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EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS AND DEMOCRATIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF REFORMS AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to study the influence of the European Union (hereinafter EU) on the ongoing democratization process in Georgia. Through a detailed study of the existing strategic partnership and integration efforts between Georgia and the EU, the paper analyses how the EU became a catalyst for significant political, economic, and societal reforms in Georgia. This paper will discuss the main areas of reforms – political governance, rule of law, electoral integrity, and anti-corruption measures, to assess their impact on the development of Georgia's democratic governance and integration into the European community.

The role of the EU in promoting the country's ongoing democratization processes is evident. However, the paper also deals with the complexities and challenges of Georgia's integration into the European family. These challenges include national sovereignty, economic dependence, gaps in the implementation of obligations undertaken by Georgia under various agreements discussed in the paper, and socio-cultural incompatibility, which emphasizes the unique nature of Georgia's integration. Based on various sources, including policy documents, evaluations of international organizations, and analysis of academic literature, the study offers a balanced perspective on Georgia's achievements and challenges along the said path.

This paper also discusses the strategic importance and benefits of bilateral cooperation between the EU and Georgia for both sides and the potential for future cooperation. Because Georgia's European integration is its strategic choice, this paper contributes to the deep understanding of the transformative impact of EU involvement on Georgia's democratization process.

Keywords: European Union, Georgia, European integration, democratic reforms, judicial independence, electoral reforms, anti-corruption measures, social development

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia embarked on a complex and difficult path to establishing democratic governance. However, numerous internal and external challenges, such as internal civil and separatist conflicts, economic instability, and difficult geopolitical location, accompanied this path. Against these challenges, the strategic choice of Georgia's European integration became the basis for encouraging its political, economic, and societal transformation. Georgia's ambition to become a member of the European Union (EU) is a strategic choice for the country's development and democratization process.

The Rose Revolution in 2003, marked a turning point in these wavering relations and considered to be the starting point of political transformation for Georgia, as sectoral and crosscutting reforms began, which has been going on for over two decades.² The mentioned series of reforms and implementation of comprehensive legislative and institutional changes showed that Georgia's strategic choice to become a member of the EU is one of the main contributing factors to the democratization and development of the country. Despite many challenges and resistances, Georgia has shown its commitment to European values on the way to these reforms.

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² Burkadze, Z. (2022). Great Power Competition and the path to democracy: The case of Georgia, 1991-2020. University of Rochester Press.

The signing of the Association Agreement (AA) with Georgia by the EU in 2014, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), followed by the visa-liberalization process in 2017, is a recognition and appreciation of this steadfast commitment. These processes further contributed to and strengthened Georgia's political, economic, and societal ties with the EU, which in turn helped to initiate comprehensive legislative and institutional changes in the country to align it with European democratic norms and standards.³

The desire to receive the EU candidate status also significantly impacted the path of comprehensive legislative and institutional changes in Georgia. The prerequisite for receiving the candidate status, the legislative reforms and obligations assumed by the AA, was the promotion of the democratization process by the political elite and the acceleration of the reforms to be implemented, which will help establish the culture of democratic governance in the Georgian reality. Georgia has implemented several waves of reforms to establish a democratic governance system, various reforms for judicial independence, and several new anti-corruption initiatives.

A brief history of Georgia's relations with the European Union

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was followed by the restoration of Georgia's independence, the newly formed, independent Republic of Georgia began to establish its relationship and aspiration towards Europe. Georgia's strategic choice and path toward Europe were determined by the desire for stability, democracy, and economic growth, guaranteed by European integration and values. The establishment of the first ties began right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the EU aimed to support the democratization and transition to a market economy of the newly formed sovereign states in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region.⁴ This was followed by signing the first agreement in 1996 between the EU and Georgia, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA),⁵ which formalized the previously established and existing bilateral relations. This agreement covered vital areas and issues such as initiating political dialogue, trade, investment, and technical assistance. The agreement's main goal was to create a basis for such an environment, which would contribute to Georgia's desire to aspire to European integration within the framework of future bilateral cooperation.

The Rose Revolution in 2003 proved that Georgia is committed to democratic values. The democratic governance system and the rule of law were essential for the country, proving that Georgia maintained its commitment to European values and strengthened its aspiration for European integration.⁶ After the Rose Revolution, the EU further deepened and strengthened its support for Georgia, helping it take essential steps to contribute to political stabilization and economic modernization.

In 2004, Georgia joined the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP),⁷ the main goal of which was to raise cooperation to a new level by establishing a structured economic policy and strengthening the country's democratic governance. Burkadze⁸ argues that the EU prioritised civil society, human rights activists, and electoral processes in its political approach, resulting in the strengthening of human resources within the political system. For Georgia, inclusion in this policy framework was proof that the EU recognizes Georgia's strategic importance, emphasizes and appreciates Georgia's increasing compliance with European standards, and supports its aspiration toward European integration.

In 2009, the EU developed an initiative to establish the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, which aimed to strengthen the political association and economic integration between the EU and the six Eastern European

³ Burkadze, Z. (2022). Great Power Competition and the path to democracy: The case of Georgia, 1991-2020. University of Rochester Press.

