

Navigating Borderlands: Civil Society and Relational Narratives in Georgia's EU Candidacy

Szilvia Nagy

Central European University, Austria & Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany,
ORCID: 0000-0002-0181-7712, corresponding address: nagy@soz.uni-frankfurt.de

Abstract

This paper investigates how civil society organisations (CSOs) navigate and reshape geopolitical narratives within the European Union's evolving candidacy framework. By highlighting the performed inclusivity of EU narratives, it offers a nuanced perspective on the socio-political dynamics of accession processes and promotes a more pluralistic interpretation of the EU candidacy approach. Focusing on Georgia's EU candidacy application, it examines how CSOs, situated in semi-peripheral borderlands, address the complexities of accession processes, structural inequalities and the exclusionary practices embedded in performed inclusivity. The analysis unfolds in three parts. First, it situates the study within the broader context of the politicisation of EU candidacy narratives and introduces the conceptual framework based on relational narratives. Building on the scholarship of strategic narratives and structural narratives, it explores how relational approaches can contribute to the pluralistic understanding of emerging narratives. Second, in a methodological section, it outlines the empirical approach to study relational narratives, based on narrative analysis. Third, through engaging with Georgia's EU candidacy application process, it analyses how civil society organisations narrate Georgia's candidacy to address the

geopolitical tensions through relational narratives, highlighting their efforts to contest the EU's limited geopolitical framing. In conclusion, the paper discusses how civil society organisations use relational narratives and offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics of accession processes, advocating for more pluralistic interpretations of the EU's borderlands to counter performed inclusivity.

Keywords: *performed inclusivity, geopoliticisation, relational narratives, EU candidacy, Georgia, EU borderlands*

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Introduction

The shifting geopolitical landscape, often described as the ‘geopolitical turn’, provides a backdrop for exploring how social relational theories contribute to a pluralistic understanding of the narratives surrounding Georgia’s European Union candidacy. By examining how civil society organisations engage with geopolitical tensions and narrate the dominant approaches of EU enlargements, this study offers insights into the role of relational narratives in challenging performed inclusivity.

This article examines two interrelated dynamics through the lens of narrative analysis. First, it interrogates the notion of performed inclusivity as articulated in EU communications and documents, which, while signalling openness, tend to obscure the structural conditions of the candidacy process. Drawing on the politics of inclusion, performed inclusivity is conceptualised as an idealistic and often symbolic gesture of inclusion that lacks substantive engagement (Zembylas 2019; Cutri & Whiting 2025). In the context of Georgia’s EU candidacy, this article explores how such performed inclusivity is embedded in official statements and policy discourse. Second, the analysis outlines the geopoliticisation of candidacy narratives as constructed by local civil society actors in Georgia. To counter the performed inclusivity, these actors relationally reframe the EU candidacy as a geopolitical claim – an assertion of belonging and alignment within a contested regional order. Conceptualising geopoliticisation as an interpretive and cultural practice (Kuus 2010; Agnew 2004), the article foregrounds the discursive production of space and power, where candidacy becomes embedded within broader struggles over identity, sovereignty and regional positioning in the EU’s evolving borderlands (Kazharski & Makarychev 2015; Cadier 2019).

The analysis focuses on Georgia’s 2022 EU candidacy application. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, in force from 2016, establishing political and economic ties, including visa-free travel and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). By 2022, Georgia, Ukraine and

Moldova were implementing the AA and DCFTA as part of gradual EU integration (Samadashvili 2022; Gogolashvili 2018). However, EU membership had not yet been pursued. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created a historic window for accession bids. That year, Ukraine and Moldova gained candidate status, while Georgia received a membership *perspective*, contingent on fulfilling 12 priorities set by the European Commission (Akhvlediani 2022; Samadashvili 2022; Grigoriadis & Gugulashvili 2022; Crombois 2023). These reflect the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, covering governance, rule of law, human rights, market economy and EU alignment. Following progress reviews, the Commission recommended candidate status for Georgia on 8 November 2023, confirmed on 14 December 2023. As of mid-2025, Georgia holds official EU candidate status, granted in December 2023 following the European Commission's recommendation. However, the accession process has effectively stalled due to concerns over democratic backsliding, particularly the adoption of a controversial 'foreign influence' law, suppression of dissent and the disputed 2024 parliamentary elections. The European Council has since declared Georgia's accession path 'de facto halted', with accession talks suspended until at least 2028.

At this critical juncture in Georgia's EU candidacy, civil society organisations (CSOs) have become politically and analytically central. Despite ongoing scholarly debates over the contested nature of civil society (Buzogány 2024; Luciani 2021; Kamilsoy 2025), many local actors self-identify as CSOs and occupy a unique intermediary role between the state, international actors and the public. Unlike political elites, CSOs offer insights into how democratisation and Europeanisation policies are interpreted and implemented at grassroots and meso-institutional levels. The Rose Revolution highlighted both their influence and limitations – mobilising public sentiment and reform demands, but also revealing vulnerabilities to cooptation and institutional fragility (Broers 2005). In this context, CSOs have emerged as key agents in implementing EU external governance. Initiatives like the Eastern Partnership and the Civil Society Forum (CSF) were designed to empower CSOs in reform and democratic consolidation (Císař 2010; Nizhnikau 2015). Their role is not merely symbolic; they help translate and localise EU norms within Georgia's political context. Though initial engagement was limited by weak institutional capacity, the CSF gradually formalised civil society's role in EU-Georgia relations (Rommens 2014). However, post-Rose Revolution, foreign-funded NGOs became highly politicised, prompting a preference for the more neutral term 'civil society' (interview GE03_16052023).

This paper analyses the relational narratives of organisations, that – regardless of funding origin – self-identify as CSOs, forming overlapping communities of practices (COP) aligned with EU integration and democratisation goals. In the current geopolitical context, CSOs emerge as not merely implementers or observers of political reform, but also active meaning-makers and norm entrepreneurs

whose practices, discourses and networks articulate broader societal responses to both domestic politics and international interventions. Their narratives provide a relational and situated perspective on democratisation that complements and challenges elite-centric analyses.

