

European Perspective of Georgia: A Comparative Analysis of Compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria in the Case of Georgia and Albania

* Tamar Bitsadze

Abstract

The increasing importance of the 29-years-old relations between Georgia and the EU, the relevance of the issue and the delayed membership have become the key reasons for the research topic.

It should be noted that joining the EU is not an easy process and contains a number of bureaucratic elements. Therefore, the paper analyzes Georgia's economic and political willingness to comply with the Copenhagen criteria for future integration into the EU. It also compares the pace of development and the situation in Georgia and in Albania, which has the status of "official candidate" of the EU. It is interesting to see what changes and reforms (different from Georgia) are being implemented by Albania, which brings it even closer to the EU. The main research question also serves to determine Georgia's European perspective based on an objective analysis of 2018-2021 years data and processes and to explain the main reasons that hinder Georgia's integration (unlike Albania) with the EU.

Key words: *EU, Georgia, Albania, Copenhagen criteria.*

* MA in International Relations, E-mail: tbitsadze@ibsu.edu.ge

Introduction

During the 2020 election campaign the ruling party, the Georgian Dream (GD), announced that in 2024 Georgia will formally apply to Brussels for EU membership. According to David Zalkaliani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, integration process with EU is a top priority for country's foreign policy (mfa.gov.ge, 2020). In addition, he noted that despite the new configuration of the European Parliament and the Commission and the difficulties caused by the global pandemic, the country has managed to maintain close ties with Europe through great efforts. The question is how ready Georgia is for this step, how well it meets the membership criteria and what are the main implications for Georgia in terms of compliance with the Copenhagen criteria? Therefore, the main idea of the paper is based on the study of Georgia's readiness and fulfillment for integration.

While the EU continues to pursue an open-door policy for the Western Balkans, given the challenges it faces today, the EU lacks the political will to make a similar commitment to the Eastern Partnership countries. In this regard, the challenge for the EU is to develop mechanisms for cooperation with countries that do not have the prospect of EU membership in the near future. For Georgia, the main challenge is to maintain the dynamics of the reform process in the context of a "transitional period" of cooperation with the EU. Uncertainty about the transition period increases the risk of negative consequences for the European integration process, which may be reflected in the weakening of democratization in Georgia and the strengthening of anti-Western narratives, as well as weakening the EU's influence in the neighborhood.

It should be noted that the topic has not lost its relevance since independence and is still one of the most important issues for discussion. It is noteworthy that the European Union is quite actively involved in the post-election political crisis occurred in Georgia. The Lithuanian Public Broadcaster (GPB) quotes Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis as saying that EU foreign ministers are working to set up a mediation group to help the Georgian government and opposition overcome the political crisis. During a visit to Tbilisi on 1 March, European Council President Charles Michel invited the parties to the negotiating table and called for a resumption of dialogue and the adjustment of the role of mediator from the facilitator, so that the parties could reach an agreement through negotiations (Civil.ge, 2021). In addition, the EU and Team Europe provided approximately 1.5 billion to mobilize Georgia to assist in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic by raising new funds and redistributing existing ones. Moreover, the Brussels provides policy advice and sharing of experience through ongoing projects and other mechanisms, further enhancing targeted assistance from the EU and the European team. Georgia also has access to EU regional funds to provide working capital, to alleviate the burden of loans and trade finance.

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to analysis Georgian and European perspectives on the issue of Georgia's integration into the European Union and to study the importance of the EU Copenhagen Criteria, to analyze Georgia's readiness towards it. The paper presents a comparative analysis of political and economic steps of Georgia and Albania taken towards European integration. This approach will help us to see the real results and challenges that Georgia faces in the integration process.

It is noteworthy that the ambition of membership is not only for the Georgian government, but also for the majority of the Georgian population, according to recent research, support for EU membership is 80% (NDI, 2021). This is one of the largest rates not only among the candidate countries but throughout Europe. Based on the discussion of the presented issues, comparative analysis, the data of Eastern Partnership Index 2018-19, European Commission's latest (Report, 2021) joint staff working paper and other recent researches (NDI, CRRC, BTI) the following paper answers the research question, whether Georgia meets the Copenhagen criteria and analyzes the causes for delayed integration. However, since the study of the accuracy of compliance with the criteria requires a fairly extensive and comprehensive study, it is impossible to determine the exact situation by analyzing specific data on the pace of development of a country. For example, if the obligation to transpose EU legislation in full can be determined by the introduction of Chapter 35 and the conclusion of negotiations, an objective assessment of criteria such as the existence of a functioning market economy or respect for and protection of political values may require expert assessments, which are not based on quantitative and easily calculated data. Also, the data are variable and in the course of conducting the research, some specific indicators experience a decrease or, conversely, an increase. Nevertheless, by analyzing the general situation, it is possible to form some kind of notion, on the basis of which it will be permissible to make assumptions about the future perspective.

AA Implementation Assessment for Georgia

The 2008 military aggression and open occupation of part of the country hampered Georgia's integration with the EU. Georgia has made significant progress in the priority areas of cooperation with the European Union under the Eastern Partnership. A new format of cooperation between Georgia and the European Union has been established since 2009 - the Human Rights Dialogue (HRD). Meetings within this format are held annually. At the Vilnius Summit on November 28-29, 2013, the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) component, was signed. The agreement has benefited Georgia in the region and strengthened it, and, most importantly, it has brought Georgia closer to the EU and granted visa-free travel to Georgian citizens in the "Schengen area". Also, it allows a country to join EU programs and gain access to its agencies. At the same time, it requires a significant approximation of the Georgian regulatory framework to the EU acquis (referred to as a set of legal acts adopted by EU institutions or harmonized between member states).

On March 16, 2021, the 6th consecutive meeting of the Georgia-EU Association Council was held. The Association Council evaluated the report on the implementation of the Association Agreement published by Georgia in 2021 and the current condition of Georgia-EU relations after the last meeting of the Association Council in March 2019. The parties reaffirmed their readiness to jointly continue to promote Georgia's deeper political association and economic integration with the European Union under the Association Agreement and its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The Association Council welcomed the quality and frequency of the existing high-level dialogue and noted the importance of actively working on its results. Both sides recognized Georgia's European aspirations, its European choice and common goal to continue building a democratic, stable and prosperous country. The Association Council also welcomed the ongoing negotiations on the Association Agenda for 2021-2027, which aim to set priorities for the implementation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. By 2024 Georgia has revealed its intentions for accelerating its progress toward European integration.

Since 2020 was an election year, this year played an important role in the political part of the country. The non-fulfillment of the condition presented by the parliamentary majority on fully proportional elections in 2019 led to polarization of events, as political parties failed to agree on the basic rules for conducting elections. Freedom House highlighted "significant shortcomings", including misuse of administrative resources, voter intimidation and bribery, alleged inconsistencies in the vote count and election-related violence, which was eventually followed by a boycott of the second round and the new parliament by opposition parties (Freedomhouse, 2021). On March 8, with the assistance of the Ambassadors of the United States, Germany, the EU and the Council of Europe, a broad range of Georgian political parties reached an agreement on a compromise for the 2020 election system. The necessary amendments to the Electoral Code were made on the basis of the Constitution revised by the Parliament in June. This became a precondition for the immediate introduction of the electoral system and underwent significant changes, for example: the 5% threshold in the previous Parliament was reduced to 1% and also 77 proportional and 73 majoritarian seats were replaced by 120 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats. The new system will assist Georgia in introducing a pre-planned fully proportional electoral system by 2024.

Despite the difficulties caused by Covid-19 pandemic, Georgia remains committed to implementing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. Alignment to the European standards and EU acquis has been maintained effectively. This is confirmed by the words of the Vice President and High Representative of EU, Josep Borrell (TV1, 2021). Georgia managed to hold the first round of parliamentary elections with a renewed electoral system and a high voter turnout. Notably, that, according to the different statements from OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO, again, in 2020 parliamentary elections fundamental freedoms were respected and an election process was competitive (CoE, 2020). However, as observers noted, there was some pressure on voters and emphasized some rift and mistrust between the population and the ruling party during the election period. Many credible observer groups have called for counting or cancellation of results in problem areas. Thousands of opposition activists gathered in the streets of Tbilisi to protest, questioning the fairness of the process and the legitimacy of the results.

According to Freedom House's annual report, Freedom in the World 2021, Georgia's score fell by one point. On a 100-point scale, Georgia has 60 points (37 points - civil liberties, 23 points - political rights), which is a small decrease compared to last year (61 points). Georgia remains among the "partly free" countries, like previous years. Georgia's score fell in two figures - the independent media score fell from 3.75 to 3.50 and election process score fell from 3.25 to 3.00 compared to last year. The rest of the figures remained unchanged (Freedomhouse, 2021).

