



Report

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Decoupling EU Enlargement From Liberal Democracy

*The Engagement of Hungary's Government in
Georgia and Serbia*

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Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the EU to revitalize its enlargement policy by granting candidate status to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. After decades of "enlargement fatigue", the EU sought to reassert itself as a normative actor in its neighborhood. Because accession depends on candidate countries' compliance with liberal-democratic criteria, enlargement has significant potential to advance democratization.

Not all member-state governments, however, see enlargement as a way to promote liberal democracy. Since coming to power in Hungary in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have positioned themselves as challengers of liberalism at home and abroad, with the openly stated goal of transforming the EU from within. Together with potentially helping in the future to protect themselves from sanctions, which became a realistic scenario after the EU froze some of Hungary's funding in 2022, decoupling enlargement from liberal democracy also served their goal of strengthening illiberalism internationally.

The revival of enlargement coincided with Hungary's government temporarily holding important institutional levers to challenge the EU's normative agenda—a Hungarian diplomat as enlargement commissioner and the presidency of the Council of the EU—in addition to its permanent veto power in the council. As well as to obstruct Ukraine's accession, Orbán and Fidesz have used these and other tools to undermine the EU's approach to two candidate countries with autocratizing governments: Georgia and Serbia.

In Georgia's case, Hungary's government diluted EU pressure on the Georgian Dream government that has accelerated the country's democratic backsliding. It did so through high-level visits and supportive statements, blocking sanctions, and helping entrench illiberal values that violated the EU's Copenhagen Criteria. Orbán and Fidesz built close ties with Georgian Dream. They helped it maintain a pro-EU veneer for the sake of its electorate as well as deflect the blame for Georgia's lack of accession progress onto the EU and the West.

In Serbia's case, where the EU applied less pressure on President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party government for strategic reasons, most of Budapest's efforts have aimed to accelerate the country's accession. Before 2022, Orbán and Fidesz promoted this goal through, for example, deploying a high-level "EU integration adviser" to Belgrade and through the softening of critical reports in the European Commission. This intensified after 2022, with Hungary's government using its council presidency to advance Serbia's membership and accusing the EU of penalizing the country. This reinforced Vučić's narrative portraying the EU as responsible for reforms and the accession process stalling.

With enlargement back on the EU agenda, Hungary's actions shed light on the challenges facing the EU's strongest democracy-promotion tool. This aligns with the growing calls for limiting the veto power of member-state governments when they undermine the union's liberal-democratic foundations as well as for shifting key foreign policy and enlargement decisions from unanimity to qualified majority voting.

Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU reopened its membership door after nearly a decade of "enlargement fatigue" due to a combination of internal and external crises, alongside the challenges of integrating recent Central and Eastern European members. The decision to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine that year, and to Georgia in 2023, was therefore a strong signal in a moment of profound crisis. For years, enlargement has been one of the EU's most effective foreign policy tools. Reviving it was not just a geopolitical move but also a normative one, aimed in part at reasserting the EU's role as a promoter of liberal democracy. The prospect of the benefits of membership and its accession conditionality has long been considered the EU's most successful normative tool as membership is directly tied to compliance with the liberal-democratic norms set out in the Copenhagen Criteria. Enlargement has thus been a powerful instrument to shape candidate states' behavior and to promote their democratization. Conditionality can succeed in authoritarian contexts by exposing governments as anti-democratic and mobilizing public opinion, but it is most effective when the EU speaks in a consistent and united voice.

The above vision is not shared by every member-state government, however. Following the return of enlargement to the forefront in 2022, different illiberal actors within the EU have tried to dilute its ability to promote liberal democracy and reinforce the EU as a normative power. Hungary's government is one notable example. Since coming to power in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have positioned themselves as challengers of liberalism at home and abroad. Their aim is to transform the EU from within. Orbán and Fidesz's motives are ideological and strategic. Undermining liberalism serves their project of building an illiberal democracy and showing the EU to be corrupt and driven by double standards. It also seeks to weaken the ability to threaten Hungary with sanctions and the suspension of its voting rights in the Council of the EU, given that the EU activated rule-of-law conditionality against the country in 2022 and froze some of its funding. The approach of Hungary's government to Georgia and Serbia is part of its efforts to build a network of like-minded allies, in this case in potential future EU members.

Hungary and Georgia

Once a frontrunner in European integration, Georgia has seen its democracy erode since the start of the Georgian Dream party's second term in government in 2016, a trend that intensified after Ukraine's invasion in 2022. Progress toward EU membership would require, among other things, dismantling the oligarchic structures that sustain the party's power, which it has resisted. Having given Georgia a membership perspective in 2022, the EU began applying conditionality—including delaying granting it candidate status, suspending funding, and freezing high-level talks—to incentivize reform and to signal that accession was impossible under the current trajectory. At the same time, Georgian Dream's ties with Fidesz strengthened. Hungary's government tried to dilute EU pressure and position itself as Georgia's ally, supporting the government in Tbilisi by trying to neutralize EU conditionality and offering political backing.

Fidesz-UNM Relations, 2010–2021

Orbán and Fidesz became quite active in Georgia after they returned to power in 2010, which coincided with the final years of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency and of his United National Movement (UNM) government. Orbán's goal was already then seeking like-minded partners in EU's eastern neighborhood and advocating their countries' membership.

At the time, Fidesz was a member of the EU-level European People's Party (EPP)—in which the UNM was an observer member—and had less-open connections to Russia. Not yet having declared his goal of building an illiberal democracy at home and of transforming the EU from within, Orbán's motive for supporting Georgia's drive for Euro-Atlantic integration under the UNM reportedly stemmed from his fascination with the latter's neoliberal economic reforms and strong executive rule.¹ This also showed Orbán's affinity for actors that did not comply with conventional liberal democratic models of governance, even though the UNM was openly pro-EU and conformed to most rules of the liberal international order. Therefore, Georgia's eventual membership under a UNM government would not challenge the foundations of the EU but it would provide Orbán's Hungary with an ally in it.

