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EXPERT COMMENT

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## Should Georgia Apply for EU Membership in 2024?

A plan to submit a formal application for EU membership by 2024 was announced recently by the ruling Georgian Dream party. The decision was announced a few weeks before the parliamentary election, during the election campaign, and was later confirmed by a parliamentary resolution. Setting a deadline for EU application is an ambitious move, especially considering the current enlargement fatigue in the EU. Consequently, it has sparked debates in Georgia on whether the timing of the initiative was justified and what would happen if the EU declined the request.

The sensitivity of the issue was notably apparent when the announcement drew virtually no reaction from Brussels. However, preparing for a formal application could also have the potential to provide impetus for internal reforms and take Georgia further along the path to EU integration.

At the invitation of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from France, Germany and Sweden have given their responses to the following three questions:

- **Considering current challenges in the EU, what could be the costs and benefits for Georgia's European ambitions of an initiative to apply for EU membership in 2024?**
- **If Georgia does decide to apply for EU membership, would it be wiser to do so alone or together with Ukraine and/or Moldova?**
- **What strategy/tactics do you recommend to the government of Georgia (and other EaP countries) to best handle the EU's scepticism towards the European aspirations of the EU associated countries?**



**Prof. Dr. Tanja Börzel**, *Director of the Center for European Integration, Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany*

The EU has its hands full with the four Western Balkan countries that have membership aspirations. Yet, it cannot simply say “no” to an application from Georgia, but needs to justify its decision in the light of its membership criteria. It would have to argue that Georgia has neither stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, nor a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU. This may not be so easy in the light of the performance of some of the Western Balkan candidates. Yet, the EU has made it quite clear that it would not accept any new members with protracted territorial disputes. Moreover, even though the Western Balkans are unlikely to join before 2024, they would eventually bring the EU to more than 30 members. This could allow the EU to invoke the “fourth” Copenhagen criteria, namely its capacity to absorb additional members.

Neither of these two issues precludes membership for Georgia per se. Rather than simply rejecting Georgia’s application for membership, the EU might seek to “kick the can down the road”, as it did in the case of Turkey in 1989. While the EU confirmed Ankara’s eventual membership, it deferred the matter to a future by which time Turkey would have made political and economic progress, improved its relations with Greece and settled the conflict with Cyprus. Ten years later, the European Council of Helsinki recognized Turkey as a candidate.

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**Dr. Laure Delcour**, *Associate Professor, University Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris*

Given both the scope of challenges currently faced by the EU and the reluctance of some EU member states to further enlargement, there is little chance that Georgia will be granted the status of candidate country in the coming years. If faced with a premature application, the EU is likely to respond with a request that the Association Agreement be fully implemented before possible further moves are contemplated. Having said that, irrespective of the EU’s answer, a formal application for EU membership may also enhance Georgia’s visibility on the EU’s radar screen.



History shows that the EU has usually (even though not systematically) enlarged by admitting several countries together. Applying simultaneously enables candidate countries to share experience and it also reinforces (even if slightly) their weight vis-à-vis the EU. From the EU’s perspective, group applications

allow the Union to use “naming and shaming”, which creates additional leverage to foster reforms in those countries lagging behind.

However, in the case of the three associated countries one can assume that, given its size and population, Ukraine’s application would raise specific challenges for the EU. This has to be taken into consideration by Georgia (and Moldova).

I think the key lies with mutual understanding by the two sides of the challenges they face. While it is important for the EaP countries to recognise the situation in the EU and remain realistic in terms of expectations, their governments could also try to raise EU awareness of, and sensitivity to, the external and internal challenges they face in seeking integration with the EU.



**Rikard Jozwiak**, *Europe Editor Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, Prague*

I am in favour of the Georgian government submitting a formal EU membership application by 2024. It is a bold move, likely to end in initial disappointment, but it is obvious to me that Tbilisi needs to move forward in its relationship with the EU and that the Eastern Partnership has become something of a straitjacket for the country. This move can kick-start your European aspirations again – but it should only be done in coordination with Ukraine and Moldova. Alone, your application will gather dust in the drawers of the European Commission, just as Bosnia’s did. What your government needs to do is to make sure that this move has cross-party support, that all your politicians explain to your public that this is a marathon without a clear finishing line, and that your diplomats in enlargement-sceptical countries in western Europe work overtime to convince politicians and local populations that Georgian membership does not mean the import of criminality, political instability and economic mismanagement.

Of course, Tbilisi has to be prepared that many EU countries, possibly openly, but more probably via diplomatic channels, will try to discourage a Georgian membership application. You have to be ready for the delays this can cause and the EU fatigue this can trigger in your country.

But there is one thing Georgia has to keep in mind: its road to EU membership goes via Moscow. As long as there is Soviet-romantic nationalist rule in the Kremlin, your journey to Brussels remains blocked.

**Dr. Ketevan Bolkvadze**, *Senior Lecturer in political science, Lund University, Sweden*



There is little doubt that Georgia's path to development and welfare lies in further integration with the EU. However, we need to ask ourselves: what is EU integration all about? There has been a tendency among the political elites in Georgia to portray the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as a preparatory step towards membership. But the EaP is not about membership and was, in fact, designed as an alternative to it. Instead, the EaP is about bringing Eastern neighbours closer to European norms of governance – rule of law, free and fair elections, protection of minorities – and, as a result, extending the European model of welfare in the region.

Yet, the current pace of democratic reforms in Georgia leaves much to be desired and, as noted by several MEPs, Tbilisi's ambition for membership is not matched by equally ambitious reforms. Recently, increased politicization of the judiciary and electoral irregularities have further solidified the existing dominant party system. The Georgian authorities need to recognize that the EU – facing rule-of-law backsliding in Hungary and Poland – is now ever more vigilant against admitting states that do not adhere to this crucial dimension of the Copenhagen criteria. Georgia still has a lot to gain from the 'carrots' it obtained through the Association Agreement, however many of the objectives have been thwarted, including by the authorities' handling of foreign investment projects (Caucasus Online, Anaklia port). The EaP countries need to get serious about reforming their politicized institutions in order to convince Brussels that they would be an asset – rather than a liability – to a Union which is already experiencing enlargement fatigue.

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