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When and how the ‘Neighbours’ matter: ‘Immediate’ opportunity structures in the Eastern neighbourhood and policy frame-alignment by the EU

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the external opportunity structures of the EU’s eastern neighbours during times of high security threat. The research investigates when and to what extent opportunities in the neighbourhood affect EU engagement and shape policy-frame alignment. The study introduces the concept of an ‘immediate’ opportunity structure and concludes that the EU’s decisions to initiate or alter policy frames towards countries in the Eastern neighbourhood are driven by immediate security-related opportunity structures that exist at the moment of decision-making. Furthermore, the EU’s decision to engage depends on whether the security threat in the region and the neighbourhood directly affects the Union’s security architecture. As the political environment in the neighbourhood becomes more open and concessions towards the EU increase, the EU boosts its engagement, reflected in its policy alignment. The paper claims that the EU strategy prioritises immediate opportunity structures over indicators of long-term achievements in target countries. This focus on immediate opportunities aims to address, create, and further expand long-term opportunity structures.

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Introduction

On 23 June 2022, the EU officially confirmed membership opportunities for three neighbours in the Eastern neighbourhood by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, and a European perspective to Georgia. The decision is a U-turn in the Union’s policy. Even as late as 2021, such a change in the EU’s policy framework was unthinkable (Civil Georgia, 2021a/2021b). This was not only due to shortcomings in the three neighbouring countries but also, most importantly, because of the EU’s priority relations with Russia. However, once priority relations with Russia crumbled due to the Kremlin’s threat to the European security architecture, it created opportunities for the EU to increase engagement in countries that had explicitly expressed their wish to ‘return’ to the European family; nevertheless, the availability of institutional and discursive opportunities at the national level remains a crucial factor for the EU’s increased engagement and subsequent changes in the policy framework from ‘neighbour’ to candidate and European perspective.

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In European studies the concept of opportunity structure was introduced by Bretherton and Vogler in 2006 to analyze EU actorness (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). They borrowed the concept from social movement studies, including works by Tarrow (1996), Koopmans and Statham (1999), Koopmans et al. (2005), and Giugni (2009), and adapted the framework for EU research. According to Bretherton and Vogler (2006/2013), EU actorness – engagement/ disengagement – at the global level depends on its presence, capability and opportunity structures in the external environment. The EU presence and capability are well documented and analyzed by the extensive literature on the EU engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood covering from the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (see: Blockmans, 2015; Browning & Joenniemi, 2003; Delcour & Tulmets, 2008; Emerson, 2011; Gstöhl, 2016; Nițoiu, 2013) and Eastern Partnership (see: Hillion & Mayhew, 2009; Kostanyan, 2017) to EU's disengagement in security dimension of the policies (see: Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022; Gebhard & Norheim-Martinsen, 2011; Sierra, 2009). The main argument posits that the EU constructed the narrative surrounding 'neighbours' and 'neighbourhood' through the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) since 2003/2004. The ENP, notable for its absence of membership conditionality, has deliberately adopted the label 'European neighbourhood' to avoid being perceived as a pre-enlargement strategy. This strategic decision was made to shift the emphasis away from the idea of a membership prospect being the primary focal point in relations with neighbouring countries (Rupnik, 2008).

Since the initiation of the ENP in 2003/2004, the EU has progressively broadened and deepened its engagement with eastern neighbours. Despite a variety of field for cooperation with the neighbour, EU engagement in the sensitive fields like security was limited, because of intra-EU disagreements and a lack of a shared narrative among Member States and the institutions (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022). The EU's approach underwent a drastic change overnight when Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In addition to a U-turn in the EU's narrative towards Russia, the EU, at all levels, managed to unite to counter Russia's actions and support Ukraine. Besides the diverse assistance packages provided by the EU, already on March 7, the EU gave green lights to the membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which were previously locked into the ENP without perspective to the EU membership. Moreover, and arguably more importantly, this was the first time in the history of the EU that, during a period of high security threat – in the sense of military security that entails the use and control of military force (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 2–5) – the EU provided military assistance to an external country like Ukraine (European Commission, 2022b).

Considering that a single paper cannot comprehensively cover the analysis of the EU's actorness and provide insight into all three concepts, it becomes essential to acknowledge the limitations. Also, since the paper is limited to the analysis of the partners' foreign policy, more specifically on the openness of non-member states towards the EU at the national level, the study of decision-making at the EU level on foreign policy issues – a shared competence within the EU – is outside the scope of the research; firstly, it is a different level of analysis and secondly and consequently, it requires a qualitatively different methodology in order to trace the process of decision-making and make complex assessment of the interplay between the 'three strands' of the Europe's 'external relation system', comprising: (a) the national foreign policies of the member states; (b) EC external trade relations and development policy; and (c) the Common Foreign and

Security Policy of the EU (Wong, 2008, p. 321). Moreover, the EU's decisions to be present and provide capability in these countries are substantiated by different EU documents; however, why such presence and capability differ in otherwise similar countries remains a puzzle. The research believes that the concept of opportunity structure offers an assessment of the EU's priorities in the external environment, particularly in the Eastern neighbourhood during high-security threats, by analyzing external political and public patterns. It is important to emphasise that the political and public environment is external to the EU, whereas it is internal for the Eastern neighbourhood countries, including Georgia and Moldova, in this case.

To clarify the concept further, opportunity structure 'denotes the external environment of ideas and events – the context which frames and shapes EU action or inaction' (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006, p. 24) and 'enables or constrains EU action' (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013, p. 378). Therefore, the opportunity structure concept analysis targets the political and public environment beyond the EU borders. Such external environments range from domestic and international to global level analysis. The authors argue that opportunity structure is not an 'inert background' but 'a dynamic process where ideas are interpreted and events accorded meaning' (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006, p. 24). The concept encompasses not only external perceptions and expectations of EU actorness and related, evolving understandings of EU identity (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013, p. 266), but also 'opportunities for the EU influence and defence of interest' and the ability to exercise power (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013, pp. 379–381). Research on opportunity structure focuses on various levels of analysis, including rules and structures of power at the global-level and opinions of third-party states (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013, p. 266). Bretherton and Vogler's studies examine cases such as interdependence, the end of the Cold War, and events like the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. They also analyze changing opportunities over time and the impact of other regional players on EU actorness.

The definition of the concept provided by Bretherton and Vogler is quite general, and while this broad approach is not necessarily the issue, it fails to distinguish between the various types of political opportunity structures. These structures can range from 'the temporal' (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 62) to institutional and discursive opportunities (Koopmans et al., 2005). The main problem with their approach is that they only consider either institutional or discursive opportunities, rather than examining both in conjunction to assess the openness and closeness of each structure for EU engagement. Furthermore, their choice of case study seems to favour temporal opportunity structures, which are events and discourses that arise suddenly and require an immediate response from the EU. If such a response is not provided, the authors classify the EU's strategy as a failure. This approach conducts an event analysis, specifically a crisis event analysis, without further considering the immediate and long-term institutional and discursive opportunity structures to determine their openness to EU engagement in short- and long-term perspectives. This narrow perspective overlooks the complexities of the external environment and, as Koopmans et al. (2005, p. 16) argue, limits its 'explanatory power compared to the impact of the political context'.

