

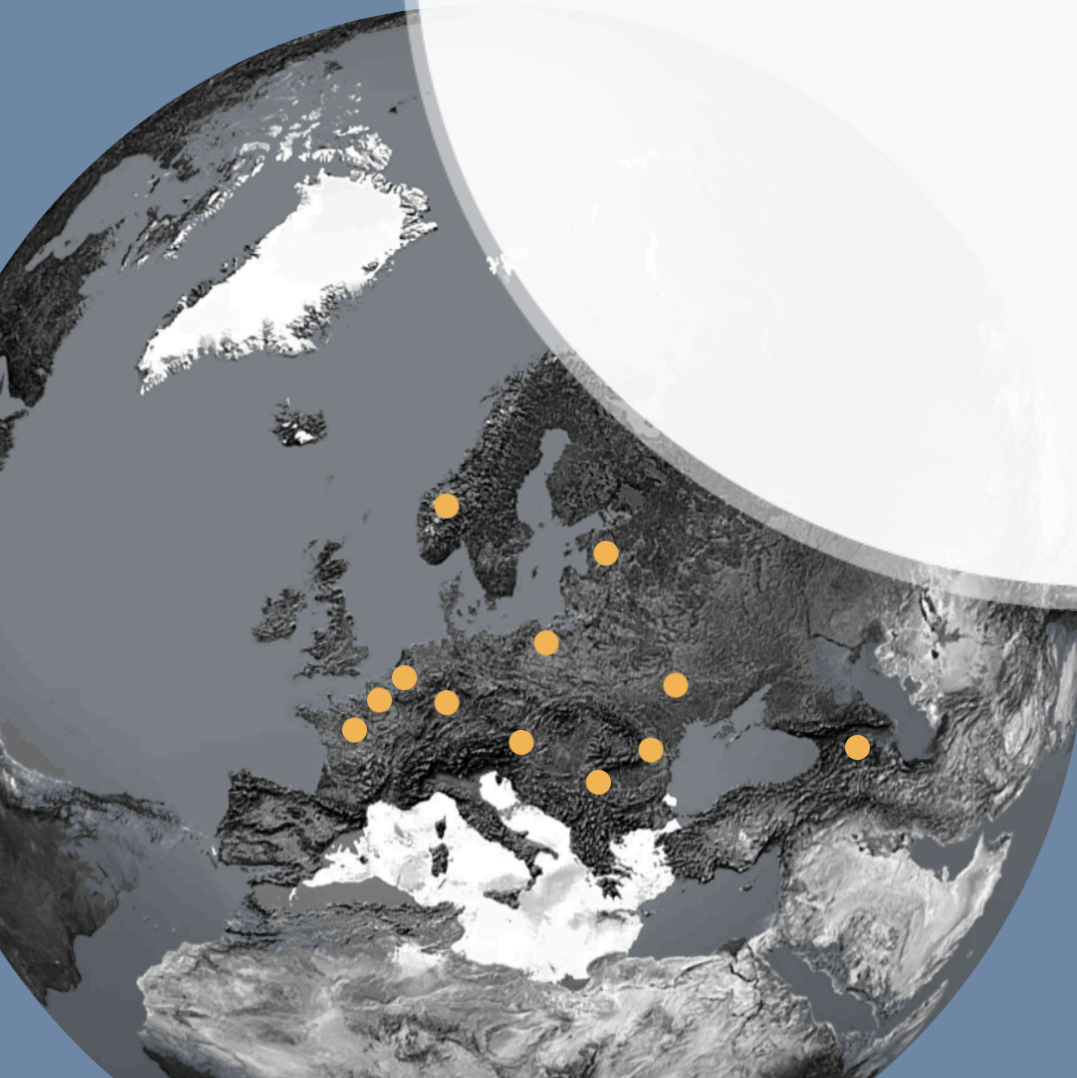


# CIVIC MOBILISATIONS IN GEORGIA AND SERBIA: TESTING THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT CREDIBILITY

REUNIR BLOG

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## INTRODUCTION

Georgia and Serbia, both candidate countries for EU membership, have seen large waves of civic mobilisation in recent months. While the immediate triggers for public protests differ, the underlying drivers are similar: democratic backsliding, rising corruption and informal governance, and mounting authoritarian practices. In contrast, the countries' European future played a significantly different role in galvanising public outrage.

The EU's response to these alarming developments has also varied. Brussels has been more vocal in Georgia's case, while taking a noticeably softer approach towards Serbia. Yet, in both instances the reaction has been fragmented and slow. This raises a key question: can the EU's revived enlargement policy - reignited by geopolitical urgency — withstand this serious challenge to its credibility?

