

Two Roads Toward the EU: How Differently Georgia and Albania Are Moving Forward?

Nino Samkharadze

Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics;
WEASA alumna, 2020 edition. E-mail: samkharadze@gip.ge

Introduction

Georgia joined the club of the EU membership candidate countries in December 2023 “*on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken*” (European Commission 2023b). Conditions enshrined in the Commission Opinion depict several factors that remain problematic. To catch up with Ukraine and Moldova, which are opening the accession negotiations, Tbilisi needs to accelerate reforms and address recent drawbacks. With this background, the Western Balkan countries’ enlargement experiences can provide interesting insight for Georgia. The two regions have different contexts for EU integration. However, in seeking to move Georgia’s EU membership bid further, Tbilisi needs to consider various scenarios and experiences.

The Republic of Albania is one such example. It is the most advanced and approximated WB state when it comes to EU integration. As of now, the country is advancing its steps towards the accession negotiations stage. After the first Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations in July 2022, the European Commission launched the screening process (European Commission 2023a) which is considered an important improvement for the country since getting membership candidate status in 2014.

This paper aims to identify the similarities and differences between the Georgian and Albanian contexts for EU integration and outline key areas where Tbilisi can follow and learn from Tirana’s experience. The given analysis is based on a combination of desk research and four online interviews conducted with experts engaged in Albania’s EU integration with different capacities (Appendix 1). Advantages and barriers for both countries on the EU integration road are sorted into three dimensions: (1) *external dimension* (geopolitics and foreign policies of the two enlargement states); (2) *domestic dimension* (political polarization and public attitudes); (3) *Institutional approximation* (Judiciary reform as a critical area for both states). This paper can help the readers (students, policy analysts, policymakers) interested in and engaged with the EU enlargement to follow different scenarios, identify the problematic areas of approximation, and develop a profound agenda for successful EU integration through experience-sharing.

Georgia and the Republic of Albania: Two Different Contexts for Successful EU Integration

Georgia was granted candidate status for EU membership in December 2023, which put the country on a new level of EU integration and at the same time raised the factor of EU conditionality with new power. Tbilisi not only should meet 12 recommendations enshrined in the 2022 EU Commission report (European Commission 2022), but also should address the nine conditions necessary to move forward and open the accession negotiations as soon as possible (Delegation of the European Union in Georgia 2023). As Oliver Varhelyi, European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement reports, Tbilisi managed to meet three priorities out of 12 by the time of publishing the 2023 EU Commission report

(Georgia Today 2023). The rest of the tasks were reframed in the new list of steps published in November 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1: Recommendations and conditions assigned to Georgia by the European Commission¹

12 Recommendations for Georgia (2022)	9 Conditions for Georgia (2023)
1. De-polarization	1. Political polarization
2. Electoral and institutional reforms	2. Free, fair and competitive electoral process in 3. 2024
3. Independent Judiciary	3. A holistic and effective judicial reform
4. De-oligarchization	4. De-oligarchization
5. Anti-corruption measures	5. Institutional independence and impartiality of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Special Investigative Service and the Personal Data Protection Service
6. Fight against organized crime	6. The protection of human rights
7. Media	7. Disinformation and foreign information manipulation
8. Vulnerable groups	8. Parliamentary oversight notably of the security services
9. Involvement of the CSOs	9. Alignment with the EU CFSP
10. Gender equality and violence against women ²	
11. Proactive consideration of the ECHR judgments	
12. Independent ombudsperson	

Sources: European Commission 2022; European Commission 2023.

