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Visa Liberalization for Georgia: What's Next?

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Introduction

On March 28, 2017 the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens to the Schengen Area officially entered into force. This was another historic decision on the road to Georgia's homecoming, its final integration in the European family. The visa regime liberalization is the fruit of a prolonged political process and chain of reforms, which were initiated back in June 2012 under the framework of EU-Georgia Visa Dialogue.

The launch of EU-Georgia negotiations on visa regime simplification was followed by the elaboration of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP)¹, which the European Commission gave to the Government of Georgia on February 25, 2013. A framework document for legislative harmonization and sector policy reform, it set forth key directions and requirements for visa-free short-term visits to the Schengen Area for Georgian citizens with biometric passports.

An open door to the European family and the right of free movement is one of many benefits Georgian citizens receive as a result of EU-Georgia cooperation. This initiative is unique as it reaches every citizen, making this hard-earned achievement on Georgia's European path very concrete and tangible.

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¹ State Commission on Migration Issues of Georgia, official web-site, EU-Georgia Visa Dialogue, Action Plan on Visa Liberalization; accessed on 02.04.2017, <http://migration.commission.ge/files/vlap-eng.pdf>

This decision, which can appear to be a technical change, has political significance. It plays a crucial role in the process of Georgia fulfilling its declared foreign policy objectives. The unhindered movement of Georgian citizens in the free world means not only more ties and better opportunities to penetrate the European market, but also establishing and developing civic relations, which in a modern system of interdependency is a cornerstone for pursuing the foreign policy.

Georgia's foreign policy ambitions go far beyond free travel on the European continent. As soon as visa liberalization officially entered into force, a new topic of interest emerged – the next phase of the EU-Georgian partnership. Both the local audience and Western partners are aware of Georgia's intention to not stop at visa liberalization and to continue to work toward eventual EU membership. However, the nature of Georgia's action plan for membership remains the subject of discussion: whether to pursue the policy under the existing cooperation framework or establish new formats and further instrumentalize them for ultimate approximation with membership goals.

Georgia and EU – Next Stage of Cooperation

In a joint statement issued on April 12, 2017, the Foreign Affairs Ministers of the Visegrad Group (V4) supported the European perspective of Eastern Partnership countries. The statement stipulates that Brussels' 2017 summit declaration should reflect the different aspirations of partner countries and offer a European perspective for interested partners.¹ The joint statement was made after a meeting in Warsaw between the foreign affairs ministers from the Visegrad Group and Eastern Partnership countries.

One month prior to the launch of the visa-free regime for Georgia, Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, paid an official visit to Georgia. During his speech at the official press-conference, where he assessed Georgia's road to visa liberalization, the commissioner also spoke about Georgia's European perspective. "Georgia is an example of progress and reforms that bring it one step further to its European path, to its European perspective," the commissioner stated.²

The remarks of Dimitris Avramopoulos were something new for Georgian society, as the numerous attempts by the Government of Georgia to include clauses on "European perspective" in official EU documents have traditionally been treated with reluctance by

¹Joint Statement on the Eastern Partnership of the Foreign Ministers of the #Visegrad Group; Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Poland(MFA) <https://twitter.com/PolandMFA/status/852171700112416768>

²Online Journal Civil Georgia, the European Commissioner Speaks of Georgia's European Perspective, 28.02.2017, <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=31065>

Brussels. Besides, EU representatives, both politicians and bureaucrats, have noted on many occasions that the European perspective was off the agenda and that it would be better for Georgia to focus on the fulfillment of its responsibilities stipulated in the Association Agreement (AA).