While there were instances of abuse of administrative resources and senior state officials from the ruling party were active in the campaign, the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations of 2019 state that the election was competitive and professionally conducted, fundamental freedoms were generally respected, candidates were able to campaign openly and voters had a genuine opportunity to vote (Report, 2021). But, recommendations about dispute resolution, addressing voter intimidation and commission compositions were not satisfactorily handled.

Violence and intimidation are unacceptable in a democratic society and in elections. It is noteworthy that the government and political leaders have repeatedly called on public officials and party activists to refrain from violence and provocations. Nevertheless, some parties, media outlets and civil society organizations spoke of violent incidents. In a joint statement issued on October 29, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Transparency International Georgia and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics named 20 cases (Joint Staff Assessment, 2020).

Georgia has taken significant steps to achieve greater political diversity and inclusion. Adopting a required gender quota is particularly important. Despite this development, women, people with disabilities, religious and ethnic minorities, and LGBT+ persons continue to be underrepresented in the new parliament, as well as in party organizations and platforms.

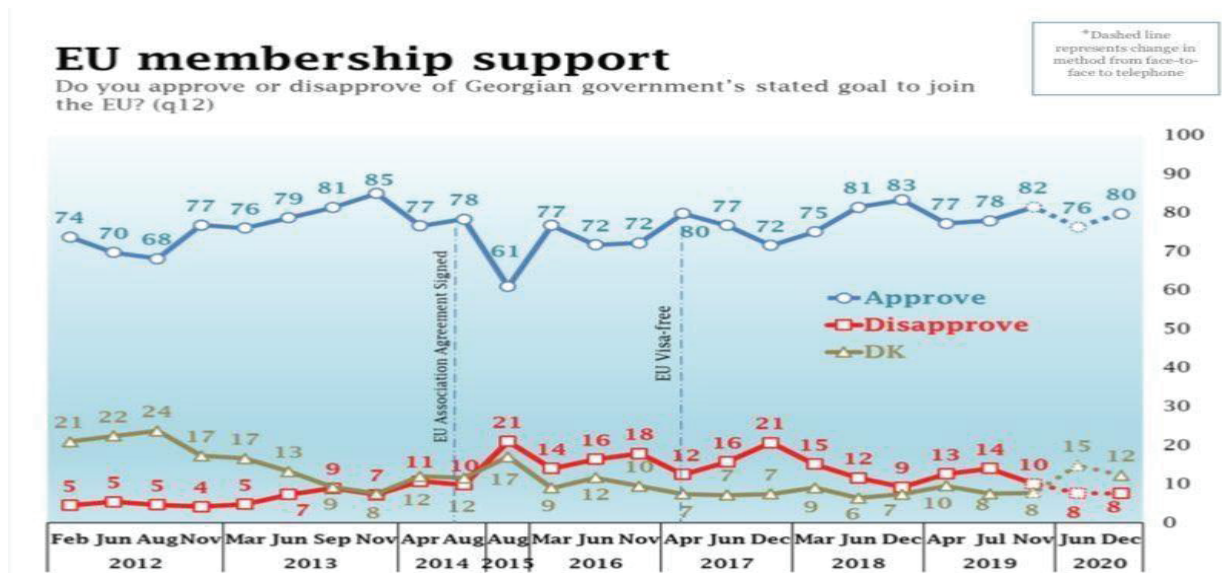
As the implementation report noted, the Public Defender's Office maintains its active oversight role. In terms of the Gender Equality, according to the 2020 Global Gender Gap report on Georgia, score increased compared to 2018 year of 68% and it became 70.8%, which is above the global average score of 68.6% for the first time and Georgia is in the 74th place out of 153 countries (WEF-GGGR, 2020). In addition, the state has introduced gender quotas for elections, where the limit of 25% of the proportional party candidate list (does not apply to majoritarian candidates) was reached in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Accordingly, 31 out of 150 seats belong to women.

Significant progress has been made in the implementation of the Association Agreement in the approximation of national legislation with EU legislation, including during the reporting period the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law on Energy Efficiency, the Law on Energy Efficiency of Buildings, the Forest Code, and the Law on Investment Funds. Amendments to the new Law on Vocational Education, the Law on Special Vocational Education and the Law on the Development of the Quality of Education (WEF-GGGR, 2020).

In addition, the Georgian government is effective in the fight against corruption in the lower echelons of the state administration, in some international indexes Georgia is in a better position than some EU member states, such as Italy, Malta, Croatia, Slovakia... (CPI, 2020). In the 2017 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, Georgia is ranked first in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the "absence of corruption dimension" (Emerson & Kovziridze, 2018). But, elite corruption remains a serious problem and requires appropriate efforts. Georgian civil society organizations have loudly expressed similar concerns and called on the authorities to investigate. This issue was also mentioned in the European Parliament report, which was adopted in October 2018 on the implementation of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union (implementation-report, 2018). The document acknowledges Georgia's success in fighting low and middle-level corruption, but stresses that elite corruption remains a serious challenge. To overcome this situation, the Georgian government must first acknowledge the existence of this type of corruption and then find a solution. In this regard, one option would be to establish an independent investigative body tasked with high-level corruption cases.

Despite the current serious challenges in the world, it is evident that the country has taken steps and reforms in the specific areas discussed above in terms of European integration and the active involvement of the government and its connection with Europe is noticeable. However, it is clear that there are significant gaps in the areas of economics and politics, which we will discuss in more detail below. Before that, we must emphasize one important fact, despite the serious economic or political crisis, which have affected not only Georgia but the whole world, EU membership support and trusts of the Georgian population in 2020 increased by 4% compared to the previous year and 80% of the population supports the EU integration (See, Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: CRRRC 2020

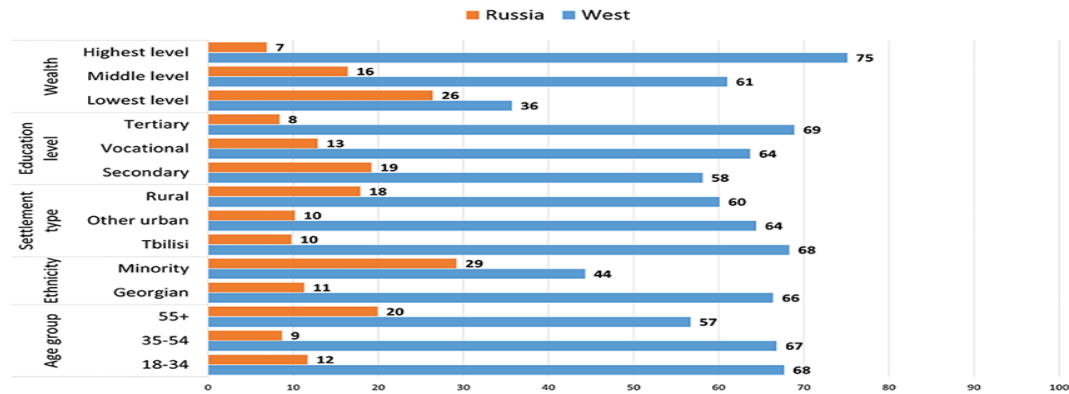
According to a poll conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC), with the growth of supporters, the percentage of opponents of EU membership decreased by 2% compared to 2019.

Clearly, just high support of the people will not be the guarantee for the country's integration process, and it requires clear and strong institutional reforms in terms of democracy, rule of law or economics, but all this emphasizes that the integration process is important for the country not only at the governmental but also at the national level, which is a contributing factor in terms of the European development of the country, for which the state has been fighting for years.

Due to the fact that 2020 was an election year, today the population of Georgia is still in a domestic political crisis, which after the elections accompanies the country. With the fight against the pandemic, the population is worried about how the country will manage to get closer to the EU through tough political moves?

Figure 2

FIGURE 1

Georgians' Views of Their Top Foreign Supporters*Who can currently give the best support to Georgia: the EU, the United States, or Russia?***SOURCE:** September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).**NOTE:** The survey answers for EU and the United States were combined to give a joint answer, the West.

As the Figure 2 above shows, today, when the majority of the country's population is facing a severe social, economic and political crisis, it favors the collapse of the Soviet Union and focuses on the sovereignty of the country. This is reflected in the positive perception of the West as the best supporter of Georgia, with 63% of the population committed to European development, while only 13% support Russia. Russia's support can be explained not by its pro-Russian orientation, but by the population's fatigue caused by the hopeless anticipation of EU membership. Consequently, studying the main obstacles and real facts will help us find the answer to the main question: what is the main reason for the delayed membership, is it country's non-compliance with the Copenhagen criteria or something else? Accordingly, it is necessary to explain the reasons for the different EU politics towards the EaP and Balkan states, as the different data and reports show us that there is no significant difference between them in terms of their achievements, development, and integration. Therefore, a comparative analysis of the reports on Georgia-Albania progress in the context of European integration will help us to better analyze Georgia's European perspective.