The Georgian authorities approved the Action Plan addressing the implementation of nine steps. However, the turbulent domestic and external contexts of EU integration around Georgia are making the country's EU road muddled: while Georgia had been considered a frontrunner among the Eastern Partnership countries for many years, the recent unstable democratic developments and severe affective political polarization places the country in a precarious situation, challenging its dedication to democratic principles and influencing its foreign policy direction. Meanwhile, the geopolitical context changed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine opened the window of opportunity and accelerated the enlargement process which, according to the President of the European Council Charles Michel, should have its tangible outcomes in 2030 (Politico 2023). Yet, according to local pundits, failure to receive the Candidate status in 2022 (as did Ukraine and Moldova) is a "missed train" for Georgia (Gogolashvili 2023; Chkhikvadze 2022). While Ukraine and Moldova managed to move to the negotiations stage

¹ Conditions assigned by the EU to Georgia are ordered by author to illustrate similarities and differences between them according to two different years; The given table does not depict the sequences in original documents;

² Priorities that are reported as fulfilled by the European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement are marked in green.

unprecedentedly swiftly, Tbilisi might not have a similar chance next year: the EU parliamentary elections are ahead and the window of geopolitical opportunities might not remain open for long. Thus, as a newcomer to the enlargement club in such a unique geopolitical period, Georgia should look at the different scenarios experienced by other enlargement countries to prepare for the next steps of approximation faster than ever.

Based on interviews and desk research, the following parts of the paper will be sorted into three dimensions that have important impacts on Georgia’s perspectives of the EU integration. Comparisons with the Republic of Albania in relevant areas are summed in Table 2.

Table 2: Common and different contexts of Albania’s and Georgia’s EU Integration³

	The Republic of Albania	Georgia
External Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EU with reshaped political approach towards the enlargement process after invasion of Ukraine 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 100% of alignment with the CFSP (2023) ▪ Issue of regional disputes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 43% of alignment with the CFSP (2023) ▪ Issue of Russian hybrid threat
Domestic Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Traditional high level of public support ▪ High degree of political polarization 	
Reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong judicial reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Flawed judicial reform

Source: Outcomes of individual interviews and desk research, sorted by author

External Dimension: Different Foreign Policies During Ongoing Geopolitical Shift

The ongoing global geopolitical shift caused by the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shaped a new vision for EU enlargement. As High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated in March 2022: “Putin’s war has given birth to geopolitical Europe” (Borrell 2022). Brussels began seeing accelerated enlargement as one of the major instruments to deter Russia’s aggression and ensure its own security in this way. This is how the window of opportunity was opened for the three “Associate Trio” countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – shortly after February 2022. All three countries applied for candidate status in March 2022. Unusually for the EU bureaucracy, granting a candidate status happened to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, while Georgia received the status only in December 2023, a year and a half after submitting the membership application. Since the EU foreign policy has become more geopolitical (Lehne 2022), the rapprochement of Tbilisi to Moscow is

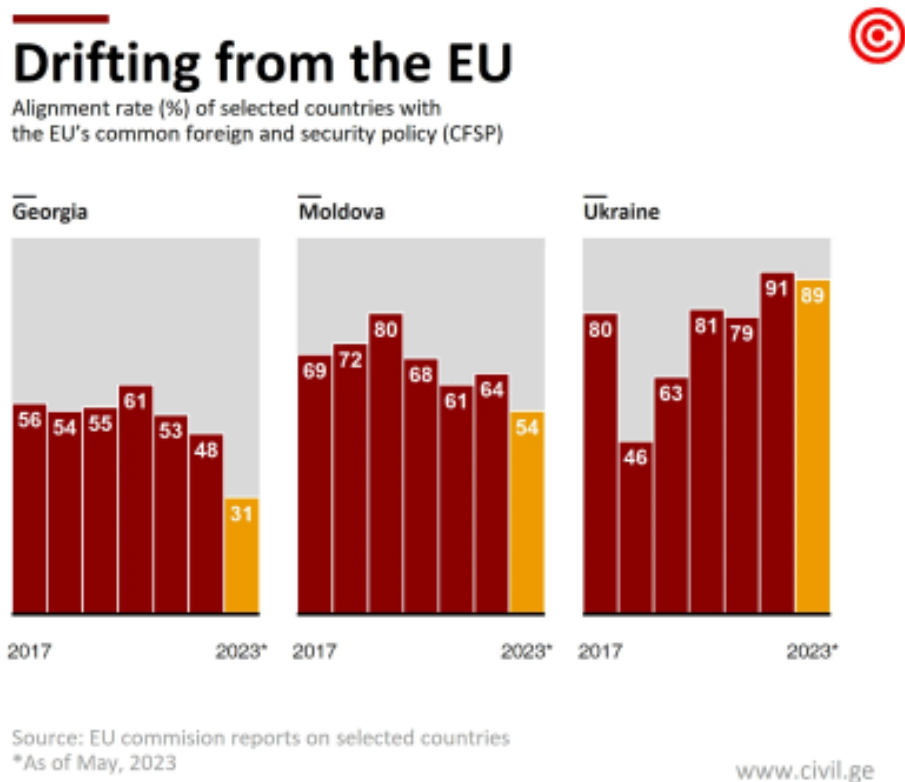
³ Presented factors based on the interviews with four Albanian pundits and might not be a complete report of achievements and challenges for both countries