⁴ Steenland, R. A. (2016). Democratization in Georgia: what role for the EU? an analysis of the democratization process of Georgia and the influence of EU policies. Utrecht School of Governance.

⁵ European Council. EU relations with Georgia – consilium. (2023, December 21). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>. Accessed on February 7, 2024.

⁶ Dobbins, Michael. "The Post-Rose Revolution Reforms as a Case of Misguided Policy Transfer and Accidental Democratisation?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 5 (May 28, 2014): 759–74.

⁷ European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). (February 29, 2024). "Georgia." https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/georgia_en. Accessed on February 17, 2024.

⁸ Burkadze, Z. (2022). Great Power Competition and the path to democracy: The case of Georgia, 1991-2020. University of Rochester Press.

partner countries. Börzel et al.⁹ point out that the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, have not taken clear steps towards democratization by joining this initiative. According to them, Georgia is characterized by a stable hybrid regime that occupies a "Gray zone" between democracy and autocracy. They note that despite the changes and notable improvements in Georgia's democratic governance system, the sustainability of this progress is unclear. The authors also talk about the change of the political regime characterized by the authoritarian tendencies of Saakashvili, which was changed through the elections in 2012 and 2013, and note that this could become a turning point for the process of democratization and European integration of Georgia.

The next and most important milestone in the history of bilateral relations is the 2014 Association Agreement (AA),¹⁰ which includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). This agreement is a turning point, as the phase of deeper relations in the political and economic spheres has begun. The treaty granted Georgia the privilege of having access to the European single market and provided the basis for a comprehensive framework of reforms that integrates democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and economic sustainability.

Georgia's pursuit of European integration and its commitment to European values, accompanied by several implemented and ongoing reforms, took bilateral relations to a new level in 2017, as the Visa Liberalization Agreement between the EU and Georgia was implemented. This agreement allowed Georgian citizens to enjoy short-term visa-free travel in the Schengen area.¹¹ The transition to this stage of bilateral relations is uniquely crucial for the country's development, as visa liberalization has contributed to the people-to-people exchanges and the broader integration of Georgian society with European society. Also, this confirms Georgia's substantial progress and compliance with the strict criteria of the EU.

In 2022, Georgia applied for EU membership, after which, on June 23, 2022, Georgia was granted the European Perspective.¹² The political authorities of Georgia were given 12 recommendations, after which, according to the decision of the European Council, Georgia would be granted candidate status.¹³ These recommendations included effective governance and functioning of state institutions, political polarization, judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, human rights, and de-oligarchization. The 2023 European Commission assessment,¹⁴ describes the steps taken concerning each recommendation and the reforms carried out by Georgia. In December 2023, by European Council decision, Georgia was granted candidate status, which is the most significant step towards European integration in Georgia's long-term perspective. Despite many challenges, obstacles, and political polarization, the goal that Georgia has been following for the past decades has been achieved. According to the assessment, despite this achievement, Georgia has several reforms to implement and steps to take, which are necessary for full membership of the EU.

Progress and challenges in the process of democratization of Georgia

Georgia's path to European integration was a significant turning point for the country's ongoing political reforms. These reforms aim to modernize the governance system per EU standards, ensure austerity, and ensure the independence of judicial systems and the implementation of democratic processes. It is interesting to see this integration's strategic importance and impact on Georgia's political reforms and the country's efforts to strengthen its governance, judiciary, and democratic integrity in general. Based on cooperation with the EU,

⁹ Börzel, T., Dimitrova, A. L., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2017, October 24). *European Union Enlargement and Integration Capacity*. Routledge.

¹⁰ EEAS. "EU/Georgia Association Agreement". https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/eugeorgia-association-agreement_en?s=221. Accessed on February 27, 2024.

¹¹ Migration and Home Affairs. "Visa Liberalisation with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia". https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia_en#:~:text=The%20decision%20to%20transfer%20Georgia,a%20short%2Dstay%20was%20abolished. Accessed on February 8, 2024.

¹² European Council. *EU relations with Georgia – consilium*. (2023, December 21). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>. Accessed on February 7, 2024.

¹³ EEAS. *The Twelve Priorities*. (2022, September, 20). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/twelve-priorities_en. Accessed on February 8, 2024.

¹⁴ European Commission – European Commission. (2023, November 8). *Key findings of the 2023 Report on Georgia* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5626. Accessed on February 8, 2024.

mainly through the AA and the DCFTA, Georgia has embarked on a path of complex political, economic, and legislative reforms, which once again emphasizes the country's commitment to European democratic values.

Despite the country's and society's commitment to these values, this path is full of challenges, which is an additional test for the country's resilience and development. This chapter will discuss not only the country's successes and steps forward in areas such as judicial reforms, electoral processes, anti-corruption measures, and political governance but also ongoing challenges and obstacles in these areas, such as political polarization, judicial independence, and corruption in both, public and private sector. By studying the interaction between reforms and challenges, we try to see the country's difficulties in democratization and integration into the EU.