Orbán's relations with Saakashvili and the UNM started to develop soon after Fidesz returned power. In 2011, he invited his counterpart to Budapest. A month prior to the UNM's defeat to Georgian Dream in the 2012 parliamentary elections, Orbán visited Tbilisi in support of Saakashvili, advising Georgians not to make a "mistake" and return to the past. He praised Saakashvili and the UNM for "modernizing" the country, and he emphasized that he was speaking as the vice president of the EPP.² During the visit, the two governments announced a connection by Hungary's WizzAir between Kutaisi and Budapest, saying this symbolized Georgia's "return" to Europe. Orbán's support for Saakashvili and the UNM allowed officials in Tbilisi to say to the people that the government had "Europe" on its side.³

Orbán's motive for supporting Georgia's drive for Euro-Atlantic integration under the UNM reportedly stemmed from his fascination with the latter's neoliberal economic reforms and strong executive rule.

Relations between the two parties did not immediately end with the UNM's 2012 defeat. Orbán granted asylum to high-level government officials from the party who were sentenced under the new Georgian Dream government. On the day in 2014 when Saakashvili was sentenced on criminal charges for "exceeding official powers", Orbán stood with him in Budapest, reaffirming his unwavering support to his "friend" and condemning all forms of political repression in Georgia.⁴ There was no public meeting between them after that but their relations appeared to be largely positive. In 2019, Saakashvili publicly defended Hungary's prime minister when compared to him: "Viktor Orbán is my friend – we have a lot of difference, but during his time Hungary's economy became one of the fastest growing economies of Europe".⁵ A strain in the relations between the two parties was only revealed in 2021 when Saakashvili was arrested upon his return to Georgia and Orbán made no statement in support of him. Orbán's silence was presumably due to he and his Fidesz government becoming increasingly illiberal and seeking

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closer ideological allies, for which Georgian Dream fit the bill more than the UNM. After Georgian Dream's victory in the 2020 parliamentary elections, Orbán's silence on Saakashvili's detention may have also been based on the realization that it has entrenched its dominance in the country's politics. Foreign Minister Szijjártó visited Tbilisi twice between 2020 and 2021, a sign of closer ties between the two parties.

Given Fidesz's membership in the EPP and limited ties to Russia during this period, when Orbán criticized the EU for not doing more for Georgia and emphasized that Hungary was its true friend and ally, he did not do so in the openly Euroskeptic way he would adopt later. At the time, Orbán was also a staunch advocate of Georgia joining NATO, which was the boldest red line for the Kremlin. That he continued his relations with Saakashvili after the latter lost power in 2012 also showed that personal ties most likely guided relations between their parties.

Fidesz-Georgian Dream Relations Since 2012

As Orbán became more openly illiberal, he showed himself to be more driven by transforming the EU into an economic union instead of a liberal one, exposing its weakness on the global stage, and filling it with like-minded member states. In Georgia, this led him to shift his support to the pro-Russia and autocratizing Georgian Dream government.

While some intergovernmental meetings were held between 2012 and 2021, Fidesz and Georgian Dream only began to form a strong alliance when they faced mounting EU pressure and criticism from 2022. In 2021, Fidesz left the EPP before it could be expelled. Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has faced mounting criticism for its pro-Russia stance. Georgian Dream also pre-emptively left the Party of European Socialists in 2023. Like Fidesz, it has faced domestic and international pressure for not complying with EU requirements and pursuing a pro-Russia policy despite being granted candidate status. According to one Georgian diplomat, relations between the two governments started to intensify when relations between the EU and Tbilisi began to strain and Budapest offered a "helping hand".⁶ Therefore, both parties were driven by similar motive in their relationship: overcoming international pressure and ensuring their survival in power by challenging and undermining the EU.

Although Orbán is not known to have had private or official contact with Bidzina Ivanishvili, the oligarch who is the power in Georgian politics, he reportedly developed a close, personal relation with Irakli Gharibashvili, who was prime minister in 2021–2024, which played an important role in strengthening ties between the two governments.⁷ Gharibashvili is considered one of Ivanishvili's most loyal associates. Orbán's relations with the current prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, are also good—Orbán described him as a "grand chess master"⁸—though reportedly not as close.

From 2022, the governments of Hungary and Georgia have signed several trade and investment-related agreements, but economic interests have been a sideline rather than a driver in their partnership. Trade between the two countries has grown steadily since 2020, including by 14% in 2024, but this was largely driven by imports from Hungary, with exports to the country accounting for less than 4% of Georgia's total trade turnover.⁹ Hungary was 14th out of the EU's 27 member states in trade with Georgia. Economic issues reportedly were not the focus during meetings between the countries' senior officials and political, and Euroskeptic ones dominated the

agenda.¹⁰ Another piece of evidence about the limited interest of Hungary's government in economic relations is that it did not include Georgians in the National Card scheme it introduced in 2024, which allows non-EU workers to work in the country.

Providing Support and Legitimacy in Critical Moments

As Georgia's backsliding accelerated after 2022, so did the EU's efforts to counter this and to incentivize Georgian Dream to return to the democratic track. The EU has taken multiple measures to signal to Georgia's government and citizens that membership is unattainable on the country's current trajectory. This has included withholding candidate status until December 2023, issuing critical statements on the passing of the "foreign agents" law in 2023, pausing high-level meetings with government officials and freezing funding in 2024, and ending visa-free travel for diplomatic-passport holders this year.

