

**Why did the European Council grant
Georgia potential candidate status for
European Union membership?**

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Abstract / Summary

This dissertation examines why the European Council unanimously concluded to grant Georgia potential candidate status for European Union membership. Such an analysis is highly pertinent given that since the establishment of the current accession process in 1997, the European Council has never made such a pledge to an applicant state that has not received a resoundingly positive opinion from the European Commission in their first conclusion of a membership application. Using the meta-theory of rational institutionalism, which explains enlargement through the substantive theories of neo-liberal institutionalism, realism and earning re-election, this dissertation aims to elucidate how Georgia's membership application in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine benefits European Union member states in achieving their 'material' or strategic interests. Additionally, the concepts of bargaining and 'rhetorical entrapment' will be applied to understand why certain states against this decision may still have agreed to it.

Key Words: bargaining, candidate status, enlargement, European Commission, European Council, Georgia, rationalist institutionalism, rhetorical entrapment, Russia

Contents

I. Abbreviations	4
II. Introduction	5
III. Literature Review	7
IV. Theoretical Framework	9
IV. I. Rationalist Institutionalism	9
IV. II. Bargaining	11
IV. III. The Role of EU Institutions	12
IV. IV. Sociological or Constructivist Institutionalism	13
IV. V. Rhetorical Entrapment	14
V. Methodology	16
VI. Hypothesis	18
VII. Why did the Council grant Georgia potential Candidate Status?	19
VII. I. EU Member States' 'material interests' through a neo-liberal and realist institutionalist lens	20
VII. II. Earning Re-election	25
VII. III. Bargaining and 'Rhetorical Entrapment'	27
VIII. Conclusion	30
IX. Bibliography	33

I. Abbreviations

ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EP	European Parliament
EPF	European Peace Fund
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GAC	General Affairs Council
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MS	Member state
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PM	Prime Minister
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly

II. Introduction

Shortly after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, Ukraine and subsequently Moldova and Georgia applied for membership to the European Union (EU). On June 23rd, 2022, the European Council (henceforth the Council) granted both Ukraine and Moldova candidate status and Georgia with potential candidate status for EU membership. This decision by the Council in relation to Georgia in particular was exceptional.

In the current step-by-step process of enlargement, inaugurated in 1997, before the Council makes its conclusion on a membership application, the European Commission (henceforth the Commission) must give its opinion on it. This opinion is made in accordance with the Copenhagen Criteria, the prerequisites to become an EU member, outlined by the Council in 1993 at the Copenhagen Summit. Of the associated trio, Ukraine and Moldova received favourable opinions, while Georgia did not. Next, EU member states (MSs) under the General Affairs Council (GAC) configuration of the Council, taking the Commission's opinion into consideration, decide by unanimity voting whether to grant the applicant state candidate status. Therefore, despite the Commission stating several priorities for Georgia to reform upon, the Council still concluded that they are "ready to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia", once these are addressed (European Council, 2022a). This is therefore unprecedented because within this accession process the Council has never before made such a pledge to a state that has not received a resoundingly positive opinion from the Commission at the first time of asking.

Other applicants to receive an initially unfavourable opinion from the Commission since 1997 include Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Much like Georgia, these two states, who applied in 2009 and 2016 respectively, thus also within the present enlargement framework, received reform agendas from the Commission, listing numerous priorities for them. Yet, unlike Georgia, these applicant countries were not immediately promised candidate status by the Council if they addressed these priorities.

Moreover, within their opinion on the membership applications of Georgia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Commission referenced a pledge made by the Council in 1993 at the Copenhagen Summit, stating that the accession of any association state from central and eastern Europe that wished to join the EU, "will take place as soon as" they satisfied the necessary conditions (European Council, 1993; European Commission, 2010, 2019, 2022), the aforementioned Copenhagen criteria. At the time this did not extend to Turkey, as EU-Turkish relations were discussed in an entirely separate section of the Council's 1993 conclusions, within which no such promises were expressed (European Council, 1993). This because in 1989 in its opinion of their membership application the Commission stated that a

“series of substantial measures” were necessary before Turkey could advance on the “road towards increased interdependence and integration” (European Commission, 1989). Concerning the conclusions on Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the Commission citing this, the Council did not reaffirm this commitment within their initial conclusions (European Council, 2010, 2019). In contrast, the Council decreed a reiteration of their 1993 promise to Georgia in their very first conclusion on the nation’s accession, as they said they were “ready to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia” (European Council, 2022a). Whereas the Council only made Albania a candidate state in 2014, after the Commission gave them a positive recommendation upon re-evaluation in 2012. They did however announce their readiness to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina on June 23rd, 2022, at the same time as for Georgia (European Council, 2022a), however this was the second conclusion to be made on their accession.

Although this outcome prompted public disappointment in Georgia, exhibited by the Georgian Prime Minister (PM), Irakli Garibashvili, calling the decision “unfair” (Georgian Journal, 2022), in addition to some 10,000 people who gathered in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi after the Commission’s opinion was revealed, to demonstrate their belief that they deserved full candidate status like the other two members of the associated trio, Moldova and Ukraine (Katamadze, 2022). Nonetheless, as has been highlighted, the fact that Georgia were offered this promise of candidate status by the Council at the first time of asking, despite them not having received a resoundingly positive opinion from the Commission, even if they did refer to the Council’s pledge made in 1993, makes the Council’s decision incredibly surprising. Therefore, questioning why Georgia was granted this status is hugely pertinent, as it unveils the reasons heads-of-state or government unanimously agreed within the Council to take such an atypical decision.

To coherently answer this the subsequent sections will firstly summarise the relevant extant literature regarding EU enlargement. This will then lead into a delineation of the relevant theories that will be employed within this dissertation. Following this will be a methodology and hypothesis, after which the empirical study of Georgia will commence. Finally, from all this I will conclude why heads-of-state or government unanimously agreed within the Council to grant Georgia potential candidate status for EU membership.

III. Literature Review

EU enlargement has been a continual source of debate. This is underscored in a speech from the former president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, in 2002, when the EU was facing the prospective accession of the Eastern Bloc, within which he proclaimed:

“We cannot go on enlarging forever. We cannot water down the European political project and turn the European Union into just a free trade area on a continental scale.” (Prodi, 2002)

Such concerns essentially speculate that widening, in other words enlargement, over deepening integration will dilute the European project, a claim which many scholars have in fact discredited (See Haas, 1958, pp. 313–315; Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig, 2013, p. 21; Heidbreder, 2014; Kelemen, Menon and Slapin, 2014). Supplementary to this, Jean-Claude Juncker, another former Commission President, claimed in an interview that the EU was suffering from “enlargement fatigue” when referring to the membership cases of Serbia and Montenegro (Juncker, 2018). Moreover, like Juncker, academics argue that “enlargement fatigue” has caused a deceleration in EU enlargement (Szolucha, 2010), evidenced by the cases of Turkey (Aktar, 2009) and the Western Balkans (Petrovic and Smith, 2013; O’Brennan, 2014). Together with other hinderances to the accession of new members, like concerns of the EU’s “absorption capacity” (Petrovic and Smith, 2013) and “institutional overstretch” (Kennedy, 1989, p. 666; Haukkala, 2008, p. 1610), the issue of “enlargement resistance” has been occasioned among all parties, applicants, candidates and existing MSs (Economides, 2020). An exemplification of this sentiment by MSs, whose perspective is arguably the most crucial to understand when it comes to answering this question given their role as the decision-makers on enlargement within the GAC, is when France, Denmark and The Netherlands vetoed accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia at a European Council summit in 2018.

