysis strongly support the underlying assumption and confirm the central hypothesis of this thesis. As posited, states in which governments' domestic incentives are strongly aligned with the European Union are more likely to experience successful accession Europeanization – characterized by democratization, the strengthening of the rule of law, and the liberalization of the economy. This expectation was borne out in the cases of Ukraine and Moldova. Both countries demonstrated high public support for the EU and EU accession, strong economic dependence on the EU, and a prevailing perception of the EU as a guarantor of security

in the face of the Russian threat. The alignment of domestic incentives led to the successful accession Europeanization, as evidenced by significant progress in democratic reforms, rule of law measures, and market liberalization. In contrast, the case of Georgia illustrated how misalignment in domestic incentives – in this case due to the external threat perceptions – can lead to stagnation or even reversal of the Europeanization process. Georgia has experienced notable democratic backsliding, alongside a marked stagnation in rule of law and market economy reforms. Instances of de-Europeanization are also observable across the latter two indicators. These findings substantiate the thesis's central claim: alignment between a government's domestic incentives and the EU is a critical determinant of the success or failure of accession Europeanization.

The findings highlight both the transformative potential and the inherent fragility of the EU's influence on candidate states. Accession Europeanization, while a powerful tool of normative and institutional convergence, remains highly contingent on domestic political contexts, particularly in fragile or hybrid regimes. The case of Georgia is especially instructive: despite years of progress, the swift retreat from EU-oriented reforms demonstrates how fragile the process can be when domestic incentives shift. In contrast, Ukraine and Moldova have continued to pursue ambitious reform agendas even under severe external pressures, including full-scale war and persistent hybrid threats from Russia. These cases underscore Börzel's (2012, 199) observation that the EU's influence can empower not only liberal democratic actors but also non-liberal or opportunistic elites. The trajectory of Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, serves as a cautionary example of how such actors may benefit from EU engagement and then turn against it when domestic incentives change. In contrast, more liberal and reformist actors, as seen in Ukraine and Moldova, appear to sustain alignment with EU norms even under challenging circumstances. This contrast suggests that the nature of domestic actors matters deeply, not just their formal willingness to pursue reforms.

To enhance the effectiveness of the EU's transformative power, greater attention must be paid to the domestic political environments of candidate states. The EU's influence, grounded in its ability to induce reforms through conditionality and normative appeal, represents a key component of its soft power. In an increasingly polarized global environment, this soft power will only become more critical. However, as this study shows, miscalculations, such as empowering non-liberal actors, can significantly undermine this influence. Therefore, the EU must move beyond working

solely with executive branches of government and engage more actively with parliaments, civil society, and other democratic institutions. Doing so could create internal checks and balances that mitigate the risks posed by autocratic tendencies within ruling parties. Additionally, ongoing and detailed assessments of domestic political dynamics, including the identification of actual selectorates and shifts in elite interests, could help the EU respond more effectively to emerging risks. A more inclusive and nuanced approach to engagement would strengthen the resilience of accession Europeanization and reduce the likelihood of democratic backsliding or de-Europeanization.

In terms of its contribution to the broader field of Europeanization research, this thesis seeks to enhance the understanding of the relationship between domestic factors and accession Europeanization. Accession Europeanization remains a relatively recent subfield within the wider Europeanization literature, which itself is still developing. As such, many aspects of the process remain insufficiently explored. As discussed in the theoretical chapter, much of the existing scholarship on accession Europeanization tends to focus primarily on the role of the European Union, particularly on instruments such as conditionality, financial incentives, and institutional engagement. In contrast, the role of domestic factors in shaping the outcomes of accession Europeanization has received comparatively less scholarly attention. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how domestic incentives influence the success or failure of accession Europeanization, thereby contributing to the refinement of existing theoretical frameworks. By testing this framework on the Association Trio states, this thesis not only offers empirical insights into new cases but also strengthens the theoretical relevance of domestic-level analysis in understanding Europeanization processes. In doing so, it offers a valuable contribution to the evolving literature on accession Europeanization.

