Eastern Journal of European Studies
DOI: 10.47743/ejes-2025-SI11 • November 2025 • VOLUME **16**, (**SI**) SPECIAL ISSUE

War in Ukraine, transformation of perceptions in the EU's geopolitics and possibility of sectoral integration of Georgia into the European energy and transportation policies

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Abstract: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 disrupted the post–Cold War European security order and forced the European Union to recalibrate both its foreign policy instruments and its enlargement strategy. In response, the EU adopted eighteen packages of sanctions against Russia and reframed enlargement as a geopolitical necessity rather than a purely technocratic process. This article examines how these shifts affect the integration prospects of Georgia, a country whose strategic position in the Black Sea region has gained new relevance for the EU's security architecture. The research asks how sectoral or staged integration can function as a realistic pathway for Georgia's gradual accession in a context where full compliance with democratic conditionality remains uneven and the broader geopolitical environment is volatile. The article argues that sectoral integration—particularly in domains related to connectivity, energy transit, and critical infrastructure—offers a mutually beneficial framework that aligns Georgia's geostrategic assets with the EU's evolving security priorities without reducing enlargement to a single policy dimension such as energy security. By placing Georgia at the center of the analysis, the study contributes to debates on geopolitically driven enlargement and the future design of differentiated integration mechanisms.

Keywords: EU integration, sectoral integration, geopolitics, Black Sea, Georgia

Introduction

Since the Cold War's end, Europe's reliance on Russian energy has grown steadily over the decades. European nations created a hierarchy within their energy system: "Keep the Americans out, the Russians in, and the Europeans above." During the 1990s and 2000s, Russia invested billions in modernising Soviet-era pipelines through Ukraine and built new direct transit routes to Europe, such as Nord Stream 1 and 2, and South Stream, to supply European markets. These pipelines made Russia the primary energy supplier for many Europeans, despite U.S.

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criticisms. For years, infrastructure like these transit lines supplied over 50% of EU energy imports from Russia, with some countries relying on Russia for over 90% of their energy. Meanwhile, other potential sources like Azerbaijan and Central Asian nations, along with their transit routes, were considered "alternative suppliers and transit corridors", often becoming part of geopolitical strategies involving Russia.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 ended the era of partnership between Russia and the European community in security (including energy supply and economic relations) that had been based on norms and institutions. The primacy of power and new lines of confrontation returned to the European region. In response to the Kremlin's aggressive war on Ukraine, the EU and other Western partners imposed twelve packages of sanctions against Russia, effectively severing all economic and trade links between the EU and Russia. Russian high-ranking officials subsequently announced that the old relations with the West would not be restored, marking the collapse of decades-long bilateral and multilateral economic and trade partnerships.

Looking ahead, Azerbaijani and Central Asian (Kazakh-Turkmen) resources are expected to largely replace Russian oil and gas in the European Union's energy use. This change will naturally boost the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus-Black Sea energy transit routes, which were developed as an alternative pathway despite long-standing Russian opposition. In addition to energy supply, the Black Sea-South Caucasus area is gaining importance as a transit hub for goods, functioning as the "Middle Corridor" of the New Silk Road connecting East and West.

The South Caucasus region's potential to transform into a major energy and goods transit corridor for Europe presents significant challenges for both the EU and its EU membership candidate, Georgia. One of Georgia's key strategic objectives is to establish a significant link in the Black Sea-South Caucasus Transit Corridor through infrastructure improvements, including the construction of the Anaklia Deep Water Port. The reorientation of main energy and trade transit routes from north to south, toward the Black Sea-South Caucasus, would significantly impact the EU's enlargement strategy. This could accelerate Georgia's EU membership process, as through Georgia's accession, the European Union would acquire a purely *"European Corridor"* for reliable transportation of Caspian oil and natural gas, as well as cargo from Central Asia, Iran (once its nuclear issues are resolved similarly to or more comprehensively than in 2015), and China.

The coincidence of the EU's geopolitical interests, which are currently one of the strongest drivers for the EU's enlargement, and Georgia's EU integration aspirations might be a factor in encouraging staged integration, starting with pooling the energy and transportation policies of the EU and Georgia, which might have several outcomes:

- starting sectoral integration in the energy transit and transportation would align Georgia with the EU's CFSP,

- would intensify regional cooperation for EU membership between Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova,
- will create a sustainable, secure, and diverse energy supply system, which is important for the stability and economic development of EU member and candidate countries from the Black Sea Region
- will support the acceleration of regional cooperation between the Black Sea EU and candidate countries, which was the main idea of BSEC, but because of Russia's destructive position, this task was not fully realized.
- will have a spillover effect on another policy area, and
- will strengthen strategic dialogue within the EPC, between candidates, EU Member States, and institutions.

1. Retrospective and theoretical approach of gradual/staged integration

Gradual integration by sectors has been one of the main ideas and tools of European integration since the 1950s, successfully explained by neo-functionalists when six European States started creating communities - ECSC, an economic pool based on the customs Union, and EURATOM. Even the "Founder fathers" of the EU were convinced that integration on a supranational basis in the several sectors must be in a gradual manner to support the progressive dynamism of the integration process (that is why gradual and sectoral integration was advocated by Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman - "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to the one a single plan…" Schuman declaration, 1950). Gradual integration from sector to sector, or "sectoralism," was always an actual issue during the other stages of European integration.

Theoretically, three types of integration are identified: sectoral, vertical, and horizontal. According to Frank Schimmelfennig and Berthold Rittberger, *sectoral integration* refers to a process through which new policy areas or sectors are becoming increasingly regulated at the EU level. *Vertical integration* refers to the distribution of competencies between EU institutions in integrated policy sectors.

> Horizontal integration refers to the territorial extension of sectoral and vertical integration. When we are writing about horizontal integration, we most commonly refer to 'EU enlargement', the process whereby new states subject themselves to the acquis communautaire (the body of primary and secondary EU law). Yet, horizontal integration also comprises instances that do not reach the level of full EU membership, such as association or trade agreements between the EU and individual states or groups of states. Even among EU member states, horizontal integration is not homogeneous: for instance, some EU member states have negotiated 'opt-outs' from the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) or have not joined the Schengen regime of passport-free travel" (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006).