This explainer unpacks recent developments in Georgia and Serbia, assesses the EU's response, and argues that how Brussels chooses to engage with civic mobilisation in its candidate countries will be a defining test of the credibility, and future of its enlargement policy.

## GEORGIA'S AUTHORITARIAN TURN

Once hailed as a frontrunner of the Eastern neighbours in EU integration reforms, Georgia was granted EU candidate status in 2023. But now instead of moving ahead with the fast-track accession process along with Moldova and Ukraine, the country has veered sharply off course - down an increasingly authoritarian road.

A series of [draconian laws](#), [rigged parliamentary elections](#), and the Prime Minister's [announcement](#) that Georgia will not start EU accession talks before 2028 make the direction clear. As a result, public protests have erupted and continued for [over 200 days](#), yet unlike previous civic uprisings that [forced](#) government to backpedal, this time the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has only entrenched its control.

Backed by an unchecked parliamentary majority, new [laws](#) are passed with the speed of light that criminalise public protest, expand police authority, and enable dismissals of civil servants. Independent media and civil society are suffocating under multiplying legal constraints that aim to curb their funding and close every loophole for dissent. Human rights monitoring, investigative journalism, and even policy debate are under assault. Personal opinions expressed online have become [grounds](#) for administrative fines and arrests, while the judiciary functions as a tool of the executive.

Just [ten days](#) after post-elections protests erupted on November 28, 2024, authorities had detained over 30 individuals on criminal charges, 372 on administrative grounds, and fined more than 100 people. To date, [five protesters](#) have been sentenced to multiple years in prison for allegedly assaulting police - two of them 21-year-old students, receiving [4.5](#) and [5 years](#) respectively. Opposition figures face the same repression: [six are currently](#) imprisoned for defying summons from a GD-controlled commission, and a [former defence minister](#) remains in pre-trial detention. Over [800 civil servants](#) have already been dismissed, with more expected under the ongoing “[reorganization](#)” of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - designed to purge officials unwilling to endorse the government’s pivot away from the EU.

In an effort to solidify the power vertical under Georgia’s sole oligarch and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, a wave of dubious resignations has swept through GD cadres. As a powerful signal, the former head of the Adjara autonomous government who resigned in April is [currently hospitalised](#) after having been found with a gunshot in the chest. These events mirror the Kremlin’s playbook and so Georgia finds itself being an EU candidate in title, but a Moscow apprentice in practice.

## FROM PROTESTS TO REPRESSION IN SERBIA

A similar story of mass civic democratic pushback has been unfolding in Serbia. Unrest over corruption and democratic backsliding has been [brewing for nearly a decade](#) in Serbia. It was the Novi Sad train station accident in November 2024 resulting in 16 fatalities which catalysed a series of student protests demanding democratic reforms. As a result, young people, who face a future limited by a political system that stifles progress, have taken to the streets in droves in a nationwide movement. At the heart of their demands are the release of government documents and the [call for new elections](#) – and, a push for a future where democratic processes and transparency are respected.

Historically, Serbia’s civic mobilisation is rooted in the tumultuous years of the late 20th century, notably the 2000 ousting of President Slobodan Milošević, when mass protests ushered in the country's transition from autocracy to democracy. But the current climate under President Aleksandar Vučić marks a return to [troubling trends](#), with increasing state control over public institutions and a troubling alignment with autocratic regimes. The current wave of protests is a rallying cry for the preservation of democratic integrity, echoing the calls from the past even as the government’s authoritarian grip tightens. In the last months, [the movement has grown](#) beyond the student-led protests and has gained support from various sectors of society, including teachers, farmers, artists, trade unions, and civil society organisations. The protests are now [supported by 64% of citizens](#), with

the most significant increase in support over the past months coming from those who generally support the ruling parties.

On June 28, 2025, a massive demonstration took place in Belgrade with around [140,000](#) people taking to the streets. However, in response to these demonstrations, Serbian police deployed violent tactics, including beating peaceful protestors and using tear gas to disperse crowds. [Reports](#) also included widespread arbitrary arrests and excessive and unlawful use of force against the protestors.

The protests have already led to political fallout, even at the highest levels. After weeks of student-led demonstrations, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević announced his [resignation](#), marking a symbolic victory for the protestors. Despite the resignation, President Vučić continues to categorically reject the possibility of a snap election, and the Serbian government's authoritarian practices, such as media censorship and the increasing arrests of activists, continue unabated.