Georgia and Albania: Assessing the Progress in Reforms

When the EU's desire for enlargement is under question, the existence of the Balkan countries and related examples suggests that the EU is still willing to add and join new countries. "The full enlargement of the European Union to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission" said Oliver Varhelyi, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy (Challenges.fr, 2020).

The European perspective of the Western Balkans was recognized by the European Union at the first EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in 2000. That "the future of the Balkans is in the European Union" was reaffirmed at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. The EU's interest in the Western Balkans, as well in EaP countries, is primarily to ensure stability and security, which in itself is a prerequisite for EU security; the accession of the countries of the region to the European Union is also an echo of the idea of a united continent of Europe. For the Western Balkans themselves, EU integration is a 20-year vision of stability and socio-economic development, an alternative perspective, based on the state development strategy of the region and the implementation of a number of reforms directly in line with European directives.

An important milestone in European-Balkan relations was 2018, when the EU adopted an updated strategy for relations with the Western Balkans, which gave a whole new impetus to the European aspirations of the Balkan countries. It was then stated by the EU that Serbia and Montenegro are expected to be ready to join the EU by 2025, while Northern Macedonia and Albania are also expected to be ready by 2030 (COM, 2018).

Today, countries in the region, like the EaP countries, face more or less common challenges such as the rule of law, human rights, the fight against corruption and organized crime, socio-economic development, growing mass migration with low birth rates and good neighborly relations. In the context of European integration, the latter is a particularly high priority - the issue of good neighborly relations and reconciliation, as the Western Balkans, like post-soviet countries, have historically been considered an unstable region with a number of bloody ethnic conflicts. An important challenge is the unresolved bilateral disputes between the countries of the Western Balkans. Ethno-nationalist fluctuations are still observed in the region. In this regard, for example, the issue of Albanian minorities is noteworthy, as more than a third of the Albanian population is now represented in the member states of the former Yugoslavia. In order to prevent possible confrontation on ethnic grounds, one of the priorities of the Albanian state is to protect the rights of Albanian minorities in neighboring countries. In this context, relations between Albania and Northern Macedonia are delicate, whereas about 30% of the population of Northern Macedonia is Albanian, whose full integration is considered one of the country's main challenges. The issue of the rights of the Albanian minority is related to the civil war that took place in the country in 2001, the negative consequences of which still affect the state of Northern Macedonia. It is generally believed that the accession of Northern Macedonia to the European Union may be the best condition for the full integration of the Albanian minority in the country and the protection of their rights and interests. Despite this problematic issue, today the relations between the two countries are stable, they are simultaneously striving for integration into the European Union.

Albania, like Georgia, has high support for the EU membership, with 86% of respondents considering integration in a positive light, out of which for 62% EU membership associated with their economic prosperity (Balkan-Barometer, 2019). Albania has been an official candidate for the EU since 2014. Its accession to the EU in 2019 was vetoed by France, but in addition to France, Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain also opposed the commencement of negotiations, whose opinions were substantiated by the fact that more provisions were needed to address the problem of the rule of law and human rights, as well as corruption. In the case of Albania, President Macron also named a national challenge; In particular, as of today, in terms of the number of asylum seekers in France, Albanians rank second place, which increases the problems associated with illegal migration in the country (Ofpra, 2020).

However, despite the fact that Albania began closer relations with the EU later than Georgia, it is now far ahead and closer to membership. This is confirmed by Angela Merkel's statement in 2018 that Georgia should not expect quick and hasty promises from Europe, as it is necessary to move and develop gradually in this direction (IPN, 2018).

In the case of Albania, after joining NATO (in 2009), the Prime Minister of that time, Sali Berisha clearly stated the country's Western aspirations and expressed a desire to join the EU. However, according to the European Council, Albania was not ready for that yet, so the Council advised the country's administration to improve the current situation in accordance with the recommendations (BBC, 2009). Nevertheless, at the European Council in Brussel in 2014, unlike Georgia, Albania became the official candidate country for EU membership, which gave the country an obvious advantage and, at first glance, makes its future membership inevitable. Although there is a political decision to expand the EU by 2025, the Western Balkan countries did not fully meet the criteria for membership in a number of areas. It is noteworthy that, among other reasons, Albania's NATO membership has provided significant impetus for the EU to make such a decision.

Therefore, it is better to consider and compare the main criteria that the Copenhagen criteria include and which is the main task of our study. Determining a country's democracy is one of the most important preconditions for EU membership.

Political Aspect:

As for the political criteria, the EU approaches and the degree of “screening” of candidates has historically differed. For example, the political framework was not decisive in the accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal, and in some cases even turned a blind eye to the quality and sustainability of democratic institutions. However, in the case of Georgia and Albania, these criteria are of particular importance. As has been repeatedly stated, in order for the EU to grant a country the status of a candidate country, it is necessary for the country to meet the first so-called Copenhagen political criteria. Georgia and Albania, given their geopolitics, open conflict, scarcity of resources and many other challenges, should be a visible example of democracy, so that the prospect of membership (in case of Georgia) and a positive consideration of the membership application (in both cases) can be considered in the foreseeable future.

In order to determine the readiness and relevance of the country, various international or local research centers conduct the necessary studies to determine the Democracy Index (and not only). For example, Freedom House's report 2021 noted, that: “Georgia's democracy score is now close to where it was a decade ago, before the current ruling party rode to power on a wave of public frustration with the increasingly autocratic incumbents.” (Freedomhouse, 2021). However, it is interesting how objective this assessment is, since according to the report published by Freedom House in 2018, the indicators in terms of judicial system and media freedom have deteriorated and the rate of democracy in Georgia has decreased from 4.61 to 4.68. This assessment was biased by the government, as it became clear that the National Movement and the opposition were unjustly boycotting and acting in the scenario of a revolution, as there was no place for “total falsification” of elections and it is likely that the influence of the mainstream non-governmental sector was affected on the subjective assessment of Freedom House (NSP, 2018).

Moreover, in 2010-11, the European Court of Human Rights received 350-400 complaints from the Georgian population, as seeking justice in the country was complicated and, in some cases, even impossible. In addition, there was almost no family without a prisoner, and many families were victims of the “all in prisons!” policy. According to 2017 data, the number of complaints were below 70, which clearly indicates that the population feels less victimized in their own country and the democratic quality should increase instead of decreasing. However, according to table 1, Georgia ranks 91st out of 165 countries with 5.31 points (5.42 points in the previous year), while Albania ranks 71st with 6.08 points, and most importantly, it has managed to transform from a hybrid regime to a flawed Democracy, while Georgia is still in hybrid mode (EIU, 2020). It is likely that in determining democratic quality, non-objectivity arises, and raises questions about how these two countries were evaluated by the same criteria and equal strictness. Moreover, it should also be noted that due to the pandemic, in 70% of countries around the world there is a decline in the democracy index. Overall, by 2020, the quality of democracy around the world has dropped significantly. Compared to 2019, 116 out of 167 experienced a backsliding (EIU, 2021). In the sphere of Georgian democracy one of the improvements was that the number of self-governing municipalities was increased to 12.

	Overall score	Global Rank	Regional rank	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties	Regime type
Estonia	7.84	27=	1	9.58	7.86	6.67	6.88	8.24	Flawed democracy
Czech Republic	7.67	31	2	9.58	6.07	6.67	7.50	8.53	Flawed democracy
Slovenia	7.54	35	3	9.58	6.43	7.22	6.25	8.24	Flawed democracy
Latvia	7.24	38	4	9.58	6.07	6.67	5.63	8.24	Flawed democracy
Lithuania	7.13	42=	5	9.58	6.07	5.56	5.63	8.82	Flawed democracy
Slovakia	6.97	47	6	9.58	6.43	5.56	5.63	7.65	Flawed democracy
Poland	6.85	50	7	9.17	5.71	6.67	5.63	7.06	Flawed democracy
Bulgaria	6.71	52	8	9.17	5.71	7.22	4.38	7.06	Flawed democracy
Hungary	6.56	55=	9	8.33	6.43	5.00	6.25	6.76	Flawed democracy
Croatia	6.50	59=	10	9.17	6.07	6.11	4.38	6.76	Flawed democracy
Romania	6.40	62	11	9.17	5.36	6.67	3.75	7.06	Flawed democracy
Serbia	6.22	66	12	8.25	5.36	6.67	3.75	7.06	Flawed democracy
Albania	6.08	71	13	7.00	5.36	4.44	6.25	7.35	Flawed democracy
North Macedonia	5.89	78	14	7.42	5.71	6.11	3.13	7.06	Hybrid regime
Ukraine	5.81	79	15	8.25	2.71	7.22	5.00	5.88	Hybrid regime
Moldova	5.78	80	16	7.00	4.64	6.11	4.38	6.76	Hybrid regime
Montenegro	5.77	81	17	7.42	5.71	6.11	3.13	6.47	Hybrid regime
Armenia	5.35	89	18	7.50	5.00	6.11	3.13	5.00	Hybrid regime
Georgia	5.31	91	19	7.83	3.57	6.11	3.75	5.29	Hybrid regime

Table 1 Democracy Index 2020

It should be noted that parliament and parliamentary oversight are the most important components in a democracy. The EU is beginning to assess the Copenhagen criteria by discussing the role of parliament, as strong parliament and parliamentary oversight are key preconditions for good governance, and the EU sees this as a precondition for implementing the changes and implementing democratic rules and norms.

