



The Changing Landscape of EU Enlargement: What Does Slovakia's New Government Mean for Georgia?

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Attaining EU candidate status in December 2023 has created a reality for Georgia in which it is of crucial importance to solidify its strategic bonds with member states, including Slovakia. The acknowledgement of Georgia as a candidate reflects the European Union's recognition of the country's commitment to democratic reforms, the rule of law, and regional stability, especially in light of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine (*Georgia - European Commission 2023*). Granting candidate status enhances Georgia's prospects for future accession and opens doors for closer collaboration on political, economic, and security fronts.

Slovakia, having experienced its successful transition from a post-socialist country to EU membership, understands the transformative power of the European integration process. Additionally, forming a new government in Slovakia, a key member state presents a critical juncture for assessing its potential impact on Georgia's path towards integration. However, Slovakia's relationship with the EU has recently been marked by tension and disagreement over various issues (Fox et al. 2023), raising concerns about its consistency in advocating for Georgia's accession. Slovakia's focus on domestic issues and economic challenges could limit

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its attention and support for Georgia's integration efforts. Ultimately, while the new government's specific policies and priorities remain to be fully defined, the shift in power carries both potential benefits and challenges for Georgia's EU aspirations.

Georgia-Slovakia Bilateral Relations

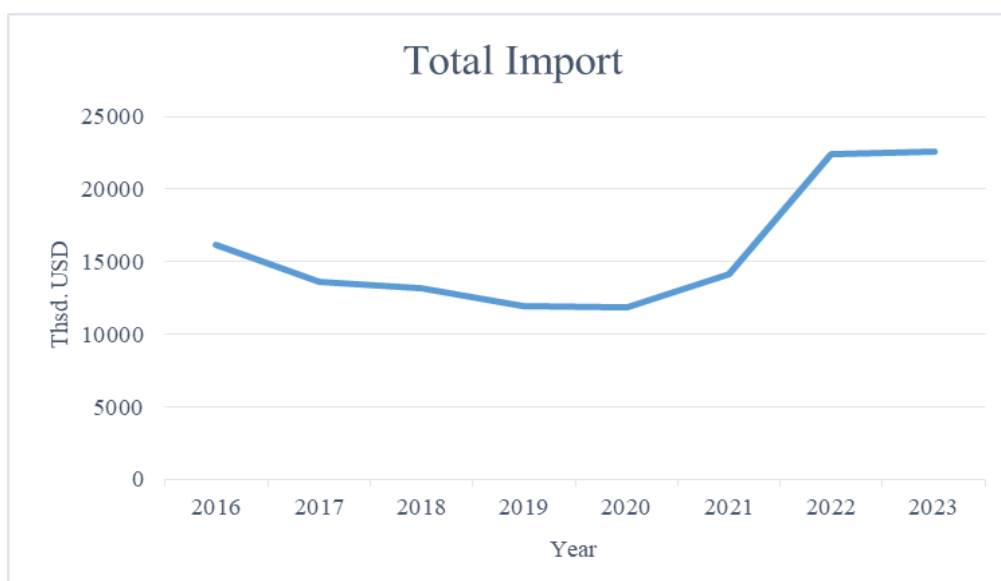
Georgia-Slovakia relations are characterized by diplomatic ties established in 1993. The relationship involves dynamic cooperation in both bilateral formats and within international organizations (Abashidze 2023; Marusiak 2010). While Georgia has never established a direct strategic partnership with Slovakia, nor does the latter hold specific interests in the Caucasus region (Gachechiladze 2023), particular ties with Visegrad countries have been evident (Legislative Herald of Georgia 1992-2023). Namely, several bilateral cooperation agreements have been signed over the years, covering areas such as the fight against crime, double taxation, transport agreements, and others (Bušovský 2023). Those agreements highlight the commitment of both nations to fostering collaboration across various domains (Bušovský 2023; Legislative Herald of Georgia 1992-2023).

Economically, while the trade volume between Georgia and Slovakia may not be substantial compared to Georgia's trade with larger economies, there have been mutual efforts to enhance economic cooperation, investment, and cultural exchanges in recent years. The trade relationship primarily involves the exchange of specific goods and services. Georgia's exports to Slovakia are typically centered around its traditional strengths, such as agricultural products, wines, and mineral waters, reflecting Georgia's rich agricultural heritage. Conversely, Slovak imports to Georgia often include machinery, electrical equipment, and other chemical and industrial products, showcasing Slovakia's industrial capabilities (Bušovský 2023). However, as the graph below shows, the trend in total imports and exports has increased only modestly in recent years. Overall, the economic relationship between Georgia and Slovakia, while currently modest in scale, holds potential for growth and diversification. Both countries can benefit from increased collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual investments, particularly in sectors where they have complementary strengths and interests.