The objective of the paper is to examine the interplay between the external political context and the differentiated patterns of EU engagement in its eastern neighbourhood. Specifically, the paper aims to explore *when and to what extent opportunities in the neighbourhood affect EU engagement and shape policy-frame alignment*. To address this

research question, the study draws on Koopmans and Statham (1999), framing the research topic within the concept of an opportunity structure. The critical approach of Koopmans and Statham (1999) and Koopmans et al. (2005) towards the concept is leveraged to address the methodological challenge, starting by clarifying the conceptual framework and adapting it to European studies research. Moreover, the paper introduces the concept of immediate opportunity structures to explain the EU's differentiated policy frame alignment towards Georgia and Moldova. The research adds to the literature on EU actorness, and particularly the concept of opportunity structure. Moreover, it contributes to the literature on the EU dis/engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The conceptual and methodological framework: opportunity structures

The concept of opportunity structure has been criticised for being a 'sponge' that absorbs all contextual elements of the external environment (Kingston, 2019, p.119). However, despite the extensive criticism, the concept remains relevant because, as Koopmans et al. (2005, p. 20) argue, 'the same actor can mobilize differently and with varying success depending on the opportunities and constraints offered by its political environment'. The most general definition of the concept is 'the opening and closing of political space' (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 14). Tallow (1996, p.54) defines political opportunity as 'consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors that either encourage or discourage them from using their internal resources' to engage. Giugni (2009, p. 361) clarifies that these signals refer to the aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities for actors to act and maximise their benefits. The concept of opportunity highlights the role played by the broader political and cultural context in which an actor operates, and emphasises the facilitating or constraining role played by power configurations, institutional and discursive structures (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 227). Opportunities are options for actors with attached chances and risks external to the actors (Koopmans, 2004, p. 65). In this sense, each EU engagement or disengagement in the neighbourhood is understood as part of a larger political process, shaped by the opportunities and limitations offered by the external political context. The impact of social structures, problems, and circumstances on the EU engagement is, according to this approach, indirect and conditional to the extent that they transform the political context and alter the balance of opportunities and constraints (Koopmans et al., 2005, p. 16).

The concept of opportunity structure encompasses both institutional and discursive dimensions. The institutional dimension encompasses 'political regimes', institutional structures, power relations, the stance of political elites, and the legal and political framework in a given country (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 62; Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 228). The institutional dimension of the opportunities is influenced by the national political elite, who focus on shaping public political narratives, formal documents that express the country's politics, and their actions, such as implementing formal agreements with the EU, to advance their own political agendas and prolong their political influence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; Mouffe, 2005, 2013). Therefore, research in this area scrutinises national political elites' narratives and actions, in particular, the authorities' political and material reactions to the EU policies in order to analyze the EU's 'chances of access and influence' in normative and institutional settings (Koopmans et al., 2005, pp. 16–17). In this context, it is important to

examine whether domestic authorities, through their political narrative and actions, repress or facilitate EU engagement at the local level, and also how they address their commitments undertaken through contractual relations with the EU.

The discursive structure, introduced by Koopmans and Statham in 1999, considers the public domain, including local people's perceptions and the privileged role of hegemonic culture, beliefs, and values (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Steinberg, 1999). In this context, discursive opportunities at the domestic level reveal patterns of the public perception of the EU (Chaban & Headley, 2021), specifically their openness to EU strategies and the Union's influence. Discursive opportunity is instrumental for policy and decision-making, as it 'determines which ideas are considered sensible, which constructions of reality are seen as realistic, and which claims are held as legitimate within a polity at a specific time' (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 228) and in this case since 24 February 2022. Snow and Benford (1988) suggest that several factors determine whether a frame resonates with the public. These factors include the alignment of a frame, ideas, or policy with the target audience's real-world experiences. Additionally, the prominence of policies, beliefs, and values within frames also plays a significant role in their resonance. The national political elite usually try to manipulate those factors for the purpose of pursuing its political interests by pushing its frames and policies to alter public perceptions; however, they are not always successful, as the public might disagree and even backlash, resulting in a change of institutional opportunity structures (Laclau, 2007).

Therefore, patterns of institutional and discursive opportunities might diverge at the domestic level, making it crucial to measure them separately. Subsequently, comparing and combining them becomes essential, as together they shape the domestic context for EU engagement. There are different combinations of these opportunities (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013, p. 150), as there may be cases where there is a broad receptivity to the EU in the discursive – public – domain, but a closed institutional – domestic regime – opportunity structure where political elites are reluctant to adopt EU-driven recommendations. The authors (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013 p. 150; Gamson, 1990, p. 29; Koopmans & Statham, 1999, pp. 225–251) identified four qualitative categories of external environment/opportunity structures namely: 1. open; 2. partially open; 3. partially closed; 4. closed. Combinations of strategies followed at the institutional and discursive levels either create opportunities or impose restrictive hurdles. In the sense put forward by Gamson (1990, p. 29) and further elaborated by Koopmans and Statham (1999, pp. 225–251), there are four domestic strategies that impact the external political environment for the EU engagement, namely: 1. full response; 2. co-optation; 3. pre-emption; 4. collapse/marginalisation. Table 1 defines the strategies and Table 2 presents the corollary relation between external environment and the EU engagement.

Distinction of the opportunities broadens the explanatory scope of the analysis (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013), whereas the division of the strategies is merely conceptual (Gamson, 1990; Koopmans & Statham, 1999), and serve as an analytical tool used to measure the external political environment in the neighbourhood. According to the framework, the EU is likely to thrive better where its notions and principles resonate with political authorities and the general public, where it is confident in its power of attraction, and where it enjoys support, and also where no other regional actor prevents its engagement or/and occupies 'its niche in the political space' (Koopmans et al., 2005, p. 17). In the eastern neighbourhood, Russia and the US are the key regional actors. In the current political

Table 1. Domestic context and its impact on the EU engagement.

