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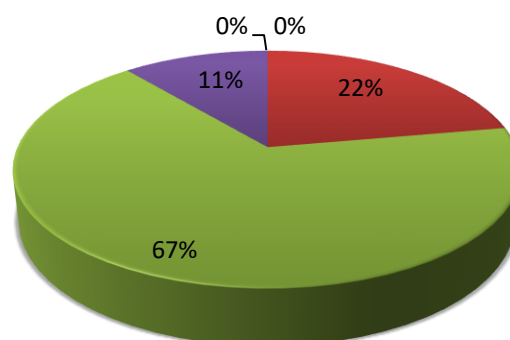
Pundits weight on Georgia's Europeanization challenges

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) asked twenty Georgian and foreign experts and scholars about the important trends and prospects of Georgia's European integration. According to the survey results, the pundits believe that close relations with the EU and democratization processes in Georgia are closely linked and that Georgia will find it hard to consolidate its democracy without the EU's support. Experts also believe that the process of European integration has a solid basis in Georgia and is supported by both the political elite and the population. The international experts argued, however, that the EU still does not view Georgia as capable of joining the EU anytime soon. Accordingly, the democratizing pressure used by the EU in Georgia is above the EaP average but far below European standards.

When will Georgia join the EU?

The experts and scholars were asked about the timeframe of Georgia's potential EU membership. Some of the surveyed experts noted that there are too many factors involved in the process of EU enlargement and it is very difficult to predict when Georgia will join the EU. Experts did, however, make approximate predictions. The majority of those surveyed (67 %) predicted Georgia will join the EU in 20 years in a best case scenario. A much smaller number – 22 % – expect Georgia's EU membership in 10 years. Interestingly, no pundits predicted that Georgia would never join the EU or that it would receive membership in less than 10 years.

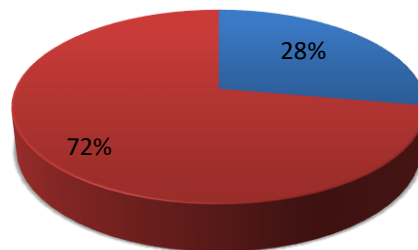
■ in 5 Years ■ in 10 Years ■ in 20 Years ■ in 30 Years ■ Never



Can Georgia democratize without European integration?

GIP also asked the pundits about the links between processes of democratization and Europeanization [approximation to the EU]. The majority of respondents (72 %) indicated that Georgia could democratize without close relations with the EU but the process would be rockier and lengthier, compared to the 28% who said Europeanization is a necessary precondition for successful democratization and that there would be no democratization without the parallel process of Europeanization. Interestingly, unlike other questions in the survey, opinions of foreign and Georgian experts significantly diverged on this issue: 90 % of foreign experts said that Georgia could still be able to democratize without European integration although it would be more difficult. In contrast, the majority of domestic experts (56%) argued that democratization without close relations with the EU would not be possible.

- European integration and close relations with the EU is a necessary precondition for Georgia to democratize
- Georgia can still democratize without the European integration but the process will be more lengthy and complicated
- There is no direct connection between democratization and European integration. Georgia can be fully democratic without close relations with the EU



How responsive is Georgia's population to the process of European integration?

GIP also asked pundits about the presence of the “permissive consensus” in the context of Georgia, or to what extent the population approves of the process of European integration and whether there is a consensus between the political elite and the population around this issue. The majority of interviewed pundits, both Georgian and international, indicated that European integration is supported by the majority of the population and that permissive consensus does exist in Georgia. However, unlike the EU member states, Georgia lacks many tangible incentives, the population is less informed and European integration in Georgia has so far failed to deliver significant economic and social progress. Therefore, many respondents also believe that support for European integration may prove to be less stable than in EU countries and may even be reversed at some point. To prevent this, the Georgian government needs to conduct a better information campaign about the benefits of the EU and the EU needs to keep providing tangible incentives, according to respondents.

What are the current challenges for EU-Georgia relations?