## EU RESPONSES - OR THE ABSENCE OF THEREOF

The EU's reactions to similar challenges (large-scale protests met with state repression, raising concerns about fundamental freedoms) were markedly different in the two candidate countries, reflecting tensions between the EU's geopolitical interests and normative influence, as well as institutional limitations.

While the EU's response to the Georgian Dream government's democratic backsliding has been swift, in some cases even pre-emptive, the EU's reaction to protests in Serbia has been cautious, belated and fragmented.

To people in the streets of Belgrade, Novi Sad and other provincial capitals, the silence from Brussels has been deafening. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. The EU has long refrained from imposing meaningful rhetoric or pressure that could compel the Serbian government to change course. In October 2024, even before the outburst of protests, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [praised](#) Serbia's progress on reforms, including the rule of law and democratic fundamentals, despite mounting concerns over democratic backsliding. Even after one of Serbia's largest protests on March 15, 2025, von der Leyen, alongside Council President António Costa, hosted President Vučić for a [dinner](#) in Brussels, signalling a continuation of the EU's supportive tone. This led to sharp disillusionment among [pro-EU Serbian citizens](#).

While the EEAS expressed [concern over violence](#) in the Serbian Parliament and kept stressing the importance of the "rule of law" and "[freedom of assembly](#)", it only belatedly demanded "[real progress](#)" in reforms, including in fighting corruption. The Commission refrained from using

conditionality, for instance through suspending IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession) funding. While the European Parliament was more vocal and held [debates on the political crisis](#), it fell short of adopting a resolution on the situation in Serbia. The European People's Party's continuous cooperation with Vučić's SNS party was also criticised for overshadowing repression.

Crucially, the EU's response is fraught with tensions between its strategic interests and normative aspirations. This was blatantly exposed by the [EU's selection](#) of the highly [controversial](#) lithium mining Jadar project among 13 new strategic projects, which in fact may fuel further protests. The EU's engagement is further complicated due to Serbia's [political ties to Russia and economic ties to China](#).

The EU's response was thus primarily shaped by the desire to access critical raw materials, maintain regional stability, support Serbia's role in the Kosovo dialogue, and counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence in the country and the Western Balkans more broadly, at the [risk of eroding EU democratic credentials](#) in the region. The question remains whether the EU will take a more robust stance on Serbia's democratic decline while the Serbian government plays a fine balancing act between the EU and its adversaries.

Looking ahead, the EU faces a crucial decision. Serbia's EU membership timeline remains more uncertain than ever, and the country's democratic future will depend on how the Serbian government responds to the growing demands for change. Without a stronger EU strategy that prioritises real democratic transformation, Serbia risks further consolidating its authoritarian tendencies, leaving the EU with difficult questions about its role in encouraging democratic progress in the region.

By contrast, the EU's response to Georgia's protest crackdown came early, and was normatively framed and more coordinated across institutions – even though it remained heterogenous across the EU Member States. In response to the introduction of anti-democratic legislation, Brussels [halted](#) Georgia's accession process, froze €30 million in military aid and suspended €121 million in bilateral support. But the only additional step taken by the EU since the eruption of post-elections protests in November 2024, has been the suspension of [visa-free travel](#) for a handful of officials holding diplomatic passports - a largely symbolic gesture. It certainly hasn't stopped government representatives from jetting off to Italy to open [a new consulate](#) in Milan or planning to open new [diplomatic outposts](#) in Slovakia and Hungary.

The European Parliament responded to the mass protests with strong political messaging as soon as Georgia's ruling party moved forward with a law on the transparency of foreign influence approved in May 2024 and started the crackdown on protesters in December 2024. In an attempt to symbolically support protesters, a delegation of six MEPs [joined demonstrators](#) in Tbilisi and openly denounced the government's democratic backsliding. In February 2025, the European Parliament also [adopted a resolution](#) on the deterioration of the political situation, calling for free and fair elections, and the

suspension of Georgia’s EU candidacy status if the repression continued. A second resolution, adopted in July 2025, called for [targeted personal sanctions](#) against Bidzina Ivanishvili and his family, as well as his companies.

The High Representative and the European Commission also took a firmer tone than in Serbia. Together with Commissioner Marta Kos, Kaja Kallas explicitly [tied progress on reforms and civic freedoms to the future of accession negotiations](#). Following the adoption of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) in April 2025, they further called on the Georgian authorities to “[heed their citizens’ clear demands for democracy and a European future](#)”. In an increasingly repressive context, the Commission is also [implementing projects to support civil society](#) through funding of over 46 million euros, with an expected additional 32 million euros.