Despite of the GoG's requests, the 2014 Association Agreement ignored the prospect of Georgia joining the union. Although the preamble of the document acknowledges "the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia", no membership prospects are envisaged there, unlike the membership promise included in the Stabilization and Association Agreements with the Western Balkans.³

In the spring of 2015, the Georgian leadership tried again to receive official EU affirmation of the country's European perspective. Prior to the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit, President of Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili, former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and then Speaker of the Parliament David Usuphashvili published an open letter addressing President of the European Council Donald Tusk, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and former President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz. In the joint letter, the GoG called for acknowledging the country's "European perspective" at the EU's Riga Summit.⁴

Georgia's attempts have usually been treated with scepticism by Brussels and member states; however, the EU has always highlighted that Georgia is a success story and expressed sincere hopes for the country's further approximation to the European family. The latter statement is further evidenced by Georgia being named as a regional example of success in a 2016 Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy for the European Union.⁵

An examination of the historical experience of EU-Georgian relations reveals that progress in the forming of institutions and democratic development always moves EU-Georgian cooperation to a new stage. Hence, further democratization processes in the country increases the probability and opportunity of Tbilisi advancing to a qualitatively new stage of partnership with the Brussels.

The fact that visa liberalization and the AA are not the final achievement of EU-Georgia relations is also strongly supported by trends in various public opinion surveys:

- A question included in National Democratic Institution-funded research, carried out by the CRRC in March 2016, "Is the Government's declared goal of Georgia becoming

³Online Journal Civil Georgia, the European Commissioner Speaks of Georgia's European Perspective, 28.02.2017, <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=31065>

⁴Joint letter to the European Council President, His excellency Donald Tusk, Online Journal Civil Georgia, accessed on 06.04.2017, http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2015/Tusk_GEO.pdf

⁵Shared Vision Common action: A Stronger Europe, A global Strategy for European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, EEAS Website, June 2016 http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

an EU member acceptable or not”, received a positive response from 77% of respondents.⁶

- Moreover, according to the survey results published by the International Republican Institute (IRI) on April 4, 2017, 90% of respondents support the idea of Georgia joining the EU.⁷

It is important that public opinion is also reflected in official foreign policy documents. On December 29, 2016, Georgia’s supreme legislative body passed a resolution on basic foreign policy directions, which reads that the Association Agreement is not the final stage of cooperation and the ultimate goal of Georgia is to join the EU in compliance with Article 49 of the Treaty of European Union. Interestingly, this is the same parliament that, in the new version of the Constitution of Georgia, has the responsibility to define basic internal and foreign policy priorities for the government.

Other notable official documents on the parliamentary level include **Statements and Recommendations of EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee**, which serve the purpose of strengthening institutional ties between the European Parliament and the Parliament of Georgia, as well as the development of parliamentary diplomacy.

Statements by four EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committees (in the years 2015, 2016, 2017) highlight the fundamental position that “the Association Agreement is not the ultimate goal of EU-Georgian relations... and Georgia, like any European state, is entitled to apply for EU membership.”⁸

In this regard, a number of noteworthy and significant resolutions have been passed by the European Parliament, including the January 21, 2016 resolution on the EU Association Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.⁹ The document once again recognizes the right of European states to apply for EU membership if the necessary conditions are met.

⁶ Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a March 2016 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia. NDI website, accessed on 01.04.2017, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_vf.pdf

⁷ Political ratings and public opinion in IRI funded research, Online Journal Civil Georgia, 05.04.2017, <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=31169>

⁸ EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee, Fourth Meeting Final Statement and Recommendations, 15-16 February 2017, Website of Parliament of Georgia, http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/56297/4th_EU_Georgia_PAC_meeting_final_statement-adopted

⁹ Association Agreements / Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, 21 January, 2016, Website of European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2016-0018&language=EN&ring=P8-RC-2016-0068>

European Parliament resolution on Association Agreements / Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine
21 January, 2016

“Stresses that, pursuant to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, any European state may apply to become a member of the EU provided that it adheres to the principles of democracy, respects fundamental freedoms and human and minority rights, and ensures the rule of law...”

Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty¹⁰, which is referenced in both the Georgian and EU parliamentary resolutions, clarifies that any European state, which respects the values referred to in Article 2, such as the respect of fundamental human rights - including protection of minorities' rights, rule of law, equality, justice, freedom and democracy - and is committed to promoting them, may apply to become a member of the Union.¹¹

Submitting a formal application does not require complex procedures. When applying, the applicant state is not required to fill in an extensive questionnaire or deal with bureaucratic routine. The only requirement is to officially express the wish to join the Union in writing and forward it to the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The institutional procedure associated with joining the EU starts after the application is submitted.

