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# EXPERT INTERVIEW

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## Georgia's European Perspective

### Expert Interview with Professor Dr. Tanja A. Börzel

Interview by Shota Kakabadze, GIP Junior Policy Analyst

*"I think Georgian society, and I'm saying Georgian society, I'm not talking about politicians here, has to make up its mind. It cannot have both the cake and eat it at the same time. If you want to be part of Europe and the European Union, you have to accept European values."*

**Prof. Dr. Tanja A. Börzel** is Professor of Political Science and holds the Chair for European Integration at the Otto-Suhr-Institute for Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin. Prof. Dr. Tanja A. Börzel is the director of the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script" and directs the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence "Europe and its Citizens". Her research mainly focuses on questions of governance and institutional change because of Europeanization, as well as on the diffusion of European ideas and policies within and outside of the EU. Her recent publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford University Press 2016, co-edited with Thomas Risse), *The Oxford Handbook of Governance and Areas of Limited Statehood* (Oxford University Press 2018, co-edited with Thomas Risse and Anke Draude), *Governance under Anarchy. Effective and Legitimate in Areas of Limited Statehood*, with Thomas Risse (Cambridge University Press forthcoming), and *The Politics of Non-Compliance in the European Union* (Cornell University Press).

Professor Dr. Börzel was kind enough to join us in an online discussion on Zoom and answer questions about Georgia's European perspective for the coming decades, about the stumbling blocks on the country's Europeanisation path, as well as ongoing developments and their implications.

*GIP: Prof. Börzel, the government of Georgia have already promised that they would apply for EU membership in 2024. How would you assess the government's promise? In your opinion, does it sound realistic or are they looking at another disappointment in three years' time?*

**TB:** I think Georgia is free to apply, I mean, any state can apply for membership as long as it is a European one, but application doesn't mean admission. As you know, there is a process - countries have to meet the famous Copenhagen criteria. And, in my assessment, Georgia is quite far away from meeting these criteria, particularly given some of the events of the past months. So, I don't think the EU will be able, or would want, to stop Georgia from applying, but Georgia should be prepared for a lukewarm response. Not only because of a general and still ongoing enlargement fatigue in the EU. There are still a number of countries which the EU has actually acknowledged as having candidate status, yet the accession processes are advancing very slowly at best. So, Georgia's membership in the EU is a very, very, long-term perspective.

*GIP: In your opinion, has the Eastern Partnership exhausted itself considering the levels of backsliding on democracy experienced among the nations in transit over the last few years? What would be the way to move forward?*

**TB:** There are always this famous fifth Copenhagen criteria on the preparedness of countries to enter the EU, and that has different dimensions. I think when the Copenhagen criteria were, I wouldn't say invented, but formulated, what people had in mind was mostly the institutional design of the EU. The issue at that time was the extent to which, existing EU institutions would be able to accommodate more countries Eastern enlargement was on the horizon

this involved already a big group of new members, and a group of countries with diverse preferences, diverse backgrounds, politically socioeconomically, culturally. So, there was an anticipation that this would make the decision-making process in the EU more difficult. The anticipation was actually not met.

In fact, there've been a lot of studies, in some of which I have been involved myself, that have shown that enlargement has done nothing to undermine the effectiveness of EU policy-making. The problems that the EU has with its actorness, its actual capacity to make decisions and put them into practice are not primarily related to the growing number of member states. So, I think what the preparedness issue has turned into is not so much about the institutions. We can talk about extended, even further qualified, majority voting, but it won't solve the problem that EU member states find it increasingly difficult to "upgrade the common interest". I think that the challenge really is that we have member states with increasingly diverging preferences, particularly when it comes to the fundamental principles or values of the EU, and that brings us back to the preparedness of the EU for accepting new member states.