Judicial reforms and challenges

Studies including Burkadze,¹⁵ Erkvania and Lebanidze,¹⁶ along with the joint assessment by the European Commission, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and the OSCE/ODIHR,¹⁷ highlight the significant impact of European integration on judicial reforms in Georgia. In the last decade, Georgia has implemented four waves of judicial reforms:

Wave (year)	Significant changes
I wave (2013)	The manner of formation and staffing of the Supreme Council of Justice was changed; The conditions for photo-cinema-video recording and broadcasting of the court proceedings were determined; Legislative changes necessary for the objectivity and impartiality of the Disciplinary Board's and the Disciplinary Chamber's activities were implemented.
II wave (2014)	The principle of lifelong appointment of judges was introduced; Prerequisites for lifelong appointment of judges were introduced (mandatory three-year probationary period); The criteria of integrity and competence of evaluation of the judges were established; A Qualification Chamber was created to evaluate the judge's performance.
III wave (2017)	The criteria for the selection of judicial candidates, their evaluation characteristics, and evaluation principles are defined at the legislative level; Prerequisites and procedures for removal of a member of the Supreme Council of Justice (incompatibility of interests) were determined; “Independent Inspector Service” was formed, and their functions and duties were defined; The powers of court chairpersons were limited, and new functions and duties of court managers were defined; The principle of electronic (random) distribution of cases was introduced, which eliminates the possibility of external intervention; The new legislative changes have increased the Supreme Council of Justice's accountability to the public.
IV wave (2019)	The manner of formation of the Independent Council of the High School of Justice was fundamentally changed; The regulatory norms of the High School of Justice were revised and refined; The basis of disciplinary responsibility and the procedures of disciplinary proceedings were refined; There was an improvement in the norms regulating the activities of the Supreme Council of Justice.

Table 1. Four waves of judicial reforms implemented in Georgia.

¹⁵ Burkadze, Z. (2022). Great Power Competition and the path to democracy: The case of Georgia, 1991-2020. University of Rochester Press.

¹⁶ Erkvania, T. Lebanidze, B. (2021) “Reform of the judicial system in Georgia and its Implications for the Idea of European Integration.” Policy Essay #31, Georgia Policy Institute,

¹⁷ Venice Commission - Council of Europe. “Follow-up opinion on previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts”. (Venice, 6-7 October 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)033-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)033-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

The unity of the four mentioned waves of reforms includes many positive changes, based on which the legislative improvement of the Georgian judicial system took place. However, these waves of reforms of the Georgian judicial system in this short period could not solve its main challenges, and it did not manage to establish the Georgian judicial system as a fully robust and independent institution.

Erkvania and Lebanidze¹⁸ note that the Georgian judicial system faces several challenges and problems that cannot be solved despite the wave of successful “cosmetic” reforms. Implementing and establishing the rule of law in Georgia took work. They identify the three most important challenges the Georgian judicial system faces: judicial corporatism, politicization of the judiciary system, and lack of institutional transparency.

According to the conclusion of the Venice Commission,¹⁹ Georgia still needs to implement legislative changes regarding judicial reforms. According to their assessment, the positive changes implemented in the judicial system need to be more cohesive and respond to the system's real challenges. The Venice Commission also emphasizes that from the five main recommendations which were determined in March 2023, four have been partially or fully implemented, which is positively perceived and evaluated by the Commission.

Electoral reforms and challenges

In the spring of 2021, the President of the Council of Europe, Charles Michel, proposed to the representatives of Georgian political parties a new detailed proposal for Georgia's progress, according to which one of the country's obligations is to implement “ambitious electoral reform.”²⁰ On June 28, 2021, the Parliament of Georgia adopted amendments to the Election Code, the purpose of which was to improve the election legislation.²¹ The mentioned changes covered such essential issues as the norms of the composition of the Central Election Commission (hereinafter CEC) and the election of the chairman, the updated rules for staffing the local election commissions, the procedures for campaigning and counting votes, and others.²² The reform of the 2021 election code, in particular the introduction of election technologies and the strengthening of election institutions in the country, played an essential role in improving the transparency and fairness of the election process, which in itself implies an increase in Georgia's compatibility with the democratic election norms of the EU.

However, the wave of electoral reforms did not end there. In 2023, changes were again made to the Electoral Code, which both local and international organizations assess as a departure from the original framework agreement proposed by Charles Michel.²³ With the mentioned change, the authority to conduct the competition of CEC candidates and submit them to the Parliament was transferred to the Speaker of the Parliament instead of the President. The election of the Chairman/members of the CEC for a full term became possible with the majority of the total composition of the Parliament (76 votes). Also, the position of the Deputy Chairman of the CEC nominated by the opposition party was abolished. This issue is also discussed in the Venice Commission/OSCE/ODIHR joint report 2023,²⁴ according to which this change should be reviewed, as it contradicted the agreement reached in 2021 and may harm bilateral relations.

At the spring sessions of 2024, the Parliament of Georgia again discusses the third wave of amendments to the Election Code. It should be noted that none of the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission are reflected in these amendments. Single-party control over the election of the CEC chairman

¹⁸ Erkvania, T. Lebanidze, B. (2021) “Reform of the judicial system in Georgia and its Implications for the Idea of European Integration.” Policy Essay #31, Georgia Policy Institute.

