

## Final Paper

# Acknowledging the Importance of EU Integration while Analyzing Its Challenges and Exploring Georgia as the EU Eastern Partnership Candidate State

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## Introduction

As a result of years of conflict and two world wars, European states came to a common agreement that they should develop ways to create a peaceful, secure, economically and culturally developed modern world. The presence of international organizations played a big role in this matter. The European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the OSCE, and other European organizations are the guarantors of the full development of nations, as they provide the member states with significant components for strengthening statehood. However, in addition to developed European countries, some Eastern European states are still in the process of perfecting the principles of European peace, cooperation, and values. The constantly changing geopolitical environment presents such young democratic states with great challenges. Against the background of these challenges, sustainable economic development and strengthening of security are significant, as these factors will reduce the impact of existing and potential external shocks on the state (NATO Effect, 2016). For this, it is necessary for these states to join the Euro-Atlantic space.

The worth noting is the European Economic Community, which was formed in the 1950s for the purpose of economic prosperity. In 1993, in the city of Maastricht, it was officially named the European Union. Since its establishment, it has significantly changed- broadened its focus and spread across region. Today, it helps member states to maintain and develop effective economic and political systems, and non-member states to establish them.

Talking about its members, some of the sovereign countries that appeared on the map after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia managed to establish their own place in the European Union, although some, despite maintaining close ties with the European Union and NATO, remain outside their borders- here mainly implying a trio of EU Eastern Partnership states- Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. European integration of such countries is significant not only for these countries themselves but also for the stability, security, and sustainable development of the European region as a whole.

Despite the obvious necessity of European integration, there are specific obstacles in the transitional democratic states and European organizations themselves, which further hinder the long-term process. At the same time, the skeptical and radical mood against the membership of the "European family" has not yet disappeared.

The paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of EU integration, to analyze its existing difficulties, and to explore the challenges of Georgia in the European integration process.

Therefore, the following research questions will be discussed and analyzed in the paper:

- Why was the acceptance of post-soviet states in the big European family delayed from the beginning?
- What are the Challenges of European integration?
- What does EU Eastern partnership candidate state status mean to Georgia and what challenges does the country face?

## Investigating the Barriers for Post-Soviet States in the EU-integration Process

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, fifteen new states emerged on the continent of Europe and Asia. In fact, the situation in the political field completely changed, and the countries that gained independence started not only to modernize but also to transform or establish their own institutions. The economic and social policy of the Soviet Union was radically different from the countries of Western and Central Europe, so capitalist Europe and the socialist Soviet Union appeared as two different poles in the Europe of the twentieth century. This can be clearly seen in the principle of the "4 worlds", where the first part of the world included capitalist countries, in which the concepts of human rights, free trade, and individualism were established. Part of the second world consisted of socialist countries with a centrist economic planning system, authoritarian-dictatorial regime, and censorship.

The Soviet influence concerned not only the member republics of the Union but also the countries of the "socialist camp" (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the eastern part of Germany, the so-called GDR), which came under the full influence of the USSR after the end of the Second World War (all this caused the building of the Berlin Wall, which divided Europe into two camps). In the winter of 1991, as a result of internal strife, "perestroika", unrest in the 80s of the twentieth century, and the self-sacrificing struggle of national movements, the Soviet Union was officially declared dissolved. In Europe, on the one hand, there was an opportunity for formations aimed at political development, but on the other hand, it was accompanied by painful transition processes, especially in the post-Soviet republics. Many states were engulfed in unrest, ethnic and territorial conflicts, and civil wars became active. Military groups took over the reins of the states. In the case of Georgia, ethnic and territorial conflicts were temporarily "canned" or frozen in the late 90s. It concerned the regions of Samachablo and Abkhazia, whereas Moldova disputed the territory of Transnistria. As for Ukraine, it is still involved in an active struggle for the Eastern region of Europe (Lugansk, Donetsk, Crimea). In the background of all this, the integration of the above-mentioned countries into the European Union and NATO was not a goal, but has long looked like a distant dream, since membership in the organizations, first of all, requires economic and political stability from the candidate countries.