While this thesis has contributed to the understanding of how domestic incentives affect accession Europeanization, it also opens avenues for future research. One area worth deeper investigation is the divergence between Ukraine and Moldova. Although both countries display strong alignment in domestic incentives, Ukraine has achieved a higher level of accession Europeanization. This discrepancy suggests the presence of additional factors, such as administrative capacity, elite cohesion, or geopolitical urgency, that merit closer examination. Furthermore, this study assumed that the electorate functions as the primary selectorate in all three countries, given their

classification as hybrid regimes. However, Georgia's recent political trajectory invites reconsideration of this assumption. Future research could explore whether oligarchic influence, rather than public opinion, serves as the primary driver of governmental decision-making in Georgia. An in-depth single-case study could provide critical insight into how non-democratic selectorates shape domestic incentives. Finally, this analytical framework could be applied to other regions, such as the Western Balkans, to determine whether similar patterns hold. In sum, while this thesis confirms a crucial link between domestic incentives and the success of accession Europeanization, it also underscores the complexity of this relationship and the need for continued research on the multifaceted process of Europeanization.

Bibliography:

Börzel, A. Tanja, 2003, “How the European Union Interacts with its Member States”, *Political Science Series* 93, Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna

Börzel, Tanja, 2010, “The Transformative Power of Europe Reloaded: the Limits of External Europeanization”, *KFG Working Paper Series* 11, Freie Universität Berlin

Börzel, A. Tanja, Risse, Thomas, 2012, "When Europeanisation Meets Diffusion: Exploring New Territory", *West European Politics* 35 (1), 192-207

Börzel, A. Tanja, Soyaltin, Digidem, 2012, "Europeanization in Turkey. Stretching a Concept to its Limits?" *KFG Working Paper Series* 36, Freie Universität Berlin

Center for Insight in Survey Research, 2021, “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova”, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IRI-2021-Moldova-Poll-Sep16-Nov1.pdf>

Center for Insight in Survey Research, 2022, “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova”, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Moldova-Poll_Public-Release.pdf

Center for Insight in Survey Research, 2023, “National Survey of Moldova”, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Survey-Moldova-2023_CISR.pdf

Center for Insight in Survey Research, 2024, “National Survey of Moldova”, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/NationalSurveyMoldova2024.pdf>

Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020, “National Security Strategy of Ukraine: HUMAN SECURITY – COUNTRY SECURITY”, September 14, No. 392/2020, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037> (last viewed on February 8, 2025)

De Mesquita, Bruce Bueno, Smith, Alastair, Siverson, M. Randolph, Morrow D. James, 2005, “The logic of political survival.” MIT press

European Commission, 2016, “Association Implementation Report on Georgia”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, <https://3dcftas.eu/library/documents/air-on-ge-2016>

European Commission, 2017, “Association Implementation Report on Georgia”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/35362_en

European Commission(a), 2019, “Association Implementation Report on Ukraine”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/association-implementation-report-ukraine-2019_en

European Commission(b), 2019, “Association Implementation Report on Georgia”, *Joint Staff Working Document*,
https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2019_association_implementation_report_georgia.pdf

European Commission(a), 2020, “Association Implementation Report on Ukraine”, *Joint Staff Working Document*,
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020_ukraine_association_implementation_report_final.pdf

European Commission(b), 2020, “Association Implementation Report on Georgia”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2020-association-implementation-report-georgia_en

European Commission(a), 2021, “Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-staff-working-document-association-implementation-report-republic-moldova_en

European Commission(b), 2021, “Association Implementation Report on Georgia”, *Joint Staff Working Document*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2021-association-implementation-report-georgia_en

European Commission(a), 2022, “Association Implementation Report on Ukraine”, *Joint Staff Working Document*,
<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Association%20Implementation%20Report%20on%20Ukraine%20-%20Joint%20staff%20working%20document.pdf>

European Commission(b), 2022, “Commission Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union”, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-moldovas-application-membership-european-union_en

European Commission(c), 2022, “Commission Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union”, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European council and the Council*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en

European Commission(a), 2023, “Ukraine 2023 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/ukraine-report-2023_en

European Commission(b), 2023, “Moldova 2023 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/moldova-report-2023_en

European Commission(c), 2023, “Georgia 2023 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2023_en