On the other hand, the EU extends its membership base to non-EU countries that strive to become part of the several EU policies. In the 1980s, European politicians and academicians introduced a different model of integration. For instance, in the 1980s, several politicians (Margaret Thatcher, John Major) and academicians developed the idea of sectoral integration between EEC member states as an alternative to the Supranational European integration, which Norway and Switzerland refused to accept. This type of sectoral integration was offered to the members and non-EEC European states for a deep integration in the specific spheres intentionally chosen by them (Agreement on the European Economic Area extends the EU internal market to Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein; Non-EU participants of Schengen Zone - Norway and Switzerland, the agreement between the EU and Switzerland on land transport).

The centre presented the concept of gradual integration by different approaches and terminology for European policy studies and the European Policy Centre. The paper presented by Michael Emerson sets out to debate a potential operational template model to help explore options for a *"Staged Accession"* to EU membership. It concludes that

> the EU's institutional structure could well accommodate a regime of progressive, conditional, and staged participation by states aiming at full membership, as an alternative to the current binary 'in' or 'out' model" (Emerson et al., 2021, p. 4). "Starting with initial accession (based on a functioning association agreement and moderate ratings for cluster averages), candidates with each further step (Intermediate accession stage, New Member State stage, Conventional membership) receive better access to EU-funding (already in stage 3 100% of conventional membership) and more substantial participation in the institutions with each step taken (Emerson et al., 2021, p. 9).

During several decades, strategy and conditionality of the EEC/EU horizontal enlargement were characterised by permanent changes across different stages of the accession process and between different groups of enlargement applications (Geteva, 2015, p. 3). For instance, during the first enlargement that took place in the 1970s, the only condition for membership was the "European identity" and respect for fundamental principles, norms, and values, which was set by the "Fathers" of European integration on an early stage of cooperation. According to article 237 of the Rome treaty, *"any European State may apply to become a member of the Community (...)*" (Treaty of Rome, 1957). During the next enlargement, conditionality was changed. In April 1978, the European Council imposed additional conditions by stating that *"(...) respect for and maintenance of representative democracy and human rights in each member state are essential elements of membership in the European Communities(...)"* (Council of the European Communities, 1978). In 1993, the EU adopted three criteria for membership, which still present the main conditionality for integration into the EU. The EU enlargement is technically based on the stage-structured conditionality model at present, which identifies four distinct stages: "Pre-Negotiation Stage; Negotiation Stage; Accession Stage, and Post-Accession Stage. However, Global and regional political transformations significantly affect the EU and its horizontal and Vertical integration processes" (Geteva, 2015).

Figure 1. Stage-structured conditionality model

Pre- Negotiation Stage	Negotiation Stage	Accession Stage	Post-Accession Stage
I. Conditions: • Conditions for applying for membership; • Conditions for opening accession negotiations; • Additional country-specific conditions **II. Incentive Structure** **1. Rewards:** 1.1. Accession Advancement Rewards: • Providing Membership Perspective; • Grating Potential Candidate Status; • Signing an Association Agreement (AA) and Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA); • Implementing AA and SAA; • Granting Candidate country status; • Credible membership perspective; **1.2. Financial Rewards** **2. Threats** **2.2. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions **III. Monitoring**	I. **Conditions**: • Copenhagen Criteria; • Open Benchmarks; • Interim benchmarks; • Closing Benchmarks; **II. Incentive Structure** **1. Rewards:** **1.1. Accession Advancement Rewards:** • Open Chapters; • Closing Chapters; • Credible Membership Perspective • Completing Accession Negotiations; • Signing Accession Treaty **1.2 Financial Rewards** **2. Threats** **2.1. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions **III. Monitoring**	**I. Conditions**: • Copenhagen Criteria; • Areas of Serious Concern **II. Incentive Structure** **1. Rewards:** **1.1. Accession Advancement Rewards:** • Treaty Ratification • Accession **1.2 Financial Rewards** **2. Threats** **2.1. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions **III. Monitoring**	**I. Conditions**: • Individual Country-Specific Benchmark **II. Incentive Structure** **1. Rewards:** 1.1. Accession Advancement Rewards 1.2. Financial Rewards **2. Threats** **2.1. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions • Economic safeguard clause • Internal Market safeguard clause • JHA safeguard clause **III. Monitoring**

Source: Authors' representation based on Geteva (2015)

2. Transformation of EU enlargement conditionality considering external factors, security shocks and crises. The Russo-Ukrainian war case

During the Cold War, the horizontal integration of the European Economic Community (EEC), or enlargement of the EU after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was significantly influenced by global or regional military, political, economic, and international events. According to the Eli Geteva, external factors always have the power to shape the development of the EU enlargement conditionality by reflecting on the influence of external pressures caused by security shocks or crises (Geteva, 2015, p. 206). After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the

EU enlargement and accession process of potential candidates' countries were mainly considered in the administrative-technical aspects and motivated by geopolitical ones and the historical mission to "unify Europe" (Jean Monnet). However, after Croatia's integration, the EU enlargement process has roughly slowed down over the past nine years. The prospect of the next enlargement was simply vague. Because the countries of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region were not fully ready for EU membership, there was no favourable geopolitical situation for their rapid integration due to Russia's negative position on the Enlargement of Euro-Atlantic Institutions to the East. It is worth mentioning that after the so-called "Big Bang" enlargement of the EU in 2005, Russia became aggressive regarding the movement of Euro-Atlantic institutions to the East, towards Russia's traditional spheres of influence, which is known as the "near abroad". That is why, after the integration of Balkan countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and finally Croatia) the question of joining the European Union or NATO by the countries of the Western Balkans and "Eastern Trio" (Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova) was placed under the so-called "informal veto" from the Kremlin. The revitalisation of the enlargement process was caused by the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, which potentially challenged European security architecture, EU policies, and enlargement strategy in general.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 ended the post-bipolar security architecture of Europe, which was based on collective international institutions, liberal norms, principles, and cooperation frameworks established after 1991. Over the past 30 years, Europe's security architecture has faced one of its most severe crises, leading to significant changes and continuing to drive transformations in the security order and Euro-Atlantic institutions. These changes include emergency enlargement to the North, such as the Baltics, and to the Western Balkans and Black Sea region near Russian borders—areas historically within the Kremlin's sphere of influence known as "near abroad" (Bazhunaishvili & Gorgiladze, 2023). That is why, in the very critical moment of the Russian military operations in Ukraine, EU institutions adopted a decision to open membership doors for the "Eastern Partnership" countries (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) and for the Western Balkans, where Russia traditionally have a strong influence.