The situation was relatively different in the Baltic coastal countries - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. These small states also had some problems, for example, in relation to the minorities of the Russian population, but with the involvement of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the processes went in their favor. The Baltic states were one of the first in the post-Soviet space to join the European Union and NATO (2004 - the year of European integration for all three states). However, they did not follow an easy path to this result. "Unlike the member countries of the socialist camp, which were under communist rule but retained their sovereignty, the Baltic countries had to start all over again. They didn't have an army, they didn't have a Ministry of Defense, a diplomatic corps, a national currency, a central bank, border control, etc." (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 20). In addition to the great enthusiasm and high statistical number of the population wanting to join the EU- Lithuania, Latvia,

and Estonia had close economic ties with Finland and Sweden, which joined the EU in 1995. Consequently, this fact had a great impact on the process of accelerating their European integration. The Baltic countries managed to take the necessary obligations to join the European Union and NATO in a short period of time. On the one hand, this was caused by their unsophisticated or completely non-existent institutions, which easily absorbed the political, economic, and value obligations of the European Union, which were the course of the Baltic countries from the beginning.

The same difficulties faced the rest of the post-Soviet countries to join the European family - Russia's aggressive foreign policy, visible political-economic backwardness, Soviet structure, ethnic and border delimitation problems. However, unlike the Baltic countries, the possibility of rapid change and the formation of new institutions/Europeanization has become not only an opportunity but a great challenge for other post-soviet states of Eastern Europe. Over time, it became even harder to absorb European-specific structures as these countries structured their own systems with their own characteristics while sustaining some Soviet institutional features. With the passage of time, Russia's interests in these countries especially increased, which further pushed back these transitional democratic states.

## Challenges of European Integration

Due to the rapid change in modern politics, European integration is quite relevant and therefore, it is studied in depth. Many papers and studies have been presented on this topic. Experts' opinions and comparisons are diverse. In this regard, the article by Plamen Akaliyski, Christian Welzel, and Josef Hien "A Community of Common Values? - Dimensions and Dynamics of Cultural Integration in the European Union" is outstanding. In this article, the authors elaborate on the difficulties existing in the European Union from a cultural point of view and present the differences in relation to non-EU countries. According to them, taking into account the Maastricht Treaty, the construction of the Union of European countries has acquired a cultural significance. A significant part of the so-called "third wave" of European integration was the cultural issues, to strengthen the European identity and increase the legitimacy of the EU institutions through the promotion of common values. The authors openly point out that there are visible cultural-social differences between EU countries and non-EU countries (Plamen Akaliyski, Christian Welzel & Josef Hien, 2022, 569-574).

Furthermore, based on modern political processes, it is a problem for both the European Union and NATO to strengthen relations with non-member countries against the background of hostile Russian interests, which hinders the strengthening of the process of European integration of post-Soviet countries as much as possible.

According to Weitz, managing a diverse number of partners who differ in their values, beliefs, and geopolitics is also a major challenge. Although his focus is mainly positioned on NATO, the same can be said regarding the EU as it is a supranational entity with major diversities within itself. (Weitz, 2014).

Integration into NATO and the European Union is accompanied by many further difficulties. In the case of the European Union, researchers often talk not only about the difficulties in developing countries, which hinder their European integration but also about the challenges in the European Union itself. The latter significantly determines the political agenda of possible member states. In the document "Opening Georgia's European perspective" former ambassador to The U.S., Archil Gegeshidze, clearly emphasizes the obstacles that the European Union faces and forces them to approach the issue of enlargement more carefully. The post-Soviet countries rushing towards the "European family" have a difficult geopolitical location, which is one of the main factors. The latter implies Russia's foreign policy, which not only scares European countries but also poses larger challenges.

