A Larger Union Without Georgia

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On 6 October the Commission published *Preparing for a wider Union*, its assessment of how the Union must change before it admits new members.[1] Georgia, a candidate since December 2023, is not named in it. The enlargement package of 4 November explains why: the Commission considers Georgia a candidate in name only and its accession process de facto halted.[2] One proposal in the Communication still matters for Georgia. The Commission wants member states to give up unanimity on sanctions, the field in which measures on Georgia have been blocked. The record of the past two years shows a clear pattern. Where the Union could act without a unanimous sanctions decision, or within the Russia sanctions, it acted. Where it needed unanimity for sanctions aimed at Georgia itself, it did not.

1. WHAT HAS HAPPENED

The Communication proposes two kinds of change. In the accession process, the Council would decide by qualified majority on opening negotiating clusters and on other intermediate steps. Accession itself would still require unanimity. In Union policy, the Commission wants to use the bridging clauses of the treaties, known as passerelles, to move to majority voting in areas such as sanctions, human rights and tax fraud.[3] Such a switch must itself be approved unanimously by the European Council.[4] The reform therefore needs the consent of the very governments whose veto it would remove.

The Communication also proposes new safeguards for future members. For fifteen years after accession, measures against a new member that seriously breaches the Union's values would count as adopted unless the Council rejected them by qualified majority. In serious cases, these measures could go as far as suspending voting rights.[3] [5] The Commission presented roadmaps for Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine with the enlargement package on 4 November, a week later than first planned.[6]

Georgia has moved in the opposite direction. Ukraine and Moldova opened their first negotiating cluster on 15 June, after Hungary lifted its veto.[7] Georgia has not opened negotiations. The Commission's 2026 report finds that the authorities have taken none of the nine steps set out in 2023 and that backsliding has continued. It puts Georgia's alignment with EU foreign policy statements and sanctions at 38 per cent, down from 40 per cent a year earlier.[2] In late July the authorities rejected grant applications from the Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Naumann foundations, which closed their Tbilisi offices on 30 September. The Friedrich Ebert and Heinrich Böll foundations later received approval to continue.[8] In September, ruling party MPs filed a new claim at the Constitutional Court to ban five opposition parties, and hearings began on 21 October.[9]

The Union's political response has so far remained verbal. On 8 October the European Parliament called for the claim to be withdrawn and for sanctions against senior officials, by 445 votes to 37 with 97 abstentions.[10]

On 12 October the Foreign Affairs Council expressed grave concern about democratic backsliding and the situation of opposition parties. It took no decision and postponed a fuller discussion to January 2027. At the same meeting it adopted almost 1,600 listings against Russia's military-industrial complex.[11] On 4 November the High Representative said that Georgia had no viable path to the Union at this stage. The Georgian government was not invited to the Enlargement Forum on 18 November.[12]

2. WHAT THIS MEANS

Georgia's absence from the Communication is not a new decision. There is simply no negotiating step for Georgia to which its proposals could apply. The judgment behind this is older. In June 2024 the European Council concluded that the government's course of action had de facto halted the accession process, and it repeated this in October and December 2024.[2] The standstill also has a Georgian side. In November 2024 the prime minister announced that the government would not seek to open accession negotiations before the end of 2028.[13] The Commission notes that this decision contradicts the Georgian constitution and the wishes of most citizens, 71 per cent of whom support EU membership.[2] [14] The Communication's silence on Georgia therefore reflects a process that both sides have put on hold.

The usual alternative, working with society when cooperation with the government stalls, is also narrowing. A study for the European Parliament finds that EU instruments lose their effect where governing elites adopt elements of the Russian model, as in Georgia, and that cooperation then runs mainly through civil society.[15] Since March 2026 almost any foreign support counts as a grant, requires prior approval by the government and can lead to criminal charges if received without it.[2] [16] The Union therefore has a large public it wants to reach, but few ways of reaching it.

Where the Union has acted on Georgia, it has done so in three ways that differ in how decisions are made. The first are measures that need no unanimous sanctions decision. The Commission suspended visa-free travel for holders of diplomatic, service and official passports from 6 March 2026 under the visa suspension mechanism, without a vote of the member states.[17] Since 2024 the EU has also withheld EUR 121 million of bilateral funds intended for the authorities, and support under the European Peace Facility has been suspended.[2] The second are measures taken within the Russia sanctions framework. These also require unanimity, but governments that have delayed such packages have so far let them pass, as the listings of 12 October show.[11] The third are sanctions aimed at Georgia itself. Measures against Georgian officials responsible for the domestic crackdown have been blocked since December 2024, when Hungary and Slovakia withheld their consent.[18] The legal basis is the same as for the Russia sanctions. What differs is the political setting in which the decision is taken.

The Communication offers little against this problem today. Its new safeguard, under which measures would count as adopted unless a qualified majority rejected them, applies only after accession. For a candidate that has stopped moving, unanimity remains the rule, and only a passerelle for sanctions would change that. A second reading of the same record is also possible. A majority of member states may not actually want sanctions against Georgian officials, and the unanimity rule may give them a convenient reason not to decide. The Council's handling of Georgia on 12 October fits both readings. Which one is right will probably not become clear before the discussion in January.

The same pattern appears in other EU documents. The July 2026 report on the Black Sea strategy calls Georgia a natural transit corridor between Central Asia and Europe, but makes its role depend on concrete steps by

the authorities.[19] Georgia thus remains present in EU documents on the Black Sea and on Russia, while it has disappeared from those on enlargement.

3. WHAT TO WATCH

Four dates will show whether the Union changes how it decides on Georgia or continues to act only under other headings. Table 1 lists them.

Table 1. Open decisions relevant to Georgia, November 2026 to June 2027

DATE	DECISION	DECISION RULE	WHAT IT WILL SHOW
From 9 November 2026	Constitutional Court hearings on the party ban; ruling due by 24 June 2027	Georgian court	Whether five opposition parties are banned
17 and 18 December 2026	European Council	Unanimity	Whether leaders endorse majority voting on sanctions
By early January 2027	Commission decision on extending the visa suspension	Commission (delegated act)	Whether the suspension is extended, possibly to all Georgian citizens
January 2027	Foreign Affairs Council, fuller discussion on Georgia	Unanimity for sanctions	Whether sanctions on Georgian officials return to the agenda

Sources: notes 9, 20 and 21; Council of the European Union, Foreign Affairs Council, 12 October 2026 (note 11).

The European Council of 15 and 16 October took note of the Communication and asked the Council to examine it. It did not endorse majority voting in any field and set no timetable.[20] December is therefore the next test. Because unanimity applies, one government is enough to block the change. The positions of the Hungarian government in office since May and of the Slovak government have not been tested on this question.

The visa suspension expires on 6 March 2027. If the Commission finds that the reasons persist, it is to extend the suspension by early January for 24 months, in principle to all Georgian citizens.[21] This decision lies with the Commission alone and is therefore the most likely next step. In Georgia, the Constitutional Court resumes its hearings on 9 November and must rule by 24 June 2027.[9] A ban on the main opposition parties would test whether the Union responds only through the channels it already uses, or whether it can agree on measures aimed at Georgia itself. Whatever the individual decisions, Georgia's relations with the Union are likely to be shaped less by what the Union says than by the procedures it can still use to act.

NOTES

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