¹⁹ Venice Commission - Council of Europe. “Follow-up opinion on previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts.” (Venice, 6-7 October 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)033-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)033-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

²⁰ European Council. EU relations with Georgia – consilium. (2023, December 21). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>. Accessed on February 7, 2024.

²¹ Election code of Georgia. სსიპ “საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე.” (2021). <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1557168?publication=79>. Accessed on February 16, 2024.

²² Venice Commission - Council of Europe. “Follow-up opinion on previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts.” (Venice, 6-7 October 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)033-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)033-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

²³ Transparency International – Georgia. (2024). Amendments to electoral legislation proposed by the parliamentary. <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/amendments-electoral-legislation-proposed-parliamentary-majority-contradict-requirements>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

²⁴ Venice Commission - Council of Europe. “On the Draft amendments to the Election Code and to the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Georgia.” (Venice, 15-16 December 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)047-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)047-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

and non-party members is still maintained, and the position of the CEC deputy chairman intended for the opposition candidate has been abolished.²⁵

Criteria	I wave of reform (2021)	II wave of reform (2023)
Authority to nominate CEC candidates	After this reform, the President of Georgia had the authority to conduct the CEC candidate competition and submit it to the Parliament.	This authority was transferred to the Speaker of the Parliament, which was considered a significant change in procedural control.
Election of CEC chairman/member	Electing the CEC chairman/members for a full term would require a broader consensus among members of Parliament.	Full-term elections of CEC chairman/member with the majority of the whole composition of the Parliament (76 votes) became possible, thereby lowering the consensus threshold.
Electoral technologies and institutions	Changes were made, which facilitated the introduction of electoral technologies and the strengthening of electoral institutions for a closer connection with the democratic norms of the EU.	Although not directly mentioned in the 2023 wave of reforms, changes in procedural controls could affect technology adoption and institutional integrity.
International assessments	These reforms were part of a deal proposed by Charles Michel to increase the sense of electoral fairness and compatibility with the EU.	The Venice Commission/OSCE-ODIHR issued recommendations that the 2023 amendments are inconsistent with the 2021 agreement, indicating a possible regression to previously agreed standards.

Table 2. Comparison of two waves of electoral reforms implemented in Georgia.

Based on the analysis, it can be seen that by implementing the original, 2021 changes in the election code and the implementation of the supporting technologies in the Georgian reality, Georgia has taken a step to ensure more transparent, fair, and competitive elections, which once again emphasizes Georgia's commitment to the electoral system. However, the challenges, such as isolated cases of election fraud, use of administrative resources, media bias, and representational inequality, represent a significant obstacle to the fairness and transparency of Georgia's election process, which also affects its democratization process. Several recommendations are written in these evaluations, which must be implemented to improve the electoral system and maintain the stability of the achieved results. By confronting challenges related to election integrity and political representation, Georgia has an opportunity to strengthen the democratic backbone of its political system and ensure a fairer and more inclusive electoral framework.

Reforms and challenges of democratic governance and public administration

Georgia's governance and public administration reforms, as described in various guidelines²⁶ and OECD/SIGMA assessments,²⁷ are some of the essential steps the country has taken to simplify operations and increase administrative efficiency through e-governance decisions. Current and implemented reforms in this area have significantly improved the efficiency of the government's work and the quality of public services, which once again reflects the country's aspiration to the EU governance model.

However, like in other areas, those reforms are accompanied by challenges discussed in the OECD/SIGMA²⁸ and World Bank²⁹ assessments. These assessments highlight that centralized power and inefficiencies in public

²⁵ Transparency International – Georgia. (2024). Amendments to electoral legislation proposed by the parliamentary. <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/amendments-electoral-legislation-proposed-parliamentary-majority-contradict-requirements>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

²⁶ The Government of Georgia. With support of UNDP. "Handbook on Public Administration Reform in Georgia." (2023).

²⁷ OECD – Georgia. (2022). <https://www.oecd.org/gov/bycountry/georgia/>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

²⁸ OECD – Georgia. (2022). <https://www.oecd.org/gov/bycountry/georgia/>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

²⁹ World Bank. "Country Program Evaluation. World Bank Group Support to Georgia, Fiscal Years 2014–23." (2023). Accessed on

service delivery are critical challenges that need further addressing to improve government performance and responsiveness. Changing the centralization of power and the inefficiency of services is crucial to strengthening governance structures, which are vital to Georgia's democratization and European integration.

Criteria	Action	Result
Policy planning and coordination	Adoption of regulatory guidelines for policy development with public participation in government agencies; Train civil servants in policy analysis, planning, monitoring, and evaluation.	A comprehensive framework for policy development was established, and the skills of policy planning staff in all relevant ministries were improved.
Public service and human resources management	Legislative/regulatory changes were implemented for the corps of professional civil servants; Support the Public Service Bureau and Ministries in modernizing public service.	The civil service was transformed into a merit-based, professional model, and the performance evaluation and professional development systems were improved.
Provision of public services	Development of uniform guidelines for service design and delivery; Establishing methodological bases of consistency and quality control; Creating a national strategy for developing public services for 2022-2025 and providing training on new standards and electronic services.	Improving and refining the quality of public services, including e-services, which ensures increased resilience to cyber-threats.

