



## FROM BELGRADE TO TBILISI: HOW THE EU VIEWS CIVIL PROTESTS

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The European Union (EU) has long positioned itself as a promoter of democratic values, human rights, and media freedom. However, its stance on opposition protests in different countries is often influenced by a complex interplay of geopolitical considerations and pragmatic interests. This paper examines the EU's contrasting reactions to anti-government protests in Serbia and Georgia in 2024, emphasizing how these responses are shaped by the political alignments of the respective governments. On the one hand, the EU has brought a strong support to opposition in Georgia, whose government maintains close ties with its northern neighbor, Russia. On the other hand, Brussels has failed to actively support opposition groups in Serbia, which has visibly distanced itself from Moscow since the war began without moving towards greater democratization.

### **Backing Democracy: How the EU Embraced Georgian Protests Against Russian Influence**

Georgia's geopolitical significance stems from its position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. A former member of the USSR, Georgia has, since its collapse, been torn between maintaining close ties with Russia and its modern aspirations to align with Euro-Atlantic institutions, primarily through deeper integration with NATO and closer relations with the EU, as a way to distance itself from Russia. This political conflict has defined Georgia's political landscape from the late 20th to the early 21st century. Pro-Western demonstrations in Georgia first gained prominence in 2003 during the Rose Revolution, a pivotal moment in the country's history (Wheatley, 2005). Over the years, these movements persisted, often clashing with efforts to

maintain ties with Russia, setting the stage for renewed tensions. Georgia applied for EU membership in March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and was granted candidate status in December 2023. By late 2024, polarization in Georgian public opinion regarding relations with Russia and European partners reached its highest point since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Although the situation had already heated up in April 2024, when the government coalition reintroduced the "foreign agents" bill modeled after Russia (Redeker et al., 2024), the situation culminated after the elections held in October last year, in which the ruling Georgian Dream secured the majority of seats in highly scrutinized elections. Since that time, Georgia has been facing one of the largest protests in this century. While the opposition claims the elections were rigged and calls people to the streets, the government has responded by suspending negotiations with the EU until the end of 2028 and accusing the opposition of working in the interest of foreign intelligence services and attempting to drag Georgia into a war with Russia (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). The EU has been one of the key actors in this conflict from the very beginning, sending clear messages of support to the pro-democratic forces in the opposition, emphasizing that "the people of Georgia have demonstrated their attachment to democratic values and their country's EU path" (European Union External Action, 2024). On November 28, one month after the Georgian parliamentary elections, the European Parliament called on the European Commission to impose sanctions on the leaders of the Georgian government and demanded new elections in Georgia with international observers (European Parliament, 2024). Shortly before that, Josep Borrell, the

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that more than 100 million euros would be frozen and redirected from the government to civil society organizations, adding that the people of Georgia will be continuously supported by the European Union (European Parliament, 2024). The latest move was EU-imposed visa restrictions on Georgian diplomats and government officials, signaling disapproval of the government's actions and expressing solidarity with the Georgian populace advocating for democratic principles. Despite the EU's robust support for pro-democratic forces in Georgia, including financial measures, sanctions, and public statements, its efforts have yielded mixed results. While the EU's actions have amplified international pressure on the Georgian government and provided significant backing to civil society, they have not yet led to substantial political changes or a resolution to the crisis. The ruling Georgian Dream party remains firmly in power, and polarization in the country persists. However, the EU's continued involvement has bolstered the opposition's legitimacy and underscored the importance of democratic principles, leaving the door open for potential shifts in the political landscape in the future.

### **Silence Over Belgrade: The EU's Muted Stance on Serbia's Opposition Struggles**

In contrast, the EU's reaction to opposition protests in Serbia has been markedly muted. Serbia applied to join the EU in 2009 and has been a candidate for membership since 2012. Despite widespread concerns about increasing media suppression, electoral irregularities, and human rights violations under President Aleksandar Vučić's administration (Bursač and Vučićević, 2021), the EU has refrained from offering explicit support to Serbian opposition movements. At the beginning of 2023, Serbia faced a political crisis rooted in significant irregularities observed by the Serbian opposition and