Based on empirical research conducted in Spring-Summer 2023 in Georgia, this analysis focuses on the intermediary period between Georgia receiving a European perspective and being granted candidate status (2022–2024). Guided by the question of how CSOs navigate performative inclusivity within the EU's evolving candidacy framework, the paper proceeds in three steps. First, it contextualises the politicisation of EU candidacy and introduces a relational narrative framework to counter reductive geopolitical framings. Second, it outlines the empirical methodology. Third, it analyses how CSOs narrate Georgia's EU candidacy to address geopolitical tensions, offering alternative interpretations to the EU's limited framing. The conclusion discusses how civil society organisations use relational narratives and offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics of accession processes, advocating for more pluralistic interpretations of the EU's borderlands to counter performed inclusivity.

A conceptual framework: relational narratives

This paper explores how civil society organisations engage with and reinterpret geopolitical tensions and contested understandings of the EU borders through the lens of relational narratives, emerging from empirical fieldwork. This section presents a conceptual framework centred on these relational narratives to illuminate how organisations navigate, negotiate and forge connections amidst geopolitical uncertainties.

Narratives have gained prominence in interpretive political science since the 'narrative turn', with scholars focusing on meaning-making through discourses and narratives based on shared sociocultural repertoires (Shepherd 2008; Shenhav 2006; Stone 1989; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Suganami 1999; Holland & Mathieu 2023). Freistein, Gadinger and Groth (2024) distinguished three research streams for narratives: narrative as scholarly intervention, social practice and strategy. This paper adopts a perspective that views relational narratives as social practices of communities, merging insights from both narrative as social practice and narrative as strategy.

Relational narratives, on the one hand, build on the conceptualisation of strategic narratives and structured narratives. Strategic narratives are conceptualised by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) as 'means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2013: 2). A more recent take on narratives is conceptualised by Holland and Mathieu as structured narratives, with a focus on 'the more nuanced relational identities' (2023: 1). Following the literature of strategic narratives, they define structural

narrative power as the momentum a story gains as it unfolds in expected ways – a softer strategy that narrows alternatives and creates specific expectations (Holland & Mathieu 2023: 5). This concept builds on the idea that narratives structure and exercise power (Hagstrom & Gustafsson 2019; Holland & Mathieu 2023), portraying structural narratives as journeys that start with a critical juncture, proceed through a development phase and aim for a projected new equilibrium (Feldman & Almquist 2012; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019; Franzosi 1998). While this framework broadens our understanding of strategic narratives, it remains too closely embedded in a linear, stage-based approach to policymaking.

On the other hand, relational narratives are embedded in the ‘relational turn’ in international relations, public policy and global studies (Kurki 2022; Nordin et al. 2019; Lovato & Maurer 2022; Marion Suiseeya et al. 2021; Qin 2016; Trowsell et al. 2021; Arts & Van Tatenhove 2004; Bertelli & Smith 2009; Koliba et al. 2017; Pera & Bussu 2024). As relational approaches encompass a wide range of conceptualisations from individualist to holistic understandings, as well as spanning from instrumental-strategic to critical-reflexive approaches, it is necessary to narrow the scope and focus for a conceptual approach (Bartels & Turnbull 2020). A relational approach to narratives underscores the intricate processes of meaning-making and highlights the inherent connection between power and agency (Bevir & Rhodes 2010; Clarke et al. 2015; Dobson 2015; Kurki 2022; Stout & Love 2015; Wagenaar 2012).

Relationality, in my understanding, follows the interpretivist paradigm, with a critical-reflexive approach to power relations, emphasising the ‘theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions and other kinds of relations among entities’ (Jackson & Nexon 2019: 583). Relational narratives are strongly embedded in socio-political and historical contexts, and through meaning-making practices reveal the contested dynamics that shape and are shaped by multiple, co-existing narratives (anonymised, forthcoming). In these narratives, the focus is not essentially on the storyline, but on the co-constitutive approach of these narratives, highlighting how these interrelations influence perceptions, power structures and socio-political practices. This paper aims to extend this framework with the understanding of emergent practices and narratives shaped by relational exchanges among various actors and networks.

Analysing relational narratives requires a methodological framework based on interpretive ontology and epistemology. In the next section, I outline the methodological approach to narrative analysis that I followed to analyse relational narratives.

A methodological approach: researching relational narratives

This study of relational narratives is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which entails specific ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments (Yanow 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012; Gherardi 2008). Interpretive research emphasises human meaning-making, contextual understanding and

researcher reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2017). It prioritises how actors construct meaning in specific settings and uses ethnographic methods – such as interviews and close textual analysis – to capture the depth of these interpretations (Schwartz-Shea 2015). Reflexivity and positionality are central, recognising the researcher's influence on the research process and the co-constructed nature of knowledge (Holmes 2020; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2017).

My research approach and positionality are shaped by these concepts: Following a critical-interpretive lens – informed by training in anthropology and political science and grounded in ethnographic practice – I tend to focus on situated manifestations as power dynamics. In this research context, as an Eastern European female researcher, I have navigated varying perceptions across institutional contexts – seen at times as a fellow regional insider, at others as a Western academic. This in-between or 'halfie' position (Doyle 2018) enabled reflexive and dialogical engagement with themes of EU candidacy and regional geopolitics, while also shaping how I approached knowledge production in the inter-imperial context of the South Caucasus.

