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Decoupling and the Reconfiguration of Higher Education Governance in Georgia

Lizi Shtaadze[1]

[1] *University for Continuing Education Krems, Austria and Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences, Germany*, lizishtaadze1@gmail.com, **ORCID**: 0009-0005-7576-6021

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Abstract

Since joining the Bologna Process in 2005, Georgia has aligned its higher education system with European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards, including three-cycle degrees and external quality assurance. This article examines the 2025 National Concept for Reforming the Higher Education System, introduced amid stalled EU accession negotiations, the quality assurance agency's suspension from the European Quality Assurance Register, and university protests. Because the reform remains before parliament, the analysis concerns its design rather than its realised effects. It argues that the reform retains the formal instruments of European participation while its centralising measures weaken the institutional autonomy they were intended to protect.

To account for this pattern, the paper applies the External Incentives Model in reverse, from rule adoption to rule retreat. For two decades, Georgia adopted European rules because the expected rewards of EU integration outweighed the domestic costs. As the credibility and proximity of those rewards have declined, while the political costs of conceding university autonomy have risen, the incentive for substantive compliance has weakened. Yet because openly abandoning those structures would forfeit the legitimacy already accrued, the government retains them while reducing their substantive function. Drawing on neo-institutional theories of isomorphism and decoupling, the paper shows how formal structures can persist after the purposes they served are withdrawn. The Georgian case indicates that EU conditionality loses its effectiveness once domestic costs exceed the benefits of integration.

Keywords: Georgia, Higher Education Reform, Decoupling, Institutional Autonomy, External Incentives Model, Bologna Process.

Introduction

Since joining the Bologna Process in 2005, Georgia has formally aligned its higher education system with the core instruments of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): the three-cycle degree structure, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and a national qualifications framework (Government of Georgia, 2025). Scholarship describes this alignment as largely incentive-driven and unevenly institutionalised, with highly visible formal change coexisting with resilient domestic governance practices (Amashukeli et al., 2020). A turning point came in December 2023, when the European Council granted Georgia EU candidate status on the understanding that the country would complete the nine reform steps set out by the Commission, mainly in the areas of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2023). The political commitment to implement those steps did not follow. Instead, the government increasingly used anti-EU narratives and framed EU expectations as external interference (European Commission, 2024, 2025).

These developments unfolded during a broader political crisis. The 2024 reintroduction of the Foreign Agents law[1] and sustained youth-led protests placed universities at the centre of civic mobilisation (Civil Georgia, 2024). In late 2024 the government announced the suspension of EU accession negotiations until 2028 (Civil Georgia, 2024). In the same year the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) was suspended from the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) over concerns about political interference and agency independence, which cast doubt on Georgia's adherence to the European Standards and Guidelines (Georgia Today, 2024).

Within this context, the National Concept for Reforming the Higher Education System marks a critical juncture in Georgian higher education policy. The package replaces student-led vouchers with a state-order funding scheme, restructures degree cycles into a 3+1 configuration, requires the geographic redistribution of faculties and students to regional hubs, and consolidates staffing around full-time academic positions (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). Presented as a response to inefficiency, labour-market mismatch, and spatial concentration, these measures also reshape the relationship between national authorities and universities across the financial, academic, organisational, and staffing dimensions of institutional autonomy. The analysis takes the Magna Charta Universitatum (Magna Charta Observatory, 2020) and the European

[1]The Foreign Agents law (formally the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence), first proposed in 2023 and re-adopted in 2024, increases state control over civil society, the media, and academic institutions by requiring organisations that receive substantial foreign funding to register as pursuing the interests of a foreign power. In an urgent opinion, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission recommended repealing the law in its current form, warning of significant negative consequences for the freedoms of association and expression, privacy, and non-discrimination (Venice Commission, 2024).

University Association's autonomy framework (EUA, 2007; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023) as its principal European benchmarks.

This paper argues that the reform is a case of means-ends decoupling, in which Bologna-compatible instruments and references to EHEA participation are selectively retained while their functional connection to institutional autonomy is severed. The guiding research question is: to what extent does the 2025 higher education reform in Georgia represent a case of means-ends decoupling from European governance frameworks, and how can this be explained using the External Incentives Model? The argument draws on two complementary bodies of theory: the External Incentives Model (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020) and the neo-institutional account of isomorphism and decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Together they frame the reform not as a sudden rupture with Europe but as a gradual shift toward de-Europeanisation: not a withdrawal from European structures, but a substantive retreat that keeps their outward forms in place.