As a result, this apprehension of Prodi, in addition to the argumentation that the EU has been experiencing ‘enlargement fatigue’, thus makes the Council’s decision regarding Georgia all the more unexpected. Therefore, this dissertation aims to build on this scholarship by considering why these issues of enlargement were seemingly overlooked or disregarded when it came to Georgia.

Averys claims that rounds of enlargement are circumstantial and depend on prior sequences of events to trigger them (Avery, 2009, p. 265). Consequently, the timing of Georgia’s membership application is of vital significance when answering this question. Therefore, to successfully build upon the existing literature, rather than compare the case of Georgia to the likes of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey, this dissertation aims to

evaluate why the Council granted them this status by taking into account the context surrounding the decision.

IV. Theoretical Framework

In order to intelligibly answer this question and unearth the reasons behind the Council's conclusion on Georgia's accession a theoretical framework is necessary. This is because it will guide our analysis and assist us in understanding the perspectives of the various actors pertaining to this question, chiefly the incumbents of MSs within the Council.

Given the nature of the question in hand, it is essential that the theories employed in this dissertation elucidate why, and not just how, the Council made such an unprecedented decision when it came to Georgia. Hence, the use of European integration theories are not relevant when answering this question. Even though enlargement can be considered a form of European integration, an argument which has already been denoted and one that Haas even incorporates into his integration theory of neofunctionalism through what he refers to as "geographical spillover" (Haas, 1958, pp. 313–315), this typology of theories explains how the EU enlarges and not why. Thus, it is ill-suited to answering this research question.

More appropriately, the scholars Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier present a theoretical cleavage of two ontological- or meta-theories, rationalist institutionalism and sociological or constructivist institutionalism. Crucially, these theories assist in expounding why enlargement takes place. Jachtenfuchs, a principal critic of this theoretical dichotomisation, too underscores this, as well as stating the following:

"[these theories] could thus contribute to a better understanding not only of world politics but also of European integration understood in the classical tradition as a subfield of international relations." (Jachtenfuchs, 2002, p. 652)

In saying this he is verifying that these theories allow us to uncover the causal processes behind enlargement, categorised as 'European integration', within the context of international relations. This is exemplified in previous applications of these theories (see Engert, 2010; Jano, 2022), and is precisely what this dissertation aims to achieve too.

IV. I. Rationalist Institutionalism

The buttresses of rationalist theories of enlargement are founded on cost-benefit analyses by states. This is because, this theorises that states, whether it be applicant states or the states involved in granting membership, seek what Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier call "material interests" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 509), or in other words strategic interests. To expound this further Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier borrow Sandler and Tschirhart's succinct explanation, which affirms that countries would never join the EU or remain in it if it did not result in net-gains (Sandler and Tschirhart, 1980, p. 1491). If we view this from the angle of the MS incumbents within the Council, which is the perspective being

questioned within this dissertation, this means that they would not offer accession to an applicant state if the costs of their admission outweighed the benefits, ergo not sufficiently delivering upon their ‘material interests’.

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier outline the potential costs of membership for both the applicant states and the states granting accession. These include “transaction costs”, “policy costs” and “autonomy costs” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, pp. 510–511), elements of which are somewhat congruous with the above-mentioned causes of ‘enlargement fatigue’. However, in the context of this decision on Georgia by the Council, it is the ‘material interests’ of MSs which are of the greatest significance. This is because such a pledge proves that while heads-of-state or government within the Council acknowledge the current detriments of making them a candidate, they clearly deem the benefits that Georgia offers to considerably counterbalance these ultimate costs. Therefore, understanding these benefits is central to resolving why the Council made this conclusion on Georgia’s EU accession.

In order to do this, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier utilise three key substantive theoretical approaches, based on actors’ ‘material interests’, or strategic interests, and that fall under the overarching ontological umbrella of rationalist institutionalism.

The first of these is neo-liberal institutionalism, which focuses on the “absolute gains” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511) to be made from enlargement. This means that a state is solely interested in the net benefits that can be earned for themselves and that improve their “welfare” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511), be this in relation to power, security, economics, culture or otherwise. Neoliberal institutionalism does not consider the losses that might be incurred by others (Powell, 1991, p. 1303). When applied in the context of this dissertation this will assist us in theorising what particular advantages granting Georgia potential candidate status brought MSs.

They then assert the second theory as realism. By contrast, this theory considers the impact enlargement has on “external autonomy and power.” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511) In other words, states contemplate the “relative gains” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511) to be made, ergo the affects that a given action could have on international power and security in the future (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier consequently highlight that an applicant state will be admitted onto the accession process if they have the capacity to “balance the superior power or threat of a third state (or coalition of states)” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511) (see Waltz, 1979, pp. 117–127; Walt, 1987). Therefore, when evaluating why the Council granted potential candidate status to Georgia, dissimilarly from Turkey, Albania, and initially Bosnia and Herzegovina, the adoption of realism would elucidate how this move could be

considered strategic in the context of Russia's onslaught in Ukraine. However, as already evidenced, realism is a state-centric theory. Therefore when employed to explain a decision made by an EU institution, the EU's construction as an international actor must be conceived as it is by Hyde-Price; a "collective instrument" (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 217) utilised by its MSs to achieve these above-mentioned realist goals in the international arena.

The last of these theories is based on how enlargement might help state leaders "retain political power" or earn re-election (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511). In particular, they reference relevant theorisations of this, like public-choice theory (Vaubel, 1986), and the concept of rent-seeking by certain states to improve domestic economic prosperity (see Mattli, 1999; Wolf, 1999). This approach allows us to consider how public attitudes and outcries, in addition to the timings of national elections can influence a head-of-states actions at the European supranational level. Its application in this dissertation will help decipher whether a head-of-state was influenced to lobby in favour of this verdict on Georgia within negotiations in the Council, as it offered a unique opportunity for personal gain.

These substantive theories provide a structured means of analysing why certain MSs favoured granting Georgia this status, based on the latent benefits this offers them in fulfilling their strategic or 'material interests'. As has been clearly delineated throughout this section, rational institutionalist approaches are heavily state centric. Consequently, this makes it suitable for the purposes of this dissertation given that, as has already been mentioned, decisions on enlargement are made through the unanimous concurrence of MS incumbents. Therefore, Hyde-Price's perception of the EU as a 'collective instrument' for its MSs is arguably applicable in relation to all substantive theories of rational institutionalism, beyond just realism.