Table 3. Two waves of electoral reforms implemented in Georgia.

The analysis showed that restructuring the public sector and introducing the e-government system modernized public services, made them more accessible to citizens, and reduced opportunities for corruption. Georgia's civil service reforms again emphasize its aspiration to become more accountable and promote professionalism in the public administration system. Thus, Georgia's way of improving its governance system and public administration is marked by significant achievements and ongoing challenges. Reforms have laid the foundation for a more efficient and transparent government, but the way forward requires continued efforts to address decentralization issues and inefficiencies in public administration. Strengthening the governance framework supporting the country's democratization goals and European integration aspirations is essential.

Anti-corruption reforms and challenges

According to the decision of the European Council of June 23, 2022, Georgia was given a "European Perspective," and a 12-point executable plan was defined on the way to European integration, one of the main priorities of which is the development of anti-corruption mechanisms in the country.³⁰ In order to fulfil this priority, in 2022, an amendment was introduced to the law of Georgia "On the Fight Against Corruption," according to which the preventive mechanisms of corruption were united under one agency and an Anti-corruption Bureau was created, the main task of which is to promote the fight against corruption in the country.³¹

According to the evaluations of International Transparency,³² the Venice Commission,³³ and the OECD,³⁴ Georgia is taking various practical steps to introduce anti-corruption mechanisms in the Georgian reality. A

February 15, 2024.

³⁰ European Council. EU relations with Georgia – consilium. (2023, December 21). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>. Accessed on February 7, 2024.

³¹ Anti-Corruption Bureau. (2024). <https://acb.gov.ge/en>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

³² Transparency International. "Georgia," (2023). <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/georgia>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

³³ Venice Commission - Council of Europe. "Opinion on the provisions of the Law on the fight against Corruption concerning the Anti-Corruption Bureau." (Venice, 15-16 December 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)046-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)046-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

³⁴ OECD. Anti-Corruption Reforms in Georgia. May 30, 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/corruption/acn/anti-corruption-reforms-in-georgia-d709c349-en.htm>. Accessed on February 14, 2024.

clear example is the creation of the Anti-corruption Bureau and establishing a comprehensive legal framework. However, the analysis of Transparency International Georgia and OECD highlights the constant challenge of corruption despite the countermeasures implemented by the country. These assessments question the effectiveness of existing strategies and point to vulnerabilities reflected in the need for solid anti-corruption mechanisms. International concern refers to the creation of this bureau as ineffective and a facade mechanism, as this bureau needs actual mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of the functions and duties assigned to it. Furthermore, regarding the criticism of the legal framework, Transparency International – Georgia³⁵ note that the procedure for staffing the bureau, choosing its head, and performing investigative and supervisory functions needs to be more specific and raises doubts about its independence and efficiency.

According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index,³⁶ Georgia ranks 49th out of 180 countries. According to this assessment report, Georgia is ahead of many EU member states in this index. However, it should be noted that in 2023, Georgia has 53 points, 3 points less than the previous year. Although Georgia is still in the leading position in the region, it has yet to have such a low score since 2015. In this assessment, it is also said that high-level corruption is increasing in the country, and the facts of the abduction of state institutions are deepening.

In response to the criticism, the Georgian authorities in 2023 presented the National Action Plan for Georgia's EU Integration, which covers both short-term (3-4 years) and medium-term (7 years) action plans. One of the main concerns of this action plan is about fighting corruption:

Criteria	Action Plan
Preventive strategies	Development and implementation of a comprehensive national anti-corruption strategy and action plan; Establishment of mechanisms for the prevention of conflicts of interest; Formation and implementation of the state governance reform strategy.
Strengthening detection and investigation	To use both preventive and prohibitory measures to fight against corruption; Strengthening the capacity to investigate corruption-related crimes; Ensure thorough investigation of suspected corruption incidents.
Monitoring and evaluation	More active checking of the Georgian Asset Declarations of officials; Strict monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.
Transparency and accountability	Promote access to information and public participation in governance; Promoting the role of civil society in the decision-making process through safe media monitoring; Increase openness, transparency, and accountability within the framework of open governance initiatives.
International practices and compliance	Effective implementation of relevant international legal instruments is a priority; Implementation of recommendations received from international institutions (UNCAC, GRECO, OECD/ACN and others).

Table 4. National Action Plan for Georgia's EU Integration – Anti-corruption measures.³⁷

³⁵ Transparency International – Georgia. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2023: Georgia's Score Drops by 3 Points," 30 January, 2024. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/corruption-perceptions-index-2023-georgias-score-drops-3-points>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

³⁶ Transparency International. "2023 Corruption Perceptions Index: Explore the Results," January 30, 2024. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

³⁷ The Government of Georgia. (2023). The National Action Plan for Georgia's EU Integration https://www.gov.ge/files/288_86887_447978_EU_9StepAP-revisedDec2023.pdf.