Each time the EU has criticized Georgia's government for democratic backsliding, Hungarian officials—led by Orbán and Szijjártó—have given it praise and legitimacy through statements or intergovernmental meetings. On the day in 2022 when the EU announced its decision to withhold candidate status from Georgia, for example, Szijjártó travelled to Tbilisi and accused Brussels of having "double standards."¹¹ He said that the Georgian people were on the right track and promised Hungary's full support for Georgia on its EU integration path. Hungarian officials made similar supportive statements when Georgia's parliament was considering the controversial "foreign agents" law in 2023. Balázs Orbán, Viktor Orbán's political director, said that "the Georgian law promotes transparency in foreign interventions, protects sovereignty, and strengthens democracy. Europe needs more such legislation!", and that Budapest's intention was to "encourage the introduction of similar laws across the EU".¹² Hungary's ambassador to Georgia until this year, Anna Mária Sikó, also frequently praised the country's progress.¹³ Hungarian experts interviewed say that she played an important role in strengthening the relationship between Fidesz and Georgian Dream.

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Orbán came to Georgian Dream's help after the contested 2024 parliamentary elections, which neither the EU nor the United States have recognized. Having congratulated Georgian Dream on its "victory" before the official results were published, he and Szijjártó traveled to Tbilisi two days after the elections. There, Orbán again praised Georgia for its progress on the EU integration path, saying: "You are perhaps the only country in the world with a constitution stipulating that all governments should strive for membership of the European Union. In such circumstances, questioning the Georgian government's commitment to Europe is very amusing".¹⁴

Orbán's trip took place in the last days of Hungary's tenure in the presidency of the Council of the EU for the second half of 2024. Although holding the presidency does not give a member state the competence to speak on behalf

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of the EU, Orbán projected the appearance of doing so during controversial trips to China and Russia—and to Georgia. Georgian Dream officials made sure to use this to the party's ends. For example, Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili said: "Like it or not, today Hungary holds the Presidency of the European Council, and his visit to an EU candidate country carried lots of weight. We let our guest know about our plans on how we are planning to continue the EU integration path – which is one of our most important foreign policy priorities".¹⁵ An analysis conducted for this paper of the content on the government-controlled media channel Imedi in this period shows that supportive statements by Hungary's government about Georgian Dream were amplified while EU criticism was either silenced or covered less intensively. This enabled Georgian Dream to convince at least part of the public that it was still a democratic actor leading the country toward EU integration. At the same time, though, Hungary's government did not include Georgia's membership among the priorities of its presidency of the Council of the EU.

Orbán and other representatives of Hungary have also frequently emphasized Georgia's economy. When arguing that enlargement should be "merit-based", for example, they have mostly pointed to the country's economic progress and achievements.

Hungary's government has also recently supported its counterpart by deploying an "EU integration advisor" to Georgia—a practice it earlier implemented in all Western Balkan countries.¹⁶ Unlike the technical experts provided to candidate countries, these Hungarian advisors are mostly former diplomats, sometimes with the rank of ambassador, with extensive experience whose role is to provide countries with political guidance and expertise across a broad accession-related agenda.

Vetoing EU Sanctions and Statements

Hungary's government also shielded its Georgian counterpart from EU criticism by vetoing critical statements and sanctions in the Council of the EU. The first time Orbán threatened a veto regarding Georgia was in 2023, when he warned that Hungary would block the opening of accession talks with Ukraine unless Georgia was given candidate status.¹⁷ Although the EU did so in the months that followed, despite Georgian Dream failing to fulfill its recommendations for candidacy, the decision was more likely a geopolitical one than because of Orbán's blackmail. Nevertheless, this incident demonstrated that Hungary's government was willing to use all the tools at its disposal to support authoritarian governments in candidate states.

Since then, Orbán has systematically used Hungary's veto power regarding Georgia. Alongside Slovakia, Hungary has vetoed multiple EU statements condemning democratic backsliding in the country, including one criticizing Georgian Dream for passing the "foreign agents" law in 2024 that blatantly violated the Copenhagen Criteria. As a result, the Council of the EU remained silent on the day the law was passed, despite having earlier warned of dire consequences. Instead, on the next day, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi made a statement condemning the law and warning of its impact on Georgia's EU integration.¹⁸ Following the violent crackdown on protesters after the parliamentary elections in November 2024, Hungary and Slovakia vetoed the EU's attempt to sanction all government officials responsible for human rights violations. The two member states reportedly also vetoed an EU statement on the day a new president was inaugurated in controversial circumstances in December 2024.¹⁹

According to a Georgian diplomat, Hungary's government told Georgian Dream in advance that it would veto any EU decision that harmed Georgia's national interests.²⁰

While most of the time the Council of EU circumvented its vetoes by switching to policies that did not require unanimity among member states or by issuing statements in different formats, Hungary's government nevertheless weakened the EU's conditionality and leverage on Tbilisi, easing the pressure on Georgian Dream. For example, instead of pursuing individually targeted sanctions against Georgian Dream officials, the EU stopped visa-free travel for Georgian holders of diplomatic passports as this did not require unanimity—a symbolic move with little political weight as those affected also have a normal passport they can use for visa-free travel in the EU.