The analysis makes three connected moves. First, it applies the External Incentives Model, which was developed to explain rule adoption during accession, to the less examined situation of rule retreat, which shows how far that logic travels. Second, it shows that the problem is not that European rules go unimplemented but that they are implemented and then detached from the purpose they were meant to serve. Third, by analysing an unfolding reform through theory, it reads a case of higher education governance against the backdrop of democratic backsliding. The connecting idea is de-Europeanisation, a concept developed in European studies to describe the partial reversal of a candidate state's earlier alignment (Aydın-Düzgit & Kaliber, 2016); applied here to higher education, it names the process by which a state that once moved toward European norms begins to move away from them while keeping their outward signs.

The reform is, for now, a government proposal. Its enabling amendments to the Law on Higher Education have passed a first parliamentary reading (bm.ge, 2025), and key measures are due to take effect during 2026. The findings therefore describe an unfolding transition and an institutional trajectory rather than a completed policy. The remainder of the paper proceeds in two parts. The first develops the analytical framework by integrating soft governance, isomorphism and decoupling, and the External Incentives Model into a single account. The second applies that framework to the 2025 reform across the four dimensions of institutional autonomy.

The Soft Governance of the Bologna Process

The starting point for Georgian reform is the governance logic of the Bologna Process, which works as a form of governance without law. Rather than relying on legal enforcement, it operates through coordination mechanisms—monitoring, benchmarking, and mutual adjustment—that resemble the European Union's Open Method of Coordination (Brøgger, 2016; Halász, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Ravinet, 2008). This soft mode allows the EHEA to shape national systems while respecting the EU's subsidiarity principle, which leaves education policy to the member states (Keeling, 2006; Ravinet, 2008). Compliance is sustained not by command but by reputation. Standardised instruments such as the three-cycle structure, ECTS, and national qualifications frameworks create a common language that makes national performance visible and comparable. Recurring monitoring cycles then generate peer pressure and establish intermediate obligations whose abandonment carries reputational and practical costs, including reduced academic mobility (Brøgger, 2016; Ravinet, 2008).

The first implication is that, because these mechanisms work through legitimacy and reputation rather than legal obligation, they do not produce uniform convergence. They produce differentiated Europeanisation, shaped by domestic capacities, actor coalitions, and power relations (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Radaelli, 2004). Second, this field-level pressure is precisely what the neo-institutional account, developed in the next section, calls isomorphism. The same flexibility that allows differentiated compliance also creates space for decoupling, in which states adopt the recognisable language of reform to secure legitimacy while leaving substantive autonomy untouched (Brøgger, 2016). The Bologna system therefore offers both an incentive to appear European and the freedom not to become so in substance.

The reputational economy therefore applies both ways. The same visibility that pressures states to adopt European instruments also signals precisely which instruments will satisfy external observers, and monitoring that checks only for their presence can be met by their presence alone. Because the shared instruments reliably signal compliance, they are useful to states that want the signal of alignment without incurring the cost of achieving it in substance.

Isomorphism, Decoupling, and Selective Compliance

Institutional isomorphism explains why reputational pressure translates into the adoption of common forms. In its original formulation, the concept accounts for convergence among organisations in a shared field, not because similarity is efficient but because conformity to institutionalised expectations confers legitimacy and improves the chances of survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three mechanisms—coercive, normative, and mimetic—all of which operate within the EHEA: national systems adopt standardised degree cycles, quality assurance frameworks, and qualifications structures in order to signal their standing as modern European states (Dobbins & Knill, 2017). Isomorphism, then, names at the organisational level the same dynamic that the reputational economy of soft governance names at the system level.

The pursuit of legitimacy frequently produces decoupling, understood in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) original sense as a gap between formal structure and everyday practice. The concept was devised to explain a recurring feature of highly institutionalised sectors: formal structures act as "myth and ceremony," adopted to demonstrate conformity with valued models while being buffered from core routines so that internal stability is preserved. Bromley and Powell (2012) refine this insight into two distinct modes. Policy-practice decoupling occurs when formal rules are introduced as symbolic window-dressing but ignored in practice; organisations adopt the rules in name without acting on them. Means-ends decoupling occurs when policies are fully implemented and monitored, yet the link between those activities and their intended goals stays weak. A university may, for example, maintain and report its performance metrics in full—the means—while those metrics bear little relation to the quality of the knowledge it produces—the end. This second mode, rather than the first, appears to fit the Georgian case. The European structures are not abandoned or left on paper: degree cycles, credit systems, and quality-assurance procedures continue to operate and are actively administered. What weakens is the connection between those functioning structures and the purposes they were meant to serve, namely institutional autonomy and international mobility.