Full response → full EU engagement	Co-optation → formal EU engagement	Pre-emption → informal EU engagement	Collapse/marginalisation → full EU disengagement
Creates an open external environment as it gives the EU both access and concessions from national governments. An open external environment 'can be achieved only when opportunities are available in both the institutional and the discursive realms' (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 247). Full response primarily entails acceptance of the EU as a partner in governance and/or internal politics.	Establishes a partially open political environment for EU intervention. In such circumstances, institutional opportunities are available, but discursive opportunities are unfavourable. This elite strategy provides limited substantive concessions despite granting some access to those elements of EU policies that comply with the prevailing rules of the game at the domestic level.	Yields a partially closed environment in which 'discursive opportunities are available, but the political system is closed' (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 247). In such an environment, the EU is able to exert some influence but cannot establish itself as an active participant in the political game. The national political elite takes up those demands and frames of the EU that do not conflict with dominant interests and cultural codes while simultaneously excluding and even repressing the EU as an internal actor.	Leads to the closure of the political environment to the EU's engagement at the domestic level. There is 'no support for the ideas and demands of the EU' (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 248) at either the institutional or discursive level. The EU is still able to exert some influence on the public discourse, but it cannot establish itself as an active participant in the political game, and its existence is confined to the political and cultural margins.

setting, the US supports the countries in European integration, in contrast with Russia, which plays a detrimental role in Georgia and Moldova due to the Kremlin's perceptions of the region as its sphere of influence.

Operationalisation

In their analysis, the authors (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Koopmans et al., 2005; Koopmans & Statham, 1999) do not spell out the lifespan of opportunity structures, the studies are mainly limited to research on certain social movements and their impact on legal framework in different countries. Due to changing opportunity structures in the neighbourhood and importance of momentum, the studies of the EU actorness require clarification of the lifespan of opportunities. The study argues that there are immediate opportunities

Table 2. The neighbours' external political opportunities for the EU engagement.

		Discursive opportunities	
		Closed	Open
Institutional Opportunities	Open	Formal EU Engagement	Full EU Engagement
	Closed	Full EU Disengagement	Informal EU Engagement

*the table draws on the figures by Gamson, 1990; Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Cinalli & Giugni, 2013.

*the table draws on the figures by Gamson (1990), Koopmans and Statham (1999), Cinalli and Giugni (2013).

existing at the moment of decision-making and long-term opportunities created in the span of 3–5 years or even more. The study demonstrates that in the long-term perspective, Georgia has better record of alignment – indicators of achievements – than Moldova (European Commission, 2023a/2023b). However, at the moment of the EU decision-making, specifically in June 2022 Georgia was almost closed to the Union. To be clear, in Georgia, the institutional domain – domestic political regime – of the opportunity structures was close to the EU engagement: the state authority actively ignored the EC recommendations and attempted to institutionalise anti-EU discourse (e.g. GD-led conspiracy discourse on the second front and Global War Party (Civil Georgia, 2023a)). Whereas Moldova appeared as relatively open, which drove the EU to give ‘candidate’ status to Moldova, a favourable policy frame in comparison to the European perspective which Georgia received by the EU decision. The study argues that, because of the past reforms registered in the last 5–10 years, the EU has given Georgian authorities a chance to open institutional domain of the opportunities in roughly one year and half and thereby accept the EU as an internal actor.

Given the analytical foundation and tool, this paper examines both the institutional and discursive opportunity structures to evaluate the degree of openness/closeness of the external environment for EU engagement in two neighbouring countries in the east: Georgia and Moldova. In this context the study makes a few methodological decisions. First, to map patterns of openness/closeness of the institutional domain of opportunities the paper analyses: 1. The two countries’ official – authorities’ – discourse towards the EU; 2. Their alignment to the EU policy towards Russia; and also 3. Their alignment to the EU discourse on Ukraine after February 24, 2022. Whereas, the discursive/public domain of opportunities is measured through public perception by mapping the EU’s public ratings in these two countries (Chaban & Headley, 2021) and also the public perception of Russia. Moreover, the focus is limited to the analysis of the institutional and discursive structures in these countries during the security-related event – Russia’s war in Ukraine – based on which the Union arguably made a decision. As Koopmans et al. (2005, pp. 19–20) argue, ‘institutional and discursive opportunity structures have both general and issue-specific dimensions’ and ‘opportunity structures can vary greatly from one issue area to another’. This means that the countries might be open to EU engagement in some issues such as trade, investment, economic cooperation, while being more reserved – closed – in areas, such as democracy, human rights and security. These are the areas where the EU’s role increases, allowing it to act as a domestic player and guardian of European principles in partner countries, which may conflict with the non-liberal/democratic plans of the domestic regime.

Therefore, certain EU-driven policy frames¹ from the ENP, such as visa liberalisation, readmission politics, people-to-people contact, are more likely to generate positive institutional and public responses at the domestic level. While other types of policy frames which envisage risks and stakes for the political regime, such as judicial and electoral reform, empowerment of civil society, freedom of speech, and sanction regimes towards Russia are less attractive, creating either a closed domestic space or a partially open environment for EU engagement. Consequently, research that focuses on visa liberalisation within the framework of trade is likely to find an open external environment for EU engagement both at the institutional and public levels. This is primarily due to financial benefits on the one hand and on the other, its limited political influence on state authorities and the cultural

fabric at the domestic level. In contrast, security is the area where the EU itself limits its engagement because it involves high human, economic and political risks, particularly in the Eastern neighbourhood where, due to the Kremlin-led threats, 'security is about survival. It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object', which incorporates and affects the state, government, society, economy and territory (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21). The EU was arguably cautious that security threats in this part of the world would lead to 'the use of extraordinary measures to handle them', [...] 'that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics' (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 21–23).

The study chose to examine security as a unit of analysis for several reasons. Firstly, recent studies show that security is the most critical issue for the EU in the neighbourhood for the time being, which has affected the Union to a great extent (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022). Secondly, some studies classify the EU's engagement in specific security-related events as a failure due to the EU's internal division, negligence or unwillingness to act decisively (see: Bretherton and Vogler (2013)). Since membership discussions with three countries from the Eastern neighbourhood began as a consequence of, and in response to, Russia's full scale war against Ukraine, this research seeks to analyse the interplay between the security-related event in the Eastern neighbourhood, the openness/closeness of these countries' institutional and public domain towards the Union, and the EU's differentiated engagement/policy-frame alignment towards them. Specifically, it examines to what extent high-security events create institutional and public opportunity space for EU engagement and which opportunity structures are the most prioritised by the EU. Thirdly, security is a critical issue that elicits unique actors and forces, who based on the perception of threat calculate whether dis/engagement is necessary or worthwhile. Last but not least, this is an opportunity to compare the security-driven openness/closeness of Eastern neighbours and the subsequent engagement and disengagement of the EU in the neighbourhood. Case studies of security-related crises in the neighbourhood provide descriptive and analytical details of the dynamics of opportunity-driven EU engagement. For instance, to what extent do the opportunities for the EU engagement in Moldova and Georgia differ, and why did the same security-related event in the Eastern Neighbourhood – Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 – result in different EU strategies in Georgia and Moldova, arguably two pro-European countries?