The Albanian parliament established the Political Council in January, entrusted with developing a plan to address the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) recommendations for electoral reforms. Most of the Council's plan had been endorsed by the parliament by October, including plans to gradually depoliticize election management, restructure the Central Election Commission (CEC), and implement electronic voter identification when technically practicable. The government declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included a ban on public meetings among other restrictions. Hundreds of demonstrators battled with police for several days in December when a police officer murdered an unarmed citizen who had broken restrictions related to COVID-19 (Freedomhouse, 2021).

As for Georgia, the management of the pandemic was carried out with much calmer and more democratic steps. In addition, the working environment of civil society organizations in Georgia is much more favorable than in some Eastern Partnership countries, such as Azerbaijan or Belarus and Georgia's civil society is fairly well-developed (Freedomhouse, 2021). In Albania Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are largely free to operate, but their funding is limited due to their reliance on policy influence and foreign donors (Freedomhouse, 2021).

According to the 2017 Eastern Partnership Index, Georgia needed stronger democratic control mechanisms in the security sector and effective and comprehensive implementation of the AA requirements instead of formal recognition (Lovitt J., 2018). In accordance with the guidelines and requirements, Georgia has taken a number of steps and signed a cooperation agreement on combating crime with France and the Czech Republic, and is currently working with EU member states to improve joint efforts to fight organized crime through joint investigation teams (mof.ge, 2020).

In terms of the Human development, Georgia has gained 0.812 points, while Albania - 0.795 points and respectively, Georgia ranks 61st and Albania 69th out of 189 countries. Georgia's progress in this direction from 2000 to the 2019 is remarkable, which is manifested by 17.7% growth in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) value. It should be noted that both countries have a high level of development in this direction. The Figure 3, below clearly show us Georgia's advantage over Albania in terms of HDI and education. Furthermore, the 2019 data do not show a significant difference in Gross National Income (GNI) per capita figures, despite the fact that Albania experienced a notable increase from 1990 to 2019 (by 183.5%). In addition, in both states, life expectancy at birth increased, for example, in Georgia by 3.4 years and in Albania – 6.7 years.

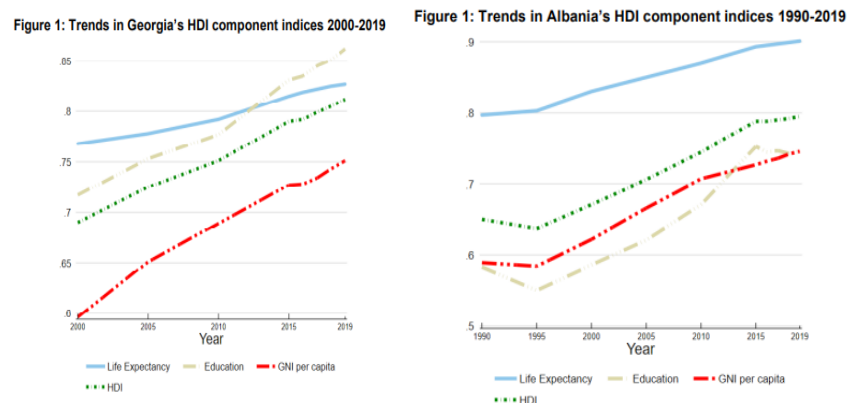


Figure 3

As a result, according to Figure 4, there is a steadily increasing trend in the case of Georgia in terms of the Human Development Index, whereas Albania experienced more stability than development and growth in 2013-2019 years, in contrast to Georgia.

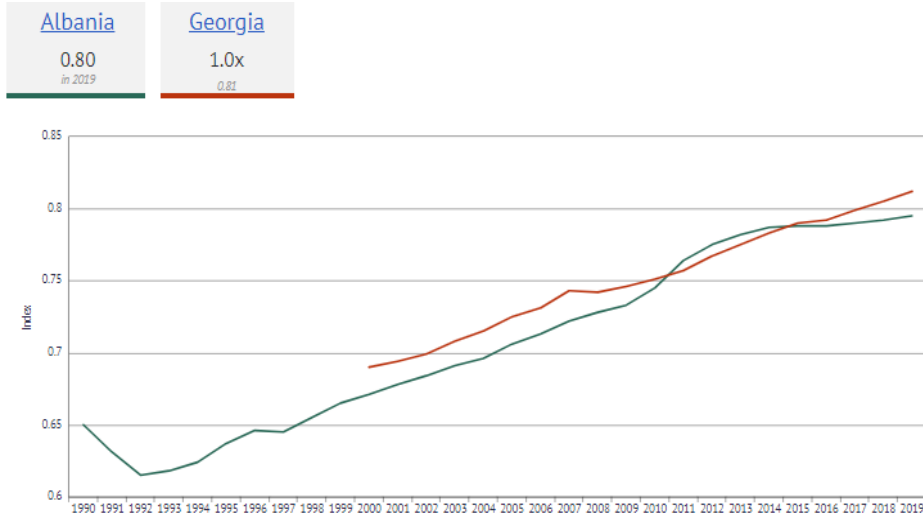


Figure 4: HDI trends for Georgia and Albania, 2000-2019

According to the Global Rule of Law Index 2020, the rule of law in Albania is estimated at 0.50 points, and in Georgia at 0.60 (maximum 1 point). Georgia ranks 42nd and Albania 78th among 128 countries. According to these indicators, the position of Albania has decreased by 0.01 points and 4 positions compared to the previous year, and the position of Georgia - by 0.01 points and 1 position (WJP, 2020). Georgia's progress in the rule of law since the Rose Revolution is perhaps its most eye-catching success. Maybe the best-known among the reforms is the police reform, which was conducted during Saakashvili's presidency. Since the Soviet era the Traffic Policy was "famous" for being corrupted, they were symbols of corruption (Khidasheli, 2011). Just in one day in 2004, 16000 officers were dismissed and the old police was replaced by a new trained and equipped team within one month and after this reform, according to surveys, the public started to trust law enforcement agencies (Loke, 2011).

In the case of the rule of law in Georgia, the report focuses on the serious challenges to the independence of the judiciary, the problems associated with the investigation of alleged high-level corruption, and the need to depoliticize the prosecution (BTI, 2020). The situation is about the same in the case of Albania, where the constitution guarantees independence of the judiciary, but public trust in judicial institutions is very low and corruption in the judiciary is still a severe problem. Moreover, underfunded courts are prone to political influence and pressure (Freedomhouse, 2021).

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2019 report, Georgia in Government ensuring policy stability received a score of 52.6 (value 4.2/7) and ranks 57 out of 141 countries, while Albania received a score of 39 (value 3.3/7) and ranks 107. With this indicator, the advantage of Georgia is obvious. However, it lags slightly behind Albania in terms of Government's responsiveness to change, where Georgia ranks 83rd with 42 points, while Albania is 4 places ahead (79rd) with 42.8 points (WEF, 2019). Beside this, Georgia has a strong advantage over Albania in the fight against organized crime, in which Georgia's score is 76.7 and ranks 25th, while Albania has only 46.4 points and is 113th out of 141 countries.

In the sphere of human rights, one of the latest improvements in Georgia are: 1) Developing mindfulness and understanding of women's rights have driven to more occurrences of gender-based savagery being detailed to the police, especially by more youthful ladies. 2) In September, Georgia embraced a Child Rights' Code which was able completely enter into force on 1 June 2020 (agenda.ge, 2020). These are considered as a step towards strengthening the protection of human rights. Since the Rose Revolution, at the legislative level Georgia's human rights record has improved and has been significant progress, but practical execution still needs to be improved (Emerson & Kovziridze, 2018). Human rights groups criticized a 2018 law that created a new state inspector's office tasked with examining police misconduct, but it would not be independent from the prosecutor's office. The new office opened in November of this year. Albania complies with international human rights agreements and has built a legal framework that meets European norms in terms of fundamental rights. Albania made efforts to fulfil commitments that arose in this aspect throughout the reporting year. However, the general implementation has to be improved (SWD, 2020). It is worth mentioning that according to the findings of OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe, Georgia's Criminal Procedure Code fully corresponds to international & European standards (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014). By decreasing the number of prisoners (through presidential pardons in 2013) and increasing budget, prisons' healthcare reform was conducted in Georgia and it helped to decrease prison mortality rate significantly, more precisely to a level comparable with some EU member states. But prisons continue to be a source of violence and poor conditions in both states (Freedomhouse, 2021).