IV. II. Bargaining

However, heads-of-state often likely harbour different 'material interests', and thus seek slightly varying outcomes. Hence, it is important to know how unanimous decisions are actually agreed upon at the European supranational level, as this equally helps us understand why a particular conclusion is made. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier attribute the answer to bargaining (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 512), to which has already been alluded.

They use Moravcsik's concept of "preference intensity" (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 62) to explain the "bargaining power" of governments (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 512). This essentially means that the value a state places on an issue, in this instance on an applicant state's accession, is relative to the power they have in the bargaining process. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier therefore highlight that just because the "formal decision-making rules" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 512) require accession decisions to

be made by unanimity within the Council, it does not mean that the agreed conclusions always represent every states desired outcome.

Consequently, states with a low ‘preference intensity’ and that have a different preferred outcome, will likely compromise on their position due to the greater ‘relative power’ of other MSs. They may do this as states with the greatest ‘preference intensity’ might offer them compensatory “side-payments”, that of course do not exceed the possible gains of enlargement for themselves (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, pp. 512–513). Either this, or the state with the most relative power has threatened them with some form of “exclusion”, the losses from which outweigh those potentially incurred from agreeing to the desired enlargement decision of those with the greatest ‘preference intensity’ (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 513).

IV. III. The Role of EU institutions

It could be argued however that putting the outcomes of the Council down to bargaining neglects the influence of EU institutions in the decision-making process. As has already been explained, the most relevant EU institutions pertaining to this preliminary stage of EU accession are the Commission and the Council. Nonetheless, within the GAC it is the MSs who are responsible for unanimously agreeing on the conclusion that is adopted by the Council (European Council, 2023a). It can therefore be surmised that the influence of the Council itself as an entity is non-existent in this process.

Nevertheless, some scholars contend that the Commission has a lot more influence within the EU decision-making process (see Pollack, 2003; Bailer, 2004; Cross, 2013). This is because, as put by Cross, the Commission has formal “agenda-setting power” (Cross, 2013, p. 77). Within the GAC this manifests itself through the Commission’s opinion on membership applications, which is then used to inform the Council’s conclusion. Such an argument could be made in relation to the Council’s conclusion on Turkey’s membership application in 1993, given that it mirrored the recommendation provided in the Commission’s opinion. However, it is plausible that the Council deemed this the most appropriate outcome regardless, due to other factors not mentioned in the Commission’s opinion, like their geography, religion and culture, which some scholars argue as being stumbling blocks to their accession (see Müftüler-Bac, 1998; Redmond, 2007). Then post 1993, in cases when the Commission has given unfavourable opinions on membership applications, as with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, within their opinion they still noted the Council’s 1993 pledge regarding the admission of new members from Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, as we know, the Council did not promise these states accession, whereas Georgia was offered this in 2022. While it could be argued that the Commission’s opinion thwarted these states prospects of

immediately becoming candidate states, the Council equally seems not to be swayed by the Commission's mention of their 1993 pledge to other states from these regions within their opinions. Had they been, the Council would have granted both Albania or Bosnia and Herzegovina potential candidate status, like it did for Georgia. This evidences that the Commission does not have a marked influence over decision-makers in this regard. Therefore, European incumbents must have deemed that Georgia warranted this status, irrespective of the Commission's opinion, illustrated by the numerous MSs that voiced their support for them even before this was issued.

Consequently, rather than view these institutions as independent actors, which may attempt to advance their own strategic interests, this dissertation will instead conceive them in the same vein as Hyde-Price, as 'collective instruments' of MSs.

IV. IV. Sociological or Constructivist institutionalism

In contrast, the foundations of the sociological or constructivist approach to enlargement focuses on what Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier describe as "not the material" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 513), given that it is hinged on principles of "community and culture or normative match[ing]" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 515). Therefore, this theoretical lens offers justification for accession decisions by looking at whether the applicant has a common culture or shares norms and values with the European community, which the scholar Sjursen referred to as a "kinship-based duty" (Sjursen, 2002).

Naturally, possessing an identity characteristic of a European country is vital to an applicant gaining membership, given that it is stipulated in article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) that only "European states" that respect and that are willing to promote European values are eligible to become members (TEU, 2016, p. 43). Nonetheless, as pointed out by Jachtenfuchs, sociological or constructivist institutionalism "leads to the neglect of empirical results." (Jachtenfuchs, 2002, p. 653) In other words, while this meta-theory does partly explain outcomes on accession, it fails to clarify specific contextual reasons. For example, if it were Georgia's Europeanness, thanks to its common cultural or shared norms and values with the European community, that caused them to gain this status due to MSs' 'kinship-based duty', then surely other countries like Turkey, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, should have received the same outcome. The fact that these countries are all now full candidates proves that their cultural Europeanness is evidently parallel to Georgia's. Moreover, they too initially received unfavourable opinions on their membership applications from the Commission, which thus evidences that their 'normative match' with the European community equals that of Georgia.

This consequently attests the criticism made by Jachtenfuchs. Therefore, sociological or constructivist institutionalism does highlight some contributing factors for admitting an applicant state onto the accession process. Nevertheless, it falls short of explaining Avery's point, as it does not consider the specific and unique circumstantial determinants that led to the Council making this conclusion on Georgia, thus lessening its relevance within this dissertation.

IV. V. Rhetorical Entrapment

Nevertheless, the discourse of decision-makers on matters of enlargement often still includes arguments of a 'kinship-based duty', even if, as underscored above, it is unable to explain the particular outcome concerning Georgia.

Schimmelfennig's concept of "rhetorical action" (Schimmelfennig, 2001) offers an explanation for this behaviour. He asserts that 'rhetorical action' is when political actors use the power of discourse, a rudiment of constructivism, to achieve their rational preferences, or as Schimmelfennig labels them, their "egoistic preferences" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 53). Hence, Schimmelfennig describes it as "the strategic use of norm-based arguments" (Schimmelfennig, 2001), meaning that it does not neatly fit within either rational institutionalism or sociological or constructivist institutionalism (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 65).

Schimmelfennig categorises those in favour of enlargement as "drivers", and those against it as "brakemen" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 76). His classification of a particular actor is hinged generally on Moravcsik's principle of "interdependence" (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 26), since those with the greatest degree of interdependence with the applicant state will probably profit most from the benefits incurred from admitting them into the Union. Therefore, in the case of MSs, Schimmelfennig assumes that "international interdependence increases with geographical proximity" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 50). He hence hypothesises that usually nations geographically closest to the incoming states are more likely to be 'drivers', and those furthest away to be 'brakemen'.

'Rhetorical action' explains how the endorsement or disapproval of a particular enlargement decision is consolidated among MSs. This is accomplished by their "strategic manipulation" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 65) of community norms and values to support their own preferences. Such tactics are what Schimmelfennig calls "rhetorical argumentation" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 68). From this a principal viewpoint emerges as being the most appropriate or legitimate within the community.

