

MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: REALITIES OF SERBIA, MOLDOVA AND GEORGIA

There is a prejudice that if a country adheres to the European Union (EU) enlargement policy, its foreign policy becomes uniform and "Europeanised", acquiring a strictly pro-European character. Thus, part of the transformation that new and old candidate states (currently there are 10) must go through is related to the adoption of the EU's foreign policy guidelines. Although all 27 European countries have their own foreign policy, the EU institutions in Brussels can propose principles for external action. The development of the EU's external agenda depends, on the one hand, on unanimity and, on the other hand, on geopolitical circumstances. However, in most cases, the EU's external agenda is shaped on the basis of a causal relationship with regional and global geopolitical developments (war in Ukraine, migrant crisis, terrorist threat, etc.).

At the same time, however, unanimity is not always and necessarily the result of voluntary decisions, but is formed as a result of the influence of a strong majority on the others. Majority influence should be behind Germany and

France, partly behind Italy and Spain, although to a lesser extent. While the latter are the four main EU economies with primacy, they must rally the other member states around them to achieve unity in the foreign policy of the entire bloc. Namely, on the basis of unanimity and cohesion, European institutions can impose sanctions against third countries, making sanctions one of the most expressive and powerful instruments of EU foreign policy. From this perspective, the EU expects the candidate countries (including Serbia, Moldova and Georgia) to take on European sanctions, thus aligning themselves with the European foreign agenda. This also applies to EU sanctions against Russia, which has become the country with the highest number of international sanctions in the last two years. Between February 2022 and June 2024, the EU has initiated 14 sanctions packages, which cannot be ignored in the accession process of candidate states. However, this varies from case to case, as some candidate countries prefer to pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy, refusing to accede to European sanctions even if they are in the EU accession negotiation phase.

Serbia and Moldova - opposites in foreign policy

Conformity with the EU common foreign policy is a prerequisite for the EU accession process, as stated in Chapter 31 (out of a total of 35 chapters). According to this, candidate states should bring their foreign policy closer to the EU policy, and the main way to do this





is to take on the EU's restrictive measures (sanctions) and adhere to the EU's geopolitical positioning (statements of the EU's diplomatic arm, the European External Action Service). For Moldova, this chapter should be open after 2025, but without a specific date when it is planned to effectively start the negotiation process with the EU. In the case of Serbia, even 10 years after the start of negotiations with the EU in 2014, Chapter 31 is still not closed and is under consideration by the EU Council (representatives of national governments of EU states). The chapter covers not only sanctions, but also actions against international organisations (UN, International Criminal Court, etc.) and international agreements (non-proliferation of weapons, countering hybrid threats, etc.). Attitudes towards Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and compliance with European sanctions against Russia are currently key to the EU's assessment of Serbia and Moldova's progress in the EU accession process. In August 2023, Brussels emphasised that Serbian authorities had not accepted any of the EU sanctions against Russia and had not joined the EU in statements concerning Russia and Ukraine. Belgrade also refused to accept sanctions against China, Belarus and Iran, which are strategic partners of Russia. Despite the EU's efforts, Serbia allows civilian flights to Russia and has been the target of suspicions of sanctions evasion with regard to exports of dual-use goods to Russia.

The EU has openly raised the issue of Serbia's "strategic direction" in maintaining relations with both Russia and China. In other words, Brussels is concerned that Serbia is pursuing a "multi-vector" foreign policy, even as it remains tied to the EU accession process. According to Brussels Eurocrats, Serbia should choose only one vector - the European one - if it really wants to join the EU. With Alexander Vučić's party (Serbian Progressive Party - SPP) winning a majority after the controversial early elections in December 2023, Serbia shows no signs of abandoning its autonomous foreign policy of close ties with Moscow and Beijing, despite EU objections. While the EU assessed Serbia's progress in implementing Chapter 31 as "moderate", Moldova received a more positive assessment ("between moderate and good"). As of August 2023, the Moldovan authorities showed a higher level (74 per cent) of compliance with the European External Action Service (the EU's diplomatic arm) statements than Serbia (51 per cent). Although Moldova did not join the sanctions against Russia (and Belarus), avoiding retaliatory measures from the Russian side (the status of "unfriendly state" - about 50 states), the EU did not criticise it as in the case of Serbia.



The EU emphasised Moldova's commitment not to allow sanctions violations

on its territory and committed to impose some sanctions gradually and selectively: 4 packages of sanctions were to be introduced by November 2023. The reduction of bilateral relations with Russia to a level not seen since that country's independence (1991) and the unconditional solidarity with Ukraine mean that the EU is not concerned about the limited compliance with sanctions against Russia and leaves cases of sanctions violations uncriticised.