Abusing the Enlargement Portfolio

As well as challenging the EU's enlargement policy at the intergovernmental level, Hungary's government did so at the level of the European Commission through Várhelyi, a Hungarian diplomat, during his term as neighborhood and enlargement commissioner from 2019 to 2024. Although commissioners are supposed to promote the interests of the EU rather than those of their respective member states, many observers have argued that Várhelyi ultimately served the interests of Hungary. He had been Hungary's ambassador on the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Member States to the European Union in 2015–2019, which some say made him a very skilled commissioner.²¹

In his post, Várhelyi could not contest enlargement policy explicitly but he played a role in weakening the criticism of Georgia and in legitimizing its government. This mostly involved making enlargement policy more about the economics, connectivity, and energy than liberal democracy. Instead of criticizing Georgian Dream's authoritarian trajectory, Várhelyi mostly praised it for developing Georgia's economy. Given that Georgia outperformed Moldova and Ukraine in certain areas of technical approximation with the EU standards and law as well as in economic indicators, Várhelyi's claims about it being ahead of the other two in some respects were difficult to challenge within the EU.²²

A comparison of Várhelyi and Borrell's speeches during two EU-Georgia Association Councils in 2022 and 2024 shows that the latter mostly emphasized the democratic backsliding in Georgia and the need for reform while Várhelyi mostly spoke of its progress in terms of trade, energy, and connectivity.²³ Furthermore, during a visit to Tbilisi in 2022, Várhelyi praised Georgia's "booming" economy and spoke of "visible" progress in this regard.²⁴ When members of the Georgian opposition criticized his statements and said that he was Orbán's ally in the European Commission, the government-linked media framed this as them being "provoked by the EU's positive assessment of Georgia".²⁵

However, there were limits to how much Várhelyi was able to divert the EU's attention from the political situation in Georgia. As noted above, he had to issue a joint statement with Borrell about the passing of the "foreign agents" law, and they released a similar critical statement after the controversial 2024 parliamentary elections.

Entrenching Illiberal, Anti-West Narratives and Policies

While Fidesz and Georgian Dream have long used almost identical, illiberal narratives about Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU, and government-critical groups, the similarities became even more apparent during Georgia's 2024 elections. Georgian Dream's campaign was mostly centered on instilling fear of war among the public and on emphasizing that the EU (alongside the United States) was trying to "drag Georgia into war" by requesting the country to align itself with EU foreign policy. This message was displayed in massive elections banners plastered around the country that juxtaposed destroyed churches and buildings in Ukraine with more prosperous-looking buildings in Georgia, respectively captioned "no to war" and "yes to peace". Hungary's government reportedly played a direct part in the campaign. Árpád Habony, who has been described as the "architect" of Fidesz's "fake news, anti-immigration, anti-NGO propaganda campaign",²⁶ was spotted in a hotel close to Georgian Dream's headquarters throughout the election year.²⁷ When the opposition attempted to expose the Hungarian influence, the government portrayed this as attempted sabotage of Georgia's EU accession.

Hungarian figures from or close to Fidesz also helped Georgian Dream legitimize its rule after the elections. The European Platform for Democratic Elections identified four Hungarians among a group of "politically biased observers" that attempted to whitewash the result of Georgia's elections.²⁸ They included a member of Hungary's National Assembly, a member of the European Parliament, and a former member of the Prime Minister's Office. These observers made positive claims about the conduct of Georgia's elections that were later amplified by government-linked television channels.

Continuing Support

Following the announcement by Georgia's government that it was "temporarily halting" the EU accession process in November 2024, Georgian Dream no longer appeared to need to maintain a pro-EU façade and thus the backing of Budapest. Since then, the party has driven the country faster toward authoritarianism,²⁹ relying increasingly on fear and repression rather than a pro-EU or pro-Western veneer to entrench its power. Even so, relations with Hungary's government have continued on the same track, with visits and supportive statements by Fidesz figures. As Georgian Dream has faced unprecedented domestic protests and international pressure, Budapest continued to back its narrative that the EU and the West are treating Georgia unfairly and were to blame for the ongoing political crisis.³⁰ The country's EU accession has continued to remain one of the main topics of discussion between the two parties.³¹ At the start of the year, Orbán also reportedly attempted to arrange a meeting between Ivanishvili and President-Elect Trump, only for the plan to fall through when the outgoing administration imposed sanctions on Orbán's chief of staff, Antal Rogán.³²

Hungary and Serbia

By contrast to the case of Georgia, Serbia's relations with the EU remained largely normal despite the authoritarian turn of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) over the same period. And the EU's

more cautious approach toward the country reflects its regional importance, with preserving stability in the Western Balkans frequently outweighing concerns about democratic backsliding. This trade-off has been labelled as support for “stabilitocracy”, in which authoritarian regimes secure external legitimacy in exchange for their perceived role in maintaining stability. In Serbia’s case, this has been reinforced by multiple actors within the EU, including member states such as France and Germany that have supported and legitimized Vučić’s government in pursuit of economic partnership or concessions regarding Serbia’s relations with Kosovo, as well as the European People’s Party.

Against this backdrop, Serbia has faced far fewer instances of strict EU conditionality than Georgia. In its case, the efforts of Orbán and Fidesz therefore have focused less on neutralizing EU pressure and more on accelerating the country’s accession with every tool available to Hungary as a member state. For them, the prospective membership of a Serbia governed by Vučić and the SNS promises a like-minded ally in the EU that could help shield Hungary from sanctions and reinforce its leverage within EU institutions. Serbia’s membership would also provide a framework for managing and easing several long-standing issues between the two neighbors. For Orbán and Fidesz, Serbia’s accession therefore holds far greater strategic value than Georgia’s and, combined with the fact the EU has put less political pressure on the government in Belgrade, this is why their efforts have been mainly directed at accelerating Serbia’s membership.

The role of Orbán and Fidesz in Serbia is less anomalous than their role in Georgia, given that several other EU actors also tolerate Serbia’s democratic backsliding. An analysis of the activities of the EPP, of which the SNS is an associate member, has found that it has to large extent ignored this issue and protected the SNS from EU pressure.³³ However, while the likes of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the EPP have periodically endorsed Serbia’s membership bid despite its non-compliance with the EU’s Copenhagen Criteria, they have done so inconsistently and only when under pressure from events in the country and from other European actors. For example, the mass demonstrations against Vučić and his government for the past year has led to pressure on the EPP to re-evaluate the SNS’s associate membership³⁴ and to initiate a scrutiny process about it.³⁵ The EPP also was one of the authors of the European Parliament’s resolution in October condemning state repression in Serbia and expressing the EU’s support for the right to protest.³⁶ By contrast, Orbán and Fidesz have been consistent, explicit, and vocal champions of Serbia’s accession since the SNS came to power.