Nevertheless, this only explains how state actors achieve their ‘egoistic preferences’, and not why certain conclusions on enlargement are made within the Council. This is where “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig, 2001) comes in, because if an actor is not seen to be behaving in accordance with the emergent legitimate rhetoric, or in other words, in a way that conforms to the new norm (Schimmelfennig, 2001, pp. 48 and 64), they may then be subjected to shaming, thus damaging their “reputation as members” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 48). For example, through ‘rhetorical argumentation’ a ‘driver’ may present the norms and values of the Community in a particular way depending on their strategic interests, which means that by ‘brakemen’ not adhering to this they could then be accused of being disloyal to what they formerly pledged as a member of the European community, their so-called “rhetorical commitment” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 66). As such, the ‘brakemen’ then becomes “rhetorically entrapped” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, pp. 72–73), given that if they wish to avoid being shamed and to hopefully uphold their reputation, the ‘brakemen’ under scrutiny is obliged to alter its position to conform with that of the community, even if it is not within their interest.

This phenomena, which Schimmelfennig refers to as “the community trap” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 77), accordingly explains why accession can unfurl. This theory has been applied by several scholars to explain how nation-states achieve their strategic interests (see Schimmelfennig, 2001, 2021; Rūse, 2014; Dufournet and Adab, 2015). As a result, ‘rhetorical entrapment’, or ‘the community trap’, will be employed within this dissertation evaluation of why the Council granted Georgia potential candidate status, as it offers us an alternative explanation to the aforementioned bargaining tactics of ‘side-payments’ and ‘exclusions’ for why initially averse state actors, ‘brakemen’, likely came to agree to this outcome.

V. Methodology

In order to answer this question, this dissertation will adopt solely qualitative research techniques.

Firstly, this dissertation will look at Georgia as a “disciplined configurative case” (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 77) as it will employ the extant enlargement theories and concepts of rational institutionalism, bargaining and rhetorical entrapment, to explain the reasons behind it. It therefore does not seek to test these theories. Moreover, it does not offer Georgia for the purpose of being a heuristic case for a “larger set of units” (Gerring, 2004), or as a yardstick for future cases of EU enlargement in other words. However, given that unlike other membership applicants that received unfavourable opinions from the Commission, the Council still promised candidate status to Georgia once they address the priorities provided by the Commission, thus making them a “deviant or outlier” case (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 77). Consequently, despite this not being this dissertation’s intention, it may end up being a touchstone or harbinger for similar prospective cases, thus potentially propounding heuristic characteristics in the future (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 29).

The particular qualitative research method that will be most predominantly employed within this dissertation is “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). ‘Thick description’ is an appropriate approach given that it is the task of “both describing and interpreting observed social action” (Ponterotto, 2006) within the context of certain “circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterise a particular episode,” (Schwandt, 2001) which is precisely what this dissertation aspires to do. This will be done by drawing upon both primary and secondary qualitative empirical sources. Primary sources will include speeches, interviews carried out by journalists, reports and press releases both from EU institutions and individual states. Secondary sources will include scholarly books, and academic and journalistic articles.

The main pitfall of a qualitative analysis is that the information discovered may be informed by bias, whether this be within my own interpretations of primary sources or those of others within secondary sources. George and Bennett call possible causes of bias “qualitative variables” (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 9), which include “individual actors, decision-making processes, historical and social contexts, and path dependencies” (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 9). In order to circumvent this Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight recommend reviewing a broad variety of qualitative sources to provide a spectrum of information and possible interpretations (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 124). This is something I will be conscious to do throughout my research, which is already in part evidenced by the variety of primary and secondary empirical sources I intend to study. Nevertheless, when interpreting primary empirical sources I will remain as objective as possible. Then, when utilising empirical

evidence from secondary material, given that they may take a particular political slant, I will have to be conscious that my investigation draws from a spectrum of sources as suggested by Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight.

VI. Hypothesis

Before commencing the empirical evaluation, and taking into consideration the extant literature and theories on this topic, I suspect that the reason for Georgia being granted potential candidate status for EU membership, unlike similar cases in the past, is due to the exceptional circumstances in which their membership application was submitted. I therefore predict that the ‘relative gains’, opposed to the ‘absolute gains’, made from guaranteeing their eventual accession to candidate status in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, more greatly fulfil the ‘material interests’ of MSs. I also hypothesise that unanimity was reached as a consequence of ‘drivers’ ‘rhetorically entrapping’ ‘brakemen’.

VII. Why did the Council grant Georgia potential candidate status?

In the press conference after the Council meeting on June 23rd, 2022, when explaining the significance of the decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status and to announce its readiness to grant Georgia candidate status, the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, said that this decision “strengthens the European Union, because it shows once again to the world that the European Union is united and strong in the face of external threats.” (Von der Leyen, 2022) French President, Emmanuel Macron, whose country held the presidency of the Council at the time, reiterated this point, stating that this recognition of the European perspectives of the associated trio send a “strong signal towards Russia in the current geopolitical context.” (Macron, 2022a)

This emphasis on the war and the circumstances that surround the associated trio’s membership applications echoes Avery’s argument that enlargement ensues as a consequent of prior events and are dependent on the circumstances (Avery, 2009, p. 265). This too reasserts the relevance of Jachtenfuchs’ criticism of sociological and constructivist institutionalism, which proved its insufficiency when trying to answer this particular question. Therefore, when evaluating why Georgia in particular was granted this status by the Council, we must contemplate the context within which Georgia submitted their membership application. The Commission themselves confirm this within their opinion of their application, stating that it “was tabled in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.” (European Commission, 2022). Evaluating the significance of Georgia in this scenario will allow us to ascertain what it is about them that helps the EU to send a “strong signal towards Russia” (Macron, 2022a) and to prove that they are indeed “united and strong in the face of external threats” (Von der Leyen, 2022).

In reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine an informal meeting of EU heads-of-state and government was held at Versailles on March 10th and 11th, 2022. Here it was collectively asserted that Russia’s actions “‘grossly violates international law’ and ‘undermines European and global security and stability’.” (European Council, 2022b) Therefore, to mitigate the ramifications of this, MS incumbents agreed upon four main strategic objectives, which therefore evidently represent their ‘material interests’. As a result, given the context within which they were established, I will use these objectives within my analysis to determine the benefits of granting Georgia this status.

In order to do this, I will implement a rational institutionalist analysis. Firstly, through the use of its substantive theories of neo-liberalist institutionalism and realism, I will discern the ‘absolute’ and ‘relative gains’ that offering Georgia this status could bestow MSs in regard to accomplishing their strategic interests. After having done this I will employ the final rational

institutionalist substantive theory, which will investigate whether advocating for Georgia's accession could help earn re-election.

Leading on from this, I will assess how certain 'drivers' may have either 'bargained' or exercised 'rhetorical entrapment' over 'brakemen' to achieve unanimity within the GAC on this matter. This will thus explain why Georgia was still made a potential candidate state, despite certain MSs not being in favour of this outcome.

From this empirical analysis I will then be able to conclude why the Council granted Georgia potential candidate status for EU membership.