This paper builds on a methodological approach to the analysis of narratives, as outlined by Freistein, Gadinger and Groth (2024). This narrative analysis examines the three core elements of narratives: (1) plot, (2) characterisation and (3) topoi (2024). The plot – or emplotment – is defined as 'the chronological succession of events', a process binding together events and characters in stories to a meaningful whole (Franzosi 1998: 520). It draws on the patterns of a (dis)equilibrium cycle – beginning with a critical juncture or a breakdown of a status quo, advancing through a transformation process narrated through causal links and a temporal sequence (Spencer 2016; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019). Characterisation is guided by questions such as 'Which actors are recognisable, and how are they characterised?' and 'What are their roles, actions, and perceptions?' Led by these questions, it looks at 'the way in which actors are defined and related to one another' (Holland & Mathieu 2023: 6). These actors, whether individuals or groups, are often cast as protagonists and antagonists – heroes and villains. Although they might seem to represent binary oppositions, the narratives co-construct them relationally, linking each character through a dynamic interplay of actions and reactions that connect them both to one another and to the unfolding plot (Freistein et al. 2024). Finally, the topoi, as socially grounded and shared 'reservoirs of generalised key ideas', serve as conceptual repertoires that narratives draw upon (Richardson 2004: 230). Emerging as a relatively stable set of concepts, metaphors and images, as well as complex plots, they connect the narratives to specific debates or discourse strands.

This paper follows these elements in the analysis of Georgia's EU candidacy narratives as a methodological guide to analyse EU policy documents and semi-structured interviews. The 41 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Georgia in spring-summer 2023 with representatives of civil society organisa-

tions. Interlocutors were identified through initial desktop research and mapping, followed by snowball sampling. Starting with larger, internationalised CSOs, the sample expanded to include smaller grassroots initiatives to reflect a broad spectrum of NGOs – ranging from pro-EU to more critical voices, including both foreign-funded and independent organisations. The aim was to explore their meaning-making practices through interviews and observations. Snowballing provided direct access to a variety of CSO actors – researchers, project managers and leaders who often held multiple roles. Interviews, conducted in English at locations chosen by participants, were recorded with consent, anonymised, transcribed, coded and securely stored in line with ethical guidelines.

To systematically analyse the EU enlargement narrative regarding Georgia, primary documents were purposively selected from the official EU enlargement portal for Georgia, hosted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).¹ Chosen for their relevance to official discourse, they were triangulated with other public communications to capture strategic framing, normative themes and geopolitical positioning. This enabled a systematic narrative analysis, allowing for systematic comparisons between EU-produced narratives and those emerging from Georgian civil society interlocutors, thereby enriching the paper's relational and interpretive approach.

After data collection, I transcribed and analysed the material through qualitative coding using MAXQDA. Following Saldana's (2013) approach, I conducted four coding cycles. The first identified key topics, actors and networks. The subsequent cycles applied qualitative document analysis (QDA) to both interviews and EU documents, guided by sensitising questions focusing on plot, characterisation and topoi. Through narrative analysis, I explored how their interpretations and anticipations inform the broader discourse on the country's EU integration prospects, and compared them with the EU narratives based on published communications and documents, presented in the next section.

The relational narratives of EU candidacy

For the understanding of the diverse narratives surrounding Georgia's EU candidacy application, this section discusses the relational narratives of civil society organisations. These relational narratives emerged along the plurality of narratives, and placed Georgia's candidacy application into a geopolitical space. The narratives emerged from the qualitative coding of the EU documents and interviews along the three main elements of narrative analysis: the plot, characterisation and topoi. Below, I analyse these elements and introduce narrative examples as part of the analysis.

1 Key documents listed for Georgia's EU candidacy: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/georgia_en

The plot: Georgia's EU candidacy

The plot, as a starting point of a narrative analysis binds together the events and characters into a storyline, with some recognisable elements, such as a definite starting point, a transformation process, a closure or suspense (Spencer 2016; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019). Below, I outline the parallel narratives of the plot, as emerged from the EU documents as well as through the interviews.

The EU's narrative of Georgia's candidacy begins on 3 March 2022, when Georgia and Moldova submitted their membership applications. While interviews and EU documents reference a broader timeline, the official narrative frames the process as linear and technocratic, focused on institutional benchmarks rather than geopolitical urgency. It traces a path from the 2014 Association Agreement and 2016 DCFTA enforcement to Georgia's 2022 application, omitting the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a key catalyst.² From 2022 to 2023, the EU storyline centres on compliance, marked by the June 2022 Council's 12 priorities, the 2023 analytical report on *acquis* alignments, progress updates and the November 2023 Commission recommendation. These steps reinforce a logic of incremental progress, suggesting accession is contingent on technical reforms rather than reactive to security imperatives. However, alternative narratives emerge in political statements and media, referencing civil protests against the 'transparency of foreign influence' law (May 2024), parliamentary elections (October 2024) and the 2024 Enlargement Package. While such events reintroduce democratic and geopolitical concerns, indicating a parallel discourse, they remain secondary to the dominant institutional framing focused on procedural milestones.

Based on these timelines and documents, a singular, EU-Georgia relationship-based plot emerges, where Georgia 'all of a sudden' applies for EU candidacy, where in response the EU recommends a 'perspective' to become a member of the EU, based on 'political criteria, economic criteria and the ability of the country to assume the obligations of EU membership (*EU acquis*)' (EC 2022a).

The European Commission assesses that Georgia has a foundation in place to reach the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, even if recent developments have undermined the country's progress; it has achieved a good degree of macroeconomic stability and has a sound record of economic policy and a favourable business environment, but further reforms are needed to improve the functioning of its market economy; and overall, Georgia has established a solid basis for further alignment with the EU *acquis*.

On this basis, the Commission recommends that Georgia be given the perspective to become a member of the European Union. It should be

2 The Appendix lists the EU documents used for narrative analysis

granted candidate status once a number of priorities have been addressed. (EC2022a)

In this narrative, the European Commission outlined the requirements as obligations of the EU membership, formulated as 12 priorities (EC 2022b; EEAS 2022). The Twelve Priorities recommended by the European Commission were mainly concerned with the strengthening of the independence and functioning of state institutions; the separation of powers and especially the ‘de-oligarchisation’ by eliminating economic, political and public influences; ensuring an independent media environment; the protection of human rights of vulnerable groups; and the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes, in line with the Copenhagen Criteria (Bitsadze 2018; EC 2020). The plot closely follows the fulfilment of these priorities, and only in the published 2024 Enlargement Package concludes that the accession process is *de facto* halted, and does not project any future (EC 2024).