Hungary-Serbia Relations Before 2012

Given they are neighbors with much historical baggage, relations between Hungary and Serbia were long marked by mistrust, especially before Orbán and Vučić rose to power in the early 2010s. Hungary lost part of its territory to Serbia following the First World War, leaving a large ethnic Hungarian minority in the latter’s Vojvodina region. During the Second World War, Hungary occupied parts of Serbia, including Vojvodina, and treated Serbians there especially poorly. Therefore, in the following decades, many Serbs viewed Hungary, together with Austria and Germany, with distrust and as intent on dismantling Yugoslavia.

Conversely, Hungary constantly perceived Serbia as a threat after the breakup of Yugoslavia, fearing the resulting conflicts might spillover into its own territory. This threat perception was amplified by the fact that Serbia was

an entry point into Hungary for migrants from the Middle East. As a result, relations between the two countries were shaped by mutual grievances, and earlier governments did not prioritize cooperation. Before the SNS came to power in 2012, the Fidesz government threatened to veto Serbia's EU accession unless problems regarding minorities in the country were sorted.³⁷

Fidesz-SNS Relations Since 2012

Things began to change after Fidesz's return to power in 2010 and the electoral success of the SNS in 2012. The ideological affinity and political opportunism of their leaders enabled the emergence of a mutually beneficial partnership. For Orbán, closer ties with Serbia have served multiple domestic and international purposes: expanding trade, reducing perceived threats, enhancing Hungary's influence in the region, and protecting the ethnic Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, the latter an issue central to his nationalist agenda. István Pásztor, the leader of the ethnic Hungarian party in Serbia, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, played a key role in the emergences of the ties between the two leaders.³⁸

Serbia's EU accession would advance all of Hungary's key interests in relation to its southern neighbor. It would enhance trade, economic cooperation, and cross-border mobility for the ethnic Hungarians in Serbia. It would also ease Budapest's border-management burden by shifting the EU's external border—and thus the main point of migration control—to Serbia. And, if he remained in power, Vučić would be Orbán's ideological ally inside the EU and would contribute to the dilution of its liberal-democratic foundations.

Serbia has also offered Orbán a venue to challenge the liberal-democratic normative appeal of the EU. Given that it has been a membership candidate since 2012 and that Vučić frequently blames the EU for this how long the process is taking, a large majority of its population has come to view the EU as an unfair and hypocritical actor. There is a widespread perception that the EU is not genuinely interested in Serbia's accession and is using the accession process merely to extract concessions from the country. Distrust of the EU is also a result of anti-West sentiments in Serbia following the NATO airstrikes in 1999 and the independence of Kosovo in 2008. This disillusionment has provided an opening for Orbán to position himself as a "true" ally that stands by Serbia regardless of its internal politics and to further diminish the perception of the EU as a liberal-democratic normative power. By portraying the EU as inconsistent and hypocritical, Hungary's government has aimed to reinforce anti-West sentiment in Serbia and to boost its standing in the region.

For Vučić, Orbán's backing has been equally important. Similar to his Hungarian counterpart, he has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, claiming to pursue EU accession while building strong ties with China and Russia. This has allowed him to appeal to various domestic constituencies and to extract benefits from multiple international actors. By endorsing Serbia's accession efforts, Hungary's government has reinforced Vučić's balancing strategy and lent credibility to his pro-EU narrative amongst those of his supporters who favor membership.

As the EU and Serbia's opposition criticized Vučić's authoritarianism and geopolitical hedging, Hungary gave him political cover and validation. The partnership has brought symbolic and material benefits: elite-level cooperation, joint infrastructure projects, and a shared regional narrative of resistance against liberal Western hegemony.

Advancing Serbia's EU Membership

Hungary's government worked to expedite Serbia's accession even before enlargement returned to the forefront of EU politics in 2022. While most other actors tied such support to Serbia's reforms or compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, its support rested precisely on Serbia's deviation from them. In 2017, Foreign Minister Szijjártó urged the EU to open five new accession chapters with Serbia, praising it as "a model for other EU countries in terms of minority protection".³⁹ Since 2015, Hungary's government has deployed an "EU integration advisor" to Serbia (the first country, with North Macedonia, to receive one).⁴⁰

Orbán and Fidesz have also resorted to less conventional means to promote the country's accession. In 2016, Hungarian officials reportedly funded advertisements in major European media outlets such as *Bild* in Germany and *Le Figaro* in France that advocated Serbia's membership and echoed an Orbán-style anti-West, sovereigntist rhetoric.⁴¹

The efforts to promote Serbia's EU accession intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the return of enlargement to the center of the EU's agenda. Hungary's government made Western Balkan integration one of the six official priorities of its presidency of the Council of the EU in 2024.⁴² During its presidency, Budapest made a particular effort to keep the opening of Cluster 3 of negotiations (which covers the EU *acquis* chapters related to competitiveness and inclusive growth) with Serbia high on the European Commission's agenda. It portrayed a relatively minor technical step—the approval letter inviting Belgrade to submit its negotiating positions for two of the cluster's chapters—as a "significant political breakthrough".⁴³ This was likely intended to convey to other member states that Serbia was prepared for further progress, while also allowing Hungary's government to boast about its presidency's achievements.

The efforts to promote Serbia's EU accession intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the return of enlargement to the center of the EU's agenda.