VII. I. EU Member States' 'material interests' through a neo-liberal and realist institutionalist lens

The first strategic interest identified at the informal meeting at Versailles was to support Ukraine (European Council, 2022b). To achieve this, MS incumbents agreed that it was imperative to "increase the pressure on Russia and Belarus even further and ensure that the sanctions which have been adopted are fully implemented" and the same is done swiftly in regard to any future sanctions, in addition to continuing to "provide coordinated political, financial, material and humanitarian support, as well as support for the reconstruction of a democratic Ukraine." (European Council, 2022b) This ambition by EU incumbents is arguably intrinsically realist, given that it aims to put pressure on Russia and Belarus, as well as sanction other complicit actors. Thus it intends to achieve the 'relative gains' of balancing or lessening the power and threat of the targeted states.

The geopolitics of Georgia is thus incredibly valuable to EU MSs if they wish to successfully accomplish this objective. This is because, despite initially voting in a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Agenda.ge, 2022a), the Georgian government has declined to participate in western sanctions on Russia since the beginning of the war (Genté, 2022; Camut, 2023) or to provide Ukraine with weapons (Atasuntsev, 2023). The Georgian PM, Irakli Garibashvili, justified this decision on the grounds that such actions would "destroy" their economy and "damage the interests" of the nation and its people (Garibashvili, 2023). Nevertheless, thanks to its geography, sharing a border with Russia, this has led to Georgia effectively becoming a loophole or "back door" (Beard, 2022) for Russia, allowing them to "sidestep" said sanctions (Fotyga, 2022). Anne Fotyga, a Polish Member of the European Parliament (MEP) made this comment in a parliamentary question, within which she points out several instances where Georgia has behaved contrarily to "EU policies countering Russian aggression." (Fotyga, 2022) For example, she says that Georgia permitted three Iran Air Cargo planes, allegedly transporting drones to Russia, to enter its airspace; that Georgian banks have allowed sanctioned Russians

to open accounts; that money transfers from Russia to Georgia have increased; and that there has been an influx in trade across the land border between the two nations, which Fotyga disputes as “propping up the Russian economy.” (Fotyga, 2022) Irrespective of the accuracy and verity of these accusations, the proposal of this question substantiates that recognition of EU politicians of the geopolitical significance of Georgia.

Something also of note in Fotyga’s question is that she blames such actions on the influence of the founder and former leader of the current governing party, Georgian Dream, and billionaire businessman, Bidzina Ivanishvili (Fotyga, 2022). Given Ivanishvili’s wealth and personal ties with Russia and the Kremlin, he is commonly regarded as an oligarch (ECR Group, 2022; Fotyga, 2022; Georgia Today, 2022). Despite Georgian officials’ denial of this, including by Ivanishvili himself (Doward, 2011; Agenda.ge, 2022b), in a motion for a resolution tabled in the European Parliament (EP), numerous MEPs on behalf of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) stressed their concern about the pro-Kremlin influence he still has on the current government. They even claim that he still has at least four close associates within the Georgian cabinet, including the current PM, Garibashvili (ECR Group, 2022). They express the following:

“the role played by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili in the Georgian politics, especially the ongoing trend of nomination of his close former associates to the highest positions in the country, thanks to which he retains high level of control over the government and its decisions, [...]; is deeply worried by Ivanishvili’s personal and business links to the Kremlin which determine the position of the current government of Georgia towards sanctions on Russia” (ECR Group, 2022).

Within the Commission’s opinion of Georgia’s membership application one of the priorities they propose is for “de-oligarchisation” (European Commission, 2022). Consequently, MSs will have bargained in favour of making Georgia a potential candidate state, as it would incentivise them to effectuate this priority, thus reducing the salience they afford to influential pro-Russian individuals. This would then assist EU MSs’ in their realist goal of more effectively implementing sanctions on Russia, given that this would renounce Georgia as a possible means of bypassing these sanctions. Therefore, granting Georgia this status is beneficial to achieving the strategic interest of putting pressure on Russia, in particular, and ensuring the comprehensive implementation of sanctions.

Furthermore, by eliminating Russian influence in Georgia it also offers neo-liberal institutionalist ‘absolute gains’ given that it helps deliver the ‘material interest’ of providing Ukraine with a “coordinated political, financial, material and humanitarian support, as well as support for the reconstruction of a democratic Ukraine.” (European Council, 2022b) This is

because, as has been aforementioned, Ivanishvili seems to boast significant pro-kremlin influence in Georgia. One Georgian Dream member of parliament asserted this by confirming that he is still “the key decision-maker in Georgia, especially about sensitive questions such as Russia.” (Genté, 2022) MEPs in the above-mentioned motion for a resolution on violations of media freedom and safety of journalists in Georgia, present manifestations of this Russian orientated influence. They suspect that Ivanishvili’s connection with Russia to be “directly responsible for current backsliding in the areas of media freedom and ambiguous relations with Russia” (ECR Group, 2022). Consequently, making Georgia a potential candidate state would provide the ‘absolute gain’ of eliminating “the risk of [Georgia] going into the wrong, geopolitical direction” (Brzozowski, 2023) as put by one journalist. In other words, this prevents the harbouring of anti-European values on the continent of Europe and in its near neighbourhood. Therefore, removing their influence in Georgia will accordingly permit a more effective “coordinated political, financial, material and humanitarian support, as well as support for the reconstruction of a democratic Ukraine.” (European Council, 2022b) This is because, it will restore stability and democracy in the associated trio, which is currently being jeopardised by Russia’s military onslaught (Akhvlediani, 2022, p. 226).

Additionally, this conclusion by the Council on Georgia’s accession provides neo-liberal institutionalist ‘absolute gains’ in relation to MSs attaining “net welfare benefits” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511) concerning their ‘material interest’ of bolstering defensive capabilities (European Council, 2022b). At the informal meeting in Versailles, this strategic interest was agreed upon so that the EU can “take more responsibility for [...] [its] own security” and “pursue a strategic course of action in defence and increase its capacity to act autonomously” (European Council, 2022b). The aim of this was “to better protect citizens and equip the EU to face fast-emerging challenges” (European Council, 2022b). It was also highlighted at this meeting that this should be done alongside the enhancement of the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the Strategic Compass (European Council, 2022b).

The cornerstones of the EPF are to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen international security (European Council, 2023b). Complementarily to this, the European Strategic Compass for Security and Defence endeavours to accomplish many of the same goals, as the name suggests. Its three principal aims are to 1) enable the EU to act quickly and decisively in times of crisis; 2) secure EU interests and protect citizens from threats; 3) to invest more and better in defence capabilities and technologies and 4) to develop partnerships against common threats (EEAS, 2023).