¹⁰ Lisbon Treaty, Article 49, accessed on 01.04.2017, <http://www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-european-union-and-comments/title-6-final-provisions/136-article-49.html>

¹¹ Consolidated Treaty of the European Union, Article 2, Pg C115/17, accessed on 01.04.2017, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:115:0013:0045:en:PDF>

Bosnia and Herzegovina Official Application – February 15, 2016¹²



**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
PRESIDENCY**

Sarajevo, February 15, 2016

Your Excellency,

I have the honour, on behalf of Bosnia and Herzegovina, pursuant to the Statement on the commitment of institutions at all levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement the necessary reforms within the EU accession process, in accordance with Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, to present the application of Bosnia and Herzegovina for membership in the European Union.

Please accept the assurances of my highest consideration,

Dragan Čović PhD
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dragan Čović'.

*His Excellency
Bert Koenders, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
President of the Council of the European Union
Brussels*

¹² Escaping the First Circle of Hell or the Secret Behind Bosnian Reforms, ESI Report, 10.03.2016, <http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/ESI%20-%20Bosnia%20escaping%20the%20first%20circle%20of%20hell%20-%2010%20March%202016.pdf>

Procedures from submitting the Membership Application to Accession Negotiations¹³

- The applicant state submits an official application to the Council of European Union;
- The Council of European Union notifies the European Commission, European Parliament and national parliaments of member states on the application submitted by the applicant state;
- The European Commission sends the applicant state the Acquis Questionnaire and prepares an Opinion on the applicant state's readiness for the Accession Process; the European Commission checks the applicant against the Copenhagen Criteria;
- The applicant state is given, on average, three months to fill in the Commission's several thousand-question Questionnaire, however it is possible to prolong the process if necessary; it takes an average of one year for the Commission to formulate its opinion on the applications;
- The European parliament examines the submitted application and makes a decision;
- The decision to approve or reject an application is made by the Council of European Union based on the Commission's opinion and the European Parliament's recommendation; the decision of the Council of EU is conveyed to European Council for final approval.

Procedures from the start to the end of the Accession Process¹⁴

- The European Council decides to launch accession negotiations with a candidate state;
- The European Commission starts the procedure of acquis screening;
- A series of Accession Conferences commence with the candidate state on a ministerial level, where issues pertaining to the harmonization of the candidate state's law with EU legislation are discussed. A total of 35 chapters of the acquis are included on the agenda of the conferences;
- An accession treaty is signed with the candidate state after the membership initiative is supported by the Council of European Union, European Commission and European Parliament. The EU's decision on membership shall be ratified by the candidate state's parliament, as well as the national parliaments of member states.

¹³ From EU Membership Application to Accession Negotiations: Frequently Asked Questions, regional web portal European Western Balkans, accessed on 02.04.2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/02/15/from-eu-membership-application-to-accession-negotiations-frequently-asked-questions/>

¹⁴ European Neighborhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, accessed on 04.04.2017, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/croatia_en

EU Membership Criteria

A prospective member state's readiness for EU membership is determined based on the Copenhagen Criteria,¹⁵ which was approved in June 1993 at the Summit of the European Council:

- Political criteria: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- Economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;
- Legislative alignment (acquis criteria): ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the 'acquis'), and adherence to the aims of the political, economic and monetary union.

An applicant state has never been refused a candidate status in the history of the Union. The only exception is Morocco, whose rejection was motivated by the fact that it did not represent a European state.

As of today, Turkey, Serbia, Montenegro, FYR Macedonia and Albania all have candidate state status. Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo are potential candidates. The time required to complete the procedure from the formal application to receiving candidate status varies from state to state. For example, Turkey applied in 1987 and the country was granted candidate status only in 1997. Turkey's accession negotiations commenced in 2005 and are still underway.¹⁶

Unlike Turkey, other active candidate states went through the mentioned procedures relatively fast. Serbia applied in 2009, received candidate status in three years and the following year, 2013, a decision was made on the commencement of the accession process.