Economic Aspect:

First of all, Georgia's very first step in the economic sphere was transformation from communist, planned economy, to market economy. It was followed by institutional, anticorruption reforms in the economy, taxes were decreased, New Customs code was introduced, and customs duties were decreased from 12 down to 0%.

In 2003 the World Bank recognized Georgia as one of the world's fastest reforming economies and leader in fighting against corruption (U.S. Department of State). Corruption decreased with no drought: On anticipating and battling corruption, Georgia proceeded actualizing the anti-corruption technique and activity arrangement, in line with affiliation plan commitments. In July, the Anti-Corruption Committee received a modern anti-corruption methodology and activity for 2019-2020 in July. The issues are reflected in universal evaluations, but a few concerns of high-level corruption endure.

According to the Freedom house 2020 report, in Georgia high-level corruption remains a severe problem while the country continues to be a regional leader in the battle against corruption. In the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) survey (table 2), Georgia has 56 points and ranks 45th out of 180 countries (freedomhouse, 2020). Georgia also had 56 points in last year's Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating that while the country has made some progress in fighting corruption (in particular the reduction of petty corruption), the high-level corruption issues that were highlighted in the 2019 and 2018 indices remain unresolved. The Georgian government has not taken effective systemic steps to prevent and combat this type of corruption. There are important problems such as: excessive concentration of power in the hands of one political group, which was especially evident during the 2020 elections. Weakness of state institutions, especially the Parliament, in performing its oversight function. Ignoring the opposition and excluding it from the political process. Also, ineffective investigation of alleged cases of elite corruption and lack of accountability in law enforcement agencies (CPI, 2020). Therefore, to eliminate such problems, it is desirable to create an independent anti-corruption agency. Transparency International put Albania in the group of nations where the CPI score has "significantly improved." This is all due to the large-scale institutional changes in Albania, both in the legislative and in the fight against corruption. However, according to the EU Commission 2020 Report, 62 percent of judges and prosecutors in the investigated cases were resigned or dismissed as a result of the procedure. Because of the vetting procedure, the Constitutional Court was left without judges and unable to make judgements from January 2018 until January 2021 (commission, 2020). Overall, corruption remains prevalent and a severe concern in Albania, which ranks 104th with 36 points (table 2). It is necessary to emphasize the fact that in terms of corruption, the situation in Georgia is much better than in Albania, which is confirmed by numerous studies and data (CPI, Freedomhouse, BTI, Heritage Foundation).

Rank	Country	2020	2019	2018	2017
180		Max. 100 points			
104	Albania	36	35	36	38
45	Georgia	56	56	58	56

Table 2: Corruption Index 2020

According to the 2021 survey of Heritage Foundation's "Index of Economic Freedom", Georgia's rating score was a historical maximum of 77.1 points, while Albania's - 65.2 and Georgia advanced by 4 positions in the world rankings and ranked 12th, but Albania making its economy the 66th freest in the 2021 Index. Compared to the previous year, Georgia has advanced by 2 positions in the European region - with this result, Georgia is in the 6th place among 45 countries in the European region with the status of "mostly free". Albania is placed 35th out of 45 countries in Europe, with a score that is higher than the global average, but lower than the regional average, while Georgia's total score exceeds both the regional (69.8 points) and the world average (61.6 points). Agriculture still dominates Albania's economy. Albania remains one of Europe's poorest countries, with high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure and slow growth (heritage.org, 2021).

According to preliminary data published by the National Statistics Office of Georgia on February 26, in January 2021, compared to the same period last year, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 11.5%. According to Geostat, despite the overall decline, an increase was observed in the areas of information and communication, insurance and financial activities. In 2020, the country's GDP will shrink by 6.1% compared to the previous year and by 11.5% during 2021 (see, Figure 5).

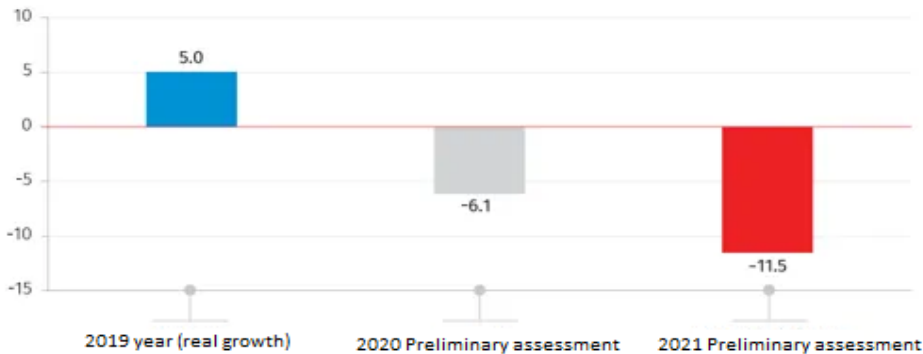


Figure 5: GDP in Georgia, 2019-2021.

GDP also fell by 4% in the case of Albania in 2020 compared to 2019. With this figure, Albania ranks 127th out of 196 countries. It should be noted here that the global pandemic has had a negative impact not only on the economies and GDP of these two countries, but also on many other countries around the world, and most countries experienced a downturn in 2020 (OECD, 2021).

Georgia and Moldova, among the eastern partner nations, performed best in terms of expanding their amount of exports to the EU. "Georgia, despite being more geographically distant from the EU, compensated for this by being much more reformist and boosting its attractiveness as an investment location" (Gaub & Popescu, 2015). It should also be emphasized that Georgia, in 2019, had made progress compared to 2018 and GDP increased by 5%. Also, GDP per capita in 2019 was \$25 higher compared to 2018. Moreover, difference between Georgia and Albania in terms of GDP per capita in 2019 was not significant, only \$477. But, according to 2020 December's data, this indicator was \$4,275 in Georgia and \$ 5.179 in Albania. Therefore, if we compare the situation before 2020, i.e. before the pandemic, we will see that Georgia experienced much economic progress than Albania, as the percentage growth in the case of Georgia was much more stable, and Albania experienced declines from 2010 to 2014 (see, Figure 6), before The EU would grant the country "official candidate" status. That is why it is likely that the EU involvement and the benefits given to the country have led to a better situation for Albania today, and the World Bank also predicts a 4.4% increase in the case of Albania and a 4.8% decrease in Georgia in 2021.

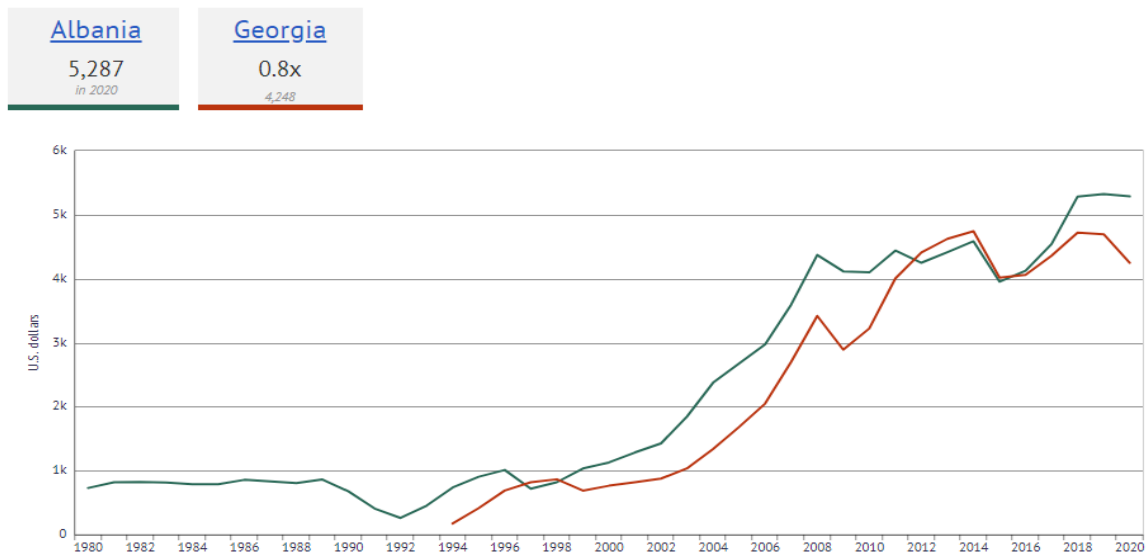


Figure 6: Albania and Georgia- GDP per capita in current prices (US dollars), 1994-2020

Since Albania was nominated as an official candidate for EU membership at the June 2014 European Council in Brussels, Albania has taken a number of pro-Western steps, such as: 1) free market reforms, which includes: a quarterly income tax system's establishment in the country in 2014, minimize the amount needed to register a business in 2015, also improving the customs system in 2016, unlimited power supply in 2017, improved credit system for individuals and legal entities in 2018, the electronic system of flexible contracts and memoranda for small entrepreneurs has been improved in 2019 (worldbank, 2021). In addition, the population receives free primary and secondary education and medical services, which in turn has a positive impact on the human development index. 2) Economic growth - according to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Albania is an above-average income country. The country's economy is dominated by services, followed by industry and agriculture. Accordingly, Albania's GDP is \$15.15 billion. As a result, Albania's GDP has grown by 3.1% over the last 5 years. Only 12.3% of the population is unemployed, while inflation is 1.4% (heritage.org, 2021).