Enlargement commissioner Várhelyi played a central role in promoting Serbia's accession by trying to decouple it from liberal-democratic benchmarks. In 2021, it was reported that he had watered down the European Commission's report on the country.⁴⁴ Várhelyi played a key role in driving the European Commission's recommendation in 2024 to open Cluster 3 negotiations despite clear setbacks in democratic reform,⁴⁵ which the member states ultimately decided against.

In October 2024, the European Commission approved the "reform agenda" that Serbia's government prepared with it as required under the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.⁴⁶ Meeting the agenda targets for implementing key enlargement priorities is meant to unlock EU funding and gradually integrate countries into the single market. Serbian opposition actors accused Várhelyi and his team of legitimizing Belgrade's document by approving it despite it being drafted with only pro forma, superficial involvement of civil society organizations and lacking clear benchmarks on improving alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.⁴⁷ Civil

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society organizations also criticized the document for only partially addressing fundamental rights and rule-of-law reforms.⁴⁸

Many Serbian civil society organizations report experiencing almost total disengagement from Várhelyi's office and that during his term as enlargement commissioner (and that there has been a total shift in the European Commission's approach toward civil society under his successor, Marta Kos).

An analysis for this paper of Várhelyi and Borrell's public statements at the 2022 Serbia–EU Stabilisation and Association Council shows the former's lenient and supportive stance toward Serbia. Várhelyi repeatedly highlighted Serbia's progress while downplaying or omitting to mention negative developments. Borrell adopted a more critical tone, emphasizing the urgent need for reform in the rule of law, media freedom, and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. While Várhelyi framed key areas such as the rule of law and media pluralism in largely positive terms, Borrell stressed existing deficits and Serbia's failure to fulfil essential conditions for accession.

Reinforcing Anti-EU Sentiment in Serbia

Paradoxically, alongside promoting Serbia's membership, Hungary's government has also tried to amplify public disillusionment with the EU in the country while reinforcing narratives of double standards and geopolitical bias. Aside from weakening the EU's credibility as normative power, this has fed into a broader frustration with the accession process and positioned Budapest as Serbia's "true" ally. This approach became particularly pronounced after the EU revived its enlargement policy in 2022 with regard to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Serbia's accession process since it became a membership candidate in 2012 has been in a prolonged stalemate, despite Vučić having the support of several EU leaders who favor the country's membership. Serbia and the EU have only provisionally closed two chapters since the start of negotiations in 2014. With progress repeatedly blocked by some member states, in many cases due to concerns about democratic backsliding in Serbia or to some of their national interests, public support for membership in the country has declined significantly, from over 70% in the early 2000s to around 33% today.⁴⁹ Hungarian officials have frequently contrasted Serbia's stalled accession with the EU's swift granting of candidate status to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. They have used this comparison to portray the EU as a geopolitical actor driven by strategic favoritism rather than merit.

In March, Orbán said: "Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia could join the EU tomorrow, bringing enormous economic benefits for all sides. Brussels ignores them, prioritizing Ukraine instead. This is not only reckless, it's dangerous. We won't stand for it."⁵⁰ And, in July, Szijjártó said:

I do not think there is a single sane person on Earth who would think that Ukraine is in a better state than Serbia. Just as there is no sane person who would think that countries in a worse state should be admitted first, and only then those in a better state. We do not agree to start negotiations with Ukraine, thus we are being disparaged with all kinds of accusations. Interestingly, the member states that are blocking negotiations with Serbia are not facing the same accusations. This is a clear manifestation of double standards.⁵¹

These statements were likely intended to deepen the disillusionment with the EU among the Serbian public.

This strategy has also benefited Vučić by supporting his attempts to blame the EU for the stalled accession process and to portray Serbia's marginalization as the result of EU hypocrisy rather than the government's lack of reforms. It has allowed him to maintain Serbia's foreign policy of balancing between the East and West, while retaining domestic legitimacy.

This narrative was reinforced through acts of alignment, such as the signing of a military agreement between the two countries in April, shortly after similar ones were signed among EU member states. Given Serbia's policy of military neutrality, this was largely symbolic—a signal to challenge to the EU's dominance in the region and a gesture of mutual support between like-minded, autocratizing allies. The construction of the China-funded Belgrade-Budapest railway was another symbolic gesture: it offered limited economic benefits and was largely intended to build Hungary's image as a “conduit between the East and the West”.⁵² As one interviewee noted, such acts were “not about substance but about sending a message to Brussels that Serbia had other options”.⁵³

Undermining EU Conditionality

There have been several key episodes in which the EU attempted to speak with one voice about the situation in Serbia and Hungary's government tried to undermine that unity. In many of these cases, Orbán and Fidesz were not the only actor shielding Serbia from pressure, though: key allies in the EPP also played a role in diluting the EU's response.

On multiple other occasions, Orbán warned that sanctions against Serbia would be “impossible”, obstructing consensus within the Council of the EU. The EU discussions earlier this year around sanctioning Aleksandar Vulin, Serbia's deputy prime minister and former intelligence chief, were one of the clearest examples of this. He is known for openly endorsing Russia's positions, visiting Moscow despite EU sanctions, and promoting anti-West narratives. In a speech in the European Parliament in April, Vulin accused the EU of making Serbia's membership conditional on going to war with Russia:

For 20 years, we've been fulfilling every wish and demand of the EU, and then we're told that the next full members of the EU, without meeting a single condition, are Ukraine and Moldova. It seems that only one condition is enough for EU membership: war with Russia, and we won't meet that condition.⁵⁴

In the end, the EU did not impose any sanctions on Vulin, reportedly because of vetoes by Hungary and Slovakia.⁵⁵

Orbán and Fidesz's protection of Serbia has not been limited to blocking sanctions. Within the European Commission, during his term as enlargement commissioner, Várhelyi softened the EU's stance by downplaying democratic backsliding in the country. He was reportedly involved in toning down critical language in the commission's reports on Serbia, presenting an overly positive assessment of its accession progress.⁵⁶ Serbian civil society actors and EU officials noted that during Várhelyi's tenure, officials perceived as less critical of Serbia's domestic developments were appointed to his directorate-general.⁵⁷ Várhelyi's approach was reinforced, though,

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by von der Leyen's accommodating posture toward Serbia, driven by the EU's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. This further weakened the European Commission's ability to apply credible conditionality or to call out Vučić and the SNS government for democratic backsliding.