The plot from the perspective of the local civil society organisations runs a different course. In this context, Georgia’s EU candidacy application remains a central narrative device, but it is embedded within a broader temporal and geopolitical framework. These narratives span multiple temporal horizons, linking recent events – such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – with earlier national traumas like the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and projecting forward to both the anticipated near-term decision on EU candidacy and the long-term aspiration of full membership. By evoking the Soviet past and envisioning divergent futures – ranging from European integration to a potential regression into authoritarianism – these narratives construct a cyclical sense of historical disequilibrium and continuity, as shown in the excerpt below:

If Georgia doesn’t get the candidacy status, we’ll have greater risk (in) relations with Russia. . . . based on our experience in recent, like 30 years, we see that, showing weakness to Russia and getting isolated, staying alone with Russia is a recipe for more conflict, more war, and more interference in the Georgian politics. . . . This is why, you know, like building democracy, democratic institutions are obviously the main goal. But, you know, one of the . . . main aspects here is also the security aspect. So Georgia needs democratic institutions, and Georgia needs greater integration with the EU in order to be safer from Russia. . . . So it’s not strictly about, you know, corruption and democratic institutions. It’s also about just basic safety from conflict and war. (GE28_14062023)

In these plots, two contrasting narrative trajectories emerged: one envisions EU candidacy and eventual membership as a pathway to stability, security and democratic consolidation; the other anticipates the failure of candidacy, resulting in a prolonged Russian geopolitical presence and a return to authoritarian uncertainty.

As outlined, the key distinction between the plots lies in their degree of geopolitical embeddedness. On the one hand, the EU narrative portrays Georgia's candidacy as a normative and institutional journey, downplaying the war-driven urgency that prompted the application, and reinforcing the EU's self-image as a rules-based community rather than a reactive geopolitical actor. On the other hand, the civil society narratives align Georgia with broader Euro-Atlantic security frameworks and democratic values, framing EU integration as both a normative and existential goal, shaped by historical traumas and fears of renewed isolation or domination by Russia. According to the categories developed by Minesashvili (2021) to analyse Georgian identity narratives, the plot based on civil society narratives falls in line with the Westerniser and Accommodationist narratives, envisioning the future along EU integration, where Europeanisation represents a future-oriented, transformative, as well as pragmatist promise.

Characterisation: protagonists and antagonists

Characterisation, as a second aspect of narrative analysis highlights the various actors and the roles they play. Actors can be individuals, organisations or groups, emerging as protagonists and antagonists of the narratives. In this aspect, I analysed how the characters co-constructed relationally, following guiding questions such as: Who are the recognisable actors? How are they characterised? What roles and actions are attributed to them?

The analysis of EU candidacy and enlargement documents concerning Georgia reveals a marked binary structure in the construction of political actors. On the one hand, the European Union is depicted as a coherent, authoritative actor that speaks with a unified voice. This 'EU voice' is constructed through statements issued by a network of institutions and high-level representatives, including the European Commission, the European Council, the Delegation to Georgia and DG NEAR, as well as key figures such as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative Josep Borrell, Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos. Despite the institutional plurality, the discourse merges these voices into a singular, normative authority, speaking *on behalf of* 'the European Union'. This narrative homogenisation performs an important discursive function: It legitimises the EU's external role as both an arbiter of standards and a custodian of democratic values.

On the other side of this narrative framework is 'Georgia', initially portrayed as a coherent, undifferentiated entity in its role as a candidate state. However, in more recent statements, this monolithic depiction becomes more fragmented. Georgia is increasingly differentiated into specific actors with contrasting roles, particularly in response to political developments such as the 'foreign agent' law and contentious electoral dynamics. Official EU communications distinguish between multiple domestic actors: The *Georgian government* is cast as a problem-

atic or resistant entity, while *Georgian citizens* are portrayed as democratic agents aligned with EU values and aspirations. This discursive shift is exemplified in statements such as: 'Georgia's citizens are demonstrating their strong attachment to democracy. . . . The Georgian government should heed this clear message . . . Georgia is at a crossroads' (von der Leyen 2024).

These statements illustrate several key discursive strategies through which the EU constructs a narrative of integration populated by clear protagonists and antagonists. First, actor differentiation separates the Georgian state apparatus from its civil society, allowing the EU to express disapproval toward the political leadership while continuing to endorse the aspirations of the broader population. In this framing, civil society emerges as the protagonist of the European project – portrayed as a democratic force aligned with EU values – while the government is cast as the antagonist, resisting reform and deviating from normative expectations.

Second, moral positioning reinforces this binary by assigning legitimacy to the civic actors and delegitimising the state leadership. Citizens are framed as democratic agents whose actions – such as protest and public mobilisation – signal their commitment to a European future. The government, by contrast, is portrayed as obstructive, invoking conditionality as a corrective mechanism. Third, temporal framing positions Georgia as being 'at a crossroads' or progressing along a 'path', embedding the narrative in a teleological structure.

These narrative configurations reveal a fundamental tension. While civil society is rhetorically elevated as the EU's primary interlocutor – cast as the authentic bearer of European values and national aspirations – the actual enlargement process remains firmly anchored in state-level negotiations and conditionalities. This dual framing creates a paradox: The EU discursively sidelines political elites in favour of civil society, constructing protagonists and antagonists to reinforce its normative authority, yet in practice it continues to operate through intergovernmental mechanisms. As a result, civil society's legitimising role is symbolically foregrounded but procedurally marginal, complicating its position within the enlargement architecture.