Since 2014, the EU has allowed Albania deeper and more comprehensive free trade integration into the common market, further improving the country's standard of living, which in turn was reflected in the data presented above. Yonca Ozer's recent study tells us that the member states of the Union were able to develop the continent in different directions with the support of the EU civilian force (Özer, 2012). It is true that Albania is not yet a member of the European Union, but its official candidacy for membership has allowed it to grow its GDP by 3.1% in the last 5 years and take other, above-mentioned, pro-Western steps to develop the country.

In a joint article by Berlin Free University professors Tanja Borzel and Thomas Risse, the EU transformational power promotes economic and social development, improves professional skills, modernizes the economy, creates jobs, encourages innovation and ensures social, economic and territorial equity (Börzel & Risse, 2009). For example, France, Croatia, Greece, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria have significantly improved their standard of living since joining the EU. It should be noted that thanks to the transformative force, the levels of education, tourism, imports, exports, freedom of speech and other areas in Albania have risen significantly (Eurostat, 2018).

It can be boldly said that in the process of Albania's European integration in 2014-2019, the standard of living in the country has significantly improved: GDP grew by 3.1%, free market reforms were carried out, the economy improved, etc. The EU has also allowed Albania to engage in deeper and more comprehensive free trade through common civil, normative and transformational forces, thus changing the country's standard of living for the better and increasing the quality of education, tourism, import-exports, etc.

In conclusion, it can be said that EU has led the transformation of Albania in 2014-2020 because, since Albania became the official candidate country for EU membership, various spheres and living standards in the country have improved significantly, which gives the country a great incentive and desire to cooperate and join the EU in the long run.

As for Georgia, all the reforms implemented in the economy were more or less effective, and created enough solid base to bear the consequences of a Russian economic embargo (2006), the deportation of Georgian migrants (2004-2006) and other troubles (Jones & Kakhishvili, 2013). Even in the event of a resumption of trade with Russia, it is likely that the Georgian market will be volatile given the given political / security context. Thus, penetration of the EU market, which is one of the most sternly regulated markets, largest, relatively stable in the world, is crucial for the sustainable development of Georgia's exports (Khuntsaria, 2013), whereas 16.4% of foreign trade of Georgia is coming on EU. The contention from the EU side is that indeed in case Georgia has approximated its laws to numerous EU guidelines, the estimation of a few EU controls beneath the DCFTA has been spread over a number of a long time, so full understanding of EU measures will require a few times.

It is true that Georgia has a certain decline in terms of democracy and the rate is low compared to Albania, but in terms of corruption and organized crime the situation is much better. In addition, no significant differences were observed in the indicators of independent media, electoral processes, and civil society (table 3). It is probable that the EU's priority attitude towards Albania contributed to the further development of the country and perhaps in the case of such support, the situation in Georgia would have been similar and even better, because the starting point and position for reforms in Georgia was better in 2014. In addition, the special involvement of the EU in the case of the Western Balkans, in particular Albania, is noteworthy, which means facilitating the adoption and implementation of EU legislation, as well as the introduction of European and international standards (IPA, 2018). In addition, it builds on a closer and closer partnership in which the EU offers the following opportunities: Trade concessions (duty-free access to the EU market); More substantial assistance in reconstruction, development and stabilization processes; Economic and financial assistance; Stabilization and Association Agreements - a relationship with the EU based on bilateral rights and obligations and relevant treaties (Commission, 2021). Also, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans region became involved in a number of initiatives for EU member states, such as joint procurement of medical equipment and supplies and extending the region an exception to restrictions on exports of personal protective equipment from the EU. The Western Balkans region also enjoys the so-called Green lanes, which serve to move goods smoothly under coronavirus-related border controls (EP, 2020).

Based on the available data, it is clear that Albania not only does not have significant advantages over Georgia, but in some cases even lags behind. For example, compared to Albania, Georgia's strength and progress in the fight against corruption and organized crime is obvious. It is also noteworthy that pandemic management and situation control is carried out in more peaceful and civilian ways in Georgia than in Albania, as evidenced by the human development index, where Georgia is 8 places ahead of Albania. It is true that Albania's democratic index is higher than Georgia's, but the issue of democracy is quite controversial, as it calls into question the issue of objectivity. Also, there is a slight difference between Albania and Georgia GDP per capita, just \$477 is difference

in 2019 (to Albania's advantage). Support for integration is high in both countries, with the majority of the population (Georgia -84% and Albania -86%) supporting EU integration. Despite this situation, it is noteworthy that Georgia is not only not recognized as a candidate country, but also does not have the status of a country with a European perspective.

Understanding EU's Current Enlargement Policy: Implications for Georgia

First of all, it should be noted that the process of European integration involves two dimensions: deepening and enlargement. Deepening means closer economic, political and trade relations between member states. Enlargement is the second important dimension of European integration, and involves the geographical enlargement of the European Union, and the admission of new members. Enlargement, on the other hand, varies from the ENP – and the Union's foreign & security policy – in several areas. To begin with, accession candidates can be verified and chosen, whereas geographic neighbors cannot (Gaub & Popescu, 2015).

To be mentioned, that accession to the EU is a two-way process and is not just about meeting the obligations of the Member States. No less important is the so-called EU's "absorption capacity", which means that the EU must be able to carry out institutional reforms that will enable the full membership of the new member states in the institutions. So, for example, before the enlargement of 2004, decisions in the Council of the European Union were made differently by the qualified majority system, and after 2004 – differently (Fontaine, 2018). Due to the fact that several large states have joined the EU, including Poland, the weighting of votes in the Council of the EU today is done through a different system to balance the distribution of votes between small and large states. It should be noted that each enlargement is linked to institutional change within the EU, so the EU is always in favor of bringing together a group of countries and not one by one, so as not to spend a lot of time and energy solving institutional problems before each enlargement (europa.rs, 2014). According to Rainer Klump, there is no effective mechanism to bring about effective institutional change everywhere and always. Such a development is hindered by the following reasons: the continued inertia of the socialist economic order; Political support for the transformation process; Introduction of democratic political decision-making process; Different rates of transformation in different institutions; Conflicts of interest (Klump, 2015).

Desmond Dinan, author of numerous books on European integration, explains that countries want to integrate into the EU for several main reasons: a) More opportunities to trade and invest; b) Better market access; c) Access to structural funds and agricultural subsidies; d) Security factor. He also explains why the EU wants to enlarge and notes, that from the very beginning, the ethos of integration was inclusive: the EU wanted to achieve prosperity and security by uniting European states. Also, expansion brings economic benefits to existing member states, which means a wider domestic market with more domestic investment and trade opportunities. In addition, enlargement strengthens EU identity and "sense of purpose" and improves the EU's international image and the potential impact of its policies (Dinan, 2010).

The form and nature of the EU is becoming more and more controversial (Werner, 1997). The enlargement of the Union and the opposition of some neutral countries to participation in the common foreign policy raise doubts about the extent to which the EU will gain further impetus for transformation into a single entity (Walter, Smith, 1994, p.142).

Researchers characterize three main dimensions for the integration/absorption capacity: 1. Economic (ability of the single market to cope with the acquisition of a new member); 2. Institutional (how much will the institutional and administrative structures of the Union be able to do and how much budget resources will be available to the services of the new member; and 3. Foreign policy dimension (how much will the new members advance or hinder the EU's strategic security and international role)? (Emerson, 2006)

Naturally, Georgia's accession to the European Union requires a number of institutional and economic changes and readiness. However, no less important is the readiness of the European Union itself to consider the post-Soviet space, in particular Georgia, in terms of enlargement. It is clear that neither side is ready for this today. However, despite the long and difficult European path and the lack of readiness of the European Union, the Georgian society and the government consider it quite possible to

achieve mutual readiness in the long run. Accordingly, academia and Georgian diplomacy will discuss the situation when Georgian institutions and economics meet the appropriate requirements, i.e. meet the Copenhagen criteria, and the EU will overcome all possible obstacles.