There is, however, one difference from the cases Bromley and Powell describe. In their examples, decoupling usually arises for structural reasons, because it is hard to connect complex practices to broad goals. Here it is deliberate: the state keeps the European forms but, by design rather than by drift, cuts their connection to autonomy. The question to ask of the reform is therefore not whether the European rules are enforced—on paper, they are—but whether they still deliver the autonomy and recognition that were their purpose.

Selective compliance is the form this takes in higher education governance. Although the Bologna Process has mobilised forty-nine systems without binding law, it has produced convergence in policy rhetoric alongside persistent diversity in substantive outcomes (Brøgger, 2019; Vukasović, 2015). States deploy "protective shields of similarity"—familiar templates and reporting formats that meet external expectations and deter scrutiny—while domestic power structures remain largely unchanged (Brøgger, 2019; Vukasović, 2015). Comparative research shows that the pattern is uneven across autonomy dimensions. Financial arrangements and tuition regimes can converge toward market-oriented models, whereas personnel autonomy and internal academic organisation prove markedly more resistant to external pressure (Dobbins & Knill, 2017).

Among these instruments, quality assurance is the most consequential. Although it is officially framed as a neutral mechanism of transparency, it often becomes a platform for "naming, shaming, and faming," in which the incentive to score well on international dashboards rewards symbolic over substantive implementation (Brøgger, 2016, 2019). The recurring fault line is institutional autonomy, whose weakness can undermine the very goals the Process formally promotes (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). Selective compliance allows states to perform the ritual of inspection while withholding any genuine transfer of decision-making power (Brøgger, 2019; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As Vukasović (2015) observes, this allows domestic actors to use and abuse European norms, producing convergence at the level of indicators that conceals divergence beneath.

The External Incentives Model: From Rule Adoption to Strategic Retreat

If isomorphism and decoupling explain how states reconcile conformity with control, the

External Incentives Model (EIM) explains why they do so and under what conditions the choice reverses. The model was developed to account for the adoption of EU rules by accession candidates in Central and Eastern Europe, where alignment could not be legally compelled and was instead driven by a logic of consequences: states adopt European norms when the expected benefits of external rewards exceed the domestic costs of adaptation (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). Whether that threshold is crossed depends on four conditions the model specifies: the determinacy of the conditions attached to the reward, the size and speed of the reward, the credibility of the conditionality, and the size of the domestic adoption costs (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Compliance is strongest when the conditions are precise, the reward is large and likely to arrive soon, the promise to deliver it is credible, and the domestic cost of compliance is low. For countries without an immediate path to membership, higher education governance operates under a “shadow of conditionality,” in which reform is propelled less by legal mandate than by the pull of incentives and expectations (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). Adopting Bologna tools thereby becomes a strategic choice aimed at securing legitimacy, easing cooperation, and signalling alignment with Europe as a geopolitical project (Radaelli, 2004; Schimmelfennig, 2009).

On the reward side, incentives are both material—financial assistance, capacity-building, and integration into the knowledge economy—and ideational, since the “return to Europe” narrative gives elites a discursive resource that can legitimise contested domestic change and even justify centralising measures (Schimmelfennig, 2009; Vukasović, 2015). For Georgia, the reward at stake is eventual EU membership and the benefits attached to it. Of the model’s four conditions, two bear directly on that reward and explain why it no longer drives compliance. The first is credibility. A promised reward motivates reform only if the government expects it to be delivered, and Georgia’s government no longer does: in December 2024 it suspended accession negotiations until 2028 (Civil Georgia, 2024), and relations have deteriorated further since (European Commission, 2025). The benefits of membership still exist in principle, but a reward that has been suspended and is openly contested no longer exerts the pull it once did. The second condition is the size and speed of the reward: the model holds that a reward expected only in the distant future motivates less than one close at hand, so a membership horizon pushed beyond 2028 lowers the present incentive to bear the costs of compliance, even setting credibility aside.