Table 1. The Total Export rate between Slovakia and Georgia from 2016 to 2023 by National Statistical Service of Georgia.



Table 2. The Total Import rate between Slovakia and Georgia from 2016 to 2023 by National Statistical Service of Georgia.



In diplomatic terms, Slovakia has consistently championed Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders and has vocally supported Georgia's aspirations for EU membership. These unwavering commitments have been reaffirmed through consistent high-level engagements, deepened economic cooperation, and expanded defense ties. In 2015, Slovakia voiced its strong concerns regarding the proposed signing of a so-called border treaty between Russia and Georgia's breakaway Tskhinvali region. This unilateral move, which would have legitimized the occupation of Georgian territory, was met with a resolute response from Slovakia (*Slovakia Condemns "Border Treaty" between Russia and Georgia's Breakaway Region* 2015). Namely, the country reiterated its unwavering support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and emphasized the importance of respecting international law. On August 1, 2023, a landmark event marked a significant step in strengthening bilateral ties: the opening of Slovakia's Office of the Defence Attaché in Tbilisi. This dedicated platform has further enhanced military cooperation between the two countries, enabling the exchange of expertise, promoting defense reforms, and facilitating joint training exercises (*Štátny Tajomník M. Majer: Zriadenie Úradu Vojenského Pridelenca v Tbilisi Pomôže Skvalitniť Naše Vzťahy s Gruzínskom* 2022). The establishment of the Office is a testament to Slovakia's commitment to strengthening its defense partnership with Georgia and fostering regional stability in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, Slovak ambassadors to Georgia have consistently demonstrated their dedication to supporting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. They have pledged to continue to accompany Georgia on its path to the EU, drawing upon Slovakia's integration experience before 2004. This valuable support has been instrumental in helping Georgia navigate the complex process of EU accession and pave the way for its future membership.

Thus, Georgia and Slovakia have a lot in common, including their transitional experiences from former Soviet and Eastern Bloc states to market-oriented democracies, their European aspirations, and their strategic geographical positions. These commonalities present numerous opportunities for deeper economic collaboration. Areas such as trade, investment, tourism, and cultural exchange hold substantial potential that is yet to be fully tapped.

The New Slovak Government and Their EU Enlargement Vision

Slovakia's position on EU enlargement towards Eastern Partnership countries, particularly the "Associated Trio," is a tangled tapestry woven from past decisions, present anxieties, and the broader geopolitical landscape. The dominant Smer party casts a long shadow on Slovakia's stance. Their rhetoric often echoes anti-American sentiments, conspiracy theories, and Ukraine-focused disinformation, raising concerns about their true commitment to support EU enlargement policy. However, a closer look at Smer's 12-year governance reveals a different picture. While their pronouncements may be fiery, a pragmatic streak often dictates their actions, with political survival taking precedence over ideological pronouncements. This pragmatism echoes in Slovakia's historical support for Eastern Partnership countries, seen in actions like signing the Association Agreement and advocating for visa liberalization. Beyond Smer's rhetoric, Slovakia's own journey to EU membership in 2004 deeply informs its perception of enlargement. Understanding the challenges and opportunities for post-socialist states fostered initial enthusiasm for Eastern expansion. Closer ties with Eastern European countries were also viewed as a way to bolster regional cooperation and security. However, this stance has evolved over time, reflecting both changes in Slovakia's political landscape and broader EU dynamics.

Notwithstanding Slovakia's affirmative vote on the December 14th decision by the European Council to initiate accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and to confer candidate status upon Georgia, recent actions like halting arms aid to Ukraine and expressing concerns about corruption suggest mixed signals regarding its support for the Associated Trio (European Council 2023). However, these reservations may be specific to Ukraine rather than a rejection of the enlargement itself. Notably, Slovakia has expressed a more positive view of Balkan countries as potential candidates. This, coupled with Slovakia's active support for Western Balkan countries during its 2016 Council of Europe presidency, suggests a nuanced approach based on assessing each candidate's readiness for EU membership.

Ultimately, Slovakia's perception of Eastern enlargement remains multifaceted and evolving. The interplay of historical legacies, Smer's pragmatic yet rhetoric-heavy approach, and ongoing regional struggles like the situation in Ukraine contribute to this uncertainty. With Robert Fico back at the helm of Smer, predicting Slovakia's future position on this

crucial issue will remain a complex and intricate dance in the years to come. Despite these uncertainties, the ensuing section of the paper will endeavor to forecast the likely approach of Fico's administration towards Georgia's EU aspirations.