The paper finds that Georgia was partially closed, whereas Moldova was partially open to EU engagement, which resulted in a differentiated alignment of the policy frame towards these two countries in June 2023. The study draws its findings from a comparative analysis of the political environment in Georgia and Moldova and an in-depth analysis of opportunity-driven EU engagement and frame alignment in two Eastern neighbouring countries. In this respect, the research focuses on opportunities for EU engagement during a time of high security threat – Russia's war against Ukraine – and examines the level of openness or closeness of the institutional and discursive space for the EU at the domestic level. The paper also scrutinises the EU-driven indicators of achievements in both countries over the span of the last 3–5 years, revealing better records of achievements in Georgia than in Moldova from the long-term perspective. The paper argues that the EU's decision to pursue different strategic frames is influenced by the immediate institutional and discursive opportunities identified by the EU in the neighbouring countries at the moment of decision-making.

High-security threat: Russia's war against Ukraine as 'Opening' at the regional level

February 24, 2022, marked not a return of war to Europe, as President von der Leyen claimed, but rather an intensification of Russia's occupation of its 'sphere of influence' in the neighbourhood of the EU. The Kremlin's war against its 'near abroad', including Ukraine, began following the collapse of the Soviet Union with its 'divide and conquer' policy. In the 1990s, Russia created breakaway regions in Georgia and Moldova, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Transnistria, to keep these countries in a state of turmoil with little chance of prosperity. Later, after recalibrating from President Yeltsin's legacy, the Kremlin attacked Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and the wars have not ended. In Georgia, Russia continues to annex territory near the administrative border through its 'borderization' policy. In Ukraine, Russia occupied Crimea in 2014 and has continued the war in Donbas. Additionally, the Kremlin destabilises these countries internally through its proxy oligarchs, such as Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia and Ilan Shor in Moldova, who made their fortunes in Russia. The full-scale military attack against Ukraine by Russia on February 24 should not have come as a surprise given the preceding events and the Kremlin's nostalgic discourse on the Soviet Union. However, the EU failed to change its policy towards the Kremlin or contradict Russia's actions, which threatened not only the region but also the global order and balance. Instead, Brussels seemed to accept the Kremlin's actions as the new normal.

Even though Russia's actions were arguably predictable, the February 24 attack was a wake-up call for the EU that shocked with its brutality, scale, and impact on regional security, human safety, food, energy, and migration crises. The 'unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine' by the Russian Federation prompted a number of actions and decisions within the EU (European Commission, 2022a). Importantly, the EU realised that Europe is in danger due to the Kremlin's intention to regress to Cold War-era thinking, which undermines European unity and encroaches upon the independence and sovereignty of former Soviet states (EEAS, 2022). The elevated threat perception further convinced the EU that it needs 'to be a real geopolitical actor' (Euro-news, 2022). Moreover, the high-security threat united the Union against the Russian invasion, discontinued business as usual with the Kremlin, and supported Ukraine. Conceptually speaking, the EU took the opportunity to handle the crisis by imposing eleven packages of sanctions one after another against the enemy of peace in Europe and the culprit that brought war back to the European continent 'after almost thirty years' (European Commission, 2022b). In parallel, the Union offered humanitarian and macro-financial assistance, along with emergency aid programs and support packages to Ukraine (European Commission, 2022a). For the first time in history, the EU announced its intention to finance and ship arms to freedom-fighting Ukraine (European Commission, 2022b).

Moreover, the EU made a shift towards the EU membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. On March 7, the Council of the EU invited the European Commission to consider the applications of the three countries for EU membership. On June 17, the European Commission (2022b) issued a recommendation to include the three countries in the EU enlargement process, with a less advanced formulation for Georgia. The Commission advised candidate status for Georgia once certain priorities are addressed. On June 23,

the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and offered a conditional 'European perspective' to Georgia, promising the status of a candidate country once the priorities specified in the Commission's opinion are addressed (European Council, 2022). The recent U-turn in the EU's stance towards the membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia is a significant shift in the EU's discourse and perspective. Previously, their membership had been considered off the agenda due to the countries' issues with their judicial systems and democratic institutions (Civil Georgia, 2021a/2021b). The EU's endorsement does not exempt the countries from meeting the Copenhagen criteria, but it marks the end of their classification as mere 'neighbours' and instead introduces them as having 'candidate' or 'European perspective' status, indicating a different level of EU engagement with each country.

The EU's alignment of frames towards Ukraine is arguably a logical reaction to the ongoing situation. Russia's attack on Ukraine was not only an assault against a sovereign state but the attack on the European security architecture (EEAS, 2022). Subsequently, the perception of Russia's threat has significantly amplified in the EU, which led the Union to unite against a common enemy by increasing its engagement with Ukraine and framing Ukraine's defence of statehood as a defence of European values (Council of the EU, 2022; European Commission, 2022a/2022b). The reason for the EU's differentiation between Moldova and Georgia is relatively contested, especially since Georgia, as an Eastern European frontrunner, ranks ahead of the Balkan frontrunners in political and economic criteria (Emerson & Blockmans, 2021). In the long-term perspective, Georgia stands out as the sole post-Soviet state to have effectively restructured its institutions, achieving a comprehensive transformation marked by the embrace of the Western political and economic model (Matusiak, 2012). Despite Georgia experiencing democratic setbacks in recent years (Akhvlediani, 2022; Emerson, 2021), it still scores the highest among associated countries in political and economic criteria (Emerson, 2021) and is classified as moderately free in the 2023 Index of Economic Freedom, while Moldova is considered mostly unfree (The Heritage Foundation, 2023a/2023b). Both Georgia and Moldova are considered partially free democracies by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2020). Moreover, Moldova is still a member of the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and ranks poorly in the 2020 Corruption Perception Index due to numerous shortcomings in institutional reform (Transparency International, 2020).

To understand why the EU granted candidate status to Moldova and a European perspective to Georgia, the study examines the two countries' governments' approach towards the EU and Russia's war in Ukraine to map the 'immediate' opportunity structures for EU engagement in Georgia and Moldova. Table 3 presents the 'immediate' opportunities identified in Georgia and Moldova and argues that Georgia was partially closed to the EU engagement, while Moldova remained partially open.

European perspective for Georgia: opportunity structures

Georgia's aspiration to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures has been enshrined in the constitution since 2017 (Constitution of Georgia, 2019). The GDDG initiated amendments to the constitution in response to opposition parties' allegations of its affiliations with the Kremlin. These allegations have increased due to the GDDG's engagement with the Kremlin, as well as the party's anti-EU narrative (e.g. discourse on sovereignty, EU integration with dignity, and

Table 3. The context/environment for the EU engagement in the eastern neighbourhood.