The third condition, determinacy, works in the same direction and explains why higher education in particular was a low-risk place to disengage. The nine conditions on which Georgia's candidate status rested concerned democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, not higher education (European Commission, 2023). No specific European rule requires Georgia to keep a voucher system, a particular degree length, or any given funding model. Because the EU never set determinate conditions for the sector, its leverage over higher education was weak even while the membership reward was credible, and the government can now reshape university governance without breaching any explicit commitment it was asked to meet. This is also why the European forms can be kept in place while their substance is removed: nothing in the conditionality tied those forms to the autonomy they were meant to protect.

The fourth condition is the size of the domestic adoption costs, and in Georgia these have changed the most. Adoption costs are what it costs a government, at home, to comply. They reflect how far European demands sit at odds with national structures, and they rise where administrative capacity is weak or the state's reach is uneven (Börzel, 2011; Börzel & Risse, 2012). They are higher still when compliance would weaken the government's own hold on power rather than require only a technical change. The revisited model makes this the decisive factor: once the reward and the EU-side conditions are fixed, it is the size of the domestic adoption cost that determines whether a government complies (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). In Georgia, the EU-side conditions no longer push toward compliance—determinacy for the sector was always low, and credibility and immediacy have now fallen too—so the domestic cost becomes decisive. For higher education that cost is high: granting universities genuine authority over appointments, curricula, and leadership would mean surrendering instruments the ruling party currently controls (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012).

These costs have risen rather than fallen. Universities became focal points of civic mobilisation during the Foreign Agents protests, which plausibly raised the political value the government placed on controlling them, and the national quality assurance agency was brought under closer executive control (Georgia Today, 2024). The governance tipping point is reached when these domestic costs exceed the now-diminished rewards of integration (Vukasović, 2015); beyond it, elites move from substantive reform to the strategic use of European frameworks for domestic ends (Schimmelfennig, 2009).

The model was built to explain rule adoption by states moving toward accession, whereas the present case involves the opposite movement: a state stepping back from rules it had already adopted. The same cost–reward calculus that once drove alignment can, when its terms change, drive disengagement, but the two are not mirror images. When rewards fall short of costs at the outset, the model predicts simple non-adoption. Georgia's situation differs, because two decades of adoption have already made it recognised as European, at least to some extent, and that recognition is an asset—valuable for mobility, qualification recognition, and reputation—that open repudiation would throw away. The government therefore faces three options: It can keep complying in substance, which has become politically costly; it can abandon the European system, which would forfeit the recognition already gained; or it can keep the outward European structures while removing their substance. It chooses the third. This is what produces decoupling rather than withdrawal: the recognition that comes from displaying European forms can be retained even after the autonomy those forms were meant to protect has been taken away.

The 2025 Reform: Reconfiguring Governance and the Crisis of Institutional Autonomy

In 2025 the Georgian government began a structural reconfiguration of higher education through the National Concept for Reforming the Higher Education System (Civil Georgia, 2025b). The Concept addresses seven challenges: excessive geographic concentration, resource inefficiency, weak human resource management, weak research–teaching links, labour-market misalignment, an inefficient funding system, and inadequate infrastructure (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). The process that produced it was itself centralised. A fifteen-member state commission, established in January 2025 and chaired directly by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, drafted the reform without the involvement of the universities and academic staff it affects (Civil Georgia, 2025a); the enabling amendments to the Law on Higher Education passed a first parliamentary reading in October 2025 (bm.ge, 2025). Because the reform is still a proposal under legislative consideration, the assessment that follows concerns its design and demonstrated direction rather than its realised effects.

The framework set out above locates the substance of the retreat in institutional autonomy: the European forms are retained, but the autonomy they were meant to protect is withdrawn. Assessing the reform therefore requires a benchmark for that autonomy, and three sources provide one. Domestically, Article 27 of the Constitution (1995) guarantees academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and the Law of Georgia on Higher Education obliges the government to "ensure the autonomy of higher education institutions" and the participation of staff and students in decision-making (Parliament of Georgia, 2005, art. 3). Internationally, the Magna Charta Universitatum holds that universities must remain "morally and intellectually independent of all political influence and economic interests" (Magna Charta Observatory, 2020). Building on this principle, set out in its Lisbon Declaration (EUA, 2007), the European University Association distinguishes four measurable dimensions of autonomy—financial, academic, organisational, and staffing—in its Autonomy Scorecard (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). These four dimensions structure the analysis that follows.