Making Georgia this promise of eventual candidate status offers substantial ‘absolute gains’ towards achieving this strategic goal. This is because while war rages in Europe no MS

is guaranteed peace and security (Bourguignon, Demertzis and Sprenger, 2022, p. 206). In 2008 Russia also invaded Georgia, leading to their occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, under a “similar pretext” to that of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its 2014 annexation of Crimea (Genté, 2022). Therefore, according to Akhvlediani, not offering candidate status to Georgia makes them susceptible to prospective Russian incursions (Akhvlediani, 2022, p. 226). Consequently, granting Georgia this status signals to Russia that Europe is united against external threats and that they are serious about restoring peace and security in the continent (Akhvlediani, 2022, p. 226). This is precisely what was implied by Von de Leyen and Macron at the post-Council meeting press conference on June 23rd, 2022. Therefore, granting potential candidate status to Georgia was a display of strength by the Council to deter Russia from launching future attacks, as Akhvlediani suggests will happen. Minimising EU MSs’ vulnerability to Russia in this way, inadvertently bolsters Europe’s defensive capabilities, consequently helping to sustain peace and security in Europe, thus also fulfilling the objectives of the EPF and Strategic Compass.

The third strategic interest outlined at the informal meeting of heads-of-state and government in Versailles, was to reduce energy dependencies, by phasing out the EU’s reliance on Russia for oil and gas and providing MSs with greater energy security (European Council, 2022b). Yet again the geopolitics of Georgia provides important ‘absolute gains’ in this regard. Prior to the war in Ukraine, EU MSs were hugely dependent on Russian energy resources, being the EU’s largest importer of crude oil and of petroleum products (Kardaś, 2023). Georgia’s location helps greatly diminish this dependency on Russia, as it provides a gateway to alternative energy sources and energy rich regions, especially Azerbaijan. This is underscored in a 2021 blog post on the importance of the South Caucasus, the region within which Georgia is located, by Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission. He states that the EU should foster and harness the regions potential as a “connectivity hub”, “in terms of transport corridors linking the EU with Asia and the diversification of EU energy resources” (Borrell, 2021).

In 2008, in an attempt to augment European energy security, the Commission first proposed the establishment of the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline. This would supply Europe with gas from the Middle East and the Caspian, to the east of Azerbaijan, without passing through Russia (European Commission, 2008). The pipeline was first opened in December 2019, starting in Azerbaijan, passing through Georgia and Turkey, then finally entering Greece, from which the energy its supplies is transported through southern Europe. The original proposal even outlined ambitions for this pipeline to carry energy from sources even

further afield in countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq and Mashreq countries (European Commission, 2008).

Therefore, greater integration of Georgia into the EU, preventing them from going in the “wrong geopolitical direction” (Brzozowski, 2023) towards Russia, vastly improves Europe’s energy security. This is firstly because it would safeguard the Southern Gas Corridor from Russian interference. Secondly, through boosting the security of the pipeline in this way it helps facilitate its extension far beyond Azerbaijan and the Middle East, an ambition expressed by the EU at the 4th Association Council with Georgia in 2018 (European Council, 2018). However, the war in Ukraine now make the ‘absolute gains’ and subsequent ‘net welfare benefits’ afforded to MSs by Georgia in relation to enhancing energy security and becoming less dependent on Russian energy even more crucial than before. This therefore provides another explanation why Georgia was granted potential candidate status.

This deduction is arguably proven by the signing of the new powerline under the Black Sea by the president of Azerbaijan and the PMs of Georgia, Hungary and Romania in Bucharest, on December 17th, 2022. The submarine power bridge will transport electricity produced in Azerbaijan, predominantly green energy from wind farms in the Caspian Sea, through Georgia, under the Black Sea to Romania and Hungary (Calus and Sadecki, 2022; Tsereteli, 2023). The agreement of this initiative clearly displays why MSs desired that Georgia be granted this status.

Moreover, if Georgia enables MSs to sustain themselves using energy from alternative sources and bolster their energy security, they will rely less on Russia. Consequently, making Georgia a potential candidate state provides MSs with substantial realist ‘relative gains’ too, as the more they are able to minimise their dependency on Russian energy, the more they diminish the salience and power of Russia internationally. This is because, this thereby lessens the leverage of Russia’s strategic tool of oil and gas.

The last strategic aim agreed upon at the informal meeting at Versailles was to create a “robust economic base” (European Council, 2022b). To do this, it was stated that strategic dependencies in the areas of critical raw materials, semi-conductors, health, digital and food, should be reduced. Secondly, to “create an environment that facilitates and attracts investments” (European Council, 2022b).

Once again, the geopolitics of Georgia are hugely favourable in achieving both ‘absolute’ and ‘relative gains’ in terms of reducing digital dependency on Russia, in the same respect as they do in regard to energy. This is because, since having granted Georgia this status the EU has been planning to install underwater internet cables through the Black Sea connecting Hungary and Romania to Georgia and Azerbaijan. This has come as a result of

security concerns of espionage and sabotage in relation to the existing cables passing through Russia (Gross and Heal, 2023). However, in regard to the diminishing dependencies in these other strategic areas, Georgia does not unfortunately appear to offer substantial neo-liberal institutionalist ‘absolute gains’ or realist ‘relative gains’. This is because, their primary imports and exports that either pass through Georgia or are produced there, are of such small quantities that they do not greatly help to decrease dependencies in these other identified areas, which is a point Georgian PM, Garibashvili, alluded to when further reinforcing why Georgia has not imposed sanctions on Russia (Garibashvili, 2023).

Nevertheless, granting potential candidate status to Georgia provides neo-liberal institutionalist ‘net welfare benefits’ for MSs, thanks to the ‘absolute gains’ they deliver in regard to boosting investment attractiveness. Despite the fact that, if Georgia were to become a member of the EU they would have the second lowest GDP, only above Malta (The World Bank, 2022), they offer very favourable conditions for business and commerce. In 2019 the World Bank ranked Georgia seventh in the world for ease of doing business. The only European country to rank higher was Denmark, in fourth (The World Bank, 2019). This success for Georgia has firstly arisen as a result of its favourable tax rates, illustrated by the fact that their total corporation tax and contribution rate is the third lowest in the world at just 9.9% of profit (World Bank Group, 2019, p. 40; Bloomberg, 2023). Secondly, they have low levels of bureaucracy, as well as simple and fast administrative procedures (McCarthy, 2019; World Bank Group, 2019, p. 40; Bloomberg, 2023). Consequently, this will draw in significant amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI), an ‘absolute gain’ that will allow existing MSs to improve their economic foundation.

VII. II. Earning Re-election

The final substantive theory included within Schimmelfennig’s and Sedelmeier’s meta-theory of rationalist institutionalism is that of earning re-election (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 511). If we consider the other theories comprising this theory, especially public-choice theory (Vaubel, 1986), it could be presumed that the countless anti-war protests and demonstrations throughout Europe since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (BBC, 2022; Jordans, 2022), would have prompted incumbents seeking re-election to display solidarity and lobby in favour of Georgia’s pursuit for EU membership within the Council, given that it would likely help them gain public support ahead of an election. However, if we look at every election of MSs governments, that determined the heads-of-state or government that represents their nation in the Council since Georgia submitted their EU membership application on March 3rd, 2022, this does not appear to be the case.