		Georgia	Moldova
Institutional opportunities	State official discourse towards the EU	partially closed	open
	Alignment to the EU policy on Russia	Closed	closed
	Alignment to the EU discourse on Ukraine	partially closed	open
	Overall	partially closed	partially open
Discursive Opportunities	Public discourse on the EU	Open	open
	Public discourse on Russia	Open	partially closed
	Overall	Open	partially open
Political context for EU engagement		Pre-emptive	Co-optative

second-front (Interpressnews, 2023)) and actions that have strained its relationships with its ‘friends’ in the EU and US (de Waal, 2022). The ‘friends’ are primarily concerned with the GDDG’s continued disregard for EU recommendations to uphold judicial reform, strengthen democratic institutions, and create a political space for pluralism. The GDDG’s lack of action on these commitments is part of its strategy that combines cautious engagement with the Kremlin with targeted efforts to crack down on civil society and media organisations (e.g. law on foreign agents) and exclude the opposition from decision-making.

When Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, the Kremlin’s framing of the conflict found its way into the GDDG’s narrative. For the Kremlin, the invasion of Ukraine is not a war between Moscow and Kiev, but a power struggle with the US, as suggested by Sergei Lavrov, who referred to it as a ‘proxy war’ with the US-led NATO and its allies (The Guardian, 2022). According to this ‘proxy war’ reasoning, Washington and its allies are allegedly delivering ‘shattering blows’ to Russia in Ukraine (Brands, 2022). Given that the war is over a sphere of influence, and Georgia is part of this ‘sphere’, the GDDG reportedly found itself ‘at the crossroads of quite complex geopolitical processes’, as noted by the lawyer of the billionaire leader of the GDDG (Civil Georgia, 2022b). The situation has been allegedly complex for the GDDG as it required them to avoid an extension of the war in Georgia while being explicit about Russia’s actions and aggression in Ukraine (Civil Georgia, 2022b), which contradicts their non-provocation/engagement policy towards the Kremlin.

Institutional opportunity: guts and politics in state driven radical discourse towards the EU

The official stance of the Georgian Dream government can be described as a mix of non-alignment, opportunism, and protection of the party’s interests carried through a radical reactive narrative towards the EU and US driven by guts and at times lacking strategic planning. Despite officially supporting Kiev and condemning Russia’s actions in Ukraine (Civil Georgia, 2023a; Interpressnews, 2022d), the GDDG avoids harsh criticism of the Kremlin. This is despite ongoing borderisation by Russian military forces near the administrative border with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although the GDDG supported UN resolutions against Russia’s aggression in Ukraine (UN News, 2022a; UN News, 2022b), its representatives did not participate in the adoption of a resolution at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) that labelled the Kremlin as a ‘terrorist’

regime (Civil Georgia, 2022c). Arguably, the resolution contradicts GDDG-driven engagement and non-provocative policy towards Russia.

Meanwhile, the GDDG has adopted a hostile narrative towards Ukrainian officials, reportedly due to their close ties with former President Saakashvili. There are also allegations that Ukrainian officials are willing to drag Georgia into the war (e.g. Garibashvili (Civil Georgia, 2023b)). The GDDG's politics are characterised by cautiousness and a desire to maintain power domestically, coupled with fear and engagement with Russia and grievances towards Ukrainian officials. The party's approach to Russia involves aligning its war-related narrative with the Kremlin's discourse and avoiding any provocation. In contrast, the party has treated the EU with hostility and controversial remarks/narrative, leading to a significant deterioration of their relationship. The relationship with the EU became strained before the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Officials of the Georgian Dream have been frustrated with the EU's push for judicial reforms and a more inclusive political space in the country. This perception of inclusiveness contradicts the key priority of the party to remain in power, and threatens its very existence. This perception stems from the limited history of power-sharing in Georgian political culture and the tense, antagonistic relationships between political opponents. In Georgia, political elites operate under the principle of 'winner takes all', leading to the alienation of opponents and the formation of hostile political factions. Consequently, the ruling party found the implementation of EU-recommended reforms aimed at ensuring the functionality of democratic and political institutions (European Commission, 2022b), particularly measures to address political polarisation, to be unacceptable.

GDDG-led contentious discourse towards EU officials mainly targeted EU ambassador Carl Hartzel and certain Members of the European Parliament (Interpressnews, 2022e/2022f). GDDG officials were irritated by the EU ambassador's proactive role in domestic political processes as a stakeholder (Interpressnews, 2022e/2022f) and also by the MEPs' critical comments on the Georgian government's failure to fulfil its commitments. The confrontations with EU officials persisted after Georgia's application for EU membership on March 3, 2022, and even escalated. The European Parliament's resolution on Georgia on 6 June 2022, sparked a new round of criticism and accusations towards the MEPs (European Parliament, 2022). On June 9, the head of the GDDG stated that the resolution had 'nothing in common with European values and [...] is not worth a dime' (Civil Georgia, 2022d). After the European Council denied Georgia candidate status on June 23, the GDDG officials took their critical narrative towards the EU to a new level.

On June 28, three proactive MPs left the GDDG and created a new party, 'People's Power', to reveal 'the truth' (Interpressnews, 2022a). In fact, the separation from GDDG was a publicity stunt aimed at creating anti-EU discourse and derailing Georgia's EU accession (e.g. Kavelashvili (Interpressnews, 2023c)). The first statement on 29 June 2022, by the MPs claimed that the issue of the candidacy was a 'mousetrap' in which the Georgian government was trapped (Interpressnews, 2022a). According to the MPs, the United National Movement along with President Zourabishvili and accomplices in the European Parliament conspired against the Georgian government by drawing the country into the EU membership application process. The conspiracy allegedly included 'two alternative scenarios' for revolutionary change of the government in Georgia (Interpressnews, 2022a). Additionally, their statement argued that the key goal of the scenarios was to open a 'second front' in Georgia because 'Georgia is only needed militarily and the Georgian

people are considered to be the means of war' (Interpressnews, 2022a). Ever since, every critical statement by MEPs has been met with similar anti-EU statements by the MPs. The most infamous statements even defied the integration of Georgia into the EU as the goal of the country (Interpressnews, 2023b/2023c). In parallel, the GDDG officials joined the departed MPs' ranks to reinforce the anti-EU discourse, which by default and design transmitted pro-Russian messages (e.g. Kaladze (Interpressnews, 2023b); Kobakhidze (Interpressnews, 2023a); Garibashvili (Civil Georgia, 2023a)). As it is in the best interest of the Kremlin to see Georgia diverting from the European track.