It is essential that the Russian Invasion of Ukraine pushes the EU to revitalise the enlargement based on geopolitical and security considerations, as it was declared in the Granada Declaration 2023 of the EU Council. The declaration underlined that "*Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity*" (European Council, 2023). However, besides the fact that the EU revitalised the enlargement process and set out a date of 2030 for opening membership doors for aspirant countries, according to the technocratic perspective of normative approaches, most of the EU's membership candidate countries across the Western Balkans and Black Sea region are not ready to fulfil all stages of accession and become conventional members of the EU. Aspirant countries with a lack of economic and infrastructure developments and a lack of so-called "fundamentals" (Criteria of Copenhagen) need a more complex approach to maintain their integration process. Unlike the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, the candidate countries — including the Western Balkans and the Eastern trio — are progressing slowly toward EU membership, hindered by both external and internal challenges. Obstacles are present on all fronts:

- Weak developments in economic and social areas;
- Lack of stability of democratic institutions or rollback in the democratization process (current case of Georgia);
- Slow progress in the area of Europeanization and harmonisation with European laws and regulations;
- Slow pace of development of strategic infrastructure.

In such circumstances, from a European perspective, it is not enough to make a political decision based only on the geopolitical aspect, but to accelerate the accession process into the EU. The same Granada declaration (2023) of the EU Council argues that

> looking ahead to the prospect of a further enlarged Union, both the EU and future Member States need to be ready. Aspiring members need to step up their reform efforts, notably in the area of the rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU (European Council, 2023).

It is necessary to develop flexible strategies based on normative and political approaches that will help candidate countries take more effective steps in the integration process. The EU needs to develop and propose to the aspirant countries a more flexible approach that will effectively respond to the geopolitical challenges of enlargement, will not undermine the conditionality (normative principle) of enlargement as well, and at the same time will effectively maintain the dynamics of enlargement. In this light, sectoral integration could be identified as a different strategy that can be adopted regarding those fields (i.e. trade, climate, energy, research, health, and foreign and security policy, etc.) in which the EU and the member candidate country would be able to deepen the integration process by fulfilling the required acquis. Moreover, sectoral integration might have "spillover" effects, and integration will occur in other areas, which will finally help the candidate countries to become ready for full membership. In this case, the neo-functional theory about the spillover would acquire a new turn in light of the enlargement of the EU and the integration of less developed countries in the Union. Thus, the Russian invasion of Ukraine drastically changed not only the EU Security and enlargement agenda, but it is also possible to transform EU enlargement conditionality too.

Thus, sectoral integration may serve not only as a tool for deepening integration among EU member states, but also as an effective mechanism for addressing strategic challenges during the enlargement process. This approach becomes particularly pertinent when an EU membership candidate country (EU MCC) is not, according to normative criteria, fully prepared to achieve full membership within the anticipated timeframe. In such circumstances, geopolitical imperatives, political considerations, and the strategic interest in maintaining integration momentum with the EU MCC necessitate the continued advancement of integration through sector-specific modalities. Generally, it can be presented as a political decision rather than a normative approach for successful integration. Unlike staged integration, which is more structured and cadenced, sequential, based on more technocratic approaches and integration conditionalities, sectoral integration might be more diffuse and motivated by geopolitical considerations and external factors, and by the capacity of the EU membership candidate country, as well, to ensure integration requirements in mutually selected policy fields.

However, it is a fact that all the EU candidate countries of the "Eastern trio" are different due to their geopolitical situation, capacity, and development. Considering this difference, it is important to define a clear strategy by both the EU and the candidate country, in which the sectors will be effective to start sectoral integration and desirable to ensure the effects of spillover on other areas. Considering Georgia's geopolitical situation in the Black Sea-South Caucasus region, its transit capacity of energy and goods creates geopolitical aspects for the EU to maintain a sectoral integration process in the energy and transportation sectors.

3. Challenges and changes in the EU's geopolitics of energy supply. Black Sea and South Caucasus - from alternative to major energy supply and transit status?

After the 12-round sanctions imposed on Russia due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the decades-long bilateral and multilateral relations between Russia and the EU in strategic economic, political, military, and cultural fields have collapsed (Bazhunaishvili & Gvalia, 2023, p. 238). The consequences of sanctions and "strategic divorce" from Russia in the energy supply area appeared immediately. According to the European Commission's quarterly report on European gas markets,

> Russian pipeline gas imports were down by 74% in Q3 2022 (through Belarus by 96%, via Nord Stream 1 by 85 %, through Ukraine by 63 %, only increasing via the Turk Stream, by 21 %), year-on-year. In January-November 2022, Russian pipeline gas imports to the EU decreased by 69 Bm^3 [1]. year-on-year; considering the increase in Russian LNG imports of 4.5 Bm^3, total gas imports from Russia were down by 64 Bm^3. At the same time, non-Russian LNG

[1] Billion M^3.

imports increased by 45 Bm^{3,} and pipeline imports other than from Russia rose by 19 Bm^{3} (Boehm & Wilson, 2023, p. 4).