Current political challenges

Significant political challenges characterize Georgia's path to democratization and European integration. The mentioned political challenges are discussed in many international evaluations and scientific articles. Transparency International – Georgia,³⁸ 12 recommendations of the European Commission,³⁹ the evaluations of the Venice Commission, and OSCE/ODIHR⁴⁰ talk about the problems of political polarization and oligarchization in Georgia, which have a significant impact on the democratic governance system of Georgia. This, in itself, causes political instability and concentration of power in the hands of a few persons. According to their assessment, this is against the country's current democratic processes and requires more reforms.

According to the 2024 V-Dem Institute Democracy Index,⁴¹ Georgia ranks 100th in democracy index, and according to the 2023 assessment,⁴² Georgia is among the top ten countries with a decade of progress in democracy. Georgia is characterized as a country with a moderate level of democratic governance. The final index is derived from critical dimensions of democracy, such as the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.

Aspect	Point
Electoral process and pluralism	0.52
The functioning of government	0.65
Political participation	0.50
Political culture	0.41

Table 5. Georgia's ranking by V-Dem Institute Democracy Index.⁴³

The unity of the mentioned points gives us a nuanced view of the democratic landscape of Georgia. This assessment reflects the effectiveness of Georgia according to the main dimensions of democracy and reveals both the strengths of the country's development and the areas for improvement. As a result of the electoral process and pluralism, Georgia shows a moderate development and basis to ensure the smoothness of the electoral system and the diversity of political actors in the country. The government score indicates a vital aspect of the country's governance, which is the basis for effective government performance and country stability. However, the political participation and political culture scores highlight ongoing challenges in Georgia's political processes, characterized by a lack of broad public engagement and a culture supportive of democratic values.

According to Freedom House's 2022 assessment,⁴⁴ Georgia experienced a decline in independent media rating, and compared to last year, its score dropped from 3.50 to 3.25. According to assessment, it appears that this decline was due to an increased trend of violence and harassment against journalists. As for Georgia's democracy score, compared to last year, it has also decreased slightly, from 3.07 to 3.04. This score places Georgia in the transitional or hybrid regime category. These indicators highlight the ongoing challenges of media freedom and democratic processes in Georgia, which require constant efforts to ensure journalistic independence and improve the general democratic environment.

³⁸ Transparency International – Georgia. "Corruption Map," 09 February, 2024. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/corruption-map>. Accessed on February 11, 2024.

³⁹ European Council. EU relations with Georgia – consilium. (2023, December 21). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>. Accessed on February 7, 2024.

⁴⁰ Venice Commission - Council of Europe. "Opinion on the provisions of the Law on the fight against Corruption concerning the Anti-Corruption Bureau." (Venice, 15-16 December 2023). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)046-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)046-e). Accessed on February 16, 2024.

⁴¹ V-Dem Institute. (2024). Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot. https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf. Accessed on February 16, 2024.

⁴² V-Dem Institute. (2023). Defiance in the face of autocratization. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf. Accessed on February 16, 2024.

⁴³ V-Dem Institute. (2024). Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot. https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf. Accessed on February 16, 2024.

⁴⁴ Freedom House. (2023). "Georgia." <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/nations-transit/2023>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

Political polarization and the strong influence of oligarchization on Georgia's political landscape create a problematic environment for the country's ongoing democratization process. This affects the current waves of reforms and modernization of the governance system in the country.⁴⁵ The presence and pressure of oligarchic interests, which often prioritize their private interests over the public good, threaten the principles of democracy and the rule of law, which calls into question the principle of fair power distribution.⁴⁶

The analysis showed that, first of all, it is necessary to deal with these challenges to continue the process of democratization of Georgia, which in turn is the basis for achieving the goals of European integration. It is necessary to develop effective strategies that encourage political pluralism in the country and ensure stability and principles of equality. The road to democratization and to the EU for Georgia is undoubtedly full of difficulties and challenges. However, through continuous, effective, and focused reforms, Georgia is ready to overcome these obstacles, which will establish a framework for more democratic governance.

Analysis of the Impact of the EU on Georgia's Democratization Process

Georgia's desire to establish closer ties with the EU has laid the foundation for significant reforms in the governance structure and the economic and political spheres. The main goal of those reforms is to increase compatibility with European values. The role of the EU in establishing democratic governance, economic prosperity, and community empowerment in Georgia is clear. This cooperation, which has been ongoing for the last several decades, has significantly impacted Georgia's democratic development trajectory. Georgia has chosen the path of Euro-Atlantic integration. To achieve this goal, Georgia is trying to introduce European and Western values and standards through reforms in all areas of the country.

Democratic Governance and Political Stability

The wave of reforms implemented in various fields discussed above showed that the EU played a turning role in strengthening the democratic governance and political stability of Georgia. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) laid the foundation for political dialogue and cooperation between Georgia and the EU, the main goal of which was to promote the formation of a more stable and democratic governance structure in Georgia.

The comprehensive legislative framework for the country was formed according to the Association Agreement (AA), with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), as well as with other agreements and prerequisites for EU candidate status. Many reforms were carried out in the country, mainly aiming to improve the existing election processes, strengthen judicial independence and the rule of law, redistribution functions and duties between governmental institutions, and develop effective anti-corruption mechanisms.

Effective public administration, the rule of law, and the adoption of a comprehensive legislative framework are critical parts of political development. Combining these and other reforms lays the foundation for a stable and robust governance framework, fundamental to building a stable democratic system.

