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European Union Policy and Geopolitical Realities of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

In parallel with the geopolitical changes that have occurred at the global level, the functions and tasks of international organizations have also undergone significant developments and transformations. It is imperative to underscore the pivotal role of the European Union in fostering global peace and stability. In the 21st century, several global actors are modifying their political approaches towards Georgia, thereby influencing the geopolitical landscape. Global and regional actors in world politics are engaged in a competitive process to secure a dominant position in the South Caucasus and expand their spheres of influence.

It is important to note that the significance of Caspian energy resources is increasing in the context of the current global situation. This makes Georgia an important and intriguing partner in the region.

In the most difficult conditions, when 20% of Georgian territory is occupied by the Russian Federation, the country's membership in NATO is a goal of strategic importance and the creation of a worthy place for the country in the Euro-Atlantic structures is the most important strategic and political task (Mikadze, 2021).

This article has three objectives: to define the EU enlargement policy, analyze the dynamics of the development of relations between Georgia and the EU, and present the modern challenges of Georgia's integration into the EU.

The theory of social constructivism posits that individuals' consciousness and experience are shaped by their knowledge and evaluation of events. In light of the aforementioned considerations, the research question can be formulated as follows: What is the pivotal importance of EU enlargement for Georgia, considering the geopolitical context?

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The objective of this article is to examine EU policy and the geopolitical context of Georgia. To gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, Richard Cohen's Cooperative Security Theory was employed, which puts forth two dominant concepts of international security, namely:

- collective defense;
- individual security.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the maintenance of global stability as a fundamental aspect of this security paradigm.

To achieve the aforementioned objective, the article is divided into five sections. The initial section provides an overview of the challenges associated with EU enlargement and analyzes the potential advantages and disadvantages. The subsequent section presents a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical context in Georgia.

Keywords: *EU enlargement, Conflicts, Regional actors, Security.*

ევროკავშირის პოლიტიკა და საქართველოს გეოპოლიტიკური რეაქციები

ვახტანგ მაისაია

პოლიტიკის მეცნიერებათა დოქტორი, პროფესორი
კავკასიის საერთაშორისო უნივერსიტეტი

გელა გიორგაძე

პოლიტიკის მეცნიერებათა დოქტორი, ასისტენტ პროფესორი
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მირანდა მიქაძე

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გლობალური გეოპოლიტიკური ცვლილებების პარალელურად, მნიშვნელოვანი ტრანსფორმაცია განიცადა საერთაშორისო ორგანიზაციების ფუნქციებმა და ამოცანებმა. აღსანიშნავია, ევროკავშირის გადამწყვეტი როლი მშვიდობისა და სტაბილურობის ხელშეწყობის პროცესში.

21-ე საუკუნეში საერთაშორისო აქტორები ცვლიან პოლიტიკურ მიდგომებს საქართველოსთან მიმართებით, რაც გარკვეულწილად გავლენას ახდენს გეოპოლიტიკურ ლანდშაფტზე. პოლიტიკური აქტორები ცდილობენ გაიმყარონ სამხრეთ კავკასიაში საკუთარი პოზიციები და უზრუნველყონ გავლენის სფეროების გაფართოება.

არსებული გეოპოლიტიკური ვითარების პირობებში, აღსანიშნავია კასპიის ენერგორესურსების მნიშვნელობის ზრდა, რაც საქართველოს საინტერესო პარტნიორად აქცევს რეგიონში. იმის გათვალისწინებით, რომ საქართველოს ტერიტორიის 20%-ი ოკუპირებულია რუსეთის ფედერაციის მიერ, ქვეყნის ევროატლანტიკურ სტრუქტურებში გაწევრიანება და ღირსეული ადგილის დაკავება სტრატეგიულ და პოლიტიკურ ამოცანას წარმოადგენს.