Expectations for Georgia

Georgia's aspirations for EU accession face a nuanced landscape influenced by the evolving dynamics in Slovakia. While historical ties and shared experiences present opportunities for collaboration, recent shifts towards Euroscepticism and potential illiberal tendencies in Slovakia raise concerns. The interplay between Slovakia's trajectory, internal EU divisions, and Georgia's commitment to necessary reforms will define the path forward. Given the shared ambivalence towards enlargement policy, it invites a discussion of the implications for Georgia's position within the Associated Trio.

On the one hand, there is a history of Slovakia being open to EU enlargement during Fico's governments. During his first term as Prime Minister (2006-2010), Fico played a crucial role in advocating for Eastern European countries' EU membership. He recognised the benefits of integration for regional stability and economic prosperity. Fico actively participated in the Eastern Partnership initiative, which fosters closer ties between the EU and Eastern European countries. He saw it as a stepping stone towards eventual EU membership for these countries. During Slovakia's chairmanship of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2016, Prime Minister Fico was a fervent supporter of Georgia's European integration process (Gachechiladze 2023). This support was particularly notable in initiatives related to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and the implementation of visa liberalization policies toward Georgia (*Slovakia Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2016*).

Furthermore, the Slovak government is aware of the challenges of EU integration despite the eurosceptic tendencies on the domestic level. Considering that Georgia is a 'fellow' post-socialist country, Slovakia's experience transitioning from a socialist system to a democracy within the EU could provide valuable insights and guidance to Georgia. Sharing best practices and lessons learned could accelerate Georgia's progress towards EU membership. In addition, Slovakia's familiarity with the challenges and opportunities associated with EU accession can foster empathy and understanding for Georgia's situation. This could translate into more robust political support for Georgia's candidacy within the EU (Abashidze 2023).

On the other hand, Fico's priorities shifted towards keeping power on the domestic level rather than focusing on the European integration project (Burke 2023). This has arguably led to less emphasis on EU enlargement and a more cautious approach, reflecting growing Euroscepticism within the Slovak government. Another open Eurosceptic country in the EU enlargement process can complicate the integration process for the Associated Trio and further emphasize the lack of readiness on the EU side to accept new members (Nguyen et al. 2023).

Additionally, the escalation of Eurosceptic sentiment within EU member states significantly impacts the political discourse in aspiring member countries, such as Georgia. Political leaders and factions in these nations often leverage the EU's internal discord to support arguments opposing accession or advocating for a more measured integration process. In Georgia, this manifests as challenges in meeting the EU's stipulated requirements. The ruling Georgian Dream party exhibits ideological parallels with Eurosceptic member states, particularly in their critique of the EU's bureaucratic approach and perceived insensitivity to the nuances of the post-Soviet context. Notably, both Georgian Dream and certain Eurosceptic EU members, like Slovakia and Hungary, demonstrate a reluctance to fully align with the EU's stance on Russia. The latter is evidenced by Georgia's non-participation in sanctions against Russia, and Slovakia's and Hungary's hesitance in offering military support to Ukraine, favoring dialogue with Russia instead.

Ultimately, the historical openness of Slovakia towards EU enlargement under Fico's leadership, particularly during his first term and the country's EU Council Presidency, has been pivotal for Eastern European nations, including Georgia. However, Fico's later shift towards a more cautious approach to EU enlargement, combined with growing Euroscepticism and a focus on domestic politics, presents a complex scenario. Furthermore, the rise of Euroscepticism in the EU, mirrored by similar sentiments in Georgia, complicates the integration process. The potential alignment of interests between Georgia's Georgian Dream and eurosceptic EU member states, particularly in relation to Russia, adds another layer of complexity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Slovakia's new government plays an important role in shaping Georgia's path as an EU candidate. Georgia's recent attainment of candidate status underscores the importance of strengthening ties with EU members, with Slovakia being pivotal due to its successful EU transition. While Georgia's commitment to European integration is evident, challenges arise with Slovakia's evolving dynamics and recent tensions within the EU. Concerns arise about Slovakia's strategic engagement in supporting Georgia's accession amid its focus on domestic and economic issues.

Despite uncertainties, positive engagements between Georgia and Slovakia persist in diplomacy, defense, and economics. Slovakia's consistent support for Georgia's territorial integrity is evident, solidifying the defense partnership. As Georgia aspires to EU membership, navigating Slovakia's dynamics, evolving EU perspectives, and its own reforms pose challenges. Collaboration in trade, investment, and cultural exchange holds potential, but growing Euroscepticism presents hurdles. Georgia's prospects hinge on learning from Slovakia's EU transition and actively engaging with Slovakia for support on its EU path, as the intricate geopolitical dance continues.

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