European Commission(a), 2024, “Ukraine 2024 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/ukraine-report-2024_en

European Commission(b), 2024, “Moldova 2024 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/moldova-report-2024_en

European Commission(c), 2024, “Georgia 2024 Report”, *Commission staff working document*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2024_en

European Commission Directorate-General for Trade(a), 2024, “European Union, Trade in goods with Ukraine”,

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_ukraine_en.pdf

European Commission Directorate-General for Trade(b), 2024, “The EU and Moldova”, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/92191a54-ce6f-4b22-916b-599db7ac4013_en?filename=EU-Moldova-factsheet-2024.pdf

European Commission Directorate-General for Trade(c), 2024, “European Union, Trade in goods with Georgia”,

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_georgia_en.pdf

European Digital Media Observatory, 2024, “The fearmongering “Global War Party” and other tools of the Georgian ruling party’s propaganda to discredit the US and the EU”, October 14,

<https://edmo.eu/publications/the-fearmongering-global-war-party-and-other-tools-of-the-georgian-ruling-partys-propaganda-to-discredit-the-us-and-the-eu/> (last viewed on February 25, 2025)

Eurostat, 2022, “Ukraine-EU- international trade in goods statistics”, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/78214.pdf>

Grabbe, Heather, 2002, “Europeanization goes east: power and uncertainty in the EU accession process.”, *The politics of Europeanization* 27

Grabbe, Heather, 2011, “How does Europeanization affect CEE governance Conditionality, diffusion and diversity”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 8 (6), 1013-1031

Gordadze, Thornike, 2024, “From “Free Money for All!” to “SOS! LGBT are Coming!” - Georgian Dream's Drift from Social Populism to Nativist Ethnonationalism”, *Geopolitics* 10, September 4 (last viewed on April 17, 2025)

IPN, 2024, “Irakli Kobakhidze - You will not find any statement where we say that the US or the EU have seized Credit Suisse funds”, October 2, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/814623-irakli-kobaxize-tkven-ver-naxavt-vercert-gancxadebas-sadac-chven-vambobt-rom-kredit-suisis-tanxebi-ashsh-s-an-evrokavshirs-dakavebuli-akvs> (last viewed on February 25, 2025)

IPN, 2025, “Irakli Kobakhidze - The scenario of 1921 was not repeated in Georgia, which is thanks to the government”, February 23, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/831135-irakli-kobaxize-sakartveloshi-1921-clis-scenari-ar-ganmeorda-rac-xelisuplebis-damsaxurebaa> (last viewed on February 25, 2025)

Kane, John, Patapan, Haig, 2012, “Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Legitimacy”, *The Democratic Leader: How Democracy Defines, Empowers and Limits its Leaders*, 30-48

Maliszewska, Maryla, 2004, “EU Enlargement: Benefits of the Single Market Expansion for Current and New Member States”, *Center for Social and Economic Research*

Meckstroth, Theodore W, 1975, “Most different systems” and “most similar systems” a study in the logic of comparative inquiry”, *Comparative political studies* 8 (2), 132-157

Mission of Ukraine to the European Union, 2021, “Statistics of trade between Ukraine and the EU”, <https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/2633-relations/torgovelnno-ekonomichne-spivrobitnictvo-ukrayina-yes/pokazniki-torgovelnno-ekonomichnogo-spivrobitnictva-ukrayina-yes#:~:text=Ukraine%20%E2%80%93%20EU%20trade%20in%20goods,for%2023%2C5%20bln%20USD> (last viewed on February 8, 2025)

Mission of Ukraine to the European Union, 2021, “Ukraine-EU Association Agreement”, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/about-ukraine/european-integration/eu-ukraine-association-agreement#:~:text=The%20AA%20provides%20for%20a,pertinent%20to%20EU%2DUkraine%20Relations> (last viewed on February 8, 2025)

Moisé, Gian M., 2021, “Populism in Moldova’s Informal Political System”, *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 5 (2), 1-26