¹⁷

¹⁵European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Conditions for Membership, European Commission, accessed on 06.04.2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en

¹⁶ European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations - Turkey, European Commission, accessed on 04.04.2017, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey_en

¹⁷ European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations -Serbia, European Commission, accessed on 04.04.2017, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en

Country	Applied	Candidate	Accession Negotiations
Turkey	1987	1997	2005
Montenegro	2008	2010	2012
Serbia	2009	2012	2013
Macedonia ¹⁸ □	2004	2005	X
Albania	2009	2012	X
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	X	X
Kosovo ¹⁹ □□	X	X	X

EU Financial Instruments

In a rapidly changing world, the EU holds 9 key financial instruments for implementing foreign policy priorities that include both geographical and thematic instruments²⁰.

Geographical instruments:

- Instrument for Development Cooperation (DCI)
- Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance II (IPA)
- European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI)
- Instrument for Greenland (IfG)
- European Development Fund (EDF)

Thematic instruments:

- European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)
- Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP)
- Partnership Instrument (PI)
- Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation (INSC)

Presently, the key funding instrument of the EU for Georgia is the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI). The ENI framework covers programs such as Erasmus+; Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX); Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA); Neighborhood Investment Facility (NIF); and other related programs. In addition to the ENI, Georgia also benefits from thematic instruments,

¹⁸*Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia

¹⁹**This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence; https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/kosovo_en

²⁰Funding Instruments, European Commission, accessed on 06.04.2017, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/funding/funding-instruments-programming/funding-instruments_en

including the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).

EU extends its assistance to Georgia under ENI via the Single Support Framework (SSF) programming document. In the period of 2014-2017, from 335,000,000 to 410,000,000 euros in assistance will be allocated to Georgia.²¹ This number, when comparing using the principle of proportionality, is far less than the assistance provided under IPA II to accession candidate and potential candidate states.

**Allocated and budgeted financial assistance under IPA II
during years 2014-2020²²**

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018-2020	2014-20
Albania	83.7	86.9	89.7	92.9	296.3	649.5 million €
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39.7	39.7	42.7	43.7	*	165.8 million €
Macedonia	85.7	88.9	91.6	94.9	303.1	664.2 million €
Kosovo	83.8	85.9	88.7	91.9	295.2	645.5 million €
Montenegro	39.6	35.6	37.4	39.5	118.4	270.5 million €
Serbia	195.1	201.4	207.9	215.4	688.2	1,508.0 million €
Turkey	620.4	626.4	630.7	636.4	1,940.0	4,453.9 million €
Multi-support program (multi-country)	348.0	365.0	390.0	410.4	1,445.3	2,958.7 million €
* Presently unknown						

²¹ Programming of the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) - 2014-2020 Single Support Framework for EU support to Georgia (2014-2017); Pg- 5 -8; accessed on 06.04.2017, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/financing-the-enp/georgia_2014_2017_programming_document_en.pdf

²² Overview - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, European Commission, accessed on 06.04.2017, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en

Georgia's European Perspective

In addition to increasing its approximation to Europe's political, administrative and trade space, Georgia's aspiration to accession is obvious from its efforts to forge closer cooperation with the EU. The Preamble of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement acknowledges "the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia"²³ but EU officials often highlight that the association agreements signed with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine do not envisage any perspectives for membership.

However, as evidenced by the above-mentioned official foreign policy priorities documents, Georgia's main strategic goal is EU accession and the EU Association Agreement, as well as Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), visa liberalization and other integration-related initiatives, are the means to reach the ultimate goal.

Two presumable scenarios manifest themselves for the country to achieve its strategic foreign policy objectives. Those scenarios may guide Georgia on its European path:

1. EU declares a European perspective for Georgia (independently or along with Ukraine and Moldova) and grants the country potential candidate status; this could mean Georgian transitioning to become a beneficiary to the **Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance** (IPA II) from its existing bilateral financial assistance program (ENI); the next steps would involve Georgia submitting an official application and receiving the Candidate status.

This was the road taken by the Western Balkan states. The process involved EU leaders offering Western Balkans a European perspective at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit²⁴, which was later followed by concluding the Stabilization and Association Agreements, joining the IPA program, submitting an official application and officially granting the countries candidate status at different stages of the process.