Continued negative and at times radical discourse towards certain MEPs, coupled with the GDDG's reluctance to address EU-requested reforms, and most importantly anti-EU actions (e.g. the attempt to adopt the 'Foreign Agent' law on 7 March 2023, and its eventual adoption on May 28, 2024) have gradually and partially closed the door to the European Union. At the institutional level, the government's resistance to accept the EU as an internal actor still could not close the door on the EU completely. The GDDG is aware that it cannot fully disengage from the EU due to the pro-European sentiments among the people of Georgia. The pro-EU public protests and the opposition to the 'Foreign Agent' draft law on March 8 serve as proof that the government's failure to achieve candidate status for Georgia incites anger among the public. To mitigate damage caused by failure and deflect attention away from their shortcomings, the GDDG has consistently tried to shift the blame onto the MEPs by associating them with the opposition parties. Additionally, the party has introduced new themes such as a 'second front', 'joining the EU with dignity', and 'retaining sovereignty' to entrench anti-EU discourse through continuous reiteration (Interpressnews, 2023a).

Discursive opportunity: Europe as a place of historical dislocation

The European identity plays a significant role in Georgian society. The concept of 'Europe' is framed in Georgia as a place of historical roots and ultimate destination (Gamkrelidze, 2019, p. 1). This idea is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century literature, which portrays the European project as the only path for Georgia's national development (Gamkrelidze, 2019, p. 1). Despite political elites trying to change this discourse, it remains dominant in Georgian society. On the other hand, the difficulty of understanding and accepting values such as freedom, pluralism, and equality has long been a problem in Georgian society. The European project is often seen more as an emotional goal rather than a commitment to adopting European values, such as liberty, gender equality, and sexual minority rights, which are considered controversial by some people in Georgia (ILGA-Europe, 2006; UN HRC, 2011). Thus, there is a gap to a certain degree between the desire to be associated with Europe and the willingness to adopt European values.

In general, there is a limited understanding of concepts such as democracy, pluralism, and liberty within Georgian society (Gilbreath & Silagadze, 2023), which leads to relatively limited public engagement and demands towards the government to address issues in these areas. This situation gives the political elite significant leeway to manipulate these concepts, allowing them to evade accountability for meeting democratic governance criteria and inclusive decision-making. These values do not generate much emotional response within the public, either positive or negative. However, there are values such as gender equality and rights for sexual minorities that are feared and contested by the people of Georgia. The negative public attitude towards sexual minorities

in Georgia is linked to the popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church with an 81% support rate (IRI, 2021), which considers homosexuality a crime (ILGA-Europe, 2006; UN HRC, 2011). This social fabric is regularly misused by the state officials to contextualise the interlinking of EU-driven recommendations with issues such as loss of sovereignty, identity, promotion of LGBT rights, and potential conflicts with the Orthodox Church (as noted by Mdinardze (Imedineews, 2023) and Kobakhidze (Interpressnews, 2023a))

Despite some disagreements on certain values, the EU is highly approved by the population in Georgia (NDI, 2022). Over the last decade, the EU's public rating has been improving, with 33% of respondents naming the EU as their primary partner in 2011, second only to the US (IRI, 2020). By 2021, the EU's standing in the eyes of the Georgian population had increased to 56% of respondents, likely due to the increasing financial and technical support/engagement provided by the EU in the country through initiatives like the Association Agreement (AA) and visa liberalisation (First Channel, 2021). The positive public perception of the EU has resulted in strong support for European integration in Georgia. Public support for EU membership fluctuates from year to year, but overall, the Georgian population has been consistently supportive of EU accession. For example, in 2015, 85% of respondents in Georgia supported EU membership (IRI, 2015), while in 2017 this dropped to 80% (NDI, 2017) and further decreased to 77% in 2019 (NDI, 2019). However, the EU approval rating increased substantially in 2022, with 83% of respondents approving of Georgia's goal to join the EU according to an NDI survey published on 27 January 2022 (Civil Georgia, 2022a). This support further increased to 85% according to an IRI survey published on 11 November 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 (Interpressnews, 2022b).

The GDDG government has low public approval, with only a 25% support rate (Interpressnews, 2022b). The low public confidence is not necessarily due to the failure to secure candidate status for the country, as a National Democratic Institute (NDI) survey from 27 January 2022, showed similar results, with only 24% support (Civil Georgia, 2022a). The opposition's labelling of the GDDG as pro-Russian is not the sole reason for the limited public support; however, the label is harmful in Georgia, where 88% of respondents consider Russia to be the main threat to Georgian statehood (IRI, 2021). Since the independence of Georgia, there has been an ongoing debate on Russia's detrimental role in Georgian state-building. For the Georgian people, Russia was seen as their number one enemy, perceived as an obstacle to the nation's and state's formation and a key problem for the achievement of national goals. The August 2008 war solidified Russia's status as an enemy of Georgia. Since then, Russia has been viewed as the country's number one enemy, and this status has been institutionalised by the Georgian government through the adoption of a law on 'Occupied Territories', which declares Russia as 'a state exercising military occupation' of Georgian territories (Government of Georgia, 2008). This social fabric has ensured support and solidarity towards Ukraine in the wake of Russia's attack on February 24. The primary reason for the overwhelming public support for Ukraine were the shared perception of Russia as a feared enemy.

Candidate status for Moldova: opportunity structures

Moldova has pro-European leanings; however, as Cațus and Kosienkowski (2018, p. 99) argue, it is a nation caught in the crosshairs between the East and the West. The

country has linguistic, cultural, and historical affinities with Romania on the one hand. And on the other, Moldova also has strong connections to its Soviet past and Russia, which keeps pro-Russian parties relevant and influential within the public. Since the creation of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) in 2015, Moldova has been reaffirming its pro-European orientation. The election of Maia Sandu as President in 2020 further solidified this stance, as she replaced the pro-Russian president. The PAS's landslide victory in the 2021 parliamentary elections, securing 63 out of 101 seats in the parliament, reinforced the country's pro-European direction. The official discourse fed into the notion that Moldova belongs in the European Union (European Parliament, 2022). The pro-European party in the legislative and executive power led to 'moderate' harmonisation of the country's foreign policy with the EU discourse on external affairs (European Commission, 2023a, p. 51) and subsequent disengagement with the Kremlin-driven narrative.

Moreover, Moldova also aligned its official discourse with the EU narrative on Russia's attack against Ukraine on February 24. The president deplored the Kremlin-driven military activities and expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine (European Parliament, 2022). However, Moldova 'has not aligned with decisions on Russia and Belarus sanctions or with decisions under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions regime' (European Commission, 2023a, p. 51). Despite the change of the state discourse, disengagement or even weakening linkages with Russia is still a main unresolvable issue for the state leadership. To a certain degree, Moldova remains under Russian influence, first of all because the country is almost divided between pro-Russian and pro-European-minded populations, but also due to the legacy inherited from pro-Russian predecessors and in particular from the close runner-up Igor Dodon from the party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), which is an anti-NATO and anti-EU power. In practice, the anti-Western stance and Soviet legacy affect the structure and functioning of democratic, political, and state institutions. This has been reflected in European Commission documents, which underscore the necessity of addressing deficiencies in electoral and justice systems, the rule of law, public administration, finances, and services (European Commission, 2022b). Furthermore, organised crime and corruption have emerged as the primary challenges in the country (European Commission, 2022b). Nevertheless, such EU assessments have not sparked anti-EU discourse among Moldovan authorities, in contrast with their Georgian counterparts, whose narrative has been predominantly anti-EU. Anti-European-ness would automatically play into Kremlin politics, especially given the strong pro-Russian-orientation of the population, which constituted 33% in 2021 (Macuhin, 2021).