Parallel to the gas import cuts from Russia also declined the Primary Energy Transit Hub, which was run from Ukraine to Europe. Consequently, the EU's energy security policies and approaches are being significantly challenged. In response to the changed geopolitical reality and disabused safe and stable dependence on Russia's energy imports, the EU was forced to design new energy security strategies in an emergency manner to ensure its member states have a reliable, diversified, and sufficient supply of energy resources. To gain energy independence and security, the EU has to deal with several challenges such as:

1. *Green Deal* - developing alternative energy to reduce gas emissions by 55% by 2030 (the so-called Green deal). But before achieving this task, EU and its economic development still depend on hydrocarbons. That is why the energy security of the EU still needs to develop alternative energy supply and transit capacity, mainly in two dimensions: medium and long-term supply (Boehm & Wilson, 2023, p. 8).
2. *Import of electricity instead of natural gas or LNG* - to reduce natural gas imports, the EU encourages developing new energy transit projects, such as electricity supply infrastructure from Azerbaijan to Europe via Georgia and the Black Sea.
3. *Strategic change of "energy supply geography"* - Presumably, to a large extent, in the energy supplies of the European Union, Russian oil and gas will be replaced by Caspian and (Azerbaijan) and Central Asian (Kazakh-Turkmen) hydrocarbons.

According to Szymon Kardaś's research on the EU's Energy politics, in the first year of Russia's war on Ukraine, the EU and its member states concluded around 100 energy cooperation agreements, memoranda of understanding, and road maps in the area of energy cooperation, environment, and security. Most of these agreements were concluded with reliable old and new partners having the largest reserves, most longstanding suppliers of fossil fuels with transportation infrastructures and capacity for secure delivery, and effective tools of environmental protection. The list of contracts is: with 17 agreements, the United States companies are top of the list, then follow Azerbaijan and Norway with 9-9 agreements each, 8 with Qatar, and 7 with Algeria (Kardaś, 2023, p. 2). According to the statistics published by the EU Commission, in 2024, the major supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the European Union was the United States, ahead of Qatar, Algeria, and Russia. The US is one of the biggest manufacturers of LNG and at the same time it is delivering by sea and does not rely on existing pipeline infrastructure, which is more reliable (after Russia's invasion on Ukraine there are several incidents when Russian commercial vessels were suspected of damaging submarine pipelines and strategically important cables) However, global LNG markets are unstable due to several factors, especially for volatile markets, periodic swings of prices conditioned with political tensions, armed conflicts and sanctions in the area of LNG-producing or transportation areas and limited ability of LNG production capacity vs demand on global markets. For these reasons, LNG typically tends to be more expensive for Europeans than traditional pipeline supplies (Boehm & Wilson, 2023, p. 5). Azerbaijan is becoming another important supplier of natural gas and liquefied natural gas to the European Union, having been perceived as a complementary supplier to the EU, compared with Russia over the past decades. After Russia started an aggressive war against Ukraine, and Western sanctions came in effect, Baku began sending more gas to the EU. In a very short time in the energy diversification strategy of the European Union, Azerbaijan became a reliable regional supplier, and, in the European strategic perceptions, Caspian and Central Asian energy sources acquire the status of “major” sources, instead of “alternative” as they were during the decades when EU-Russia were at the top of their strategic economic relations.

In July 2022, during the high-level visit of the EU delegation in Baku, the president of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijan’s president Ilham Aliyev signed a memorandum of understanding and agreed to double gas supplies to at least 20 bcm by 2027 through the Southern gas corridor. During the visit, President von der Leyen delivered her speech and emphasised the importance of this deal. She highlighted that with this agreement, the EU opened a new chapter with Azerbaijan in energy cooperation, calling him a key partner and an effective tool to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022). Moreover, calling Azerbaijan a key partner of the EU means considering not only the gas and oil sources but also an important part of the sea and land transit routes in the Caspian and Eastern part of the South Caucasus, heading from Central Asia. As Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan become more open for Western markets, the securitisation of Black Sea – South Caucasus and Caspian Sea transit routes is acquiring more geopolitical significance not only for the EU, but for the entire Euro-Atlantic region as well.

In addition to abundant hydrocarbons and transit capacity, Azerbaijan can offer the EU other forms of energy, such as electricity, which is cleaner, cheaper, and faster to deliver. Alongside gas imports from Azerbaijan—most of which are used for electricity generation (gas-fired power plants produce 20-25% of electricity)—European and Azerbaijani leaders have developed a more effective strategy: the so-called “Green energy deal”. This plan involves developing gas-fired and renewable energy plants in the South Caucasus countries, generating electricity in Azerbaijan and transmitting it to the EU through strategic electricity grids via overhead, underground, and submarine cables through Georgia and the Black Sea. The concept of transmitting electricity by laying high-voltage cables on the sea floor was suggested in 2017, but scepticism slowed its progress. It was only after the outbreak of war in Ukraine that the effort sped up. The Black Sea Electric Cable, with a capacity of 1 GW, will connect Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary using overhead and submarine cables, grids, and infrastructures. Ultimately, this type of transnational energy project will allow the European Union to import green electricity produced by Azerbaijan, at an estimated cost of 2.3 billion Euros (Kardaś, 2023, p. 24).

In the plenary meeting on the signing of the Agreement on strategic partnership on green energy in Bucharest on 17 December 2022, the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted that

> (…) this agreement will bring the European Union closer to our partners in the South Caucasus region, and it will both help our regions achieve the clean energy transition (…) To integrate a growing share of renewables, we need, indeed, stronger electricity interconnections, and this is why the Black Sea electric cable between Romania, Georgia, and Azerbaijan is so important. I can only say what an ambitious project! It would connect us on both sides of the Black Sea and further towards the Caspian Sea region. It will help reinforce our security of supply by bringing electricity from renewable sources to the European Union via Romania and Hungary. The Black Sea electric cable is a new transmission route full of opportunities. This project could bring Georgia, a country with a European destiny, great benefits as well. It could transform the country into an electricity hub and integrate it into the EU internal electricity market. Finally, the Black Sea electric cable could also help bring electricity to our neighbours in Moldova and the Western Balkans, and of course, to Ukraine – it will help start rebuilding Ukraine's energy system and the reconstruction of the country" (European Commission, 2022)**.**

Analysing the statements of European leaders of the EU, it can be concluded that the EU have far-reaching goals such as:

- Economic goals: Electricity transportation is faster and cheaper than natural gas or LNG transportation. Electricity transmission will decrease the need for imported natural gas used in electricity generation. Additionally, this cable will have a significant positive economic impact on participating countries by establishing a regional and interregional energy transit hub, which will attract new investments and boost trade.
- Security goals: The EU aims to improve the diversification of its energy imports and strengthen energy security for both EU countries and the South Caucasus region. A project of this importance will reduce Russian harmful influence in the energy sector by cutting dependence on Russia's energy sources, which often have "two sorts of prices: economic and political".
- Regional cooperation goals: the cable project will maintain regional cooperation not only in the area of energy production and transit between the EU, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and in the future, Armenia, but it will have "spill over" effects to continue regional cooperation and integration in other areas.