A certain group of researchers and analysts openly say that the EU is currently in a multifaceted crisis. If we look at the history of the European Union, we can clearly see that the Union was developing to overcome crises, although, as analysts point out, the EU is now in a particularly difficult situation. The growing stability of the EU is compounded by the growing threat of terrorism (Gogolashvili, 2017). On the one hand, we face the problem of refugees, on the other hand, the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic sentiments around the world, accompanied by the challenges posed by Britain's decision to leave the Union. Today, the EU has significant challenges in terms of "deepening" in the form of Brexit (Richardson, 2018). However, there are different views on overcoming the situation, including e.g. "Multi-speed Europe" (Maurice, 2017). However, the idea of a "multi-speed Europe" has many pros and cons, which are still being debated within the EU (debatingeurope.eu, 2021). Similar institutional development challenges obviously complicate any enlargement agenda. This is accompanied by large-scale wars in the European neighborhood and globally, the rise of populism, which has led to a higher skepticism than usual in EU member states and as well as waves of migration and the severity of the problems associated with it.

The EU, including Chancellor Merkel, has repeatedly mentioned that a promise of EU membership should be made if enlargement to a post-aspirant country or group of countries is allowed. This position is also stated in the statement made by Merkel, where she says that the integration of the Western Balkans is on the agenda, and the thinking about Georgia has not started yet and it is not known when it will start. However, it can be said that after the EU-Georgia Association Agreement stated that Georgia is an Eastern European state, which is in line with Article 49¹ of the Rome Agreement on European Union, the geographical situation is no longer an obstacle in this direction (Gogolashvili & Gaphrindashvili, 2018). Nevertheless, the possibility of expanding eastward after the accession of the Western Balkans is not considered at this stage, nor can it be promised.

Georgia, aside from its geographical location, is significant for the EU because of its intentions and strong desire for EU integration. It is possible to say that the South Caucasus is balanced between the West and Russia, owing to Georgia's significant contribution. Georgia, like EU member states, is the engine of the region in terms of democratic development and liberal values. Georgia serves as a model for the rest of the post-Soviet countries, with the exception of the Baltic States, and it is important for the EU to demonstrate that cooperation with the West can and should be beneficial. Ukraine and Moldova can be included in the same camp as Georgia because they have nearly identical relations with Russia. Both assert that liberal-democratic values are desirable, and they recognize that collaboration with Georgia would result in more productive and successful outcomes.

However, it is known that in 2014 the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, when he assumed his office, stated that the door was open for membership, but no membership was made for the next 5 years (Euractiv, 2014). The same message was echoed by Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy. He said no country would join the EU for the next five years, noting that "quality rather than speed" would be a priority in further membership, with the rule of law and fundamental rights, the economy and a functioning democracy remaining key criteria (Hann, 2014).

The attitude of the European Commission towards the countries of the Western Balkans has already changed. The Commission predicts that by 2025 the countries of the region may join the European Union, although they cite three main preconditions before accession: strengthening democracy, regional stability and increasing the competitiveness of the economy. According to experts, the European Commission's counter-action was counterbalanced by the intensification of the role of other major external players in the region, Russia and China, and thus showed once again its readiness to use membership as an incentive for stabilization and democratization in the European region (Wesel, 2018).

¹ Article 49 of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union: Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (europa.eu)

As EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Stefan Fule noted, the new EU approach implies a higher level of differentiation, which means that the pace of development of each partner country's relationship with the EU will depend on their aspirations, needs and capabilities. EU assistance to its neighbors depends on meeting the preconditions for progress in respecting and strengthening democracy and the rule of law. The faster the country achieves progress in domestic reforms, the more support it will receive from the EU (Fule, 2014). In addition, the EU may not be able to provide Georgia (and other EaP states) a membership perspective in the short or even medium term due to present enlargement weariness among both political elites and population of the EU member states (Börzel T. , 2015).

Analyzing political systems, we see that the role of the EU as a foreign actor is important in the transformation process. As a result of constitutional changes in Georgia, the presidential system was changed and the role of the parliament was increased, as well as the reform of local self-government. These changes are aimed at creating a better system of control and balance.

The Eastern Partnership was a key instrument of the EU 's foreign policy (Kavadze, 2020), and the EU intended to pursue its enlargement policy and geopolitical interests. As a tool, naturally, it made its result. In fact, 3 out of the 6 members of the platform - Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine - became pro-European. Also, according to historical processes, it seems that the EU's interest in the Caucasus region is mainly due to the inertia of the geopolitical vision, as the Caucasus is the only way to open the shortest trade route in Asia. That is why it is important to promote economic reforms, democratic processes, as well as the establishment of international trade rules. The subject of geopolitics is the strengthening of opportunities for economic and cultural cooperation and commercial ties and the Caucasus is interesting not as a market, but as a route to the rich markets of Asia. To this end, the EU uses a variety of tools, such as Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, as well INOGATE and TRACECA projects, with countries in the region.

It should also be noted that the EU has recently been intensively interacting with its neighbors. This interaction is driven by the EU's desire to have neighbors who share its principles, European norms and values and are part of the same security system. The European Neighborhood Policy, which includes the EU's Eastern and Mediterranean neighbors in addition to Georgia, and the Barcelona Process, which regulates relations with African countries, are clear examples of this.

Despite the importance and role that the European Union plays and develops for Georgia, the main result – integration- in the direction of the East, in particular, for Georgia, is not on the agenda, which can be explained for several possible reasons. First and foremost, European integration has always been accompanied by enlargement, which means the admission of new members to the Union. The European Union (European Coal and Steel Community) was founded in 1951 by six countries - France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It should be noted that after the collapse of the USSR and the Cold War, EU enlargement was much more active until 2004, and from 2004 onwards, discussions began on the possible fatigue of EU enlargement and they also felt that it would be difficult for EU institutions to transform post-Soviet countries within their own framework (Gegeshidze, 2018). However, the EU continued to expand, albeit and probably naturally, at a small pace, but in 2007 Bulgaria and Romania and in 2013 Croatia joined, although, enlargement process for other European micro-regions is define as “a difficult process” (Chitadze, 2016). In 2018, the European Union announced an estimated enlargement to the Western Balkans by 2025 (Commission, 2018). Consequently, it turns out that the current thinking of the EU is to expand towards the Balkans, and so far no thought has been given to expanding towards the East.

Second, scientific circles are talking about the existence of Capability-Expectations Gap in the case of the South Caucasus countries, the EU has not yet formally set its goals in the region and is still in the process of developing a joint strategy for the South Caucasus. In general, different types of resources and tools are needed to achieve the goals. The tools used by the European Union in Georgia are mostly economic and diplomatic.

Moreover, in the EU's ruling circles, the South Caucasus region, in particular Georgia, is seen differently. Some of them focus on the protection of EU values in the region, such as democracy, market economy, social welfare. Others pay more attention to expansion and new energy needs. Some see Russia's influence in the region as a threat, while others see it as a positive factor in achieving stability in the region. Some see the role of the EU in the first international donation based on technical and humanitarian assistance to the region. The result is a lack of a common strategy, which is accompanied by a conflict of interests between the EU and the various member states, especially when military interests are involved. Some member states support sending military observers to conflict zones such as Abkhazia, while others do not share this position at all. Until the EU develops a unified foreign and security policy, it is too early to talk about any specific joint policy actions in the region.

Also, in recent years there has been a democratic regression within the EU, in particular in Hungary and Poland democratic institutions are experiencing erosion. This event causes excitement and concern among politicians, even though these processes have not had any impact on EU decision-making, although it is likely that they will. It is also being argued that membership is not a guarantee of democracy and calls into question all the criteria that aspirant countries meet. This view is uniquely dangerous and obstructive for Georgia, especially since the situation in Georgia is complicated by the fact that there are no developed democracies in its neighborhood with a European perspective (Gegeshidze, 2018).

In addition, the EU has faced a number of economic challenges over the past period. The eurozone crisis of 2009-2010 created a rift between debtor and creditor countries, and some countries did not like Germany's sharply increased influence in the EU (T.Raines, D.Cutts, & M.Goodwin, 2017). Also, the "migration crisis" of 2015 became the basis for different views on border and immigration policy, and the issue of migrant redistribution led to disagreements between the old and new member states, as this issue included not only humanitarian and fiscal issues, but also security. It should also be noted that "Brexit", in various respects, has an indirect impact on the future policy of the EU, as, in the form of Britain, the EU has lost a wealthy and strong member who was an active supporter of enlargement, raising fears of strong EU enlargement opportunity to accept relatively poor countries. In addition, as it is known, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU was preceded by the decision of the Council of the European Union that in case of staying in the Union, the UK would be given the right not to pass laws passed at EU level which it deemed not in its interests. It is true that due to the positive result of the Brexit referendum (withdrawal from the union) this decision no longer came into force, but it set a serious precedent. In fact, there is an opportunity for other countries to demand similar conditions. Beside this 2010 year was characterized by the rise of populism in Europe and the best example of this is the French National Front, as an example of successful nationalist populism in Europe. These facts raise some doubts about how strong the EU is on its part and how ready it will be to take care of the membership of poor and small countries in the future, which in itself is directly related to Georgia's future prospects.