seen a concern in the EU. As an example of this, Borrell stated: “Brussels very much regrets the [Georgian] government’s decision to allow the resumption of flights with Russia and allow sanctioned individuals to enter Georgian territory” (Borrell 2023).

Changing the image of Russia as the main ongoing security threat for the EU intensified Brussels’s focus towards the Western Balkan countries is seen in Albania as well, even though a “Russia challenge” is not an immediate geopolitical barrier on the accession road. The enlargement process was “almost dead” before the invasion (Gjipali 2023). While a recently changing geopolitical conjuncture opened a window of opportunity, Albania still faces its own regional geopolitical difficulties. The country is usually coupled with North Macedonia, which is in a dispute on identity issues with EU member Bulgaria (European Parliament n.d.; Haas 2023; Horvath 2023; Marusik 2021). Accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were formally opened only in July 2022 following long delays that were mainly caused by issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Since this obstacle is seen as a geopolitical factor in Tirana, it is not considered a deadlock and is a matter that can be dealt with (Krisafi 2023). Simultaneously, Albania has the additional geopolitical advantage of being a NATO member country and having the United States as a traditional partner when it comes to security and capacity building, necessary for successful EU approximation.

Alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remains a contrast between the two countries. If the CFSP was not an issue of high interest in Brussels prior, in the light of the EU’s confronting stance against Russia this factor has become center-stage. As the European Commission reports, in 2023 Georgia did not align with the EU’s restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus nor with the related statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU. Georgia’s alignment with EU statements and Council decisions under the CFSP remained below 50% (44% in 2022, 43% in August 2023). In this regard Georgia’s performance is assessed as “moderately prepared” with “limited progress” (European Commission 2023b). Beyond the numbers, the most alarming for Georgia’s pro-European expert community as well as the European authorities is a trend, which is downward (Chart 1). The rhetoric of the current Georgian Dream government is not providing hope for change in this regard (Samkharadze 2023).

Chart 1: Alignment rate of Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine with the EU CFSP (2017-2023)



Source: Civil Georgia 2023, Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/542831>

Security matters represented a major challenge to the stability of the WB region for years, though the EU managed to translate its “containing” policy to “transforming” policy (Skara 2020) which allowed Tirana to accommodate its foreign policy priorities successfully and adjust them to the EU CFSP. In the absence of immediate hybrid threats coming from Russia, Albania’s 100% CFSP alignment rate emerged as one of the important advantages for Tirana (European Commission 2023c, Xhafa 2023, Dzananovic 2020). With all the appropriate structures to participate in the common foreign and security policy present, Albania reports a “good level of preparation” and “good progress” (European Commission 2023a).