A noteworthy factor is the so-called "fatigue" by extension as well. In 2004, a part of large European countries joined the European Union, and after that, discussions on the possible "fatigue" of the European Union began, since they thought that the transformation of the post-Soviet countries within the European Union would burden the institutions of the organization. Despite this, the European Union was still expanding by inertia. For example, Bulgaria and Romania were granted membership in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

Another important factor is the regression of democracy in some European countries (Poland, Hungary), as well as the proliferation of right-wing populists, which contributed to the diversity of opinions of the European population about the expansion of the European Union.

In addition to this, the European Union has one of the largest bureaucratic apparatuses, which significantly hinders the process of European integration. At the same time, the fragmented region of Eastern Europe and the economic regression of the sub-regions located here give the European Union, even more, to think about (Gegeshidze Archil, 2018, 14-22).

## **New Term Emerges- EU Eastern Partnership Candidate State**

The European Union (EU) and its six Eastern European partners- Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus -launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) together in 2009. The main objective of this partnership is to strengthen the political and economic ties between the European Union and its neighbors in Eastern Europe. In June 2022, the EU extended a membership prospectus to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which marked a dramatic improvement from the union's prior stance. Candidate status was officially granted to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 and Georgia in late 2023. An enlargement would be the fourth largest in terms of population, and the sixth largest in terms of GDP (Lucio Vinhas de Souza, 2024). This change in the EU's proactive enlargement steps is regarded mainly as an effect of the current geopolitical situation in the region.

The difficulties of integration in the Euro-Atlantic space are visible in one way or another, but the question arises - what actions are essential to further the integration process? European Union's main precondition is the implementation of its values. Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union

emphasizes the openness of the organization to the accession of the states of the region. It clearly states “Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.”

Preconditions are clearly conveyed in ‘Copenhagen criteria’ that determine the Membership requirements that candidate countries must achieve:

“[1] stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities,

[2] the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.

[3] the candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of the political, economic, and monetary union (Presidency Conclusions, Copenhagen European Council, 21-22 June 1993). “

## Obstacles Facing Georgia

Georgia was given status with the proviso that it implements the necessary measures as outlined in a Commission recommendation. Consequently, accession talks are still pending. The Council urged Georgia to show a strong commitment to EU principles, carry out its reform plan, and permanently meet the requirements outlined in the Commission's report in the most recent conclusions, which were approved in December 2023 (European Council).

Georgia's Candidate status is a huge possibility to a better future but also a great challenge to its inner and outer political aspects, let alone economic conundrums that are inevitably interwoven with foreign relations.

The status of a candidate is based on Tbilisi fulfilling nine (formerly twelve) requirements; this serves as a reminder that Georgia still has quite a long way to go before membership.

Over the past year, political life in Georgia has grown more divisive. Both financial means and a workable political agenda are absent from the opposition. Though it has greater popularity, the ruling party is nevertheless dealing with serious issues, such as an increase in political indifference.

These issues, which will still exist in the lead-up to the 2024 legislative elections, cannot be resolved by becoming a candidate. Although the ruling party is expected to perform well in the election, striking a balance between the political aspirations of the parties and the expectations of Brussels, as well as Georgians' aspirations for democratic and economic advancement, will be difficult.

Dealing with issues in Georgia's judiciary, which has become infamously vulnerable to political interference since the nation achieved independence at the beginning of the 1990s, will be a top priority. One of the EU's requirements for Georgia is to clean up the legal system, which will be challenging to do because numerous fundamental adjustments need to be made.

The necessity for Georgia to harmonise its security and diplomatic policies with those of the EU is equally significant. In fact, Tbilisi has long maintained a pro-Western foreign policy, and 75% of Georgians believe the same (Régis Genté, 2022).

However, Georgia's hopes of joining the EU will probably face the biggest obstacle from its relations with Russia. Over the past few years, Tbilisi has investigated a multi-vector foreign policy. Since the full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the nation has had to navigate a challenging road between supporting Kyiv and not provoking an aggressive, revanchist Moscow. This has caused occasional disagreements with Western allies, and this tactic has not constantly worked well. Despite the conflict in Ukraine, the long-standing Russian occupation of 20% of Georgian territory, Moscow's apparent intention to establish a naval base in part of that territory (Abkhazia), and the recent kidnapping and murder of Georgian nationals (a Georgian national was killed by Russian troops on November 6 while attempting to visit a monastery in occupied South Ossetia, for example), Georgia nevertheless still maintains financial connections with Russia for sake of its economic stability. This fact makes the state even more susceptible to Russia's foreign policy.