In the European Parliament, the EPP has repeatedly worked to block or to water down resolutions critical of Serbia.⁵⁸ However, since 2021, it has become somewhat more critical, partly as a result of Fidesz's departure from the group, which reduced pressure on the group to maintain alignment with Hungary and removed some pro-Vučić parliamentarians from its ranks.

While Hungary's government was not the only actor shielding Serbia from the EU's conditionality, it was among the most consistently influential, especially due to its veto power in the Council of the EU and Várhelyi's handling of the enlargement portfolio. As in the case of Georgia, Orbán and Fidesz's actions undermined the credibility of enlargement as a merit-based process. In doing so, they reduced the incentives and the costs for Serbia's government to diverge from the Copenhagen Criteria, ultimately weakening the EU's leverage as a democracy-promoting actor in the region.

Entrenching Illiberalism and State Capture

A profound but indirect way in which Hungary's government has undermined the normative basis of EU enlargement in Serbia is by helping Vučić and the SNS entrench their state capture in the country. It has reinforced their kleptocratic regime through economic investments and elite-level partnerships. Reports by investigative journalists suggest that Hungarian businesses have acquired shares in strategic sectors in Serbia, including through opaque deals that strengthen networks of power and wealth linking the two regimes.⁵⁹ One high-profile case involves companies connected to Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz, which, together with Serbian and Slovenian partners, have been contracted to install lighting in local government buildings. Additionally, as of 2024, Tiborec reportedly owned around 11 buildings in the New Belgrade development.⁶⁰ This approach has consolidated the model of political economy favored by Orbán and Vučić, in which state capture, clientelism, and monopolization of resources underpin regime survival.

In 2022, Vučić and Orbán attended the inauguration of the renovated Novi Sad railway station, whose deadly collapse in November 2024 triggered the ongoing mass protests, an event seen by some observers as part of their respective electoral campaigns at the time. The Hungarian firm Utiber was among those awarded consultancy and supervision contracts for the reconstruction carried out by Chinese contractors.⁶¹

Orbán and Fidesz have aided Vučić and the SNS entrench their illiberal ideology and narratives, particularly through investments in Serbia's regions inhabited by the ethnic Hungarian minority. Hungarian actors have acquired media outlets there, helping to spread illiberal and pro-Orbán messaging while suppressing critical voices. This media control promotes illiberal norms in a region already susceptible to nationalist and sovereigntist discourses. This has produced electoral benefits on both sides. The Fidesz government has granted most ethnic Hungarians in Serbia dual citizenship, which allows them to vote in Hungary, and this community has become a reliable voting bloc for Orbán's party in exchange for targeted investments and political patronage. At the same

time, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians is a key ally of Orbán and Vučić. It is a coalition partner of the SNS in Serbia's parliament, strengthening its grip on power and deepening the cross-border illiberal alliance.

Through these economic, political, and media ties, Hungary under Orbán and Fidesz has contributed to the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Serbia. It has reinforced the harmful domestic structures that the EU's accession process is meant to dismantle, further blurring the line between Serbia's membership aspirations and authoritarian entrenchment.

Hungary and Enlargement

The Fidesz government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary has actively challenged use of enlargement and of accession conditionality as a tool to strengthen liberal democracy beyond the EU's borders. In addition to its various foreign policy tools, it has relied heavily on its power to veto decisions requiring unanimity in the Council of the EU, which include nearly all those related to enlargement. These efforts were further enabled by Hungary's institutional position within the EU in recent years. The revival of enlargement in 2022 coincided with the term of a European Commission that included a Hungarian diplomat as commissioner for enlargement as well as with Hungary's six-months term in the Presidency of the Council of the EU. All this gave Orbán a set of instruments to undermine the EU's normative power and to prevent enlargement from functioning as a democracy-promotion tool.

As part of Orbán and Fidesz's agenda to challenge liberalism at home and abroad, as well as to transform the EU from within, Hungary's government has obstructed the accession of Ukraine to the EU. Ukraine's eventual membership risks bringing a large, relatively democratic state into the EU and also a reduction in the amount of funding Hungary receives from EU's Cohesion Fund and Common Agricultural Policy, given Ukraine's large agricultural sector and the significant reconstruction and recovery aid it would require.

From the moment Kyiv submitted its membership application in 2022, Budapest consistently threatened to veto its progress. While the EU has so far managed to circumvent this obstacle, particularly by persuading him to leave the room when the Council of the EU was voting for starting accession talks, Orbán has persisted in trying to derail Ukraine's bid. Earlier this year, Hungary's government held a controversial national consultation on whether the EU should open negotiations with Kyiv, and Orbán used the overwhelmingly negative result as justification for continuing to block progress. In addition, it was Budapest that pushed for the inclusion of the protection of minority rights as one of the seven precondition for starting Ukraine's accession talks with the EU.⁶² Around 150,000 ethnic Hungarians reside in Ukraine, and Orbán has long accused it for treating them unfairly.⁶³ Despite Ukraine passing a relevant law on minority languages and leaders of the ethnic Hungarian minority reassuring Orbán that the country was making progress in this direction,⁶⁴ Hungary's government has continued to accuse its counterparty of not doing enough.