The EU’s strategic messaging in Georgia also made reference to Russian influence and hybrid threats, situating the crackdown within broader concerns about authoritarian diffusion in the Eastern Partnership. This added a geopolitical rationale for normative action, rather than one that contradicted or diluted it. However, targeted sanctions is the only measure that could meaningfully impact GD and its informal leader, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Yet while [several](#) EU member states, the [UK](#) and the [US](#) have imposed targeted sanctions on Ivanishvili and select GD officials, the EU Council fell short of deciding concrete sanctions against leading Georgian officials, due to [Hungary’s and Slovakia’s vetoes](#). The varied reaction from the EU member states reflected their differing historical ties, geopolitical interests, and domestic political contexts. The Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic were among the most vocal critics; France and Germany, as well as the Netherlands, issued joint statements condemning violence against protesters. Hungary, by contrast, remained conspicuously muted. Despite these differences, the EU has been more forward-leaning in its response to Georgia’s backsliding as a result of three interwoven factors, namely timing within the enlargement process (as Georgia just received candidate status in December 2023), greater normative legitimacy among the Georgian population compared to Serbia, and strategic concern over Georgia’s drift towards Russia-friendly positions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

The contrast between the EU’s forward-leaning response to Georgia’s democratic backsliding and its comparatively muted stance on Serbia reveals fundamental tensions at the heart of EU foreign policy and enlargement strategy. While in Georgia, the post-2022 geopolitical climate and strong pro-European societal consensus have enabled the EU to apply more normative pressure, the EU’s

response to Serbia has been more constrained by pre-existing institutional commitments, geopolitical balancing acts, and internal divisions among Member States.

In sum, the EU is faced with the challenge of adopting a consistent response to a critical dilemma between its aspirations to act as a normative power and its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. The EU's inconsistency in answering this dilemma undermines the credibility of the enlargement process as it weakens the effectiveness of conditionality, leads to the disillusionment of pro-European domestic actors, and can embolden illiberal elites.

Maintaining credibility requires that democratic regression be met with consequences. A calibrated approach could involve targeted sanctions to the individuals responsible for the country's democratic backsliding, reinforcing support for civil society and independent media, increasing transparency in enlargement benchmarks, and developing a more robust mechanism to track and respond to political developments in candidate countries in real time. Additionally, the EU could establish rapid response mechanisms to act swiftly when human rights and democratic backsliding occur, sending a clear message that abuses will not go unchallenged.

In the case of Serbia, this could mean ensuring greater transparency in its accession process by clarifying specific, [measurable](#) reform benchmarks that align with EU standards, while also introducing transparent monitoring and reporting to provide clearer visibility into which reforms are being met and which remain unaddressed. Insisting that progress is made on respect for the 'fundamentals' before existing clusters and chapters of the accession negotiations are closed and new ones are opened is the logical thing to do

In Georgia's case, the country has not yet opened accession negotiations: its accession process has already been stalled by the Council and negative conditionality has also been applied through the freezing of EU financial support to the government. The next logical and impactful step would be to widen the token visa bans on targeted GD officials and adopt also asset freezes against those responsible for Georgia's authoritarian drift. In the absence of unanimity, as is currently the case, bilateral sanctions by individual EU member states should be scaled up.

In parallel, the EU should consider suspending several bilateral arrangements and agreements in place, either in part (e.g. political dialogue under the [Association Agreement](#) (AA) or in whole (e.g. the [visa-free regime](#) established in 2017). Suspending the political dialogue under the AA could be particularly effective, as it would undercut the Prime Minister's [repeated claim](#) that Georgia remains on a European path by implementing the agreement. Suspending visa liberalization, on the grounds of country's democratic backsliding and non-alignment with the EU fundamentals, should be used to increase the pressure on the GD to change the course. To this end, [sending the letter](#) to the Georgian government with clear conditions which need to be met for keeping visa-free regime makes it clear



that the responsibility for any further fallout lies solely with GD as the government should embody the will of the people, who continue their unwavering support for Georgia's European integration.

In the end, the EU's credibility, both in Georgia and with other candidate countries, depends on the consistent application of the essential elements that undergird bilateral relations and upholding the fundamental values on which the Union is founded.

## ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR’s foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of ‘protean power’ unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU’s ‘control power’ in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU’s support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU’s external action.