From a civil society perspective, the discursive construction of actors mirrors the EU's narrative structure in terms of protagonists and antagonists, yet it is notably more geopolitically embedded. Through narrative analysis, it becomes evident that Georgian civil society organisations (CSOs) strategically reframe the national subject, positioning themselves not merely as implementers of reform, but as protagonists actively shaping Georgia's European trajectory. In their accounts, 'the Georgian people' are narratively constructed as a collective actor, distinct from and often in opposition to political elites.

This protagonist role is not symbolic but performative: CSOs report concrete contributions toward fulfilling the EU's 12 priorities – drafting policy proposals, facilitating reform dialogues and engaging with EU institutions. These actions

serve not only technical ends but also form part of a narrative strategy to assert legitimacy and credibility, especially in contrast to state actors. In doing so, CSOs construct a *topos of responsibility*, whereby the absence of political will among the ruling elites and fragmented opposition justifies the civil sector's self-ascribed leadership. As one interviewee stated:

We were telling the government what is needed to be done . . . not only the government, but also the opposition. . . . But the government did not fulfil. And that's why we saw that Georgia did not receive candidate status. (GE40_21062023)

Here, the antagonists are constructed as internal: The political elite – both government and opposition – are cast as either inert or obstructive. This moral dichotomy deepens the narrative tension and sharpens the civil society's contrast with formal political actors.

Yet, external antagonism also plays a central role. In many civil society narratives, 'Russia' is constructed as a *metanarrative antagonist* – not merely as a geopolitical actor, but as a force of disruption to Georgia's European alignment. This framing introduces a topos of existential threat, where EU integration is not only a normative aspiration but a geopolitical safeguard. As one civil society actor articulated:

We are kind of asking the EU to grant candidate status, not only with the technical assessment . . . but also for the political decision, because, you know, when it comes to EU integration . . . Russia is trying to push back all the time. So it's kind of a struggle of Russia and Europe here . . . like in Ukraine. (GE40_21062023)

Overall, the EU's discourse does not merely describe political developments; it narrates them through a narrative tool that shapes perceptions of legitimacy, agency and belonging. By casting civil society as the protagonist and the state as a potential antagonist, the EU strengthens its role as a geopolitical actor and a moral narrator of European integration in its Eastern neighbourhood. This framing is mirrored and amplified by civil society organisations themselves, who position their work not only as technical reform but as part of a broader geopolitical struggle against authoritarian influence, particularly from Russia. By drawing parallels with Ukraine and invoking shared struggles for democratic sovereignty, Georgian CSOs situate themselves within a transnational community of pro-European actors resisting authoritarian influence. This narrative framework positions civil society as both a normative and strategic interlocutor, not only compensating for domestic political dysfunction but also actively engaging the EU through a shared geopolitical vocabulary. Mirroring the EU's discursive tendency to cast civil society as the legitimate protagonist, CSOs deploy relational narratives

that connect Georgia's trajectory to that of neighbouring candidate states, while reinterpreting conditionality as political recognition. These relational narratives aim to reframe civil society as agents of Europeanisation instead of as technical implementers, seeking not only validation of reforms, but affirmation of their geopolitical role within Europe's contested borderlands.

Topoi

Topoi, as socially and locally grounded conceptual repertoires, are underlying and connecting the narratives to existing and embedded debates (Freistein et al. 2024; Richardson 2004).

The EU's enlargement discourse, particularly in the 2024 Enlargement Package, articulates candidacy as both a legal obligation and a normative-geopolitical mission (EUR-Lex 2025). On one hand, the accession process is grounded in the *topos of acquis*, based on the *acquis Communautaire* – a binding and evolving body of EU law – structured into thematic clusters such as the rule of law, internal market and sustainable development (EC 2023). On the other hand, the *topos of enlargement* incorporates broader narrative elements: historic destiny, normative universality and geopolitical urgency. As President von der Leyen asserts, 'The tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law.' At the same time, conditionality remains central: 'The enlargement process continues to be merit-based and depends on the objective progress made by each of the partners' (EC 2024).

This dual framing presents the EU as both legal authority and moral arbiter, constructing enlargement as a teleological journey towards European unity under shared values. However, the candidacy process also introduces differentiated expectations for candidate states. While framed as a strategic and symbolic opportunity, the *acquis* is often criticised for enforcing a homogenised model that overlooks local contexts and reinforces asymmetrical power dynamics. Scholars have underscored how this conditionality gives the EU coercive leverage over domestic policymaking (Grabbe 2003; Trauner 2009; Economides & Ker-Lindsay 2015; Berisha & Cotella 2024), highlighting the tensions between normative discourse and political practice.

From the perspective of civil society actors, both dimensions of the *acquis* have been critically assessed. The benchmarking function is often embraced as a tool for advocacy, enabling CSOs to promote reforms and align with EU norms, casting themselves as key drivers of change. In contrast, the gatekeeping function has drawn significant criticism. Civil society representatives have questioned the fairness and consistency of accession criteria, noting the lack of clarity around compliance thresholds, shifting policy priorities and opaque hierarchies of tasks and stakeholders (Grabbe 2003). Some have even argued that several existing EU

member states would struggle to meet the very standards imposed on candidates, further highlighting the structural imbalances in the accession framework.

Through interviews with Georgian civil society actors, a relational narrative of EU enlargement emerges, contrasting with the EU's primarily bilateral framing of candidacy. While the EU and Russia are often constructed as central protagonists and antagonists, respectively, civil society actors introduce alternative narrative topoi, particularly through comparisons to other countries' candidacy paths, to situate the narrative frames in a wider context. These topoi, based on comparisons to parallel and previous EU candidacy decision models, were mostly referred to as the 'Albanian model' and the 'Bosnia and Herzegovina model', next to comparisons with the parallel candidacy applications of Moldova and Ukraine.