Aspect	Description	Action
Development of governance	The adoption of EU standards contributes to introducing a governance model characterized by accountability, transparency, and citizen involvement.	Public administration, judicial, and electoral reforms were carried out to increase justice, transparency of the electoral system, and government accountability.

⁴⁵ De Waal T., Gegeshidze A., "Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization." Carnegie Europe, December 8, 2021. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/12/08/divided-georgia-hostage-to-polarization-pub-85937>. Accessed on February 15, 2024.

⁴⁶ Konończuk W., Cenuşa D., and Kakachia K. (2017). Oligarchs in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as key obstacles to reforms. CEPS Brussels

Aspect	Description	Action
Impact on democratization	Strengthens judicial independence, fights corruption, and ensures protection of fundamental rights.	Reforms have been implemented to ensure the independence of the judiciary, and anti-corruption measures have been introduced to make governance more transparent and accountable.
Adoption and implementation of EU standards	Transparency, accountability, and effective public administration are essential for the rule of law and civil liberties.	Reforms in the delivery of public services in line with European governance models and the adoption and implementation of EU legal standards.

Table 6. Political dimension of Georgia's development: Main aspects and reforms under the conditions of EU integration.

Economic Growth and Integration

As primarily an economic union, the EU plays an essential role in Georgia's economic development – in terms of legislation and in forming a free and competitive market. Georgia's integration with the EU is an excellent economic growth and stability guarantor. In this regard, DCFTA facilitates integration, which gives Georgian products access to the expanded European market. The mentioned agreement also stimulates the current trade processes within the country, attracts direct foreign investments for the Georgian market, and contributes to the diversification of the country's economy.⁴⁷

The EU gives Georgia access to the European market and contributes to its integration into a broad, stable, and predictable economic domain governed by the principle of fair competition. The introduction of such an economic system in Georgian reality develops businesses and small and large enterprises, contributing to the country's economic growth and creating jobs in the local market.⁴⁸

Integration into the EU also contributes to the financial and technical development and sustainability of Georgia, which in turn contributes to the modernization of the economic infrastructure. These ongoing economic reforms are critical to promoting economic diversification and ensuring long-term sustainable growth. Georgia's economic ties with the EU ensure the country's economic stability against the current unstable and economic uncertainty in the region, which in the future will ensure the attraction of more foreign investments and lead to a more secure, independent and stable economic future of the country.⁴⁹

The financial and technical support received from the EU contributed to the modernization and sustainable development of the country's economic infrastructure. Through these aid efforts, the country has implemented reforms in areas such as energy efficiency, environmental protection, and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which in turn contribute to the development of the country's economic sustainability and competitiveness.

⁴⁷ World Bank. "Doing Business 2018: Georgia Ranked Highest in Europe and Central Asia Region," October 31, 2017. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/10/31/doing-business-2018-georgia-ranked-highest-in-europe-and-central-asia-region>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

⁴⁸ Whitman, R. G., & Japaridze, S. (2018). *Deepening EU-Georgian Relations – What, Why, and How?* London: European Union External Action.

⁴⁹ World Bank. "Doing Business 2018: Georgia Ranked Highest in Europe and Central Asia Region," October 31, 2017. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/10/31/doing-business-2018-georgia-ranked-highest-in-europe-and-central-asia-region>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

Aspect	Description	Action
Economic integration and access to the European market	DCFTA opens the European market for Georgian products, promotes trade, and attracts investments. It also grants access to a larger, more stable, and predictable European market characterized by the principle of fair competition.	Various necessary regulatory reforms have been adopted and implemented to meet EU market product standards. This, in turn, will simplify trade relations, which will ensure compatibility with the EU single market in both trade policy and practice.
Improving the business environment	Promotes innovation, SME development, economic growth, and job creation in the country.	Legislative reforms have been implemented to improve the business environment and promote innovation and enterprise development.
Financial and technical support	It contributes to the modernization and sustainable development of Georgia's economic infrastructure.	Various economic infrastructure development projects are underway in the country to modernize the economic sectors with the support of the EU and increasing compatibility.
Stability and security	Economic ties with the EU are a significant buffer against regional instability and insecurity.	Political and economic reforms were implemented, the main goal of which was to strengthen economic stability and security in the country.

Table 7. Economic dimension of Georgia's development: Main aspects and reforms under the conditions of EU integration.

Societal Advancements

The role of integration in the EU is also significant for the social development of society. Georgia's compatibility with EU standards is manifested in its commitment to raising the quality of education, improving health services, and protecting cultural heritage. The visa liberalization agreement contributed to the increased mobility of Georgian citizens, which strengthened people-to-people contacts and increased the participation of Georgian youth in educational exchange programs and cultural interactions. The deepening of ties between the Georgian and European peoples has increased and contributed to the popularization of European values among the Georgians, increasing the perception of community unity and strengthening the European identity in the country.⁵⁰

EU-supported programs and initiatives also played a crucial role in developing healthcare, education, and social inclusion in Georgia. The reforms implemented in the social spheres, aimed at increasing compliance with EU social policies, led to the improvement of public health services, the improvement of higher education standards, and the promotion of the protection of minority rights, which in turn laid the foundation for the formation of a more inclusive and fair society.