- Geopolitical goals: considering economic and security factors, constructing a Black Sea submarine cable along with existing energy transit capacities and planned economic projects, such as the construction of Anaklia deep water port, will significantly alter the geopolitical landscape of the region.
- Environmental goals: electricity will be generated from gas-fired thermal power plants in Azerbaijan and transmitted to the EU. In the future, the project will also encourage South Caucasus countries to develop clean and renewable energy, not only for their own use but also for export.

As a result, the South Caucasian region can quickly become a source of clean electricity exports to the EU alongside hydrocarbons and develop a more complex energy transit route that includes all types of energy, along with various transportation systems, corridors, and grids.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU has begun phasing out fossil fuel imports from Russia, identifying Central Asian states as one of the alternative energy suppliers for the EU, an important part of the "middle corridor" connecting China with the Caspian Sea, and a huge potential of critical minerals, which are becoming significant resources to ensure the transition to clean energy, digital advancement, driving technological innovations, promoting economic development and security. Central Asian countries possess proven reserves of manganese and chromium, accounting for 30-35% of the global resources. Also, in the region, there are significant amounts (10-15%) of global resources of lead, zinc, titanium, aluminium, copper, cobalt, and molybdenum. With this amount of critical minerals, central Asian countries have already held their place among the top 20 critical mineral-producing countries (Vakulchuk et al., 2021, p. 1682).

Central Asian countries have long been an important focus in the EU's external policy. In the early 1990s, with European Community support, the TRACECA and INOGATE projects were established as pioneering transportation development initiatives. These projects aimed to connect the new geopolitical areas of the Black Sea, South Caucasus, Caspian, and Central Asian regions to Europe and emerged as promising geo-economic zones in global economic and transportation systems following the Soviet Union's collapse. The South Caucasus region's geopolitical importance, particularly its energy transit capacity for the EU as an alternative to Russian hydrocarbons, has consistently concerned the Kremlin. These alternative corridors have gradually weakened Russia's energy position, especially regarding Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Labarre & Niculescu, 2016, p. 28).

With the aim of ensuring robust economic and political connectivity with five Central Asian states (C5), EU high-level representatives and diplomats conducted several official visits and extensive diplomatic efforts to establish joint cooperation formats meant to develop a shared strategy for deepening trade, economic, and political ties with C5 countries. These efforts intensified after Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted all strategic economic links between the EU and Russia due to economic sanctions and political confrontations. Meanwhile, the

EU needed to address gaps in energy, critical minerals, and trade. On October 27, 2022, followed by June 3, 2023, the first-ever high-level summit was held between the president of the European Council and the presidents of the C5 countries. These summits laid the groundwork for the adoption of the "Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties" by the EU-C5 Ministerial on October 23, 2023, marking another high-level forum for Political and Security Dialogue between the two regions along the southern rim of Eurasia. On March 27, 2025, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital, the 20th EU-C5 Ministerial took place, where foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states and EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy Kaja Kallas discussed issues of mutual strategic interest, including cooperation under the EU's global gateway flagship initiatives in sectors like trade, transport, water resource management, energy, climate change, digitalization, and critical raw materials (European External Action Service, 2025). The joint communiqué emphasised that parties committed to strengthening their comprehensive partnership based on shared values and mutual interests will work together for peace, security, the promotion of fundamental rights, and sustainable development. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining regional cooperation, stability, and prosperity in Central Asia. Regarding specific issues, point 12 of the communiqué highlighted the importance of establishing strategic partnerships in critical raw materials (CRMs) between the EU and Kazakhstan, as well as between the EU and Uzbekistan (Council of the European Union, 2025), which were successfully completed on April 4 and 5.

Additionally, the EU and all Central Asian countries welcomed the willingness of European and international financial institutions to commit 10 billion euros to develop the Trans-Caspian transport corridor (TCTC), a multimodal, modern, sustainable, predictable, smart, and efficient network that will significantly improve transport links between Central Asia and Europe. Both the EU and C5 countries also emphasised the importance of continuing cooperation with a peaceful South Caucasus in developing the TCTC to boost regional trade and seamless logistical connectivity (Council of the European Union, 2025). It's clear that without the South Caucasus region and its connection to the Black Sea, there is no effective way to develop or operate strategically important transnational energy, trade, and transit projects such as the "Middle corridor," South gas corridor, Trans-Caspian transport corridor, and oil transit corridors. With the South Caucasus, it becomes possible to successfully bypass Russia and Iran, avoiding their direct involvement during the transportation of CRMs, petrochemicals, hydrocarbons, or electricity to global markets. Several Central Asian countries are working to increase oil, gas, and cargo shipments via the Caspian corridor to evade sanctioned Russian transit routes. For example, Kazakhstan diversifies its export routes and aims to increase oil transits through Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines, while also using railway connections to ship its oil and LNG to the Black Sea terminals in Batumi. Turkmenistan also seeks to transit its gas through the Caspian and South Caucasian corridor. In the 1990s, based on US proposals, Turkmenistan, along with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, initiated plans to construct a subsea gas pipeline. The projected pipeline aims to start from Türkmenbaşy and include a connection with the Kazakh gas field Tengiz, then reach the Baku Sangachal terminal, and continue toward Europe via Turkey's Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline. The estimated capacity of this project was 30 BCM. However, due to objections from Russia and Iran, the project remains under planning.