Georgian civil society actors frequently interpret the EU candidacy process through comparative narrative frameworks, drawing on regional precedents to make sense of Georgia's position and potential outcomes. Two dominant scenarios are often invoked: the 'Bosnian model' and the 'Albanian model'. These models serve as narrative tools for anticipating how the EU might respond to Georgia's candidacy, while also reflecting broader concerns about symbolic recognition, political accountability and geopolitical alignment. Rather than viewing the EU's decisions as purely technical, these scenarios embed the candidacy process within relational and political dynamics, highlighting both the symbolic and strategic dimensions of enlargement. Through these narrative comparisons, civil society actors articulate expectations, express anxieties and position Georgia within a shared regional storyline of conditional integration and democratic aspiration.

The 'Albanian model' of EU candidacy is narrated as a strategic sequence where political change, particularly leadership turnover, becomes a prerequisite for candidate status, rather than referring solely to Albania's reform path – building on the broad range of political, economic and social reforms marked by institutional restructuring, anti-corruption efforts and alignment with EU norms (Panagiotou 2011; Peshkopia 2014). The Albanian model is not merely invoked as a technical roadmap, but as a strategic and symbolic narrative that civil society actors in Georgia deploy to reframe their own candidacy trajectory. The success of Albania's judiciary reform since 2016 is positioned as a narrative exemplar – a story of transformation and compliance that Georgia might emulate to legitimise its European aspirations (Samkharadze 2020). This comparative framing does more than highlight institutional parallels; it constructs a relational narrative that links Georgia's post-2003 democratic path to a broader regional storyline of delayed, yet possible, accession.

Contrasting it with the 'Bosnian model', where candidacy was granted symbolically to the people rather than the political elites, an interlocutor noted:

Well, basically, there are two scenarios I would say. We are calling it tentatively the Bosnian scenario and the Albanian scenario. The Bosnian

scenario means that when last year it was the candidate status was given to Bosnia, the commissioner . . . actually said . . . during the press conference that this is . . . given to the Bosnian people and political elites have to deliver on that still. . . . And the second one is the case of Albania . . . the Commission said that, okay, we see that there is some progress, but since there is an election in Albania in 2012, we will also take this into consideration. And they decided the fate of Albania, whether to grant candidate status or not, only after it kind of organised the election and only after the Prime Minister was ousted from the office. So these are like two probable and likeable scenarios that might happen here in our case. (GE17_30052023)

In light of the broader relational and geopolitical narratives discussed earlier, the invocation of the ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina model’ functions less as a direct institutional comparison and more as a symbolic narrative device. While Bosnia’s EU trajectory is shaped by its post-conflict political fragmentation and slow reform progress (Cotella & Berisha 2016; Kollias & Messis 2020), Georgian civil society actors appropriate this model to articulate a discourse of symbolic recognition. As one interviewee remarked, ‘the Bosnian scenario means that . . . [the EU candidacy] is something that Georgian people get, not the Georgian Dream’ (GE17_30052023). Within this framing, the EU is called upon to distinguish between the public – constructed as the moral and democratic protagonist – and the governing elite, portrayed as the antagonist obstructing reform. This narrative strategy seeks to reconfigure the logic of enlargement away from elite-state compliance and toward popular legitimacy and geopolitical solidarity. By referencing Bosnia, civil society actors narrate their struggle for EU candidacy not only as a technical endeavour but as a normative and political claim for inclusion, recognition and alignment with democratic values under threat.

Adding a second dimension of relational topoi, the narratives emerging from civil society interviews reveal how the EU’s differentiated treatment of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine fuels contestation around legitimacy, fairness, and symbolic inclusion. One interlocutor asserts:

What they’re telling us from the EU side is that, for example, in purely technical measurements, we are better than Moldova, basically. I don’t compare us with Ukraine. That’s really a different thing. But if you compare like points of corruption, state availability, democracy, free media, everything is better here in terms of numbers. . . . They just say that, well, we saw a political will, a readiness from the Moldovan side to . . . work with us. But we didn’t see any of that from your side. (GE22v_07062023)

This narrative frames Georgia as a ‘deserving’ subject of enlargement, yet structurally sidelined. It constructs a relational topos where Georgia’s candidacy is not only assessed against accession benchmarks, but also against peer states who have

received different outcomes under similar or less favourable conditions. In narrative terms, this positions Georgia as a protagonist unfairly overlooked, and the EU as an ambiguous adjudicator whose decisions risk undermining its credibility.

Through this lens, civil society actors narrate the candidacy process as a struggle not just for technical recognition but for relational justice, seeking acknowledgement of Georgia's reforms, aspirations and strategic position within the regional geopolitical configuration. The differentiated treatment becomes a discursive site of contestation, where civil society challenges the EU's narrative authority and calls for a more transparent and equitable enlargement discourse. The emphasis on relative merit and geopolitical solidarity thus transforms candidate status into a narrative tool for negotiating belonging, legitimacy and alignment within the European project.

These relational topoi were further contextualised on two accounts: considering the emerging EU-scepticism, as well as Russia's imperial aims. On the one hand, the differentiated treatment of Georgia's EU candidacy – especially in comparison to Moldova and Ukraine – emerges in civil society narratives as a key site of tension, particularly around reform benchmarks and political will, framed not just as technical assessments but as perceived injustices. This creates fertile ground for Eurosceptic counter-narratives to flourish. One interviewee warns:

The government tries to send messages that they did everything, and if we don't receive candidate status, this means that the EU is reluctant to give us confidence, that the EU loves more Ukraine and Moldova . . . and Georgia is discriminated. And this kind of stupid messages, they influence of course the minds of certain population. (GE34_I6062023)

Here, the plot shifts from one of merit-based integration to one of symbolic exclusion: The differentiated treatment of the application risks fuelling Eurosceptic narratives within Georgia, transforming the EU from a gatekeeper of democratic values into a distant and possibly biased actor. While some civil society groups continue to support the logic of conditionality, they also recognise how these standards can be rhetorically manipulated by domestic elites to stoke public disappointment and resentment toward the EU. This framing fosters a perception of unfairness and exclusion, which can deepen public disillusionment with the EU.