Examined against this benchmark, the four dimensions share a common structure. In each, a measure presented as a remedy for a real inefficiency also concentrates authority in the centre: funding is consolidated in the state, curricula and quality assurance are drawn under ministerial control, faculties are redistributed by administrative decision, and pay and promotion are tied to centrally defined output. The recurrence of this pattern across otherwise distinct policy areas is itself evidence that the reform is organised around the relocation of decision-making power, and it is what allows the four measures to be considered as a single project rather than as four unrelated adjustments.

This pattern is not new. The 2025 reform extends somewhat recurring feature of Georgian higher education: structural change pursued to signal European alignment without a matching transformation of practice. Reforms inspired by New Public Management followed the 2003 Rose Revolution and sought to dismantle the Soviet separation between teaching, concentrated in universities, and research, concentrated in the institutes of the Academy of Sciences. Around seventy research institutes were merged into seven universities between 2010 and 2011 to integrate the two (Gogadze, 2024), yet the 2014

State Audit Office assessment found that the integration "took place only physically," with no substantive measures to produce synergy (State Audit Office of Georgia, 2014, as cited in Gogadze, 2024), and later observers have judged it superficial and incomplete (Gogadze, 2024). Georgia thus already has a documented episode of means-ends decoupling. The 2025 reform continues this pattern rather than marking a sudden break, and the same gap between European form and domestic substance now recurs on a larger scale. The following sections trace it across each dimension of institutional autonomy in turn.

Financial Autonomy: The State-Order Funding Model

The reform shifts higher education funding from a market-based voucher system to a state-order model. Under the previous arrangement, higher education operated on a “money follows the student” principle. Students who passed the Unified National Exam received vouchers—100%, 70%, or 50% of tuition, capped at 2,250 GEL a year for full grants—that could be redeemed at any accredited institution, public or private (Government of Georgia, 2025). This sustained a diverse sector. On the government’s own count, it comprised 64 institutions (19 public and 45 private) serving 187,800 students in 2024/2025, including 37,100 international students, a profile that gave institutions varied sources of revenue (Geostat, 2025; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). This diversity persisted even though public spending on higher education remained low, at 0.3% of GDP, and 75% of resources came from tuition fees (Eurydice, 2025). The reform abolishes the voucher, directs public funding to state universities on the basis of government quotas, and excludes private institutions. From 2026, students at public universities are to study tuition-free, while high-achieving students who often chose private universities lose state grants altogether. In parallel, the admission of foreign students to public universities is restricted to “exceptional” cases (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). The Prime Minister justified the latter measure on the grounds that foreign students at public medical universities diverted resources from training Georgian doctors, and he proposed redirecting most international enrolment to private institutions. On figures reported in the press but not independently verified, he projected that this change would reduce state medical university revenue by roughly GEL 80 million, of which only about GEL 5 million would be state-compensated (edu.aris.ge, 2025).

The significance of these measures lies in how they reshape universities' dependence on the state. As the framework anticipated, a funder's power over an institution grows as the institution's alternative sources of revenue are closed off, and the reform closes them. By abolishing the voucher it removes the market-based revenue that allowed institutions to reduce their reliance on direct state funding, and by restricting foreign admission it closes a second channel of diversification. For private institutions the effect is sharper still. Excluded from public funding and left to compete for fee-paying students whose state grants have been withdrawn, the providers the voucher had sustained—forty-five of the sector's sixty-four institutions—face a direct threat to their viability, which narrows the diversity the previous model had produced. The state thereby becomes a near-monopoly funder, with the structural capacity to reward compliant institutions and to marginalise those that depart from official priorities.

The asymmetry between the two halves of the funding change compounds this effect. Public provision becomes free at the point of use, while the grants that once followed high-achieving students into private institutions are withdrawn. The predictable result is that enrolment migrates toward state universities, not necessarily because they offer better provision but because they become the only funded option. As demand concentrates in the public sector, the state's position as the dominant funder is reinforced by its position as the dominant provider, and the two forms of dominance support each other.

This leverage is reinforced by a mandatory market-analysis requirement, under which student quotas must be calculated in advance against labour-market scenarios and national development plans (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). The requirement presses universities to expand their compliance bureaucracies at the expense of academic priorities, and it gives central authorities a further point of control over what institutions may teach and to how many students. Funding is thus not only concentrated but also conditioned, because the level of provision is tied to centrally defined projections rather than to institutional judgement.