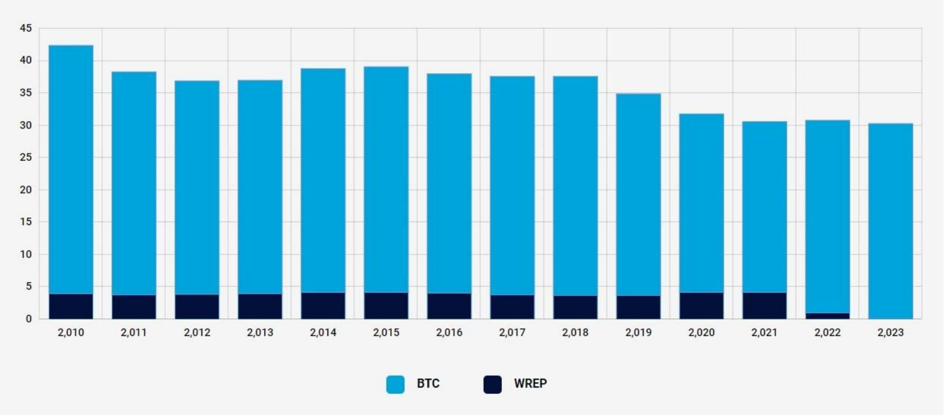
4. Georgia's transit capacity and energy sector as a trigger for EU's enlargement to the South Caucasus?

In the wider Black Sea and Caspian regions, Georgia holds a strategically important geographical location, bridging energy-producing and consuming countries. Through East-West and North-South, Georgia can transit energy (hydrocarbons and electricity) from the central Asia-Caspian region to Europe using Turkey's land and sea routes or independently via the Black Sea. Thus, it can be estimated that Georgia is one of the *major energy hubs* in the region for delivering Caspian hydrocarbons to the European market and, therefore, a magnet for foreign direct investments and development projects on its territory (Labarre & Niculescu, 2016, p. 35)

In 2022-2023:

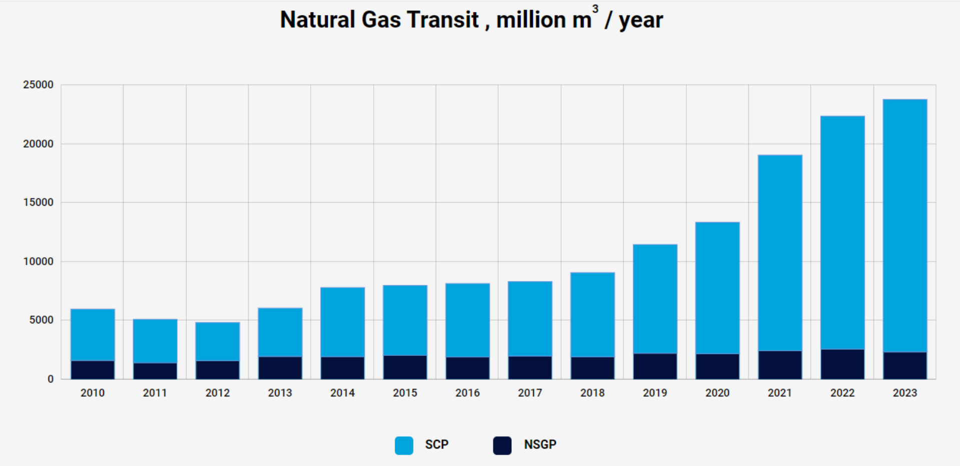
- Electricity transmitted through Georgia totalled 3.5 billion kWh by a transboundary electricity grid;
- Average 29-30 million tons annually by pipelines and Sea ports by BTC and WREP;
- Average 20-21 million m^3 annually by SCP and NSGP (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023).

Figure 2. Oil transit: tough Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and Western Route export pipeline



Source: Authors' representation based on Georgian Gas and Oil Corporation, https://www.gogc.ge/en/

Figure 3. Natural gas transit through South Caucasian Pipeline and North-South Main Gas Pipeline



Source: Authors' representation based on Georgian Gas and Oil Corporation, https://www.gogc.ge/en/

Table 1. Share of renewable energy in Georgia's overall energy consumption

Parameters (in Tera-Joules)	**2019**	**2030**	**2040**	**2050**
Overall Consumption of Energy (TJ)	182,338	223,227	265,3903	15,103
Renewable Energy Sources (TJ)	34,407	50,023	64,866	87,164
Share of Renewable Energy in overall energy consumption	20,52%	22,41%	24,44%	27,66%

Source: Authors' representation based on Georgia's State Energy Policy document https://www.economy.ge/

Apart from the strategically important location and well-developed energy transit systems, Georgia also has important potential for producing electricity using hydro and wind energy. Hydro resources are one of Georgia's most important natural resources. Approximately 300 rivers are significant for energy production, with a total annual potential capacity of 15,000 MW and a production potential of 50 TWh. According to GNERC, however, only 22.5% (3,380.2 MW) is used for hydropower. Georgia's wind energy potential is estimated at 4 TWh (1,500 MW). The average wind speed fluctuates from 2.5 meters per second (m/s) to 9 m/s. The most favourable places for wind farms are being identified throughout the entire country. Meanwhile, the solar energy potential is high, with annual solar days ranging from 250 to 280 and mounting to 1,900-2,200 hours. Solar irradiance in Georgia varies between 1,250 kWh/m2 and 1,800 kWh/m2 annually, and total solar energy potential is estimated at 108 MW. Household solar water heating systems have been installed in rural areas, where solar energy warms water to 40-50°C (International Energy Agency, 2023).