EU sees Chisinau's actions as fully committed to the European vector, even if it is being used by the current leadership to help Maia Sandu achieve a better result in the 20 October presidential election. However, the government (Action and Solidarity Party) has decided to organise a referendum on the issue of European integration, which will lead to the amendment of constitutional provisions to include European integration. Although this political move by the PDS carries risks, including for the EU image in Moldova, Brussels is not concerned about the attempt to politicise the European vector. Brussels seems to believe that the referendum victory of the "yes" votes in favour of European integration in Moldova will rule out the possibility of pursuing a "multi-vector" foreign policy in which relations with Russia could be resuscitated by subsequent governments. Despite all these EU calculations, they may be in vain, as the mention of European integration in Georgia's constitution (along with NATO) has not prevented the current government from adopting a "multi-vector" position similar to the Serbian one.

Georgia - horizontal "multi-vector" foreign policy

The EU candidate countries' relations with Russia will matter at least until 2029, when the term of office of the European Commission, which is in the process of being formed, expires. The future head of EU diplomacy could be the current Estonian Prime Minister Kaija Kallas, who has become a favourite

target of Russian disinformation. Kallas is known for her harsh and critical statements against Moscow for its imperialist policy towards Ukraine and the entire post-Soviet space. Given the future configuration of the European Commission, which will strengthen its geopolitical voice, including through Kallas' pragmatic diplomacy towards Russia, it will be difficult for countries like Georgia to pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy. Although Georgia has been a candidate country since November 2023, it risks losing this status after the adoption of a law on "transparency of foreign influence". In June 2024, the EU Council warned the Tbilisi authorities of the geopolitical implications of the law, which from autumn will allow civil society to be categorised as "agents of foreign influence" if it receives more than 20% of its funding from abroad (regardless of origin). The EU does not make direct references to Russia, but those who protested violently in Georgia (youth, NGOs, opposition, citizens in general) perceived the adoption of the law (similar to the one adopted in Russia in 2012) as an attempt at "Russification".



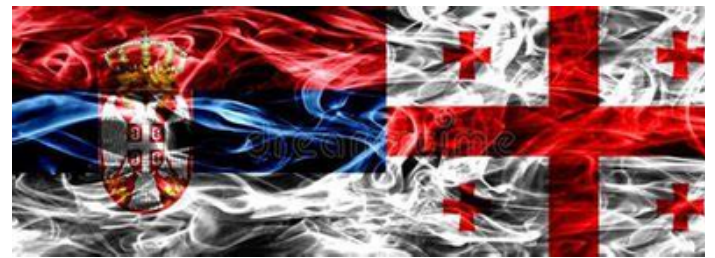
Brussels emphasised that Georgia's EU accession process could be halted if the law remains in force. However, the Georgian Dream-led government in Tbilisi (an oligarchic regime due to the influence of Bidzina Ivanishvili) keeps repeating that the country's European integration is not cancelled and that the aim is to achieve this (unrealistic) goal by 2030. De facto, like Serbia, the Georgian authorities are pursuing a "multi-

-vector" policy, trying to combine EU membership with strategic partnership with China and normalisation of relations with Russia. Signs of a non-exclusive pro-European stance are illustrated by the EU's assessment of Georgia's readiness for Chapter 31. In August 2023, Brussels determined that the Georgian side was 43 per cent compliant with EU diplomatic statements, lower than Serbia (51 per cent) and almost half that of Moldova (78 per cent). In addition, Georgia has not joined the EU sanctions against Russia adopted after 2022 (like Serbia and, partly, like Moldova) and is reluctant to join human rights sanctions (the EU's analogue to the Magnitsky Act).

While the Georgian authorities are open to adopting European legislation in various technical sectors (as was done under the 2014 Association Agreement) in pursuit of pragmatic economic interests, they prefer broad sovereignty in foreign policy. Therefore, if they apply individual and political sanctions to legislation targeting civil society (some of which receive funding from the EU and member states), Georgian authorities are likely to respond by intensifying dialogue with China, Russia and Iran. The realisation of the Anaklia port (critical infrastructure) project by Chinese companies is an example of an approach that the Georgian government could adopt more widely if it felt isolated. The turning point that will set new political terms in the dialogue between Tbilisi and Brussels will be the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2024. The opposition is taking steps to mobilise pro-European forces, and European institutions make future dialogue with Tbilisi contingent on fair and free parliamentary elections.

The outcome of the elections will determine whether Georgia moves closer to Moldova (if the presidency remains in the hands of the current government after the 20 October Moldovan elections) or reinforces its "multi-vector" position, Serbian-style, building selective relations with the EU in the accession process, while having close ties with China and at least normalised relations with Russia.

The states involved in the EU's enlargement policy (10 in total) must adopt a clear pro-European policy if they are to progress in the accession process. Otherwise, any form of 'multi-vectorism' involving Russia and China could become an obstacle in realising the conditions for accession (Chapter 31). Obviously, the future European Commission will be as tough on Russia as the current one, even if Russian military aggression against Ukraine stops for reasons unknown so far.



Therefore, the accession negotiations of Serbia, Moldova and Georgia in terms of common foreign policy (including the harmonisation of sanctions against Russia) could affect the progress of accession. Finally, if these states take on Russia-related policies, as in the case of Georgia, the EU accession process could be suspended or at least slowed down as much as possible.