Academic Autonomy: Degree Compression and Curricular Control

The reform combines three interlocking measures: the reduction of secondary education from twelve to eleven years; a mandatory 3+1 degree structure, that is, a three-year bachelor's degree followed by a one-year master's; and the centralisation of textbook development under a national framework, alongside a stated intention to revisit the quality assurance system (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). The most consequential is degree compression. The Bologna Process was designed to produce transparent, comparable qualifications that support recognition and mobility, and the most common combined first- and second-cycle workload across the EHEA is 300 ECTS (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). Georgia's previous 240+120 structure met and exceeded this benchmark, and so provided a recognition buffer. The 3+1 model compresses the total to 180+60, or 240 ECTS, which is 60 below the typical benchmark. Bologna formally permits second-cycle programmes of 60–120 ECTS (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024), so a 60-ECTS master's is not in itself non-compliant; the difficulty is functional rather than formal. A qualification at the lower bound carries less recognition weight, and in systems without automatic recognition it may complicate both credential recognition and progression to doctoral study. Because Georgia lacks system-level automatic recognition, the compression is not a neutral technical adjustment. It can complicate individual recognition and, for some graduates and destinations, raise the threshold for doctoral entry. The reduction of schooling compounds the effect, lowering total pre-doctoral education to fifteen years against an EHEA norm of seventeen to eighteen.

The practical stakes of recognition are higher in a system oriented toward outward mobility. Georgian graduates who seek employment or doctoral places within the EHEA rely on their qualifications being read as equivalent to the prevailing 300-ECTS standard. A degree at the lower bound does not prevent recognition, but it shifts more of the burden onto case-by-case assessment, where outcomes are less predictable and depend on the receiving institution.

This points to a further effect, and one that fits what officials have said. In presenting the reform, Minister of Education Givi Mikanadze listed reducing student outflow among its aims and described it as a way to curb migration (Tabula.ge, 2025). The numbers are not small: more than 13,000 students have taken part in mobility programmes and over 22,000 young people in EU-funded youth initiatives (European Union in Georgia, 2025).

Degrees that are shorter and less easily recognised abroad would tend to reduce that outflow, whatever the official rationale—and on the minister's own statement, reducing it is part of the intention.

Curricular and quality assurance measures extend state reach into the substantive core of teaching. In 2024 the NCEQE's registration in EQAR was suspended after its director was simultaneously appointed Deputy Minister (Georgia Today, 2024). This step subordinates quality assurance to executive control and repurposes it as a tool of political oversight, in tension with the ESG principle of agency independence. The reversal is especially telling because quality assurance was introduced in Georgia as part of its accession to the Bologna Process and its broader alignment with the European Higher Education Area (Gogadze, 2024). When an instrument built to demonstrate Europeanness is captured for domestic political control, the gap between European form and domestic substance is not merely widened but inverted.

The mandate to produce "modern, high-quality textbooks for all core and elective courses" within a unified national framework points the same way. Centralised content production narrows instructional diversity, constrains faculty authorship, and presses teaching toward state-approved materials. The 2024 Implementation Report already identifies time pressure, limited resources, and staff capacity as systemic obstacles to learning-outcome-based implementation across the EHEA (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024), and this reform intensifies these constraints rather than relieving them.

Across this longer trajectory, the measures fall into a consistent pattern. Amashukeli, Lezhava, and Chitashvili (2020) describe Georgia's two decades of Bologna participation as "Potemkin harmonisation": formal compliance pursued to secure external rewards such as ENQA membership, while political interference prevented genuine institutional change. The 2025 reform represents the culmination of that trajectory and exemplifies means-ends decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012). The country continues to signal compliance through three-cycle structures, ECTS, the planned self-certification of the National Qualifications Framework, and prospective integration of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Government of Georgia, 2025), while the substantive ends of comparability, recognition, and autonomy are detached from those forms.

Organisational Autonomy: The Spatial Politics of Consolidation

The reform's organisational thrust is a programme of spatial redistribution. The National Concept identifies "excessive geographical concentration" as a structural deficiency, noting that over 85% of students study in Tbilisi (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025), while Geostat (2025) reports that 64% of institutions are located in the capital. The reform proposes a second academic hub in Kutaisi, new infrastructure in Rustavi, and a principle of "one city, one faculty," under which faculties that are duplicated among Tbilisi universities are to be consolidated and reassigned according to their historical specialisations (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). Organisational autonomy, as the EUA defines it, is the right of universities to determine their internal structures, governing bodies, and statutes (EUA, 2007; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023).