სტატუსს გააჩნია სამი მიზანი: პირველი - ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის განსაზღვრა, მეორე - საქართველოსა და ევროკავშირის შორის ურთიერთობების განვითარების დინამიკის ანალიზი და მესამე - საქართველოს ევროკავშირში ინტეგრაციის პროცესის თანამედროვე გამოწვევების წარმოჩენა.

სოციალური კონსტრუქტივიზმის თეორიის თანახმად, ინდივიდის ცნობიერება და გამოცდილება ყალიბდება მათი ცოდნითა და მოვლენების შეფასებით. ზემოაღნიშნული მოსაზრებიდან გამომდინარე, შემუშავდა საკვლევო კითხვა: რა როლი ეკისრება

ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკას საქართველოსთვის გეოპოლიტიკური კონტექსტის გათვალისწინებით ?

სტატიის მიზანია ევროკავშირის პოლიტიკისა და საქართველოს გეოპოლიტიკური კონტექსტის შესწავლა. თემის სიღრმისეულად შესწავლისათვის გამოყენებულ იქნა რიჩარდ კოენის კოლექტიური უსაფრთხოების თეორია, რომელიც აყალიბებს საერთაშორისო უსაფრთხოების ორ ძირითად კონცეფციას, კერძოდ:

- კოლექტიური თავდაცვა;
- ინდივიდუალური უსაფრთხოება.

გარდა ზემოაღნიშნულისა, გლობალური სტაბილურობის შენარჩუნება აუცილებელია განხილულ იქნეს, როგორც უსაფრთხოების პარადიგმის ფუნდამენტური ასპექტი.

დასახული მიზნის მისაღწევად სტატია დაყოფილია ხუთ ნაწილად. პირველ ნაწილში მოცემულია ევროკავშირის გაფართოებასთან დაკავშირებული გამოწვევების მიმოხილვა, ასევე, პოტენციური უპირატესობებისა და უარყოფითი მხარეების ანალიზი, ხოლო მომდევნო ნაწილებში წარმოდგენილია საქართველოს გეოპოლიტიკური კონტექსტის ანალიზი.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ევროკავშირის გაფართოება, კონფლიქტები, რეგიონული აქტორები, უსაფრთხოება.

1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian government began to look for guarantees for the country's security in the Euro-Atlantic security space. In terms of creating peace in the international arena, the European Union is one of the key players in which the public is placing increasing trust.

A secure environment is crucial for a country's stable development. Threats facing the modern world include weak governance, organized crime, extremism, terrorism, religious fanaticism, and much more.

In the era of growing strategic rivalry, ongoing conflicts in the European neighborhood, and the fragility and instability of countries increased the importance of strategic partnership between Georgia and the European Union. The favorable geographical location of Georgia determines its interest in international political and socio-economic processes. The importance of Georgia's favorable transport geographical location was once again confirmed after the foundation was laid for the construction of the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipelines. In 1998, an international agreement was signed in Baku on the creation of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia transport corridor, which connects Western Europe and East Asia and is called "Traceka" for short.

Due to its geopolitical location, Georgia's sovereignty, security, and development have always been under threat throughout its independence history.

After regaining independence in 1991, Georgia was engulfed in civil conflicts. Since then, the Russian Federation has occupied the territories of Georgia (Kuroptev, 2020). Despite the involvement of the European Union, after the August War, the Russian Federation declared Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region⁴ as independent states. Since 2008, the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has been working near the administrative borders (EUMM, 2012). The European Union recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and is involved in the conflict settlement process in the occupied regions.

Georgia's historical aspiration to join the European Union has steadily high support from the population. Getting EU candidate status in December 2023 created a new reality for Georgia. Granting candidate status strengthens Georgia's prospects for joining the European Union in the political, economic, and security fields.

The European Union is one of the successful examples of an integration union in the region, which, in addition to its economic dimension, has acquired significant political weight.

2. The necessity of EU enlargement and related challenges

In recent years, geopolitical events have brought the topic of EU enlargement back to the European public agenda (Research, 2023).