It used to be institutions, then it became an issue of public opinion - that the peoples of Europe had to be taken along with the deepening and widening of the EU - the introduction of the Euro and Eastern enlargement as the two most salient changes. Today, the EU wants to make sure that it only accepts countries that have fully internalized the fundamental values and principles the EU has been built around in order not to face the problems that we've been seeing increasingly with member states like Hungary and Poland, but also Slovenia! The fundamental values of the EU are increasingly being contested, not only in Central and Eastern Europe. There are other member states in which

liberal democracy is under stress. Let's wait and see what's going to happen with the French elections. What I'm saying is illiberal democracy is not only a problem of potential new member states. It has become an issue within the EU. And as long as we have not resolved that, I think taking on new member states that are not fully consolidated democracies with a clear record and a clear commitment and a compliance with liberal values, makes enlargement a very far away perspective.

*GIP: Can the membership perspective have a positive effect on the EaP countries' commitment to reforms and democratization?*

**TB:** Well, existing research shows that a credible membership perspective is pretty much the only thing that can effectively support democratization processes. Democratization is a process that cannot be induced and certainly not enforced from the outside. The EU has never done that. Even in normative terms, the EU has never pursued democracy promotion by force! Empirically, we have hardly any evidence that shows that you can actually impose democracy from the outside – think Afghanistan. What external actors can do is to support the democratization processes in countries where there is sufficient momentum and where there is a strong social force that pushes for democracy. External actors can empower these forces and the EU has done this very successfully in the Eastern enlargement.

But we have to be mindful of the fact that these countries had strong democratization movements that the EU could empower. And the membership perspective then was very important. By providing credible and sizable incentives for political forces that are not necessarily in favor of democracy, the EU can make a difference on the membership perspective as long as it's not too far

away. In Georgia's case, I'm not sure to what extent a membership perspective for the political elite would be able to make a difference, maybe for the population. To find out, the EU would have to tell Georgia: You want to be part of the EU sometime, then you have to accept now that liberal values are the sine qua non. And that entails that you respect minority rights, including LGBTQI+. This would be the kind of discourse the EU would have to conduct. And I don't see that the Eastern Partnership is able to lead such a discourse.

So that is the one thing. The other thing with the Eastern Partnership is its lack of discursive power. The Eastern Partnership is set up to work with credible and sizable incentives, but I think these incentives are exhausted. Beyond visa liberalization and access to the Single Market, there is not much left to entice political elites in the Eastern Partnership countries to introduce democratic reforms. In fact, the incentives the EU has offered so far come with a hefty price tag due to conditionality: anti-corruption reforms reduce the rents Georgian elites seek, and compliance with EU technical standards imposes costs on Georgian business. So, the incentives that the EU can credibly offer often don't work. And the technical and financial assistance the Eastern Partnership provides is not sufficient to pay-off the costs. A membership perspective, is not in the cards in the foreseeable future either.

Where the EU could make a difference is by not alimentering corrupt and repressive regimes. It has to walk a fine line between maintaining stability in the immediate neighborhood and engaging with corrupt and repressive regimes. Still, I think that EU has to draw some red lines – it has red lines obviously, but it has to actually enforce these red lines much more vigorously. In Georgia, the EU has done a fairly good job in the past months in this regard. With Ukraine, I am not so sure. Some

of the developments we see with Zelensky are worrying. He has not turned out to be the sort of forceful democratic reformer a lot of people had hoped for, including, I think, some of his own voters. So, this will be very difficult to deal with because Ukraine is in a such delicate situation.

Again, the Eastern Partnership, in my view, is not very well-prepared to deal with these issues. This is a rather technical framework, based on the experience of Eastern enlargement. It is based on the assumption that the EaP countries are all willing to engage in democratic reforms the EU would like to see and would like to support. That's just not the case. So, we have to think about different tools to build societal resilience against power and rent seeking regimes. Resilience building could be a way, but again, the Eastern Partnership has not really built these principles systematically into its framework. There is a lot of institutional path dependency. So, I'm not very optimistic that the Eastern Partnership as such offers a good framework to deal with the challenges we are facing in our Eastern, but also our Southern, neighborhood.