Exceptions to this path to membership are Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which still remain potential candidates. Bosnia and Herzegovina recently applied for membership and is currently fulfilling the application procedures. Kosovo has not officially applied yet. Bureaucratic procedures allow a state that has not officially applied for EU membership to have a European perspective and correspondingly be viewed as a potential candidate, which benefits from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).

²³ EU-Georgia Association Agreement, Pg L 261/5, EEAS Website, accessed on 01.04.2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/association_agreement.pdf

²⁴EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki Declaration, 21 June, 2003, Website of European Commission, <http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release PRES-03-163 en.htm>

In light of these developments, it is crucial for Georgia to persuade the EU and member states that it has more ambition and deserves promotion on the basis of a “more for more” principle. It is also essential to differentiate Eastern Partnership states which have signed AA and those which have the desire for further integration with EU.

Taking into account the regional and target-group differentiation policy of the European Union, achieving these goals independently will pose a serious challenge for Georgia. The policy should be implemented under the umbrella of the Eastern Partnership or outside it, e.g. by elaborating a new **Stabilization and Association Process (SAP)** or other integrational initiative.

2. In the second scenario, Georgia does not wait for a European perspective or potential candidate status, but rather it applies for accession and creates a *fait accompli* for Brussels. This step may be taken anytime, referring to Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty. However, it should be considered that, before taking this historical step of a qualitatively new nature, it is essential that the country prepares the necessary political basis to achieve the desired results.

Unlike the first option, this road is shorter, however it is also more complicated and risky. This is first and foremost because the application process may be stretched out and the applicant country’s expectations may be quite unclear. Besides, until the process is complete, Georgia will be unable to utilize the benefits offered to potential candidate states. An example is Iceland, which did not have a European perspective and the only way for the country to gain access to IPA benefits was to acquire official candidate status.^{25*}

It is noteworthy that, unlike Ukraine, small Georgia and Moldova have an upper hand in one criteria of accession – Absorption Capacity.²⁶ Correspondingly, it will be logical for Georgia to coordinate its actions in this direction with Moldova. The visa liberalization process revealed that being paired with Ukraine is nowhere near as advantageous from the political standpoint.

As noted in scenario one, it is obvious that the EU will face difficulties awarding only Georgia and/or Moldova with a European perspective and not include the Ukrainians. Therefore, Brussels may even prefer for Georgia to formally apply under its own initiative. Such an action will provide EU with more room for political manoeuvring as the membership request would be initiated from the third country itself.

^{25*}Iceland applied for Accession in July 2009, but became an IPA beneficiary only in June 2010, after being assigned Candidate State status by the European Council; Iceland joined the program in 2011 and utilized benefits designated for Candidate State until the year 2013, before the newly elected Iceland government halted Accession Negotiations.

²⁶ “Just what is this “absorption capacity” of the European Union?”, CEPS, 6 October 2006, <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/just-what-absorption-capacity-european-union>

Taking the EU bureaucratic structure into consideration, Georgia needs to act in a consistent and methodical manner in order to have a better chance of fulfilling its strategic objective. The GoG should not have a false expectation that it will be served with candidate benefits “out of turn” or be promoted “in advance”. It is also unlikely that the EU and member states will agree to elaborate a new instrument exclusively for Georgia. Hence, the GoG should focus on existing and active technical procedures and utilize them for its own interests.

The only way to increase the theoretical probability of the EU introducing a new instrument for Georgia is to create a *fait accompli* by applying for membership. Such a step creates a narrow door of opportunity for Brussels to make a specific decision regarding the expansion of its partnership with Georgia. In the best-case scenario, Georgia will be assigned candidate status and will gain access to IPA II benefits. In the worst-case scenario, a historical precedent of a European state being declined candidacy will be established. But it is possible that the EU will find a pragmatic solution and offer Georgia a new cooperation model, e.g. partnership with accession prospect and a new financial instrument other than the IPA II.

Georgia’s European Path and Historical Window of Opportunity

In an analysis of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration, the lack or absence of international organizations’ political will often surfaces and becomes the focus of discussion. In debates over the issue, the main reference is made to the so-called “Historical Window of Opportunity”, underscoring that when such a moment appears, Georgia should meet all the criteria necessary to join the European family.