Institutional opportunity: contested pro-europeanness

For the relatively young PAS, created in 2015, victory in the 2021 parliamentary elections with 53% of the votes was an impressive result. However, the cumulative vote share of three pro-Russian parties, which 'act as one opposition front in parliament and the extra-parliamentary arena' (Socor, 2022) – the Socialists (PSRM), Communists (PCRM), and the Shor Party (led by the fugitive tycoon Ilan Shor) – constituted 33% (Macuhin, 2021). In practice, even though the pro-European state leadership is in charge, they are still haunted by pro-Russian forces. This is because the margin of victory fluctuates and is subject to change in a country where regional dynamics play a considerable role,

and the existential threat from the Kremlin is imminent. Since the parliamentary elections and after Russia's attack on Ukraine, public opinion polls reveal a drop in the PAS support, whereas the pro-Russian trio saw an increase in popularity in public surveys. The CBS-AXA survey showed PAS with 24.1% support, compared to a cumulative 37.6% for the Socialist, Communist, and Shor parties (Unimedia.info, 2022a). The iData survey registered 22.5% for PAS and 39% for the three Russophile parties (Unimedia.info, 2022b). In contrast, the IMAS poll in July recorded 30.7% support for PAS and the Russophile parties emerged with 42.5% (Unimedia.info, 2022d). The surge in support of the pro-Russian parties affected President Sandu's ratings. Over 40% of Moldovans hold President Sandu responsible for the dire economic situation in the country (Unimedia.info, 2022d). In July 2022, only 24.4% of the respondents supported her, but in December the percentage of supporters increased to 26.9% (Unimedia.info, 2022c). However, this figure is considerably lower than her winning percentage in the 2021 presidential election and dangerously low considering that the Socialists' (PSRM) Igor Dodon surpassed Sandu's ratings in July with a rating of 25.4% (Unimedia.info, 2022d), which later decreased to 19.6% (Unimedia.info, 2022c).

Moldova keeps strong economic and social links with Russia, which has been a challenge for the pro-European power to deal with. The country is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and maintains a status of observer at the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2017, both of which are Russia-led organisations. Despite the strained relations with Russia, which is reflected in the suspension of its participation in CIS meetings and the revocation of CIS key documents (RFERL, 2023), Moldova's recent plan to withdraw from the CIS seems complicated and riddled with difficulties (TASS, 2022). Initially, President Sandu was keen to maintain cooperation with the CIS even after obtaining EU candidate status, as the government intended to be pragmatic and benefit from CIS agreements (TASS, 2022). The pragmatism was linked to the difficulties the Moldovan economy would face following its withdrawal from the CIS (Banila, 2023). In recent years, the share of CIS countries in the overall export of Moldovan agricultural products ranged from 99% to 50% (Kamerrer, 2022). However, on 15 May 2023, the decision was reversed, and Moldova initiated 'a first step' to leave the CIS (RFERL, 2023). The difficulty in sustaining this decision is not only associated with the dependency of its economy on Russia, but also with the Kremlin's negative reaction to seeing the country leaving its sphere of influence.

For similar reasons, Moldova has not joined the EU sanctions against Russia. However, Moldova initially planned to follow the EU's lead and impose sanctions on Russia. In June 2022, the speaker of the Moldovan parliament, Igor Grosu, announced Moldova's intention to do so (Calus, 2023). In response, Russian Deputy Secretary of the Security Council Medvedev threatened to cut off gas to Moldova and attempted to blackmail the country by using 'Russians' in Transnistria, a Russia-supported breakaway region in Moldova. In September, Gazprom, which is the only gas supplier to Moldova, raised the household tariffs by 27% (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, in October, the amount of gas supplied to the country, including Transnistria, decreased by up to 30% (Litra, 2023). Over the span of one year, the cost of gas surged by more than 500%, from October 2021 to October 2022. The price of electricity and food has also risen, with the inflation rate reaching 34.3% year-on-year in August 2022 (Reuters, 2022). Calus claims that the significant escalation in prices has fuelled social discontent, led to a wave of protests, further deteriorated Moldova's financial situation, and contributed to a drop in support for the government (2022).

In the context of financial crises in the country, the government of Moldova accused Russia of attempting to 'destabilize Moldova' by exploiting the energy crisis, increasing costs, and causing disturbances in the country, including protests in the capital city (Lynch & Camut, 2023). After waves of protest on 10 February 2023, the pro-European government, led by Prime Minister Gavrilița, was forced to resign. Cașu (2023) argues that the government faced intense pressure from Moscow, which sought to undermine its authority. 'Moscow has a long history of turning the economic screws on Moldova over the past two decades to undermine pro-EU administrations' (Lynch & Camut, 2023). Allegations of Russian meddling in the country further increased over time. In February 2023, President Sandu reported on Russia's plan to orchestrate a coup in the country, which includes opposition protests and the involvement of individuals with military training, as well as citizens from Russia, Belarus, Serbia, and Montenegro (Ukinform, 2023).

Economic and political threats, coupled with an elevated threat perception towards the Kremlin, have hindered state officials from weakening the country's linkages with Russia and forced them to backtrack on their promise to impose EU sanctions. In June, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration reported that the EU does not require Moldova to join sanctions against Russia and that the current policy does not hinder Moldova's European integration process (European Truth, 2022). Meanwhile, the June EU summit's communiqué 'called on all countries to align with EU sanctions, in particular countries that are candidates for EU membership' (European Council, 2022). The EU Ambassador in Moldova had to clarify that while there is no explicit demand due to the sensitivity of the political circumstances in the country, it would be pleasing to witness Moldova's ability to participate in certain sanctions (Infotag, 2023).

Discursive opportunity: public preference for multi-vector foreign policy

In Moldova, the public tends to be uncertain about the relations with the EU, Russia, and Romania. Public sentiments on foreign policy orientation of the country are driven by the legacy of the Soviet Union, friendly coexistence with Romania, constitutional arrangements and economic hardship. Opinion polls keep the records of public indecision over the EU in Moldova. In the recent past, the Moldovan public was not optimistic about European integration. In 2014, only 34% of respondents supported the pro-European orientation of the country, whereas 46% opted for pro-Russian foreign policy (NDI, 2015). In 2015, the rate of public support for the EU slightly dropped to 31%, while the pro-Russian stance experienced a major blow, with support plummeting to 24% (NDI, 2015). In parallel, a new group that supports partnership with both the EU and Russia started to appear in public survey reports. The number of such respondents amounted to 34% in 2015 (NDI, 2015). Almost an equal divide among the population in terms of their preference for joining either the European Union or the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union (EAEU) confirms Moldovans' mixed feelings towards both Europe and Russia (NDI, 2015).