On the other hand, the Russian threat emerges as a central argumentative topos in civil society's strategic narrative appeals to the EU, framing enlargement as both a geopolitical imperative and a moral duty. One interlocutor articulates this discursive strategy clearly:

So when we are talking about EU institutions, the [main request] from our side is not to leave Georgian people alone before the threats of Russia. Because people actually are clearly pro-European. And this is attested by numerous statistical data and surveys and also number of people demon-

strating in Tbilisi in support with Ukraine or support with EU integration, against Russian laws. But the political situation is like a very, very, very complex here (GE16_30052023).

Through narrative analysis, this statement reveals a clear character structure: The Georgian people are cast as pro-European protagonists; the political elite, described as entangled in complexity and lacking democratic legitimacy, act as ambiguous or even antagonistic intermediaries; and Russia appears as the primary external antagonist. This triadic structure reinforces a relational narrative of democratic struggle, in which civil society appeals to the EU not merely as a gatekeeper, but as a protective ally in a broader ideological confrontation. Russia's narrative role extends beyond its geopolitical presence – it embodies a normative counterforce to European values. References to 'Russian laws' invoke domestic legislative efforts that echo Russian-style constraints on civil society, such as Georgia's proposed 'foreign agents' law. These allusions heighten the stakes by positioning the EU candidacy as a bulwark against creeping authoritarianism.

Conclusion

This paper explored how civil society organisations in Georgia navigate performative inclusivity through geopolitical narratives within the European Union's evolving candidacy framework. Using a conceptual framing of *relational narratives*, the analysis approached EU enlargement discourse as a pluralistic and contested space, shaped by both institutional and grassroots actors. Methodologically, the study applied narrative analysis – focusing on plot, characterisation and topoi – to EU communications and documents alongside 41 semi-structured interviews with Georgian CSO representatives.

The narrative analysis revealed parallel and at times conflicting trajectories: While the EU's official discourse – despite the rhetoric of a 'geopolitical Commission' – remains rooted in bilateral and technocratic logics, civil society actors embed Georgia's candidacy within a broader geopolitical and normative struggle. This divergence is reflected in the characterisation of protagonists and antagonists, where CSOs cast themselves and the Georgian public as agents of Europeanisation, juxtaposed with a domestic political elite seen as obstructive, and Russia as the primary external antagonist. The topoi invoked – particularly those comparing Georgia with Moldova, Ukraine, Albania and Bosnia – extend the discourse beyond procedural benchmarks to questions of fairness, symbolic recognition and strategic alignment. Through this relational narrative framework, CSOs seek to reframe EU candidacy as not only a merit-based process, but a geopolitical and moral act of solidarity.

At the core of this divergence lies the EU's *performed inclusivity*. From the perspective of Georgian civil society, the momentum created by Ukraine and Moldova's applications presented a genuine window of opportunity; however,

EU institutions largely framed this as symbolic, without embedding it in a meaningful geopolitical context. While official documents occasionally reference the 'complete reunification of our continent', the underlying plotlines remain technocratic, omitting the broader historical and security developments that motivated Georgia's application. This performed inclusivity also surfaces in the narrow characterisation of actors and in the prevailing *topos* of enlargement as conditional on *acquis* compliance. The EU's strong gatekeeping function – through ambiguous standards, shifting priorities and a hierarchy of reforms – can be interpreted by hopeful actors as strategic ambiguity, yet from a narrative perspective, it reveals a constrained and depoliticised understanding of enlargement. Civil society actors, in response, use relational narratives to reframe candidacy not merely as a legal status, but as a political and moral recognition of Georgia's democratic aspirations and geopolitical vulnerability.

Building on this topological and relational framing, civil society narratives do not merely contest the EU's bilateral and technocratic approach – they actively reconfigure the meaning of borders, belonging and responsibility. Rather than accepting the static spatial logic of EU enlargement, CSOs construct a mobile and dynamic vision of Europe, one in which Georgia is already embedded within a shared European normative and cultural space. These narratives contextualise Georgia's EU candidacy both in time and space: temporally, by embedding the application within a longer historical arc of European integration and democratic struggle; spatially, by geopoliticising the landscape through characterisations and *topoi* that transcend national borders and reimagine regional interconnections.

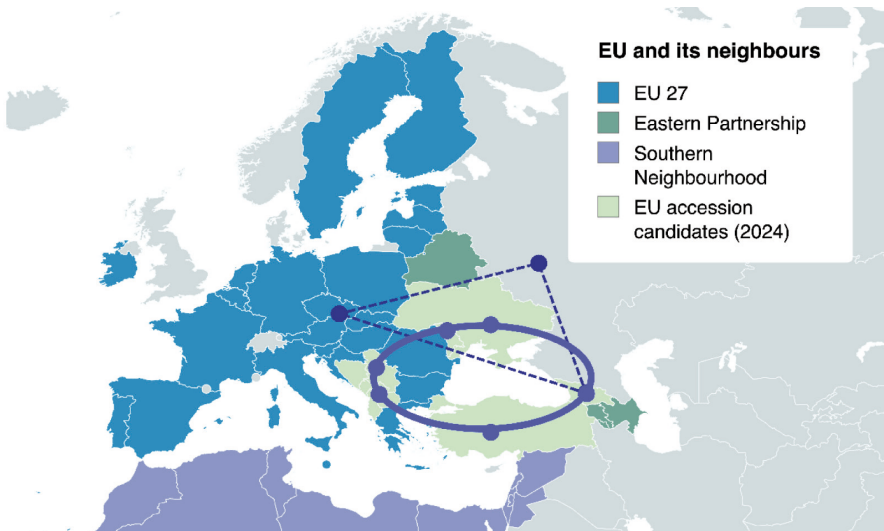
Within this framework, civil society actors draw on relational *topoi* – particularly models where candidate status was granted symbolically to the people rather than state institutions – to assert their own legitimacy and appeal for recognition. These appeals refract candidacy not simply as a technocratic outcome of reform benchmarks, but as an act of democratic solidarity and geopolitical alignment. The EU is called upon not just as an institutional arbiter but as a normative actor capable of affirming popular will.