Orbán and Fidesz have used more supportive rhetoric toward Moldova's accession to the EU. This may be because they see the accession of a much smaller country than Ukraine as posing less risk. However, since

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Moldova's prospects are tied to Ukraine's, Budapest's obstruction of the latter automatically de facto applies to the former. Voicing support for Moldova's membership may be an easy way for Orbán to make Hungary appear less disruptive of enlargement policy. Budapest's position regarding Moldova may also be driven with the hope that its current liberal-democratic government will one day be replaced by a pro-Russia, authoritarian one. Foreign Minister Szijjártó received the pro-Russia opposition leader Igor Dodon in Budapest in 2023.⁶⁵

To advance Orbán and Fidesz's agenda, Hungary's government has played a quieter but arguably more influential role in candidate states with authoritarian governments that welcome its support—especially Georgia and Serbia. Supporting in these two countries a period of increased EU criticism and pressure allowed it to pursue four goals: undermining the EU's credibility and impact as an international liberal-democratic actor; hollowing the EU's liberal-democratic foundations by entrenching autocracy in prospective member states; showing Hungarians that their country is not the only "victim" of the "Brussels dictatorship"; and expanding Budapest's international influence.

Orbán and Fidesz's impact in Georgia and Serbia has attracted much less scrutiny than their actions regarding Ukraine. The EU has tried to use accession conditionality to reverse the democratic backsliding in both countries, with greater intensity in Georgia, but in their cases Orbán has undermined its ability to speak with one voice and to apply pressure. By preventing unified EU positions and sending mixed signals through intergovernmental channels and Várhelyi when he was enlargement commissioner, Hungary's government has tried to promote Georgia and Serbia's membership despite their democratic backsliding. It has shielded the Georgian Dream and SNS governments from EU pressure by blocking sanctions and watering down critical reports. Orbán and Fidesz's actions have had direct impact in both cases, significantly weakening the EU's ability to apply credible conditionality. There have also been concerns that Hungary's "EU integration advisors" could have provided the governments in Georgia and Serbia privileged information and insights from EU institutional deliberations or negotiation processes among member states.⁶⁶

In Georgia, Orbán and Fidesz focused more on legitimizing the Georgian Dream government as well as delegitimizing the EU and undermining its ability to act as an international normative actor. Their actions were more about weakening the EU's influence and reinforcing a like-minded partner rather than genuinely advancing the country's accession. While Hungary's government rhetorically supported Georgia's membership bid, it took few tangible steps to increase the country's integration. By contrast, their aim regarding Serbia was more clearly to help it move forward in joining the EU to support their long-term goal of transforming it from within and having more like-minded member-state governments. Hungary's presidency of the Council of the EU in 2024 showed this clear difference, when it included the integration of Serbia but not Georgia in its priorities.

Conclusion

The reinvigoration of the EU's enlargement policy as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought to the fore one aspect of the challenge posed by the rising influence of illiberal member-state governments that seek to weaken the EU's liberal-democratic foundations. In particular, Hungary's government under Prime Minister

Orbán and his Fidesz party has sought to decouple enlargement policy from liberal-democratic criteria in the cases of Georgia and Serbia, two candidate states where the EU has attempted to use conditionality to counter democratic backsliding. They have done so in different ways that reflect the respective domestic contexts and their varying interests.

The backing from Hungary's government has provided political cover to the increasingly autocratic governments in Georgia and Serbia that has enabled them to keep undermining democracy while maintaining a pro-EU façade. Georgian Dream and the SNS have used the praise by Orbán and Fidesz to claim they remained on track toward EU membership, to reassure their supporters, and to deflect domestic and foreign criticism. By aligning with them and echoing their claims of EU "bias" or "discrimination", Budapest has helped legitimize their framing of EU pressure as unfair interference and enabled them to redirect domestic blame toward Brussels. It has thus amplified disillusionment with the EU in these candidate states. Endorsements of Georgian Dream and the SNS from figures like Orbán, Szijjártó, and Várhelyi have also weakened the credibility of pro-democracy actors in both countries. As a result, Georgian and Serbian opposition forces have faced greater difficulty convincing voters that ruling elites were undermining EU values when the latter received public support from a member-state government and a key EU official.

The actions of Hungary's government regarding Georgia and Serbia have weakened the EU's external credibility and the effectiveness of enlargement as its primary tool for democracy promotion.

By supporting Serbia's EU accession despite its autocratic turn under Vučić and the SNS, Orbán and Fidesz have also worked toward their goal of populating the EU with like-minded governments that they could rely on for support. And, irrespective of if or when Georgia and Serbia might become member states, Orbán and Fidesz have expanded their network of international partners with Georgian Dream and the SNS. In doing so, they have strengthened cross-border illiberal cooperation when it comes to the EU.

The actions of Hungary's government regarding Georgia and Serbia have weakened the EU's external credibility and the effectiveness of enlargement as its primary tool for democracy promotion. By obstructing collective action, whether on sanctions or other responses to democratic backsliding, Orbán and Fidesz have demonstrated how a single illiberal government could constrain the EU's ability to promote its values and interests. Since 2022, at a moment of heightened geopolitical pressure, their obstruction has directly undermined the EU's leverage. If the EU cannot credibly challenge anti-West elites in candidate states, conditionality loses its power, and its image as a liberal-democratic actor weakens.

This conclusion aligns with the growing calls for the EU to limit Hungary's veto power when its government violates its liberal-democratic foundations, and to shift decision-making on key foreign policy and enlargement issues from unanimity to qualified majority voting. The EU must ensure that illiberal member-state governments are not able to undermine its global standing or to erode its democratic foundations from within.

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