From 2013 to 2022, the EU enlargement policy was not effective, however, the Russian war in Ukraine changed the approach to the above issue, which gave some impetus to the enlargement theme (Saha, 2024). The attack on Ukraine turned out to be a watershed for the EU, so the enlargement acquired more geopolitical value than ever before (Karjalainen, 2023).

In November 2023, the leaders of the 27 member states of the European Union adopted the "Granada Declaration", which states that the enlargement of the European Union is a geostrategic investment for peace, security, stability and prosperity. Accordingly, Western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are given a chance to connect their future with the European Union (COMMISSION, 2023a).

The European Commission adopted the enlargement package on November 8 2023, (COMMISSION, 2023a) and the conclusions of the European Council on December 15, 2023, stated that enlargement is a geostrategic approach to ensuring peace, security, stability and prosperity, which will essentially contribute to the improvement of the economic and social situation of countries (European Council, 2024).

⁴The former South Ossetian Autonomous District, which includes the historic Shida Kartli. In 1922, along with the creation of the USSR, the South Ossetian Autonomous District was established. In December 1990, the Supreme Council of the Georgian SSR adopted a resolution on the abolition of the district and it was renamed Tskhinvali region.

EU enlargement has never been straightforward and has been characterized by compromises and strategic considerations. Recent conflicts have further highlighted the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for the EU, as it connects Europe with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East and is one of the key geopolitical, trade, and energy crossroads.

Interest in the region has increased even more after the accession of the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union. The security of the Black Sea region is not only limited to defense issues but also includes political, economic, social and ecological aspects. The European Union has long considered the Black Sea region as one of the most important crossroads in terms of trade and transport links with Central Asia and the Far East, as well as in the direction of energy supply from the Caspian Sea basin (Delcourt, 2023).

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the European Union has faced serious challenges in terms of security in the Black Sea region, which are complex in nature and operate at different levels.

The echo of the aggression produced by the Russian Federation can be heard quite far from the borders of Ukraine and contains serious risks of destabilization for the Black Sea region.

The political changes taking place in the world have also been clearly reflected in Europe's global strategy. The European Union's enlargement policy is a strategic investment in Europe's security and prosperity.

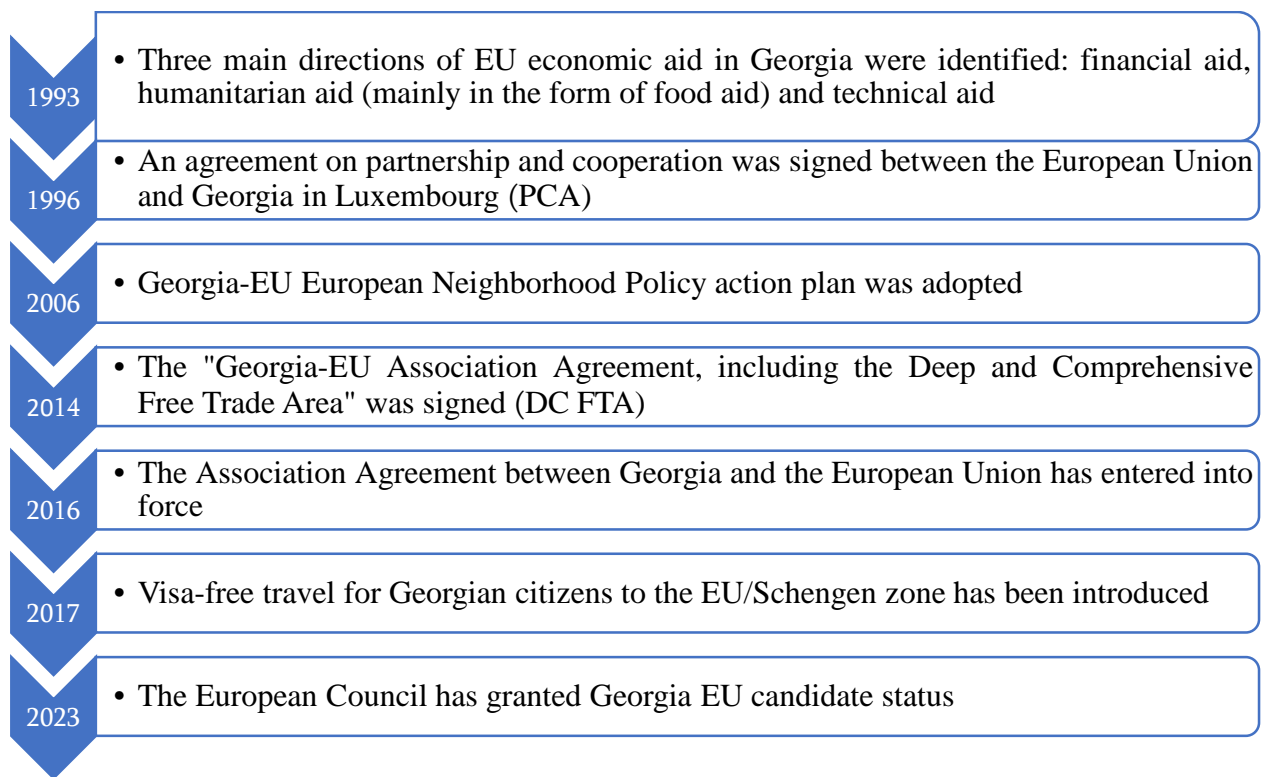
3. Georgia's European perspective and geopolitical function