*GIP: you mentioned that the Eastern Partnership incentives have been exhausted while membership is a perspective that is too far away. So how would you assess the new associated trio format? Do you think that could be a temporary platform, which would somehow give a boost to those associate countries to stay on the track of reforms?*

**TB:** It depends. We have had different generations of association agreements. Let's not forget that even the Eastern enlargement started with association and partnership agreements. It depends on how they are designed, and they have been a very important first step towards enlargement or towards closer relationships, more

broadly speaking, in the past. But the design is different with regards to the Eastern Partnership countries than it was with regard to the Eastern European candidate countries. The EaP countries are much more heterogeneous. Differentiating between those three that have membership aspirations and the other three that have not is a step in the right direction. However, there is an important part missing that focuses on the capacities of the countries to cope with the negative consequences of the reforms that the EU would like to see. Particularly when it comes to the economies and the societies. The benefits of many economic and political reforms are not immediately felt or are outweighed by the substantial cost of these reforms. In the past the EU provided some compensation for that. This is not only about money. It is also about what these reforms are supposed to look like - the current EU frameworks do not pay sufficient attention anymore on what Bruszt and Langbein have called the developmental capacities of countries.

Some would criticize the EU for its neo-liberal approach of focusing on deregulation and privatization, opening up markets, and not paying attention to the social costs of these reforms. Given its history the EU's approach might actually resonate more with Georgia and the Georgian economy and Georgian society than with some of the other countries, but still the costs are there. And Georgia is facing huge challenges when it comes to social and economic policies, at least as far as my assessment of the country goes. The association agreements are not adequately designed to take care of the social and economic consequences of the reforms that EU expects from association countries. The EU has not sufficiently addressed this issue. I'm not sure whether the EU is willing to redesign the association agreements in a way that would actually replicate its past

success of in bringing past accessing countries closer to the EU.

*GIP: In your opinion, is the change of the administration in the USA and current tense relationship with the Kremlin going to have any impact on the level of EU's involvement with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova? Should we be expecting more coordinated engagement from Washington and Brussels?*

**TB:** I think it's fair to say that the Southern Caucasus is not a top priority of the Biden administration. The US has other fish to fry. At the same time, the Biden administration is probably much more aware of the importance of the region for the stability of the shared neighborhood between Europe and Russia. The Biden administration is very concerned about Russia, and the Southern Caucasus is a region where the interest of Russia and the so-called West clash. The Ukraine is a case in point. So, I think Georgia plays a role, not as such, but in the bigger picture on how to deal with Russia and its interferences in the EU's neighborhood.

Whether this will have some immediate implications for Georgia, I'm not so sure. If it's Georgia's aspirations to join NATO, this is as far away as an EU membership perspective. What might change depends a little bit on how Biden's Club of Democracy initiative plays out. Biden's attempt to mend the US's relations with its European allies has received a major blow by its unilateral decision to leave Afghanistan. We have yet to see a major change in US foreign policy, also with regard to the democratization stability dilemma we already talked about with regard to Ukraine. I would be surprised if the Biden administration is immune to that dilemma or would solve it in a different way than how the EU has been addressing it. So, I'm not so sure whether

there're going to be sea changes with regard to the Southern Caucasus or Georgia in particular.

*GIP: How would you assess the impact of German-Russian relations on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic perspective? Do you think the election outcome in Germany is going to alter the current state of affairs?*

**TB:** Germany has a differentiated approach, not only to Russia, but also to China. It's not only Russia, the question is how do we deal with authoritarian regimes that are too big to ignore or to simply constrain. China, is actually the bigger issue, maybe not for Georgia, but for German foreign policy. Also, because the Biden administration has less issues with Russia. China is the big elephant in the room. This is not only because it's authoritarian, this is Russia too, but it is economically performing so well. It's also presenting itself as an alternative model to the liberal, Western model of democracy and market economy. That makes China not only a competitor, but a real systemic rival. Russia is a declining power. It does not have the economic and certainly not the political clout to be a challenge to the international order, which is still predominantly liberal.