Crucially, the Russian threat becomes a central narrative device: not only a rationale for urgency, but also a lens through which both domestic dysfunction and EU hesitation are interpreted. By invoking Russia, civil society actors reposition EU enlargement as a moral and strategic imperative, arguing that inaction risks enabling authoritarian influence, while symbolic inclusion would reaffirm the EU's commitment to democratic resilience at its periphery. In this way, enlargement is narratively recast not just as a matter of conditionality, but of responsibility, shifting the stakes from procedural compliance to questions of geopolitical ethics and solidarity. Through this lens, civil society actors dissolve rigid boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside', emphasising shared geopolitical threats, notably from Russia, and invoking solidarity with other Eastern Partnership countries. In doing so, they

construct what Mezzadra and Neilson (2012) describe as *geopolitical topologies* – fluid, relational spatial imaginaries that challenge the fixed binaries of accession politics. As Awan (2016: 280) notes, border topology approaches highlight bordering processes as dynamic and ecological, enabling an understanding of EU enlargement not as a bounded institutional progression, but as a contested and evolving field shaped by moral, political and geopolitical claims. Ultimately, civil society narratives perform a strategic reconfiguration of Europeanness itself, foregrounding a claim to belonging that is not contingent upon formal status, but rooted in shared values, common threats and a lived commitment to the European project.

As a concluding reflection, the analysis revealed two dominant relational topologies structuring civil society narratives: first, the EU–Georgia–Russia triangle, which reorients the focus from a bilateral EU–Georgia framework toward a more situated understanding that includes the persistent influence of Russia; and second, a symbolic circle of candidate states across the Black Sea and the Balkans, which serves to draw parallels with prior EU candidacy decisions and challenge perceptions of exceptionalism or exclusion (Figure 1). These relational topologies function as narrative devices that unsettle the EU’s practices of performed inclusivity – practices that, as Korosteleva (2017) critiques, have consistently failed to imagine a *new social order* capable of recognising the relational value of the ‘other’ within the Eastern Partnership. The EU’s normative and civilisational framing has produced a rigid power structure in which perspectives from Europe’s margins – such as Georgia – are acknowledged only instrumentally. In contrast, the relational narratives advanced by civil society actors reintroduce the geopolitical

Figure 1: Relational topologies



Source: Author

dimension, insisting on a more embedded, context-sensitive understanding of power, belonging and solidarity in the EU's neighbourhood policy.



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SZILVIA NAGY is a Research Fellow at the Research Unit of Democratic Innovations at Goethe University Frankfurt and a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations at Central European University, Vienna. Her research interests lie at the intersection of foreign policy and cultural diplomacy with particular attention to emerging practices of civil society involvement. Other research interests include interpretive methodologies, conceptual approaches to the global easts, and participatory research. She has been a Visiting Researcher at the Vrije University Brussels, and currently working as a Research Fellow on the INSPIRE (Intersectional Spaces of Participation: Inclusive, Resilient, Embedded) research project at Goethe University Frankfurt. She has published in, among others, *European Policy Analysis* and *Participations*.

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Appendix table 1: EU documents

Document Title	Publication Date	Document Type	Issuing Body	URL
<i>Association Agreement between the European Union, the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part</i>	2014 June	Legal summary (secondary source)	EUR-Lex / European Commission	https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/agree_international/2014/494/oj/eng
<i>Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part</i>	2016 July	Legal Agreement (primary source)	Official Journal of the European Union	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents/treaties-agreements/agreement/?id=2014007
<i>The European Commission Recommends to Council Confirming Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's Perspective to Become Members of the EU and Provides Its Opinion on Granting Them Candidate Status</i>	2022 June	Press Release / Policy Communication	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-recommends-council-confirming-ukraine-moldova-and-georgias-perspective-become-2022-06-17_en
<i>Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union</i>	2022 June	Opinion	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en
<i>Commission's analytical report on country's alignment with EU acquis</i>	2023 February	Analytical Report	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-analytical-report-georgias-alignment-eu-acquis_en

<i>Georgia 2023 Report accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy</i>	2023 November	Commission Staff Working Document	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2023_en
<i>Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy</i>	2023 December	Communication	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en
<i>European Council conclusions</i>	2023 December	Conclusions	European Council	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/15/european-council-conclusions-14-and-15-december-2023/
<i>Statement by President von der Leyen on the situation in Georgia</i>	2024 May	Statement	President von der Leyen	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-situation-georgia-2024-05-01_en
<i>Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell with the European Commission on the adoption of the 'transparency of foreign influence' law in Georgia*</i>	2024 May	Statement	High Representative Josep Borrell	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-european-commission-adoption-transparency-foreign-2024-05-15_en

<i>Statement by the European Commission and the High Representative Josep Borrell on the Parliamentary elections in Georgia</i>	2024 October	Statement	High Representative Josep Borrell	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-european-commission-and-high-representative-josep-borrell-parliamentary-elections-georgia-2024-10-27_en
<i>2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy</i>	2024 October	Communication	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2024-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en
<i>Statement by the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos on Georgia</i>	2024 December	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-high-representative-vice-president-commission-kaja-kallas-and-commissioner-enlargement-2024-12-01_en
<i>Commission proposes to suspend visa-free travel for officials from Georgia</i>	2024 December	Proposal	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-suspend-visa-free-travel-officials-georgia-2024-12-20_en
<i>Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos on the situation in Georgia</i>	2025 February	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-and-commissioner-enlargement-marta-kos-2025-02-07_en

<i>Georgia: Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos on latest developments</i>	2025 April	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/georgia-joint-statement-high-representativevice-
			Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	president-kallas-and-commissioner-marta-kos-latest-2025-04-02_en
<i>Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos on Georgia's Foreign Agents Registration Act</i>	2025 May	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-and-commissioner-marta-kos-georgias-2025-05-31_en

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