Geopolitics as a concept is the subject of frequent debates. Neil McFarlane, a professor at the University of Oxford, while explaining the definition of geopolitics, relies on its etymological roots, where the word "geo" refers to territory, space and resources, and "politics", power and its distribution.

States' dependence on energy resources represents a persistent challenge to their national security. Due to its geographical location, Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus with access to the Black Sea and is a transport corridor between Europe, China, and Asia.

Georgia-EU relations began in 1991-92, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia becoming an independent state.

The history of cooperation between Georgia and the European Union includes several important dates: (Georgia, 2024).



Georgia, as a part of Europe, strives to establish close relations with European countries, which acquires special value in the era of globalization. Access to the European market is critically important for stimulating the country's economy.

The European Union is Georgia's largest trading partner and provides Georgia with an average of more than 100 million euros in technical and financial assistance every year (European Union, 2023).

EU enlargement policy is influenced by a combination of strategic security, economic and normative factors that are particularly relevant in relation to the Black Sea region.

The Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine and the resulting confrontation between the West and the Russian Federation brought new risks for Georgia. Amidst the increased risks, a unique window of opportunity opened up for the country, such as the prospect of EU membership. Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the European Union has decided to speed up the integration process for the countries of the associated trio and make the prospect of membership a reality.

Georgia's foreign policy priority is to deepen political relations with the European Union and strengthen political dialog. The long-term goal is Georgia's accession to the European Union.

Georgia has great potential in trade, investment, and cultural cooperation. However, as Georgia rejects the Soviet past and the Russian path, its European integration prospects depend in part on the extent to which it succeeds in adopting the practices of successful countries.

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations continue to be a disruptive factor for the Russian Federation, so it firmly opposes any attempt to restore peace and stability in the Caucasus.

Despite the factors mentioned above, the European Union's recent policy has clearly shown that it is an important player not only in maintaining peace in Europe but also in the world.

4. Research method

The article deals with EU enlargement policy and Georgia's geopolitical factors. The article uses in-depth interviews, and a qualitative research design allows us to answer the research question.

The article discusses both descriptive and instrumental types of case studies and the purposeful sampling method within the framework of which specialists in the field were interviewed in Georgia.

To implement the research objectives, we chose a semi-structured in-depth interview and purposefully selected experts from different spheres. We interviewed five experts between December 2023 and March 2024. We also acquainted ourselves with documents and secondary information through scientific databases.