Yes, we have a shared neighborhood and Russia is important. But for the next election in Germany it's much more important to shape our foreign policy towards China, because this is also the direction in which the US administration is pushing Europe and Germany, in particular. We've been far too cozy with China. Even German business has realized that it has become far too dependent on Chinese markets. The next German government will to come up with a more nuanced, differentiated approach and, there's a lot currently going on in Germany, not only because of the

Biden administration, but also because, for instance.

Germany had a differentiated foreign policy during the entire Cold War. We have always tried to combine assertiveness with cooperation. In my view, Nord Stream 2 was a mistake, but Biden and Merkel have worked out a sort of compromise that allows Germany to finish this project, which anyway is almost completed -so, there is no point in stopping it. It gives Germany something that a lot of people don't understand: economic linkage comes with political leverage. Russia is far more dependent on gas exports to the EU and Germany than the other way round. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline gives Germany and the EU some leverage over Russia.

I think we should not focus too much on this pipeline. Beyond Nord Stream, what other issues do you have with Germany? Put it that way, if the big elephant is out of the room, which I think it is now, what's left?

I understand why Georgia, Ukraine and other countries are concerned about Nord Stream 2. But Germany is not the only country in the EU that is looking for some more cooperative relationship with Putin. Let's not forget that! Sanctions against Russia, and a more assertive foreign policy towards Russia in general, have not been blocked by Germany alone and I wouldn't even say mostly by Germany. So, we'll have to see how this works out, depending on who will be the next chancellor. I don't expect any fundamental changes in Germany's foreign policy. There is a strong consensus on foreign policy among the mainstream parties. Even if "The Left" became, for the first time, part of a federal government, it would not be able to change Germany's foreign policy.

*GIP: How would you describe the most important issues/stumbling blocks for Georgia's Europeanization process? What would be the short-term and long-term strategies to successfully address those issues?*

**TB:** That's a big question. I think Georgian society, and I'm saying Georgian society, I'm not talking about politicians here, has to make up its mind. It cannot have both the cake and eat it at the same time. If you want to be part of Europe and the European Union, you have to accept European values. So, if you want to become a member of the European Union, like it or not, this means sexual minorities have to have rights. And it's not only sexual minorities, don't get me wrong. I mean, LGBTQI+ plus is important, but it is part of a bigger picture. If you're not willing to give rights to these groups, what about religious, ethnic, other minorities? LGBTQI+ rights are in a way also a test of Georgia's commitment to liberal values - liberal values are not a matter of pick and choose.

This is why Hungary and its LGBTQI+ hostile legislation is such a big issue. It's about countries contesting the EU's fundamental principles. LGBTQI rights are part of the rule of law. It's part of liberal democracy. So, you cannot choose only those principles that you like. You have to accept the entire package. A government that is on the one hand applying for membership in the EU and on the other hand, refusing to grant and protect minority rights - that doesn't go together. If Georgia is really serious about becoming a member of the European Union, it has to accept liberal democracy all the way down. There are not certain areas where you can opt out. This is something Georgia society has to come to terms with. I What the EU can do is making it clear time and again, that LGBTQI+ and other democratic rights are, and have been a part and parcel of the Europeanization process.

This also means that there are certain red lines. if you cross them, there will be some negative consequences. I know that the EU has little credibility at the moment, but this is, at least on paper, the approach of the EU. And I think this is something that the EU in general will have to also do vis-a-vis Hungary. When Rutte [Prime Minister of Netherlands] asked Orban [Prime Minister of Hungary] to leave the EU, I think he is right. If you don't like the values the EU is standing for, then leave. If you don't like the EU and the values that it is standing for, then don't apply for

membership. It's your right, but you have to be consequential here. I think if the EU would be consistent in that approach and tell the Georgians, we're happy to help in your democratization process, but that comes with the full package! I'm not sure whether it would work, but it would certainly increase the credibility of the EU, not only with the EaP countries, but also with its own member states.



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