Pundits and scholars were also asked about the short-term and long-term challenges for Georgia's European integration and EU-Georgia relations. A problem with *the rule of law and democratization* was the most frequently mentioned long-term challenge to Georgia's EU membership (both by the Georgian and international pundits and scholars). The second long-term challenge identified by many experts was the deteriorated security situation due to territorial conflicts, Russia's intervention and Georgia's military weakness. Other long-term challenges mentioned by respondents were a functioning market economy, effective state institutions, and a stable political landscape. Among the short-term challenges most often mentioned by the pundits were the problems with the visa-free regime with the EU, especially the situation with unfounded asylum applications in many EU countries.

Democracy and rule of law were also the most frequent answer to the question concerning what the Georgian government has to do in order to be able to join the EU. Other responses included development of a functioning market economy with elements of a welfare state and the improvement of good governance. Experts also acknowledged the territorial conflicts and the borderization process near the occupied zones as a major challenge but noted that there is little that the Georgian government can do about those issues on its own.

Is EU democratic conditionality effective in Georgia?

The survey also asked the political observers and scholars about the effectiveness of EU's democratic conditionality in Georgia. Interestingly, the responses by Georgian and foreign experts significantly differed from each other. Most Georgian experts, who looked at EU conditionality from the Georgian perspective, assessed it as effective, satisfactory or average. They also mentioned the importance of positive conditionality (or awarding progress through various incentives). The experts mentioned the Rustavi 2 case and the visa liberalization process as successful examples of EU conditionality. Experts also underlined that conditionality will be more effective if it involves local democracy-supporting actors such as NGOs.

The foreign pundits, on the other hand, assessed the overall effectiveness of the EU conditionality in Georgia rather negatively overall. The majority of surveyed international pundits put the application of conditionality in Georgia in a broader context, arguing that whereas the EU conditionality in Georgia was satisfactory in the context of the Eastern Partnership, it fell short of the conditionality standards that are generally applied in the context of EU enlargement. This means that the EU does not consider Georgia as a potential candidate for EU membership. As one respondent put it, "[the EU conditionality in Georgia is sufficient] for an EaP country, but the EU does not see Georgia as mature enough to be part of EU's political sphere." Another expert provided a similar argument: "The EU does not view Georgia as a potential candidate for EU membership; therefore the conditionality is often limited. But [the conditionality in Georgia is] higher than in many other neighborhood countries." The foreign respondents suggested that the EU should provide more tangible incentives, including the

membership perspective, and react more strongly to democratic backsliding by the Georgian government.

Is there risk for Georgia to lose the visa free regime with the EU?

Finally, the GIP also asked the experts their opinion about the most pressing issue of recent EU-Georgia relations: talks about the suspension of the visa liberalization agreement amidst the increasing number of Georgian asylum seekers and the criminal activities committed by Georgian citizens in EU countries. Interestingly a large majority of the surveyed experts (all but one) said that the danger of the suspension of the visa free regime is either not real or real but unlikely in the near future and that there is enough time to improve the situation. Hence, the overall mood of the experts is rather optimistic. The pundits had several recommendations for the Georgian government: intensify its communication and coordination work with the governments of the concerned EU members; better inform the citizens of Georgia; and introduce tough legislative and practical measures to reduce the number of asylum seekers and other negative side effects of the visa liberalization between EU and Georgia.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey shows both positive and negative trends and predictions in EU-Georgia relations. On a positive side, the surveyed experts believe that the visa liberalization regime with the EU is not in immediate danger and that the Georgian government has enough time to avoid its abolishment. More broadly, the pundits argued that the process of Georgia's European integration has been supported both by the political elite and the population and confirmed that "permissive consensus" exists in the country. The experts also argued that Europeanization and democratization are closely interlinked and Georgia will find it hard to democratize without European support. On the negative side, many foreign experts argued that the EU still treats Georgia as not eligible for EU membership, which is also reflected in the downgraded application of democratic conditionality; perhaps it is above the EaP average but it falls short of EU standards.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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