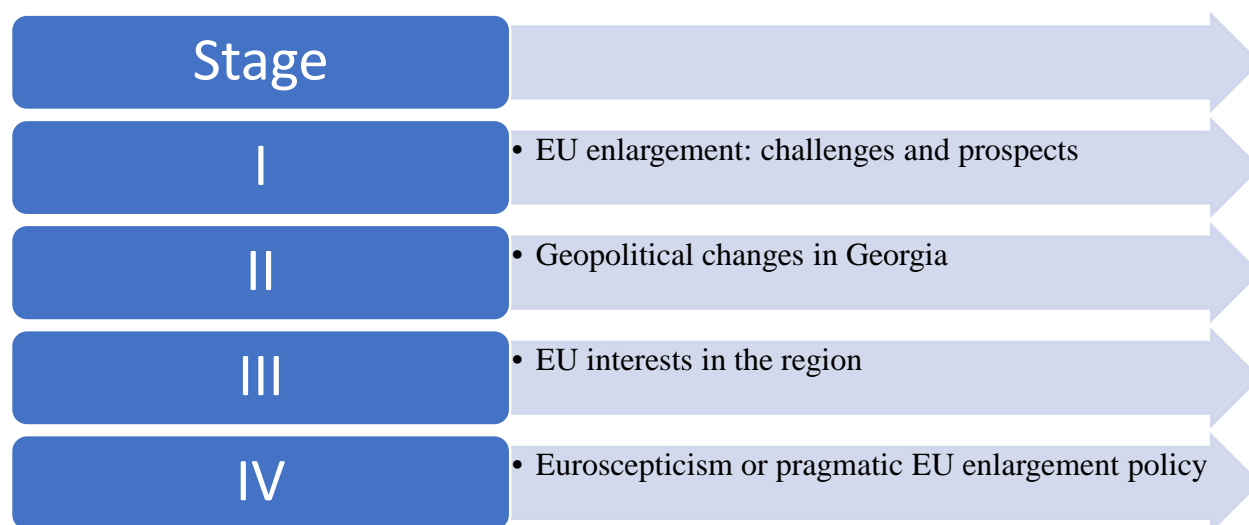
Ethical standards were adhered to during the research process, and participants were informed of the purpose of the research at the beginning of the interview. A detailed transcript was taken at the end of the interview. To guarantee the confidentiality of the information provided by the interviewees, the positions they occupy have been assigned alphanumeric codes in this article, with R1, R2, R3, and so on.

5. Results of Document Analyzes and expert interviews

Given Georgia's geopolitical realities, it is important to examine in detail the EU enlargement policy and Georgia's challenges and prospects.

Most interviewees note that, given the geopolitical situation, Georgia is in an active phase of enlargement of the European Union, which in turn was triggered by the war between Russia and Ukraine.

EU enlargement phases and expectations in Georgia



Stage I

(R1) According to the interviewee, the EU enlargement policy can strengthen social sustainability in Georgia through various mechanisms and projects, while the interaction between neighbouring countries, regional organizations and external actors shapes the geopolitical challenges in the region.

(R2) According to the interviewee, EU enlargement policy is influenced by a combination of security, economic and normative factors that are particularly relevant in the context of the geopolitical challenges in the Black Sea region.

(R3) According to the interviewee, one of the biggest challenges facing the European Union is its dependence on energy resources, which is why it is actively trying to find alternative sources. Considering the problem mentioned above, it is important for the European Union to maintain partnership relations with Georgia, which manifests itself in the peaceful resolution of conflicts in Georgia.

(R4) The interviewee cites the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as an obstacle to joining the European Union, noting that this is a significant barrier to Georgia's aspirations to join the European Union and that the polarization in the country's political spectrum is clearly a negative factor for integration into the European Union.

(R5) The interviewee cites the adoption of the law "On the transparency of foreign influence" as an obstacle to accession to the European Union, as it exacerbates the polarization of Georgian society and notes that there is a power struggle in the country in which everyone forgets that the struggle for the European perspective is extremely important.