In the cases of Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, they all announced snap elections after Georgia was made a potential candidate state. Therefore, any support declared for Georgia by these states' incumbent governments prior to the meeting of the Council on June 23rd and 24th, 2022, cannot be considered as a means of rallying popularity for themselves. This is because, at that time they would not have even been aware that there was going to be an election.

In other instances, like in Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Latvia, Malta and Sweden, who all held elections just before or soon after Georgia was granted potential candidate status, nothing appeared to be said by any state officials or ministers from the then governing parties in relation to this prior to the Council coming to this conclusion. This is also true for Luxembourg, who have a general election coming up in October 2023.

The president of Latvia did however announce the nations' support for Georgia in its aim for EU membership prior to the meeting of the Council and prior to the general election (Agenda.ge, 2022c). Although, given that the President of Latvia is independent from the governing party, in addition to being selected through separate elections and does not represent the country in the Council, this is the role of the PM, his comments cannot be considered a move to gain popularity ahead of the general election.

Prior to the general election in Slovenia in April 2022, the former PM did publicly express his backing for Georgia's membership candidacy (Agenda.ge, 2022d). However, his party, the Slovenian Democratic Party, lost the election, meaning that their support did not convert into them pushing for Georgia to gain this status in the Council.

The Polish PM also voiced his support for Georgia in this regard before the Council meeting on this matter (Agenda.ge, 2022e). Much like in other European countries, many Polish citizens protested against Russia's aggression of Ukraine (Jordans, 2022; Reuters, 2022). Therefore, such a statement of support, within which he also mentioned how Georgia too suffered from a Russian invasion in 2008 (Agenda.ge, 2022e), displaying his and his party's defiant stance against Russia's aggression may have been a strategic move to bolster their popularity ahead of the October 2023 election. Nevertheless, this election will be taking place over a year after Georgia was granted this status, therefore this act may not be in the forefront of the electorates' minds when it comes to voting, and is therefore unlikely to have much impact on whether his party remains in office.

Consequently, this substantive theory of rationalist institutionalism is not seemingly able to explain why Georgia was granted this unprecedented status by the Council.

VII. III. Bargaining and ‘Rhetorical Entrapment’

Before agreeing upon the unprecedented decision concerning Georgia, it is probable that each MS went into the GAC with slightly different preferences. For this reason Schimmelfennig’s and Sedelmeier’s theory of rational institutionalism indicates the need for bargaining. In another of his articles, Schimmelfennig originated the concept of ‘rhetorical entrapment’ to elucidate such instances. Therefore, if we are to conclusively explain why Georgia gained potential candidate status, the use of these practices is important in understanding why those against this outcome did not exercise their veto power within this unanimity process.

The sole MS to display any kind of unsupportiveness towards Georgia’s EU membership ambition before the meeting of the Council, or in other words, identify itself as a ‘brakeman’, was France. On June 15th, a few months after his re-election, French President, Emmanuel Macron, met with the Moldovan President, Maia Sandu, in Chişinău, Moldova. At the post meeting press conference, Macron made the following statement in response to a reporter’s question on whether he wanted Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to be offered candidate status:

“there is our category of countries that are part of the Eastern Partnership, but whose security, geopolitical situation is different [to Ukraine and Moldova]. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, are very close friendly nations, but if you see it well both geopolitically and geographically, they are not today placed in the same situation.”
(Macron, 2022b)

By categorising Georgia with its neighbours within the South Caucasus, rather than the other two members of the associated trio, Ukraine and Moldova, was a “major blow” for Georgia in its quest for EU membership (Gijs, 2022) according to one journalist. A Georgian media outlet claimed that this was an attempt to “disassociate” Georgia from Ukraine and Moldova (Civil.ge, 2022a). Within the press conference Macron went on to say that enlargement of the EU “cannot be the only answer to the stability of our neighbours” (Macron, 2022b), which he justified by stating that enlargement is a “demanding process” and that “simplifying our Europe” in order “to make it more efficient” should be a key objective (Macron, 2022b). This highlights what Macron believes to be the ‘transactional costs’ of granting Georgia candidate status, which are reminiscent of the aforementioned claims made by Prodi and Junker in relation to European enlargement.

At this conference Macron also put forward his idea for a “European Political Community” (Macron, 2022b), which has now been in existence since October 6th, 2022. Some journalists suggested that the idea behind this proposal was to provide the associated trio with “some kind of interim level of [EU] membership” (de Waal, 2022) or even a “middle-ground

EU membership option” (Hanke Vela, Lynch and Von der Burchard, 2022). Accordingly, this further proves Macron’s disinclination to grant any of the associated trio candidate status, let alone Georgia.

Contrastingly, support for Georgia’s EU membership ambition was publicly expressed by government officials and ministers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. As such, we can categorise these states as ‘drivers’. Considering Moravcsik’s principle of interdependence, and Schimmelfennig’s assumption that it is based on ‘geographical proximity’, the inclusion of countries like Romania and Bulgaria is somewhat predictable, given that like Georgia they border the Black Sea. Consequently, they will reap the largest rewards from Georgia’s accession. In the case of Romania in particular, this is underscored by the fact that they will be one of the major benefactors of the new submarine energy and internet lines through the Black Sea. For the same reason it is also unsurprising to see Hungary in this list, as well as southern European states like Italy, who we know will benefit from the shoring up and enhancement of the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline. Accordingly, these states have the greatest ‘bargaining power’ relative to their ‘preference intensity’. Nevertheless, the predominant rhetoric among these ‘driver’ states is that 1) Georgia belongs to the European family and thus their future should be in the EU, (see Agenda.ge, 2022e; Civil.ge, 2022b, 2022c) a more sociological or constructivist institutionalist argument, and 2) that welcoming Georgia into the EU was crucial to not providing Russia with any advantages in the context of the war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022; Agenda.ge, 2022f, 2022e; Civil.ge, 2022b, 2022c), which is clearly a realist advocacy for their accession, given the ‘relative gains’ they will bring.

Consequently, the heads-of-state and government of said states, and possibly others, likely used these points, as well as the outlined ‘absolute gains’ for ‘net-welfare benefits’ already discussed, within the bargaining process in the GAC to convince Macron that Georgia ought to be granted this status. Unfortunately however, only approximations and predictions can be made on this given that records of the negotiations among MSs within the Council are not publicly available. Furthermore, any developments in the bilateral relations between these nations and France cannot be directly attributed to being a form of ‘side-payment’ or inclusion into something made in return for France’s compliance on this matter. Many examples of this can be hypothesised, like the signing of advancements between Ireland and France on the Celtic Interconnector; the objection by the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria, alongside France, against the initial plans for the EU’s renewable energy directive, which did not favour French nuclear energy interests (Taylor and Carroll, 2023); and even the agreement of Romania and France to strengthen ties as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies.

Within some of the reporting of these instances, reference is made to how such actions relate to the war in Ukraine (see Messad, 2022; AP News, 2023; Ilie and Irish, 2023; Roche, 2023), however there is no direct association drawn back to them being done in exchange for Macron conceding on granting Georgia potential candidate status. Furthermore, often news reports also uncover other motives to explain these occurrences (see Messad, 2022; AP News, 2023; Roche, 2023; Taylor and Carroll, 2023), which consequently shows how hard it is to decipher whether a beneficial action for France done by a ‘driver’, such as these, was a supposed ‘side-payment’ or inclusion to sway Macron.