With other regional players, Georgia is part of the Energy Charter Treaty (signed in 1995 and ratified immediately), which was signed in 1991, serving as a real institutional step taken towards the establishment of a framework of rules for the East-West energy trade after the end of the Cold War. *Thus, Georgia not only has energy transit capacity, but it can also contribute to low-carbon energy production, which is one of the important challenges for EU.* Considering these facts, we may conclude that Georgia, with other South Caucasus neighbours, has the ability not only to transit and supply hydrocarbons to the EU, but also to produce and transmit green energy (mainly electricity). Moreover, Georgia is a candidate country for EU membership, and according to the integration conditionalities, Georgia is pushing for an Europeanization of all sectors, including energy and transportation, which are major economic areas. All circumstances can be perfect factors for important political transformations in the region:

- Mutual strategic interests of the EU and strengthening of partnership with regional actors create an opportunity to establish a new geopolitical conjuncture in the South Caucasus region;
- Georgia has the potential to become an EU member state, conditioned by its geopolitical and geo-economic importance in the Black Sea and South Caucasus region, also in the terms of the crucial competition of the EU with Russia and China;
- If Georgia became an EU member state, benefits would be for both Georgia and the EU. The benefits of EU membership are well-experienced and well-known. But the enlargement of the EU in the South Caucasus would ensure the union with a purely “European energy transit corridor”.

Since the war in Ukraine has changed the EU’s security agenda and development of strategic economic and political relations with old partners and reactivated the enlargement agenda even in the South Caucasus region, Georgia, like other candidate countries has a significant lack (of deficits) in the economic, social, and infrastructure development which are vital for EU integration. Moreover, the last events connected with the informal ruling of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the adopting of undemocratic laws by Parliament, and the shifting of Georgia’s foreign policy orientation from the West to the North and propaganda of representatives of the government of Georgia about an existing “Global war party” which forces Georgia to involve in a war with Russia showed that stable democratic institutions are facing significant challenges. Laws and bills on transparency of foreign influence, family values, and protection of minors significantly challenged the democratic processes in Georgia.

The lack of economic and institutional development, as well as the decline of democratization in state institutions, creates unfavourable conditions for Georgia’s integration into the EU. Even if, after the 26 October elections, Georgia regained its democratic path, which it has faithfully followed for the past decades, a lack of development will remain an obstacle to full integration into the EU. However, removing Georgia from the EU's enlargement agenda or postponing EU integration—unlike other candidates—will, as a one-time champion of the Eastern Trio in recent days, cause significant damage to both the EU and Georgia. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach to support Georgia's integration process with the EU, and one of the most effective tools for this would be sectoral integration. This involves deepening and strengthening the partnership between the EU and Georgia before full membership—not only in geopolitics but also across multiple sectors of the economy, especially in energy and transportation, which could have "spill over" effects in other areas, particularly in CFSP.

To ensure sectoral integration in the energy and transportation sector, it is essential to transform the EU's integration conditionality, especially the so-called EU's "incentive structures" of the enlargement policy. But why are the energy and transportation sectors important for sectoral integration?

- From the geopolitical point of view, energy and its transit and transportation present one of the important areas for the security of both the EU and Georgia;
- Georgia has significant progress in both energy and transportation areas, rather than in other areas of economic development. During the last decades, energy, transit, and transportation sectors of Georgia have significantly developed thanks to direct foreign investments, implementing European and international standards and experiences;
- It is clear that sectoral integration in the successful areas will encourage other areas for deepening integration, even in the so-called "fundamentals";
- Georgia is part of the Energy Union and cooperates with the EU in the Green Deal area.

It is important to implement several tasks to achieve sectoral integration in the energy and transportation sectors.

From Georgia's point of view:

- Enhance solid energy partnership and extensive experience of cooperation;
- Europeanization of the energy sector which considers making Georgia a liberal, competitive, and transparent energy market according to the European rules and regulations; in the process of harmonizing different areas of Georgian legislation with EU law, which stems from the Association Agreement, the energy sector is a crucial aspect of the agreement, in which the EU expresses its efforts to support the modernization of Georgia's energy legislation by bringing it closer to European standards. The annex to the association agreement contains all the specific legal regulations, directives related to natural gas, oil, electric energy, renewable energy, and energy efficiency, which Georgia should adhere to.
- Harmonisation of the energy policy with the EU and signing an 'Acquis Communautaire' in the energy sector; this measure is vital for Georgia to

complete the modernisation of the energy regulatory framework and to join the liberal market model of the European Union. As of now, Georgia's energy legislation is still not in line with the EU's third energy package;
- Harmonisation with the EU regulations of Georgia's all international obligations, which are based on multilateral and bilateral international agreements in the field of energy;
- Implementation of European regulations and standards in the field of energy security, diversification, environment, and climate change. The most desirable model for organizing energy markets for Georgia is represented by the principles of competitive market organization recognized by the European Union, because on the one hand, the energy markets in the European Union are one of the most efficient and liquid markets in the world, and on the other hand, their implementation of the European model will help Georgia's integration with European energy markets and cross-border trade development (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023, p. 52);
- Sharing and implementation of the European strategy for the production and use of renewable energy in Georgia within the framework of the Green agreement (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023, p. 72).

According to the draft National energy policy, the government is planning to improve Georgia's energy security by 2030 by:
- Diversifying external energy supply sources, including gas supply alternatives (i.e., LPG, LNG, and CNG swapping options);
- Reducing import dependency through energy efficiency and renewable energy development;
- Developing infrastructure, improving system safety and reliability, and installing SCADA and WAMS systems;
- Integrating renewable energy into the grid using new clean-energy technologies, including green hydrogen production, storage systems, and microgrids;
- Exploring the country's fossil fuel reserves;
- Creating gas storage and emergency reserves of oil products;
- Developing its oil refining capacity;
- Replacing outdated thermal units with combined-cycle gas plants;
- Improving security (cyber, kinetic, etc.) (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023).