This transformation process is crucial for promoting a unified society, which contributes to Georgia's integration into European society. Through these areas, integration into the EU contributes to forming a more resilient society open to the European values that define the way of life.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Migration and Home Affairs. "Visa Liberalisation with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia". https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia_en#:~:text=The%20decision%20to%20transfer%20Georgia,a%20short%2Dstay%20was%20abolished. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

⁵¹ European Union – Source: European Parliament. "Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement – November 14, 2018,". https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0457_EN.html. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

Aspect	Description	Action
Education and healthcare	Ensuring higher education standards and commitment to health capacity development.	Reforms were implemented in the education system in accordance with European standards, and health care reforms were carried out. The main goals of these reforms are access to health care for all citizens of the country and improvement of the quality of health care.
Cultural heritage	Protection and promotion of cultural heritage as part of community development.	Policies and measures necessary for preserving and promoting cultural heritage have been developed, which contribute to the country's integration into the European cultural dimension.
People-to-people contact	The visa liberalization process has facilitated educational exchange and cultural interactions, which has led to the invigoration of European identity among the Georgian people.	Several projects have been implemented to enhance people-to-people contacts and promote educational and cultural exchange programs with EU countries.
United society	The transformation of society towards common values of democracy, human rights, and mutual respect strengthens Georgia's European integration process.	Initiate initiatives to promote human rights, gender equality, and the protection of minorities to strengthen society's unity and common democratic values.

Table 8. Social dimension of Georgia's development: Main aspects and reforms under the conditions of EU integration.

Conclusion

The role and involvement of the EU in the reforms implemented in the country is clear. The EU-Georgia partnership is contributing to Georgia's democratization, economic development, and development into a socially inclusive country. In this work, we analysed the influence of the integration factor in the EU on the modernization of Georgia's political governance, forming an independent court, reforming the electoral administration and code, and anti-corruption initiatives. According to the standards and recommendations of the EU, the ongoing reforms in the country strengthened the structure of Georgian democracy. They created a solid foundation for its continuous development and integration into European society.

Reforms were implemented in the country according to various areas, more specifically:

- **Political reforms:** Georgia's commitment to strengthening its political framework has established more robust, accountable, and participatory governance structures. The reforms led to a political environment in Georgia characterized by democratic principles, which once again emphasizes the country's commitment to the democratic ethos. However, the country still faces challenges such as political polarization, inequality, and oligarchization, which are necessary to solve. First of all, it is necessary to overcome political polarization, end the current harsh rhetoric, and increase the efficiency of the Parliament through constructive multipartyism.
- **Judicial reforms:** Four waves of reforms implemented in the judicial system, aimed at ensuring judicial independence and justice, were one of the cornerstones of Georgia's reform agenda. The changes implemented in this direction have significantly improved the rule of law, creating an even more reliable legal framework for citizens and businesses. However, like other areas, the country still faces challenges in this direction, such as judicial corporatism, politicization of the judiciary, and lack of institutional transparency. Our analysis showed that Georgia continues reforms in this direction, the final goal of which is establishing a democratic, independent, and transparent judicial system.

- **Electoral processes:** reforms implemented in the direction of elections played a decisive role in increasing the credibility and integrity of elections in Georgia. The country has introduced stricter electoral laws and procedures that have increased political competition and transparency in both the 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 local government elections. However, there is also a wave of challenges in the electoral field, starting from election fraud in individual cases, the use of administrative resources, and media bias, ending with representation inequality.
- **Anti-corruption measures:** Georgia's implementation of anti-corruption measures has primarily reduced the incidence of corruption in the country, strengthening public trust in government institutions. Implementing anti-corruption mechanisms in Georgia has once again demonstrated the country's commitment to European values and its aspiration to implement rigorous governance standards. A separate Anti-corruption Bureau was formed based on international partners' recommendations. However, the analysis above showed that it is necessary to implement more reforms in this direction to establish more robust and effective anti-corruption mechanisms in the country to increase the effectiveness of existing strategies and reduce vulnerabilities.

By aligning with EU standards and frameworks, Georgia not only embarked on comprehensive reforms but also embraced the core values of democracy, human rights, and mutual respect that define European identity. The AA and the DCFTA have greatly influenced the formation and shaping of Georgia's legislative and institutional framework, ensuring closer compliance with the strict norms and standards maintained by the EU. These joint efforts of the country and society laid the foundation for significant transformations in all sectors of Georgian society, paving the way to a future that promises stability, prosperity, and deeper integration into European society.

The reforms carried out by Georgia so far are proof of Georgia's commitment and effort towards European integration. Although Georgia's journey towards European integration is full of challenges, our current partnership with the EU will continue to catalyse positive changes, ensuring the solution to the country's challenges and furthering the democratization process. Considering that Georgia continues to deepen the integration process with the EU, the focus should remain on using the advantages of this partnership to consider the difficulties that have arisen and find ways to solve them. Based on common values and mutual aspirations, the EU-Georgia relationship promises a brighter future for Georgia, which is steadfastly based on European standards and values.

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