National Democratic Institute, 2016, “Public attitudes in Georgia”, *Results of a June 2016 survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute, 2017, “Public attitudes in Georgia”, *Results of a April 2017 survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute, 2018, “Public attitudes in Georgia”, *Results of December 2018 survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2019, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Democratic Institute(b), 2019, “Public attitudes in Georgia”, *Results of April 2019 survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2020, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Telephone Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2021, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Democratic Institute(b), 2021, “Taking Georgians' Pulse”, *Key Findings From December 2021 Telephone Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2022, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Telephone Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Democratic Institute(b), 2022, “Taking Georgians' Pulse”, *Findings from December 2022 face to face survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2023, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Telephone Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Democratic Institute(b), 2023, “Taking Georgians' Pulse”, *Findings from March 2023 telephone survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(c), 2023, “Taking Georgians' Pulse”, *Findings from October-November 2023 face to face survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

National Democratic Institute(a), 2024, “Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition”, *Nationwide Telephone Survey*, <https://www.ndi.org/ukraine-research>

National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, “Vision of the President of the Republic of Moldova”,
https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20SSN_2023_En.pdf

Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/ukr?depthSelector=HS2Depth&dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2019&measureBilateralTradeSelector=vizValueOption1>

OC Media, 2024, “Georgian Dream promises ‘pragmatic policy’ with Russia in election programme”, October 8, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-promises-pragmatic-policy-with-russia-in-election-programme/> (last viewed on April 30, 2025)

Olsen, P. Johan, 2002, “The many faces of Europeanization”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (5), 921-952

Petrov, Roman, 2016, “Implementation of Association Agreements Between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia: Legal and Constitutional Challenges”, *Political and Legal Perspectives of the EU Eastern Partnership Policy*, 153-167

Place, Joseph J., 2020, “Zelensky and Servant of the People: New Party, Old Problems – An Examination of Volodymyr Zelensky's Ideology and Progress”, *Analyzing Political Tensions Between Ukraine, Russia, and the EU*, 270-297

Piotrowski, Sławomir, 2018, “Security policy of the Baltic states and its determining factors”, *Security and Defence Quarterly* 22(5), 47-70

Radaelli, M. Claudio, 2003, “The Europeanization of Public Policy”, *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford: OUP, 27-56

Rainsford, Sarah, Gozzi, Laura, 2024, Moldova says 'Yes' to pro-EU constitutional changes by tiny margin, BBC, 21 October, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wnr5qdx7o> (last viewed on February 13, 2025)

Reuters, 2024, “Georgia to lose 121 million euros in EU funding over 'democratic backsliding', says EU delegation”, October 8, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-lose-121-million-euros-eu-funding-over-democratic-backsliding-says-eu-2024-10-08/> (last viewed on February 25, 2025)

Savage, Jesse D., 2020, “Political Survival and the Surrender of Sovereignty”, *Political Survival and Sovereignty in International Relations*, 21-48

Schimmelfennig, Frank, 2015, “Europeanization beyond Europe”, *Living Reviews in European Governance* 10 (1)

Schimmelfennig, Frank, Sedelmeier, Ulrich, 2020, "The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the external incentives model revisited.", *Journal of European public policy* 27 (6), 814-833

Sydoruk, Tetiana, Tyshchenko, Dmytro, 2018, “A Review of the Eastern Partnership after Ten Years: the Need to Reconsider its Efficacy”, *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 18(2), 213-239, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-58966-9>

Trade and Economic Security, 2024, “EU trade relations with Moldova. Facts, figures and latest developments.”, <https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova>

Way, Lucan A., 2022, “Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine: Democratic Moments in the Former Soviet Union”, *Democracy in Hard Places*, 128-160

Yanchenko, Kostiantyn, Zulianello, Mattia, 2024, “Not fighting corruption, but defeating it’: the populism of Zelensky’s Servant of the People in comparative perspective”, *European Societies* 26 (2), 253–278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2203214>

Yilmaz, Gözde, 2016, “From Europeanization to De-Europeanization: The Europeanization Process of Turkey in 1999–2014”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24 (1), 86-100

Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public

I, Nikita Hakijainen,

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the digital archives of the University of Tartu until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

Europeanization and Domestic Incentives: the Case of the Association Trio,

supervised by Piret Ehin;

2. grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright;

3. am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2;

4. confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

Nikita Hakijainen

19/05/2025