‘Rhetorical entrapment’ also likely posed a genuine incentive for Macron to agree to offering Georgia this promise. This is because he will have recognised that from the ‘rhetorical argumentation’ of these ‘driver’ states a consensus was emerging in favour of Georgia’s accession. Furthermore, having seen the shaming of the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, both internationally and domestically, regarding his purported insufficient response to the war (Von der Burchard, 2022), he would be aware of the sort of backlash that would arise from other MSs if he were to implement his veto on Georgia. This is because, in a discernibly similar way as they did in relation to Scholz’ actions, they would consider such a move by Macron, or France more generally, to be defying their ‘rhetorical commitments’ of, firstly, supporting the European family and secondly, not offering Russia “a ‘green light’ [...] for unpredictable destructing actions” (Agenda.ge, 2022f), as articulated by the Senate of Ireland. They would shame France on these particular points as they correspond to the two reasons, or ‘rhetorical arguments’, made by ‘drivers’ in favour of Georgia being granted this status. Therefore, Macron was ‘rhetorically entrapped’, obliging him to conform to the decision of making Georgia a potential candidate state, if he wished to not tarnish his, and France’s, reputation in Europe.

VIII. Conclusion

As has been corroborated throughout this dissertation, the Council's decision to grant Georgia potential candidate status for EU membership was exceptional and is thus pertinent to question in order to update the extant scholarship on EU enlargement. Therefore, using Georgia as a 'disciplined configurative case' allows us to understand why this conclusion was made.

The meta-theory of sociological or constructivist institutionalism theorises how having a common culture and 'normative match' with the European community bring about enlargement. While such matters are important, given that they are even stipulated in article 49 of the TEU, this theoretical approach fails to explain the specific circumstances behind the accession of a particular case. Therefore, despite the 'kinship-based duty' of the Council undeniably contributing to their decision, this meta-theory does not sufficiently expound how the context surrounding Georgia's membership application caused them to gain this status, a key factor in enlargement decisions.

Therefore this dissertation draws upon the meta-theory of rational institutionalism to explain this conclusion by the Council. Its substantive theories of neo-liberal institutionalism, realism and vies to earn re-election, unearth the benefits this decision brings MSs, hence why they made this decision to grant Georgia potential candidate status.

The state-centric nature of these substantive theories cause us to consider EU institutions as 'collective instruments' of their MSs. This consequently reveals that this decision by the Council was evidently made to assist MSs to fulfil their strategic or 'material interests'. Given the context in which Georgia submitted its membership application, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, said strategic interests can be conceived as being those agreed by EU heads-of-state and government at the informal meeting at Versailles on March 10th and 11th, 2022.

Neo-liberal institutionalism and realism respectively explicate the 'absolute' and 'relative gains' that more deeply integrating Georgia into the EU offer MSs in the realisation of their strategic objectives. Firstly, Georgia helps MSs achieve their strategic interest of supporting Ukraine. This is because, it no longer makes Georgia a geopolitical asset for Russia, which they can use to sidestep EU sanctions, which is a significant 'relative gain' for EU MSs. The accomplishment of this strategic objective is assisted further by realist 'relative gains' provided by Georgia, because it reduces pro-Kremlin influence in the country from the oligarch ruler Bidzina Ivanishvili. Eliminating this Russian influence is also an 'absolute gain' that provides MSs with 'net-welfare benefits', as it reinforces support for Ukraine, as it prevents the development of anti-European values on the continent.

The second strategic objective decided upon at Versailles was to bolster European defensive capabilities. Georgia offers MSs significant neo-liberal institutionalist ‘absolute gains’ towards this ‘material interest’, because such an action demonstrates the strength and unity of Europe to Russia, which will discourage them from future incursions. As such this bolsters Europe’s defensive capabilities as well as fulfils the aims of the EPF and the Strategic Compass.

MS incumbents also concurred that boosting energy security was of major strategic importance. Yet again, the geopolitics of Georgia supplies ‘absolute gains’ in relation to this, and thus ‘net-welfare benefits’, as they provide a secure route for pipelines and powerlines to energy rich regions like Azerbaijan, and even further afield, without needing to pass through Russia. Georgia also thereby delivers ‘relative gains’ in this regard. This is because if EU MSs are able to source energy elsewhere and reduce their dependency on Russia, it diminishes the worth of one of their most strategically valuable resources, thus knocking their overall salience internationally too.

Lastly, MSs agreed that it was necessary to establish a “robust economic base” (European Council, 2022b). To achieve this MSs established that they should become more digitally independent. The geopolitical advantages of Georgia provide the exact same ‘absolute’ and ‘relative gains’ in accomplishing this ‘material interest’ as they did for attaining energy security. This is thanks to the planned construction of internet cables running under the Black Sea from Georgia to Romania and Hungary, bypassing Russia entirely. Making Georgia a potential candidate state also delivers ergo ‘net-welfare benefits’ for MSs in this regard, thanks to the ‘absolute gains’ they provide towards this strategic interest of improving Europe’s economic basis. This is because, they are one of the world’s most attractive countries for business, an attribute that will undoubtedly entice large amounts of FDI.

The last substantive theory of rational institutionalism is that of earning re-election. While Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier theorise how this can influence MSs’ desire for an applicant state to join the Union, circumstances do not ostensibly indicate that this is the case in relation to Georgia.

Granting Georgia potential candidate status evidently bestows EU members with numerous ‘absolute’ and ‘relative gains’, which assist them in achieving their strategic or ‘material interests’. This is just cause for MSs to bargain in favour of this outcome within the Council. However, such a decision within the GAC must be agreed by unanimity. Therefore, ‘drivers’, states with the largest ‘preference intensity’, plausibly used ‘side-payments’ or ‘exclusion’ threats within the bargaining process to sway French President, Emmanuel Macron, the only apparent ‘brakemen’, into agreeing to this outcome, even if this is difficult to

evidence. Alternatively, the public proclamations, or ‘rhetorical argumentation’, made by ‘drivers’ states in support of Georgia’s EU membership aspirations, conceivably caused this view to emerge as being deemed the most legitimate. This therefore ‘rhetorically entrapped’ Macron, who, in desiring to spare himself and his nation from shaming and maintain their reputation, then conceded to this extraordinary decision.

Therefore, this dissertation finds that the primary reasons for the Council granting Georgia potential candidate status for EU membership are grounded in the ‘relative’ and ‘absolute gains’ that they provide in assisting MSs to achieve their strategic interests. So much so that they evidently outweigh the ‘costs’ which previously caused ‘enlargement fatigue’. Unanimity was reached on this exceptional decision within the GAC, due to ‘drivers’ implementing bargaining techniques to convince Macron to alter his stance, as well as by ‘rhetorically entrapping’ him.

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