independent monitoring missions during the general elections held on December 17, 2023. In response, the fragmented Serbian opposition called for the annulment of the elections, with several leaders, such as Marinika Tepić of the Freedom and Justice Party, resorting to hunger strikes. One form of pressure on the government involved appealing to the EU, a key actor in the Western Balkans because of its influence in shaping the region's political and economic future, particularly through the EU accession process. As a result of these appeals and meetings between Serbian opposition representatives and EU officials, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that the elections "were not fair" and calling for an independent international investigation into the alleged irregularities, with special attention to the local elections in Belgrade (European Parliament, 2024; BBC, 2024). At the time, it seemed that international support for Serbia's regime was waning. However, the European condemnation of the election fraud stopped there. The European Commission did not comment on the resolution and largely refrained from further engagement with the elections in Serbia. In its annual progress report on Serbia's EU membership bid, submitted to Belgrade in November, the Commission avoided harsh criticism of the government, using notably diplomatic language: "elections require tangible improvement and further reform" (European Commission, 2024). President Vučić subsequently stated that he had "no objections" to the European Commission's report (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). It appears that Vučić managed to leverage a favorable international moment, "paying" for the EU's lack of criticism with concessions on numerous issues important to the European Union and its individual member states such as negotiations with Kosovo under the EU-facilitated dialogue process, and reducing reliance on Russian energy

sources. Although Serbia, due to its historical ties with Russia, remains one of the few countries in the region that has not imposed sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, the relationship between the two countries has cooled significantly. Before the war in Ukraine, the Serbian and Russian president met 17 times (Danas, 2025), with Vučić regularly traveling to Moscow or Putin visiting Serbia, often just before Serbian elections, where a significant portion of the electorate holds pro-Russian views. Since the war began, however, they met only once in Beijing at a summit—over the course of three years. Simultaneously, Serbia has intensified its contacts with Ukrainian leadership, sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and supported it in the United Nations (Vreme, 2023). More significantly, and likely of greater importance, Serbia agreed to arm Ukraine’s military. Through intermediaries, Serbia has delivered weapons to the Ukrainian forces valued at \$855 million (Landay and Vasović, 2023). The shift in Serbia’s foreign policy was also evident domestically. Last year, Serbia carried out the largest military procurement in its history, purchasing French Rafale fighter jets for €2.7 billion during French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit to Belgrade (Vasović, 2024). In the summer of 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič made a somewhat unexpected visit to Belgrade. During their stay, they signed a memorandum of understanding between the EU and the Serbian government on a “strategic partnership” concerning sustainable raw materials, battery supply chains, and electric vehicles (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). The centerpiece of this agreement is the extraction of lithium in Serbia to support the German automotive industry—a project the Serbian government has been attempting to implement since 2020. However, this initiative has sparked significant public opposition in Serbia due to fears of non-compliance with

environmental standards during extraction and the potential destruction of natural landscapes.

### **Explaining the Disparity**

The EU’s differing stances on the protests in Georgia and Serbia arise from a blend of geopolitical priorities and strategic interests. The disparity in the EU’s stance toward protests in these countries can best be understood through the lens of *realpolitik*. In Georgia, the EU’s support for opposition protests reflects its strategic goal of countering Russian influence and promoting Euro-Atlantic integration. With the Georgian government’s perceived pro-Russian stance, the EU has taken measures such as freezing funds, imposing sanctions, and publicly supporting the opposition to challenge the government and advance its geopolitical objective of reducing Moscow’s influence in the region. This strategy, however, raises concerns about the EU’s commitment to human rights, as the focus on countering Russia may overshadow the need for stronger support for democratic reforms in Georgia. In Serbia, the EU’s approach has been more restrained due to the country’s strategic position in the Western Balkans and its recent geopolitical recalibration. While Serbia has historically maintained strong ties with Russia, its distancing from Moscow following the war in Ukraine, coupled with key concessions to the EU—such as supporting Ukraine in international forums and agreeing to strategic partnerships—has made it a valuable partner. The EU prioritizes maintaining stability in Serbia to avoid jeopardizing its influence in the region and to ensure cooperation on critical initiatives like resource extraction and regional security. Criticizing Serbia’s domestic governance more harshly could risk alienating its government and undermining these strategic gains. However, this calculated approach raises questions about the EU’s commitment to democratic principles

and human rights in Serbia, as the desire to maintain a stable relationship with the government appears to be limiting pressure on democratic reforms and human rights issues. This divergence in the EU's responses highlights a pragmatic, yet potentially problematic, balancing act. In Georgia, supporting protests serves the EU's interests in countering Russian influence, but it may not be sufficient to foster democratic growth and human rights protection. Meanwhile, in Serbia, the EU's strategy of prioritizing stability and strategic partnerships at the expense of more assertive criticism of governance issues risks compromising its credibility as a proponent of democratic values and human rights. Ultimately, this strategy of focusing on geopolitical interests may be short-sighted. It poses the danger of prioritizing immediate political goals over the long-term development of democratic institutions and human rights in these countries. The EU's current approach may succeed in securing short-term geopolitical objectives, but it risks undermining its credibility and influence in the region, as the pursuit of stability and countering Russian influence might not be sufficient to anchor Serbia or Georgia on the side of European values in the long term.

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