The first difficulty concerns diagnosis. As Addie (2017) argues, urban concentration in higher education arises from multi-scalar processes—global knowledge circuits, national policy, labour markets, and cultural hierarchies that together position metropolitan centres as sites of prestige. Framing the phenomenon as mere duplication therefore risks misdiagnosis. Redistributing faculties addresses the appearance of imbalance without confronting the factors that sustain the capital's dominance, including the perceived quality of Tbilisi institutions and their proximity to professional opportunity. A related misdiagnosis concerns the reform's own stated objective of strengthening weak research–teaching links. That weakness is itself a legacy of the Soviet separation of teaching from research, which the 2010–11 integration of research institutes into universities only partially repaired (Gogadze, 2024). Because relocating and consolidating faculties addresses neither the incompleteness of that integration nor its underlying causes, and because it disrupts the fragile research–teaching links that do exist, the measure may deepen the problem it names rather than resolve it. The proposed mechanism, moreover, treats faculties as administratively transferable units. It neglects the disciplinary identities, collegial cultures, and research networks—the "intellectual ecologies"—that are interwoven with their urban settings and not easily relocated (Addie, 2017). As a result, the stated objective of decentralisation may produce institutional fragmentation, diluting existing centres of excellence without ensuring that regional campuses can sustain equivalent quality. Where the government determines the geographic distribution of faculties, the boundary between coordination and control blurs, and spatial planning can function as administrative centralisation in the guise of decentralisation.

A further tension concerns the capacity of the receiving regions. Relocating faculties presumes that regional campuses can absorb students, staff, and research activity and sustain them at comparable quality. Yet the indicators that describe a fragile research base nationally apply with greater force outside the capital, where research infrastructure and senior staff are scarcer still. Redistribution that outruns this capacity risks lowering provision in the regions to which activity is moved while weakening it in the centres from which it is taken, an outcome that would impede rather than advance the reform’s stated aim of strengthening research and teaching alike.

A second interpretation is more political. Students have historically been among the most active drivers of civic mobilisation in Georgia, a pattern that intensified during the 2023–2024 Foreign Agents law demonstrations, when campus occupations turned Tbilisi’s university spaces into arenas of dissent (Boffey, 2024; The New Federalist, 2025). Against this background, the identification of student over-concentration acquires a possible political dimension: dispersing students into regional centres introduces a spatial buffer that raises the physical distance and the practical cost of spontaneous mobilisation.

Staffing Autonomy: Hierarchy, Incentives, and the Academic Labour Market

The reform’s staffing model establishes a vertically integrated academic hierarchy. Citing the absence of a coherent staffing policy as a structural failure, the National Concept builds the model around the full-time professor, who is to lead “specific teaching and research directions” supported by “several full-time associate professors and at least ten assistant professors” (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). The Prime Minister has pledged a fivefold salary increase, setting a minimum of 10,000 GEL a month for full professors and positioning them as guarantors of quality (Interpressnews, 2025). The reform also ties salary increments and royalties to the production of standardised textbooks and research materials aligned with the national curriculum (Interpressnews, 2025; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2025). Staffing autonomy, in the EUA framework, is the institution's control over recruitment, promotion, and salaries on the basis of merit and disciplinary standards rather than administrative direction (EUA, 2007; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023).

Despite the language of professionalisation, tying remuneration to state-defined output concentrates power. It creates a structure in which pay, promotion, and reputation all depend on compliance. As Shore and Wright (2015) observe, when "rhetorics of quality" are operationalised through quantitative outputs and compliance mechanisms, universities risk becoming systems of ritualistic conformity in which metrics displace scholarly purpose. The result is a partial autonomy of the kind Oleksiyenko (2020) calls "surrogate academic freedom," in which the formal structures of freedom persist while managerial practices inherited from centralised administration constrain what academics can actually do.

The model is also demographically unfeasible, because it presupposes a supply of junior academics that the system is not producing. Against a prescribed ratio of at least ten assistant professors per full professor, state universities employed 1,189 full professors but only 855 assistant professors in 2024/2025—a ratio of roughly 1:0.72—while doctoral admissions fell by 24.7% and total doctoral enrolment by 15.3% over the previous year, a contraction consistent with the downward trend evident since 2019 (Geostat, 2025). Because the pipeline that would supply the required junior staff is shrinking rather than expanding, the envisaged 1:10 ratio is arithmetically unattainable. The likely outcome is a structure in which a small group of senior academics occupies secure posts while opportunities for generational renewal decline.