Figure 5. Sectoral integration within the stage-structured conditionality model: the case of Georgia's integration possible scenario

Pre- Negotiation Stage	Negotiation Stage	Accession Stage
I. Conditions: • Conditions for applying for membership - √ • Conditions for opening accession negotiations - √ • Additional country-specific conditions -√ **II. Incentive Structure** **1 Rewards:** **1.1 Accession Advancement Rewards:** • Providing Membership Perspective - √ • Grating Potential Candidate Status -√ • *Signing Association Agreement (AA)* or Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) - √ • Implementing AA and SAA; • Granting Candidate country status -√ • Credible membership perspective -√ **2 Financial Rewards** **1.1. Threats** **1.2 Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions **2 Monitoring**	**I. Conditions**: • Copenhagen Criteria - **X** • Open Benchmarks - **X** • Interim benchmarks -**X** • Closing Benchmarks - **X** **II. Incentive Structure** **1 Rewards:** **1.1. Sectoral Integration** • **Energy** • **Transportation** • **CFSP** • **Institutional Participation of Georgia in EU's Council of Ministers (Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council and Common Foreign and Security area)** **1.2. Accession Advancement Rewards:** • Open Chapters -**X** • Closing Chapters - **X** • Credible Membership Perspective - **X** • Completing Accession Negotiations -**X** • Signing Accession Treaty - **X** **2. Financial Rewards** **2.1. Threats** **2.2. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions **III. Monitoring**	**I. Conditions**: • Copenhagen Criteria - **X** • Areas of Serious Concern - **X** **II. Incentive Structure** **1 Rewards:** **1.1 Accession Advancement Rewards:** • Treaty Ratification - **X** • Accession - **X** **1.2 Financial Rewards** **2 Threats** **1.1. Explicit Threats** • Financial Sanctions • Preventive and remedial Sanctions - **III. Monitoring**
Note: √ - Completed; X -Not Completed or have not started yet; ? – Under the Question		

Source: Authors' representation based on Geteva (2015)

Because energy and its transit present an important challenge to foreign and security policy, there is an opportunity that the sectoral integration of Georgia in the European Union in the Energy and Transportation fields might have a spillover effect, encouraging and supporting Georgia's integration into the EU's CFSP. In these terms, it is important to develop cooperation in several directions:

- Convergence of Georgian national legislation with EU energy security legislation and its effective enforcement. Law, as one of the components of foreign policy in the field of energy, requires careful supervision of its implementation and diplomatic dialogue (Ministry of Economy of Georgia, 2023, p. 32);

- Securitization and diversification of energy supply and transit transportation;
- Common actions against challenges and threats in the region;
- Georgia can maintain the EU's peace diplomacy in the South Caucasus and its adjacent regions. Georgia, as one of the leading countries of Caucasus, has the capacity and experience to be an intermediary country in regional issues between conflicting parties.

Conclusion

Russia's aggressive war on Ukraine and its far-reaching military, political, and economic repercussions have created one of the most profound security crises for Europe in recent decades. This conflict has significantly reshaped the European Union's geopolitical orientation, accelerating a long-term transformation in its strategic thinking, institutional development, and regional engagement. Several key shifts have become evident. First, due to Russia's war and the growing uncertainty generated by the United States' "America first" posture, the EU is gradually moving from a normative toward a more pragmatic geopolitical identity. This transition is reflected in the EU's increased military support for Ukraine, rising defence expenditures, a revitalisation of Europe's defense-industrial base, and renewed efforts to strengthen strategic autonomy through new military, political, and security institutions. Second, with Washington's engagement in Europe becoming more selective, Brussels increasingly recognises the need for autonomous European securitisation, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Baltic–Black Sea region, and along critical transit routes connecting the European market with Asia. Third, the enlargement policy—especially in the Black Sea region—has become more overtly driven by geopolitical and security considerations rather than by traditional conditionality or normative criteria.

These dynamics are directly relevant to Georgia. However, recent domestic political developments in Tbilisi have altered the context in which Georgia's European aspirations are assessed. Democratic backsliding, institutional weakening, and confrontational rhetoric toward the EU have created serious concerns in Brussels regarding Georgia's political trajectory and its adherence to democratic norms associated with the accession process. The decision to dismantle key anti-corruption and oversight institutions, the deterioration of electoral integrity, and the broader trend of political polarisation have further strained EU–Georgia relations. As a result, Georgia is increasingly viewed not as a country converging toward EU standards but as a candidate state whose political environment has become unpredictable and, at times, openly resistant to European norms.

These tensions significantly shape the prospects for full membership. They complicate the alignment among the EU's regional security objectives, Georgia's domestic political realities, and the normative and institutional requirements of accession. Nevertheless, precisely because the political dimension has become more contested, the strategic logic for sectoral integration has grown even stronger. Sectoral integration offers a pragmatic framework through which the EU and Georgia can continue a meaningful cooperation despite political difficulties. In areas such as energy, transport, and transit, Georgia retains substantial strategic value: its location provides the EU with a direct corridor for hydrocarbons and cargo from Azerbaijan, Central Asia, China, and—contingent on a future diplomatic breakthrough—potentially Iran. At the same time, Georgia's ambitious energy development plans, including renewable generation and emerging Black Sea connectivity projects, offer opportunities for long-term European energy diversification and resilience.

Furthermore, sectoral integration has the potential to generate positive spillover effects. Deepening cooperation in energy and transportation could enhance institutional interoperability, build trust, and reinforce Georgia's practical alignment with EU standards. Over time, this could lay foundations for renewed progress in political convergence and possibly open pathways for more substantive involvement in the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), provided that Georgia re-commits to democratic reforms.

In conclusion, while Georgia's recent political trajectory has created significant obstacles to its EU membership prospects, the geopolitical environment shaped by the war in Ukraine underscores the enduring strategic relevance of EU–Georgia cooperation. Sectoral integration emerges as the most viable and mutually beneficial pathway under current conditions. It allows Europe to advance its energy security and connectivity goals while enabling Georgia to retain a credible—and potentially revitalized—European trajectory. Whether this sectoral approach evolves into deeper political and security integration will depend largely on Georgia's willingness to reverse democratic backsliding and re-align itself with the foundational values of the European project.

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HOW TO CITE:
Bazhunaishvili, L., Gorgiladze, I. (2025). War in Ukraine, transformation of perceptions in the EU's geopolitics and possibility of sectoral integration of Georgia into the European energy and transportation policies. *Eastern Journal of European Studies, 16*(SI), 200-222. https://doi.org/10.47743/ejes-2025-SI11