

EU INTEGRATION: A VIEW FROM GEORGIA - INTERVIEW WITH GHIA NODIA

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“The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System” (EUCACIS) is a PhD Support Programme for Postgraduates and Doctoral Researchers in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, organized by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE). Funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and the programme Erasmus+, it offers scholarships for three years to excellent postgraduates who are working on a doctoral thesis in political science, contemporary history or economics on a topic related to its thematic focus at a university or academy of sciences in the Southern Caucasus or Central Asia (including Afghanistan, the Kashmir region in India and the autonomous region Xinjiang in China).



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It is the objective of the EUCACIS programme to provide intensive PhD research training for its participants to bring them closer to international standards, to support them until they submit their doctoral theses, and to help them establish their own networks with other young researchers in the target regions and in Europe. This will be achieved through four international conferences (in Almaty, Berlin, Tbilisi and Bishkek); four PhD schools in Berlin and Tbilisi; two research training stays; and continuous online coaching.

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About the Series

EUCACIS in Brief publishes opinion pieces and short articles written by fellows of the EUCACIS PhD Support Programme, alumni of the Master Programme „The European Union and Central Asia in the International System” (EUCAIS) and other members of the wider EUCACIS network. It aims at making the debates within the network, notably during the EUCACIS conferences and PhD schools, accessible to a wider public. The papers are available on the programme website: www.eucacis.eu

About the Author

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Georgia has been a poster child of European integration in the South Caucasus. However, over time mistakes of the Georgian government and selectiveness towards the conditions of the EU have constantly tainted the image of the country and hence questioned its commitment towards the process of Europeanization. Time and again, questions about the progress of Georgia and drawbacks as well as reasons of such have been core issues of discussions among the political and intellectual elite, both at the national and international level.

Ghia Nodia, professor of politics and director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at the Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia, who has published extensively on democratization, state-building and European integration in Georgia and the Caucasus, shares his view on questions related to threats, opportunities and challenges of European integration for Georgia.

1. How is European integration perceived at the political level in Georgia?

GN: Policies of European, as well as Euro-Atlantic (NATO), integration are central for Georgian state policies. Despite extremely confrontational relations between political parties in Georgia, priority given to European integration constitutes a point of consensus between major political players, as well as continuity between different governments. The stability of this policy dimension ultimately depends on its popular support: Typically, numerous public opinion polls of the last fifteen years show that over seventy percent of population of Georgia backs the stated goal of the government to join the EU; at some points, support levels came down closer to sixty percent, but never lower. There is some rise in eurosceptic and generally anti-Western

sentiments as well as in preference given to the Eurasian integration (somewhat over 20 percent), but so far this did not lead to any policy changes.

The justification for making the goal of European integration so important for policies of Georgia exceeds the foreign policy dimension. Specific motives for pursuing policies of European integration include the wish to counter aggressive attempts of Russia to extend its influence to Georgia; gaining benefits of political stability and economic development through European integration is also an important point. However, the prospects of internal development of the country is also an important consideration. While most Georgians believe that Georgia should be a European-style democracy, they also think that closer relations with the European Union will make that goal easier to attain.

2. What are the main internal and external challenges for Georgia in terms of European integration?

GN: The geographical position and regional environment of Georgia may be the most important challenge for its policies of European integration. The neighbors of Georgia are either strongly opposed to the expansion of EU influence in the region (as Russia does), or, for different reasons, have complex and ambivalent relations with the European Union. Turkey, that for a long time was a staunch ally of NATO and adamant aspirant of the EU membership, has started to reorient itself. Ukraine and Moldova, not immediate neighbors, may be the nations with whom Georgia has the strongest commonality of interests in the context of European integration. Unresolved territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

constitute another principal impediment as they project a negative image of Georgia as an inherently unstable country. The general image of the South Caucasus as a region of conflicts, as well as the image of Russia's obvious claim to domination in this part of its neighborhood makes many Europeans avoid closer involvement in this part of the world – especially if they give priority to the normalization of relations with Russia.

The failure of Georgia to consolidate its democratic institutions, as well as the low level of economic development are further major obstacles on the path to European integration.

3. What should the Georgian government do in order to ensure an irreversibility of European integration at the local and international level?

GN: Georgia needs to be consistent and proactive in its diplomatic efforts to engage with the European political elite on all levels: EU institutions, member states, political parties, opinion makers, business elites, etc. This should not only aim at promoting specific political objectives, but serve to improve the image of the country in Europe in general. For that purpose, it is also important to encourage people-to-people relations, including attracting more European tourists to Georgia.

In a long-term perspective, the development of liberal democratic institutions in Georgia should reach a new level. During the 2000s and later, Georgia achieved important successes in making its public institutions more effective, clean, and transparent. It has gained an image of a fairly safe and non-corrupt country. However, it still cannot be called a full democracy due to a tradition of fully dominant single party governments that cannot withstand the temptation to abuse rights of the opposition, media, and active citizen groups. The political

party system continues to be very weak. There is a long way to go in embedding a culture of tolerance in Georgia.

Finally, it is very important that Georgia takes full use of the new economic opportunities generated by its access to the European market thanks to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. Many Georgians remain somewhat sceptical about the capacity of Georgian businesses to successfully compete on the European level. The success of Georgian economic integration in the European market may make the commitment of Georgia to a European integration more sustainable in the long run, but also improve the country's image in Europe.

4. Why do the governments of Georgia constantly choose to comply with the EU conditions selectively?

GN: The selective approach may be explained by two main factors. The first is linked to a particular vision of the national interest of the country: It is only legitimate that on particular points, Georgia may have its own opinion on advisability of implementing certain regulations advocated by the EU. In particular, the low level of economic development of Georgia suggests that it absolutely needs high rates of economic growth strongly exceeding those of more developed nations; this may imply that the country should develop an environment that is as business-friendly as possible. According to some Georgians as well as international economic experts and practitioners, the implementation of some European regulations, especially in the economic sphere, may clash with this priority incurring high costs that are likely to suppress economic growth in the short term. While the strategic aim of European integration ultimately overcomes these considerations, Georgia often tries to postpone the implementation of some conditions as much as possible.

On the other hand, political elites of Georgia may sometimes assess certain conditions imposed by the EU as threatening to their position in government. However, as a rule, suggestions coming from European institutions in the area of democracy development and rule of law are considered with respect and governments almost never reject them outright, even if they consider them contrary to their party objectives. This makes the EU (as well as other European actors such as the Council of Europe) a powerful player in the area of democratic reforms in Georgia.

prospects of membership of Georgia in Euro-Atlantic institutions more realistic.

5. What are the threats and benefits of European integration for Georgia?

GN: The main threat coming from the process of European integration is the Russian reaction: as the experience of the 2008 war as well as the Russian reaction to the Ukrainian crisis in 2013-2014 have shown, Russia is ready to punish those nations that choose an independent path of development. However, the experience has also demonstrated that power of Russia is limited and mainly negative, as it cannot propose any attractive model of development.

As to benefits of European integration, expectations are the same as in other cases of Eastern European nations: they include greater stability, peace, prosperity, and faster and smoother development of democratic institutions.

6. What are the chances of Georgia to become a member of the Euro-Atlantic institutions in the period of the next 10-15 years?

GN: At the moment, such chances appear slim. This, however, does not preclude an enhanced cooperation in specific areas, and Georgians usually consider even limited progress in this area to be important. However, the international environment is generally unpredictable and trends may change fast and unexpectedly. Georgia should always be prepared if changed circumstances make