The longer-run effect compounds the immediate shortfall. A hierarchy that secures senior posts while the junior pipeline contracts narrows the route by which the next generation of academics would normally enter and advance. Tying pay and promotion to centrally defined output adds a second constraint, because it rewards conformity with state-approved materials and metrics rather than independent scholarly judgement. These features point toward a profession that is better paid at the top but less autonomous and less able to renew itself, which is the opposite of the capacity the reform says it wants to build.

Conclusion: De-Europeanisation Behind a Compliant Shell

Across all four dimensions of institutional autonomy, the reform follows one pattern: the European forms are kept to some extent while the purposes they were meant to serve are removed. Georgia retains credit accumulation, multi-cycle terminology, and qualifications frameworks to preserve some legitimacy in peer-review and mobility networks, even as reinforcing measures in each dimension strip those forms of their function. Financially, a state-order model replaces vouchers, excludes private providers, and restricts foreign admission, which cuts off the ways universities might otherwise diversify their income and deepens their dependence on the state. Academically, the 3+1 structure and the shortened school cycle compress pre-doctoral pathways below EHEA norms, while curricular standardisation and the capture of quality assurance narrow faculty discretion and external oversight. Organisationally, faculty relocation breaks up disciplinary networks. In staffing, a centralised hierarchy ties pay to state-defined output.

Georgian higher education does face real problems, and the Concept names several of them: provision is concentrated in Tbilisi, graduate supply is poorly aligned with the labour market, and research capacity is limited. The reform's framing of these problems, however, is open to question. It proceeds in part from the premise that the system enrols more students than it should, yet the more consistently documented constraint is not over-enrolment but the sector's chronic underfunding and heavy reliance on tuition income (Eurydice, 2025). A reform directed at quality would be expected to address that resource base. Instead, the 2025 Concept alters the source of funding rather than its level, replacing the voucher with direct state financing of public institutions (Government of Georgia, 2025). As the financial-autonomy analysis showed, this shift concentrates a previously dispersed dependence on the state, turning an ostensibly efficiency-oriented measure into a question of institutional autonomy while leaving the sector's underlying weakness—insufficient and unstable resourcing—unresolved.

Explained through the integrated framework, the pattern reflects a recalibration of the cost–reward balance, in which the domestic power costs of genuine autonomy—above all amid the politicisation of universities—now outweigh the benefits of a candidate status whose rewards have become less credible and more distant. The External Incentives Model accounts for this weakening of the compliance pull, and the neo-institutional account of isomorphism and decoupling accounts for the managed retention of European forms. The redesigned funding model supplies the domestic instrument through which the retreat is carried out, by making the state the dominant funder and removing the alternatives that would otherwise check its leverage.

The case also carries a broader implication for how conditionality is understood. The External Incentives Model is usually invoked to explain why candidate states adopt European rules; the Georgian experience shows that the same logic, once its terms reverse, explains how a state can remain formally compliant while substantively disengaging. This has a practical corollary for the EU and the EHEA. Where leverage depends on the credibility and immediacy of rewards, a distant or uncertain accession horizon weakens the very mechanism on which conditionality relies. Monitoring that tracks the presence of European forms—degree cycles, credit systems, qualifications frameworks—will then register compliance precisely where substantive autonomy is being eroded. Detecting means-ends decoupling therefore requires attention not to whether European instruments exist on paper but to whether they still perform their intended function of protecting the independence of universities. In the Georgian case, the instruments remain in place, but they no longer perform that function.

Returning to the research question, the 2025 reform can be understood as a case of means-ends decoupling from European governance frameworks, and the External Incentives Model—read in reverse, from rule adoption to rule retreat—explains the shift in motivation behind it. As the measures take effect during 2026, the leverage created by the new design can be tested against what institutions, ministries, and academic staff actually do: whether, and to what extent, the funding monopoly is used to penalise universities that deviate, the shortened degree structure reduces recognition and mobility, and faculty relocation breaks up the disciplinary networks it moves. The same pattern can appear beyond Georgia, wherever the rewards of integration recede while the domestic costs of autonomy remain. Examining how such decoupling is detected, contested, or reversed in other stalled-accession cases would show how far the mechanism identified here applies more widely.

Lizi Shtaadze is a student in the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE), jointly delivered by the University for Continuing Education Krems, Tampere University, Beijing Normal University, and Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences. She is currently an intern at the Centre for Higher Education (CHE), Germany. Previously, she was an Invited Lecturer at Free University of Tbilisi, where she taught undergraduate courses in History of Ideas, and worked as a journalist and research fellow in several organisations.

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