As the EU has a rather complex political and institutional environment, made up of numerous actors and interest groups, it is difficult to analyze the nature of its decision-making. However, as experts say, the main principle is consensus and that is why the changes in the EU are taking place step by step. It is noteworthy that in the last 16 years, in fact, Georgia has changed only the "rank" and from the status of "neighbor" has become an "associate partner" whose European aspirations are recognized, but do not agreed.

In addition, according to the history of EU enlargement, it has the character of the principle of regional enlargement, i.e. it chooses the direction of enlargement according to groups of countries (example of the Western Balkans) and not towards individual countries (although Greece was an exception). In the case of Georgia, this complicates the situation to some extent, as we do not consider any of the neighboring countries - Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia - willing or able to join the EU. However, Ukraine and Moldova are countries that have similar interests and aspirations to Georgia in relation to the European Union and are in the process of implementing the Association Agreement, but they do not border Georgia geographically and, moreover, they are separated by the border crossed by Russia. This circumstance is a hindering factor for the transport-logistical connections required for close regional connections. In addition, these three countries do not have a common political and economic level/connections, which can be considered as an obstacle to coordinating the EU to develop common positions among them (Gegeshidze, 2018). However, the success of the Eastern Partnership is highlighted by the Association Agreement, increased cooperation in the sectoral areas and the existence of visa-free travel. It is the existence of these processes that suggests a change in EU policy towards the region, in particular, towards Georgia. (Gogolashvili, 2018).

Since the Black Sea region, especially Georgia, is of particular importance to the EU in terms of Europeanization, liberalization, transformation and functional integration, it naturally loses special significance without a new enlargement policy. Enlargement policy is crucial as it is the main tool for the above-mentioned implementation changes. Functional integration with Georgia is important for the EU, as it is a bridge between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In addition, increased competition and geopolitical division of influence in the region requires the EU to do its utmost to maintain its role over the region, so as not to weaken the spread of reforms and motivation in Georgia. These reasons and the changes and reforms implemented by Georgia should be the basis for future enlargement, but the EU should understand that there is no possibility of joining the whole region and should pursue an individual enlargement policy for individual countries.

At this stage, the EU has made it clear that it will not consider giving the Eastern Partners any new role (namely candidate status) in the near future or using any new instruments to support them. However, there is some prospect of increasing funding for economic and social development through the European Sustainable Development Fund, which is set up to support development in the EU's entire neighborhood and in Africa (europa.eu, 2018). Beside this, the EU's Global Security Strategy states that the EU may revise its sectoral / regional strategies in the near future. Consequently, EU policy in this regard is not strictly defined and it is likely that changes and their impact are permissible, although what changes are expected depends on the time and on changes made after dealing with the difficulties caused by the Covid-19.

It is important to know which countries do not support us or, conversely, support our accession to the EU, and what impact they have on EU decisions. When a country opposes the accession of a new country (for example Georgia) to the EU, it is important to identify and evaluate two factors: 1. How (to what extent) is its resistance strong; and 2. How influential this country is. Voting is likely to be based on the "merit" of the countries, which may be determined by assessing their role in the EU, and their influence is also in line with the EU's enlargement or change policy. However, it should be borne in mind that the recruitment of new members takes place by consensus. Nevertheless, "small" countries are relatively easily "agreed" to make decisions in the Council of the European Union (as was the case with the recent enlargement of Ireland) through "deals". It should be noted that this practice works if a member state (large or small) does not have any very principled or vital argument against a new country joining the EU. For example, Macedonia, which is a candidate country and against which Greece had such principled opposition, in particular it demanded that Macedonia have to change its name (Gogolashvili & Gaphrindashvili, 2018).

Thus, we see that joining the EU is a very difficult and time-consuming process. It not only covers a long road full of reforms and changes, but also involves a rather time-consuming negotiation procedure. It is therefore important to remember that EU membership is not a process that can be resolved and implemented in two or three years. No matter how motivated both parties are to complete the accession process quickly, bureaucratic elements must be considered. We have to admit that this is a political process and the main paying member states decide who will be the next.

CONCLUSION

Georgia, after the 30 years of independence, has made significant progress toward European integration. The country, which was not even geographically considered to be of European descent, is now regarded as one of the leading Eastern Partner states, with the vast majority of its population associating themselves with European values and principles.

In the research part, important facts were revealed based on the compliance and comparison of the Albania-Georgia's development rates and indicators with the Copenhagen criteria. In particular: until 2014, i.e. before Albania received the status of "official candidate" and the EU involvement was doubled, Albania's general situation did not have significant advantages over Georgia, moreover, even then and now, it lags behind in various directions/indicators.

It should be noted that both countries have equally high rates of support with EU integration. However, despite Georgia's advantage in all these separate indicators, it lags behind Albania in terms of overall democratic index, which is why we believe that the definition of democratic index is biased in some respect and is based on subjective political views. In addition, we have linked Albania's economic progress and some benefits in terms of GDP and GDP per capita to the EU's enhanced engagement and rapprochement, as almost all of the progress has been made since 2014. However, despite the economic progress, corruption is named as one of the most important problems in Albania, in the fight against which it lags significantly (with 54 places) behind Georgia. According to other indicators we have discussed (National Democratic Governance, Electoral Process, Civil Society, Independent Media, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence), the situation is either equal or Albania has insignificant advantages. In addition, research has shown that in the context of the Copenhagen political criteria, pandemic control and management took place in a much calmer environment in Georgia than in Albania, where police killed an Albanian citizen who violated the restrictions.

That is why we can conclude that Georgia's development and reforms are really in the European direction and in line with the Copenhagen criteria, although it clearly needs significant changes and developments, both economically and politically, as well as Albania. However, despite the current situation, the EU policy towards these two countries is different, as we have already mentioned, Albania has been enjoying the status of "official candidate country" since 2014, and Georgia has not yet been granted even the status of a country with a European perspective. It is clear that the method of selecting countries from Brussels is political in nature, and for this stage, whichever country is more acceptable to Brussels has a path to open integration.

Based on research, we see that the EU enlargement policy is mostly of a regional nature (which is evidenced by the example of the Balkans and not only), which is a hindrance for Georgia. However, despite the challenges discussed in the paper, which face not only Georgia but the almost whole Europe and the world today, the growing involvement and the active phase of bilateral cooperation are obvious from the both sides, which reflects and confirms our hypothesis that if the country continues moving towards Europe, fully complying with current recommendations, if the state, as well EU, will be able to maintain high support for the EU integration among Georgian citizens, and the EU, in turn, will change its regional policy to some extent and use individual approaches to the country, it is quite possible for Georgia to join in the long run perspective (but not guaranteed), since Georgia's rapprochement with Europe at this level was unthinkable 2-3 decades ago. Moreover, the current situations in Albania and the comparative analysis have demonstrated Georgia's significant advantages, both regionally and globally.

To conclude, moving to Europe is a historic choice for Georgia and it has been trying to take its rightful place in the democratic unity of a European state since the beginning of the idea of becoming an independent country. However, given the issues mentioned above, there is still a long way to go and many obstacles to overcome before reaching the final goal (EU membership). More bilateral efforts are also required to overcome these obstacles. In other words, Georgia have to do its "homework", which includes improving the quality of democracy, stability, and economic prosperity. Consequently, the growing democratic reforms in Georgia and the active involvement of the EU in the process of change and development, as well as Russia's continued efforts not to lose role and power in the former Soviet Union and limit the spread of Western values, give the EU the greatest impetus not to give up positions in Georgia, whereas, the Georgian people's attitude and inclination toward Europeanism is growing and becoming stronger by the year. Also, the achievements and results presented in the paper, which promotes Georgia not only regionally, but also in relation to Albania, demonstrate the country's readiness to advance on the path of European integration. Delayed membership can be explained as unwillingness from the Brussels create additional problems by letting Georgia in and irritating Russia and having additional costs. But, now Georgia should show again that it can be a champion being privileged to continue its path towards the cherished goal. The EU's approach to advanced EaP countries "more for more" should be a leading principle that will move forward the approximation process. Also, gaining the goodwill of the EU ruling elites will be the main task for Georgia, which will advance on the path to membership.

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