

# GEORGIA AND THE EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: A PATHWAY TO CLOSER INTEGRATION

## Abstract

The relationship between Georgia and the European Union has been developing with significant achievements over the years. The cooperation between the two sides has been strengthened and reached a high level after Georgia's inclusion in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative in 2009. The Eastern Partnership has brought many positive developments to the country on its path to development, contributed to the establishment of democratic institutions and constantly encourages the creation of a fair, anti-corruption system. The current paper discusses the key stages that Georgia has passed in the European integration process with the support of the Eastern Partnership; it also examines the achievements and challenges of Georgia's participation in the Eastern Partnership, assessing its compliance with EU standards. The article notes that while full EU membership remains a long-term goal, the Eastern Partnership has been instrumental in fostering Georgia's transformation and anchoring its European trajectory.

**Keywords:** European integration, democracy, Georgia, Eastern Partnership, European Union.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Georgia has sought to establish itself as a democratic, stable and economically strong state through close relations with the European Union. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, launched by the EU in 2009, is a cornerstone of Georgia's foreign policy and EU integration ambitions. For Georgia, the Eastern Partnership is not just a platform for cooperation, it is a roadmap for greater alignment with EU standards, enhanced trade opportunities and the promise of eventual membership. It is vital for Georgia to reaffirm its commitment to European values, and this task is becoming more urgent day by day. The evolving security dynamics in the region, particularly following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, underscore the importance of engaging with like-minded partners. Moreover, as Georgia grapples with domestic reforms and public demands for greater democratization, the Eastern Partnership offers a structured framework for advancing these priorities.

## *Foundations of the relationship between Georgia and the Eastern Partnership*

The Eastern Partnership, as a new platform for cooperation between the European Union and its eastern neighbours (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine), was initially conceived by Sweden and Poland. The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 significantly accelerated the development of this initiative and, to some extent, determined the positive attitude of the European Union towards it. As a result, in December 2008, the European Commission was tasked with preparing concrete proposals for the initiative. The Eastern Partnership was inaugurated by the European Union in Prague on 7 May 2009.

It should be noted that the Eastern Partnership is not an alternative to the EU accession process. Its goal is to accelerate the process of rapprochement of partner countries with the EU through both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In addition, the initiative contributes to the establishment of common values, strengthening regional security and creating conditions for economic development. Therefore, one of the priorities of Georgia's foreign policy is cooperation with this institution, especially when Georgia's constitutional obligation is to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. (Constitution of Georgia 1995)<sup>1</sup>.

The early stages of Georgia's engagement with the Eastern Partnership laid the foundation for deep political and security cooperation. After the 2008 war, the Eastern Partnership provided a platform for addressing regional security concerns. Georgia used the partnership to strengthen its resilience against Russian influence and to forge stronger diplomatic ties with EU member states. Since the Eastern Partnership began operating in 2009, Georgia has quickly emerged as one of its most proactive members.

### ***Stages of cooperation between Georgia and the Eastern Partnership***

The Cooperation between Georgia and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has evolved through several key stages, each marked by significant milestones that reflect the growing potential for rapprochement with the European Union (EU).

The initial phase was characterised by Georgia's proactive uptake of the Eastern Partnership framework. In 2009, Georgia became one of the founding members of the EaP, after which Georgia undertook institutional reforms to align with EU standards in governance, human rights and the rule of law. Negotiations on an Association Agreement (AA) were launched in 2010, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) added in 2011, reflecting the EU's confidence in Georgia's reform trajectory.

The next stage in Georgia-EU relations was a turning point with the signing of important agreements. In 2014, an Association Agreement was signed, which also includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) component. The DCFTA is a key part of the Association Agreement, which opens the EU market to Georgian goods and services. It involves the elimination of both tariff and non-tariff barriers and regulates a wide range of trade-related issues (e.g. food safety, product safety, competition policy, intellectual property protection, customs issues, public procurement, etc.). The Association Agreement involves such a high level of approximation with the EU that its effective implementation makes the country's Europeanization process irreversible. The Association Agreement is a detailed and well-timed plan for reforming Georgia based on the principles of democracy and a free, competitive economy, with the support of the European Union in this transformation (Roadmap on NATO and the EU 2021). One of the most important points is that the agreement expresses full respect and support for Georgia's sovereignty and the principles of the inviolability of its internationally recognized borders. This is precisely the issue that remains problematic and relevant today in the context of the existence of territories occupied by Russia.