It is important to note that, to promote longer-term conflict settlement, the EU is steadfastly committed to its policy of defending Georgia's territorial integrity within its internationally accepted boundaries and engaging with the separatist areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU Monitoring Mission has been in operation close to the administrative border lines since 2008. EUMM will celebrate its 15th year in Georgia on October 1, 2023 (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023).

Nevertheless, frozen conflicts in Georgia seem to persist. Whereas, EU membership inevitably should mean any conflict resolution or significant mitigation related to candidate states. This is an accountable factor concerning accession. Additionally, the "mutual defence" clause is important in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union. This clause stipulates that if an armed attack occurs on the territory of an EU Member State, the other Member States are obligated to utilise all of their resources to support and aid the affected state. Hence, unless these existing regional conflicts are resolved, accession would mean too much sacrifice and threat to already member states that are not willing to outwardly clash with Russia's interests.

The Georgian government's ability, on the other hand, to strike a balance between its ties to Russia and conflict-ridden areas and EU integration remains unclear. Although Moscow may appear to be more upset about NATO expansion than the importance of EU enlargement along its borders, that is only one side of the story. 2014 saw Russia invade Ukraine as a result of Kyiv's shift in alignment with the EU. Put differently, Moscow is just as concerned about EU expansion as it is about NATO enlargement. Notably, in the months preceding the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow issued the notorious ultimatum to the West, in which Georgia was listed alongside Ukraine. The Kremlin desired Georgia to buck its pro-Western trend, among other things.

As a result, Georgia's announcement as an EU candidate has wider ramifications for both Europe and Russia in the South Caucasus. Concerning energy diversification (as demonstrated by the extended gas agreement signed with Azerbaijan in 2022), trans-Eurasian trade routes like the growing "Middle



Corridor," and broader Black Sea security, the EU appears set to step up its involvement with the South Caucasus going forward (Emil Avdaliani, 2023).

## Conclusion

The complexity of the European integration process is evident from all of the above. Developing European countries that are on the path to EU membership are often helped by the organization itself to develop an accession plan and refine state structures, although it is clear that this alone is not enough. The domestic policy of such states (which is individual for every state), and cultural or geopolitical difficulties become a kind of obstacle to their integration into European structures. The significant process, which includes the approximation of the candidate or candidate countries to the European political culture, finding common features, and emphasizing them, is quite long-term. The process of integration does not mean the complete transformation of the new members - they should become a part of Europe while maintaining their own characteristics and at the same time introduce new practices.

The challenges in European organizations are also visible, the overcoming of which is related to large finances, structural transformations, and, to a large extent, changes in social attitudes. The domestic politics of specific European states must be taken into account, which further influences the orientation and priorities of global governance. Skeptical sentiments regarding EU enlargement are forcing local governments to take cautious steps.

As for Georgia, there are a plethora of internal and foreign specifics regarding EU integration that need to be analyzed and overcome. On the one hand, we see economic, political, and structural challenges facing Georgia. Polarisation, territorial concerns, political uncertainty, and the need to navigate through complex geopolitical situations create a real setback. Nevertheless, there is openness and motivation from Georgia as well as the EU itself to unite, uphold democratic values, and contribute to common security through cooperation.

It should also be mentioned that the European Union itself is structurally changing and developing. It is affected by external economic and political threats. However, European values, the desire for universal well-being, and the understanding of the need for mutual assistance remain its biggest priorities. This was clearly evident in the background of recent events when the Ukraine-Russia conflict turned into a full-scale war. In the most tense situation, Ukraine and Moldova were granted the status of EU candidates, and later Georgia joined them. The latter shows that despite the difficulties and obstacles for the states on the path to accession, the door of the European Union is open.

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