Stage II

(R1) The interviewee points out that the world is undergoing significant geopolitical changes, which only occur once in a century. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the Black Sea coast has become one of the most important areas where competition for trade routes has intensified.

(R2) The interviewee believes that Georgia's geographical location and transit potential are attractive for the European Union, especially with regard to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

(R3) The interviewee points out that the European Union is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and trying to bring a coalition of people loyal to it into the Georgian government, which contributes to the lack of acceptance in society and the growth of anti-Western sentiments.

(R4) According to the interviewee, Georgia has shown a strong political will to implement closer integration with the European Union. The government has carried out significant reforms aimed at aligning with EU standards and values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

(R5) The interviewee notes that Georgia has made considerable progress in implementing reforms such as the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and public administration.

Stage III

(R1, R2) According to the interviewees, the EU enlargement policy does not guarantee Georgia's EU membership. The European Union's interest in Georgia is cheap labor, natural resources and logistical access to the natural resources of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states.

(R3) The interviewee points out that the visa-free regime granted under the Association Agreement has led to an exodus of employable citizens from Georgia to the European Union.

(R4) The interviewee believes that the European Union has certain interests in relation to Georgia, such as political stability, support for democratic processes, peaceful conflict resolution and promotion of free economic trade.

Stage IV

(R1, R2, R3) According to the interviewee, the granting of candidate status has increased Georgian society's interest in the European Union. The war between Russia and Ukraine changed EU policy in the region.

(R4) The interviewee notes that the number of people who want to join the European Union is declining in Georgia, as the process of integration into the European Union is linked to the fulfillment of ideological commitments. The process described above contributes to the non-acceptance and growth of anti-Western sentiments in Georgian society.

(R5) According to the interviewee, interference in Georgia's internal affairs is an attempt to limit the sovereignty of the state. Only the Formal Declarations for the process of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity are less effective.

(R3, R4) According to the respondents, the current model of economic relations between Georgia and the EU is unprofitable and unacceptable for Georgia. The current model of relations needs to be completely revised, as the format of cooperation does not include systematic development of industry, agriculture or other sectors in Georgia.

The information obtained from the survey has shown us that the EU enlargement policy has changed the geopolitical situation in Georgia. Most of the experts interviewed look forward to the enlargement of the European Union with hope, although they do not see the accession process in the near future.

6. Conclusion

The geopolitical changes caused by the war between Russia and Ukraine opened up the prospect of rapid accession to the European Union for the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Despite the major geopolitical challenges in the region, Georgia's strategic location is an attractive investment environment for the European Union. Therefore, the European Union's enlargement policy should focus more on promoting economic integration opportunities, which will be beneficial for both the European Union and the partner countries.

Georgia's geopolitical situation and the reforms carried out are an important step towards accession to the European Union, but this is not yet a real guarantee of Georgia's accession to the European Union.

It should be noted that only the European Union cannot be the driving force for the resolution of conflicts between countries and economic developments if the states are unable to resolve internal political conflicts. The threat from Russia in the region is constantly increasing, and the West continues to take a cautious approach to the integration of the Caucasian states into NATO and the European Union. The Russian Federation wants to control the former Soviet republics and prevent "interference" from external forces in the region. A retrospective analysis of the Europeanization of Georgian politics shows that Georgia's decision in favour of Europe has deep historical roots.

It is recognized that conflict resolution requires differentiated approaches from both internal and external sources. The wrong state policies can lead to regressive processes, and internal political conflicts are often the cause of external conflicts.

According to the interviewees, democracy and the rule of law in Georgia are characterized by a deficit in political culture. It should be noted that the Russian Federation rejects the expansion of the interests of the European Union and NATO in the region, as it sees this process as an existential threat. The state of economic development, corruption, emigration, the rule of law, internal conflicts and the unstable political situation hinder the country's Europeanization process.

Despite disparate expert opinions on a given issue, it is imperative that the government and the opposition reach a consensus on contentious matters.

The European Union actively supports the sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful settlement of conflicts in Georgia.

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