The negotiation process for the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union was based on the Eastern Partnership initiative. As a result, the goals set by the Eastern Partnership in 2009 were realized: political association, economic integration, mobility - facilitating the movement of citizens and goods, and deepening sectoral cooperation (Roadmap on NATO and the European Union 2021).

The next and perhaps most remarkable phase of cooperation involves fostering direct connections between Georgian citizens and the European Union. In 2017, Georgia achieved a visa-free travel agreement with the EU's Schengen Zone, marking a significant milestone that bolstered public support for European integration.

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of Georgia, Article 78: "The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346?publication=36#>

This, naturally, led to enhanced mobility, supported by programs under the Eastern Partnership (EaP), such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 - initiatives that provide opportunities for educational and scientific cooperation, fostering closer ties at a societal level.

Each stage of cooperation between Georgia and the Eastern Partnership confirms the usefulness and effectiveness of this initiative for Georgia's European integration. At the same time, there is a clearly expressed will of Georgian society for close ties with the European Union and all its institutions and initiatives, which the Eastern Partnership significantly ensures.

### ***Future plans and challenges for cooperation between Georgia and the Eastern Partnership***

All countries involved in the Eastern Partnership policy share mutual responsibility for implementing its goals and priorities. The key areas for action and reform are the rule of law, an independent judiciary and media pluralism. A more ambitious reformer, as Georgia is often referred to, is expected to take more concrete steps towards development than other Eastern Partnership countries with a less active agenda. In return, the EU will be able to offer Georgia more favorable terms for cooperation – even though significant steps have already been taken in terms of visa liberalization, free trade and increased educational opportunities (Kragh 2019).

The EU's Eastern Partnership has achieved significant success: association agreements, reduction of trade barriers and visa liberalization. However, at the same time, the Eastern Partnership should be understood not as an instrument, but as a policy or initiative. Reforms in the Eastern Partnership countries should be perceived by local politicians and society as a good in itself, rather than something undertaken on behalf of Brussels. At the same time, the more ambitious the reform agenda becomes in a particular country, the harder it is for the EU to ignore its development and requirements, thereby accelerating the process of European integration (Kragh 2019). Therefore, Georgia's intensive cooperation with the EaP is of great importance.

In December 2023, the European Council granted Georgia candidate status, but in October 2024, Georgia's EU accession process was de facto halted due to actions taken by the Georgian government since spring 2024, including the introduction of the law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence", the legislative package on "Family Values and the Protection of Minors", and violations during the October 2024 parliamentary elections. The Commission stated that it would only be able to consider a recommendation to open negotiations when the government repeals the above-mentioned laws and returns to the European political course. All this confirms the trajectory of the EU's actions, which is directly proportional to the political steps of the countries cooperating with it. Therefore, the relationship between Georgia and the EU is fraught with challenges in the future. This is where the Eastern Partnership can be of great help to Georgia, as its future plans support the member states' path towards European integration. These plans include: supporting democratic institutions, the rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies and human rights.

## **Conclusion**

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint policy initiative aimed at deepening and strengthening relations between the European Union and six Eastern European countries. The Eastern Partnership remains a vital mechanism not only for advancing Georgia's European aspirations, but also for promoting stability and cooperation in the region. Georgia's cooperation with the EaP has yielded many useful results over the years, including the signing of an Association Agreement and visa liberalisation. While significant progress has been

made, the road ahead requires continued reform efforts and a steadfast commitment to shared values. The Eastern Partnership is a bridge between Georgia and Europe, a means of shared prosperity and security, and a testament to Georgia's unwavering aspiration to become part of the European family.

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