In 2020-2022, the public opinion surveys reveal a significant increase in support towards the EU. However, the support in Moldova is very much fragile and depends on the political and economic situation. In 2020, 63% of people in Moldova expressed trust towards the EU, 'compared to 33%' who trust Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (The EU Neighbours East, 2020). In 2021-2022, the IRI reported similar results: 64% 63% of those asked confirmed support for the membership in the EU, 29%-33% –

opposed it (IRI, 2021; IRI, 2022). Meanwhile, '67% believe that it is one of the country's most important economic partners' (IRI, 2022). In 2022, the think tank IDIS Viitorul's study revealed that there is a significant proportion of the electorate, almost 40% (39.6%), that supports both the European Union and Russia (Ernst, 2022). In contrast, the groups that hold one-sided views, such as those who are pro-EU (27.0%) and pro-Russia (30.8%), are relatively balanced and smaller than the core group of undecided voters (Ernst, 2022). Meanwhile, CBS-Research indicates that over half of Moldova's citizens favour the country's accession to the European Union (Infotag, 2023). In fact, the number of citizens who support joining the EU is twice as high as those who support joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Specifically, when asked which union they would vote for in a referendum, 53.5% of respondents chose the EU while 23.8% chose the EAEU (Infotag, 2023).

The Kremlin's influence is the major reason for the public division and indecision over the EU. This influence is significant and rather negative, consisting of different political, economic, and social threat mechanisms, including support for Transnistria's de facto government. Nevertheless, the country is almost divided on whether Russia is an enemy of the state: 44% of Moldovans think that Russia is a threat to the state, while 51% do not perceive Russia as a threat (IRI, 2022). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 61% believed that 'direct military action from Russia' in Moldova in the next 12 months was unlikely, and only 32% thought that it was likely (IRI, 2022) most probably because of the neutrality inscribed in the constitution. As such, 59% of the public also believes that Moldova's neutrality is the best guarantee of the country's security (IRI, 2022).

There is still another ambivalence within the public opinion polls. Even though there is a co-relationship between good relations with the EU and Ukraine and bad relations with Russia, the public does not seem to view the issue in this context. 82% of respondents approve of the state's relations with the EU, 79% with Ukraine, but 68% do not approve of the tense relationship with Russia (IRI, 2022). Despite the public willingness to have good relations with Russia, the rate of public support towards Russia has been fluctuating. In recent years, the support for the pro-Russian parties ranged from a combined 40% of the votes in 2014 (The Guardian, 2014), 31.15% (PSRM votes) in 2019 (IPN, 2019), to 33% (cumulative votes of the three parties) in 2021 (Macuhin, 2021). In Moldova loyalty to the pro-Russia parties is coupled with support towards integration in the Russian-led EAEU. The surveys also indicates that there has been a decline in support for Moldova's integration into the EAEU, dropping from 58% in 2015 (Institutul de Politici Publice, 2015, p. 97), 52% in 2018 (TASS, 2018), to 40% in 2021 (Cațus, 2021).

The potential unification of Moldova with Romania remains a prominent issue for the public. Support for reunification has been increasing over the years due to historical, social, and economic factors. In 2016, the approval rating for reunification fluctuated around 15-20%, in 2018 it increased to about 25%, and in the second half of 2020, it further rose to 30-35% (Cațus, 2021). According to a poll conducted by iData company in 2021, the percentage of Moldovans who are in favour of their country's reunification with Romania has reached a new high of 43.9% (Necșuțu, 2021). In 2023, CBS-Research registered 52.2% of the votes against unification with Romania, while 36.2% of the votes were in favour (Infotag, 2023). Despite the decrease, the number of supporters is still substantial, and fluctuation renders the public undecided whether the country should be independent or a part of another state.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to analyze the external opportunities available to the EU in its relationship with its eastern neighbours, focusing on the cases of Georgia and Moldova during a period of high security threat. Specifically, the research examined how these opportunities in Georgia and Moldova affect the EU's engagement and policy alignment with the region. The paper finds that the EU's decisions regarding policy framing are often based on immediate security-related opportunities. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2023 triggered the EU to open membership negotiations not only with Ukraine but also with countries from the same neighbourhood affected by Russia's protracted aggression, such as Georgia and Moldova. The issue had been off the table before February 24 because the EU largely guided accession with a merit-based approach and internal institutional readiness to widen the geographic area of integration. However, the issue landed squarely within the realm of geopolitics on February 24, when priority relations with Russia crumbled because the Kremlin became a direct threat to the Union and to the European security architecture, making it a high priority for both the Union and the member states to act and resolve the issue.

The paper further argues that while making decisions in such a high-security situation in the eastern neighbourhood, the EU primarily focuses on immediate institutional opportunity structures. Particularly, the openness of state officials, which was high with certain limitations in Moldova and partially limited in Georgia, takes precedence, while discursive opportunities, in this case, public support towards the EU, – high in Georgia and with limitations in Moldova – play a secondary role. This was arguably the major reason for granting Georgia a less favourable 'European perspective' status, in contrast to Moldova's candidate status. Additionally, the paper notes that the EU's engagement with the Eastern neighbourhood depends on involvement of another key regional actor, Russia, and its relations with the Union. However, above all, the EU acts decisively and unanimously when a security threat directly impacts the Union's security.

Extrapolating from the findings, the paper suggests that while the prioritisation of immediate opportunity structures can downplay/overshadow long-term institutional and discursive structures to some extent, the EU focuses on immediate opportunities to address and create long-term structures by setting specific conditions for partner countries to meet within a certain timeframe. However, if the condition-based policies fail, especially if institutional opportunities deteriorate because state authorities perceive EU-driven policies (e.g. reform of democratic institutions) as a threat to their political lifespan, it is unclear whether the EU has an alternative plan to keep the public open to the Union. This concern is especially pertinent in the current geopolitical climate, where immediate threats from the Kremlin and robust disinformation campaigns against the Union hold more power than the long-term incentive to join the EU.

Note

1. Frames are conceptualized as strategic issue positions, formed through intentional framing processes (Matthes, 2012). These processes, delineated by Reese (2007), act as bridges, molding, redefining, and linking different frames, actors, and events. Gamkrelidze and Väisänen (2022) define frame alignment as the process of adapting frames in reaction to both internal and external policy challenges and proposed solutions.

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