Currently the EU is undergoing the process of strategic reflection on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). A noteworthy event in this regard is the elaboration of the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy and its follow-up process – the revision of the Neighborhood Policy. Both the aforementioned document and the strategic reflection process are crucially important as the current EU Security Policy is based on the obsolete 2003 European Security Strategy document.

Another notable fact is that, out of the 16 ENP states, only Georgia and Tunisia are mentioned in the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy. The success of these two states on the regional level serve as a stimulus for new positive changes. The strategic reflection process that is developing on the institutional level may provide a push for the opening of a “window of opportunity” for states striving to complete their integration in the European family.

The Rome declaration, which was signed at the 60-years anniversary summit and celebrates the signing of the EU founding treaty, should also be mentioned. On March 25, 2017 the

leaders of member states gathered “for a refreshing unique alliance of free nations” and signed the declaration, which sets forth a common vision on the EU’s future for the next 10 years. Despite unprecedented internal and foreign challenges, the declaration stipulates that the Union remains open for European nations that respect European values and facilitate their wide distribution.²⁷

“...We want a Union which remains open to those European Countries that respect our values and are committed to promoting them....”

Changes emerging on the international level are evidence that Georgia should continue its active work to achieve the set foreign policy objectives. Changes to the global architecture complicate identifying when the “window of opportunity” will open for Georgia, which means that the state should not only prepare for the opportunity, but should also participate in the process of making it appear.

Recommendations

Participation in the process of accelerating the appearance of a window of opportunity and making the most out of it requires the active involvement of both the GoG and civil society. The recommendations below include general, as well as concrete, steps to be taken on Georgia’s European path:

- It is highly recommended for the government to make a political statement proclaiming the new association agenda an ambitious plan for moving closer to the strategic objective of membership and for preparing a foundation for receiving the European perspective;
- The government should develop a strategy on moving forward to achieving EU membership objectives, which should act as a standalone conceptual document to lay the political ground for Georgia to receive a Membership perspective;
- It is highly important that in accordance with the country’s foreign policy agenda, new approaches pertaining to membership be reflected on during the revision of conceptual, as well as strategic documents, such as Foreign Policy Strategy, National Security Concept, etc;

²⁷ Declaration of the leaders of 27 member states and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, Website of European Council, 25 March 2017, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/25-rome-declaration/?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=The+Rome+Declaration

- In addition, the government should take the initiative and launch a preemptive legal screening process, which would ensure the country's preparedness for future technical and formal proceedings;
- It is crucial to make Georgia's membership a topic of discussion at various international events that are attended by the government, as well as representatives of civil society;
- It is highly recommended that the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum send the GoG and the parliament a recommendation to call for a formal application; in addition, non-governmental and civil organizations outside the platform should also actively contribute to the cause;
- The discussion about membership should be intensified in the capitals of our friendly EU allies (Eastern Europe, Sweden, Baltic states) and it should be discussed as frequently as possible;
- Preparatory discussions shall be launched in the capitals of Western Europe; it should be underscored that the discussion concerns the affirmation of Georgia's European perspective, not accession;
- It is recommended to add the issue of Georgia's European perspective to the agenda of the Association Parliamentary Council, Association Committee and Association Council;
- The government shall make an active effort to force the European Parliament to demand differentiating the states with a signed AA from other participants of the Eastern Partnership; the European Parliament can submit a recommendation to the European Commission and the member states calling for the elaboration of a new strategy regarding those states, with the European Perspective in mind;
- The discussion of the topic under the bilateral political dialogue format should be intensified.

Preparing a political foundation will make it possible for the GoG to submit an official membership application. There is no need to go into specifics about the dates. The application should be submitted after the new European Commission is appointed in 2019. The submission should coincide with the process of implementing the second EU-Georgia Association Agenda, which is scheduled until 2020.

It is difficult to predict what Georgia will be able to achieve. Without a doubt, both local and international political fluctuations should be taken into account. However, it is certain that, after laying a solid political foundation and implementing a new wave of reforms, Georgia will be even closer to the strategic objective of membership. What is paramount is to make membership into an irreversible process and express readiness for further discussions, both within local and international political and civil circles.

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