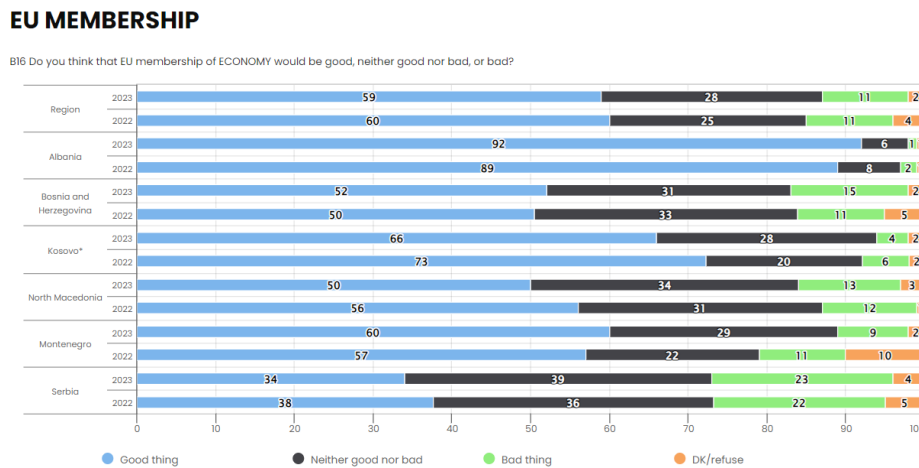
While as small enlargement states, neither Georgia nor Albania have control over the geopolitical developments, navigating efficiently with the ongoing shifts is important, particularly for Georgia which has a “Russia factor” – an immediate aggressor itself among existential as well as geopolitical and security barriers. Albania has NATO membership and a strategic partnership with the US as important lubricating Geopolitical factors for driving the EU integration process. Thus, according to this experience, intertwining the approximation with NATO and keeping close strategic relationships with the US could become a core part of the EU accession strategy for Georgia as well. This could help Georgia to underscore its geopolitical reliability and importance for the “collective” West.

Domestic Dimension: Strong Public Support VS Deep Political Polarization

In Georgia as well as in Albania public support towards EU integration is overwhelmingly high, which creates positive pressure on the governments to implement the necessary steps for the approximation. In Albania, public support for EU integration is around 90%. This high public support is considered one of the key drivers of Albania’s EU integration (Gjipali 2023, Krisafi 2023, Xhafa 2023). The Albanian population is completely behind this process even in the surrounding countries like North Macedonia or Montenegro, where the population with Albanian origin usually has a higher support behind their respective countries (Horvath 2023).

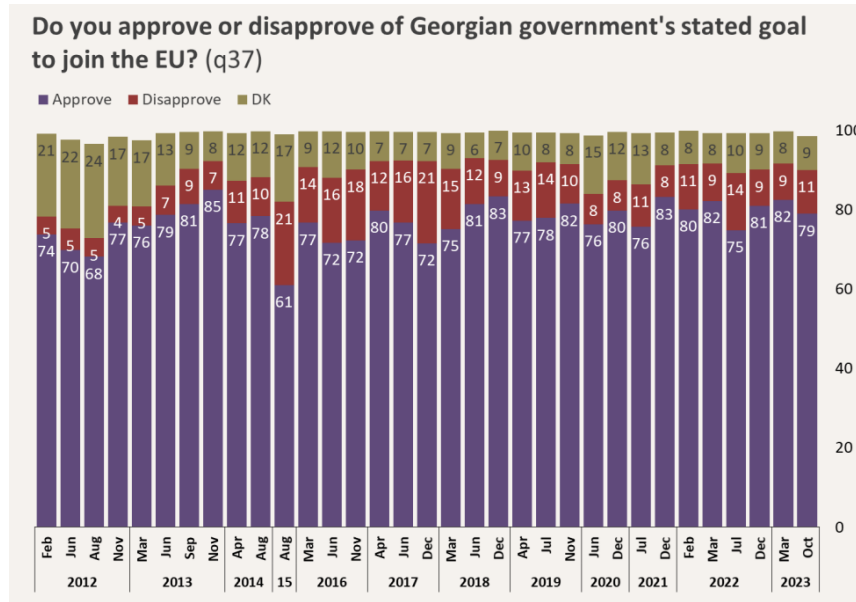
The same indicator in Georgia is around 80% (79% according to the recent survey conducted by the Caucasus Barometer) (Charts 2,3). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the credibility of the EU in ensuring the national security of the country outnumbered the credibility of NATO, which is not a usual precedent in Georgia (Chart 4). In Georgia stable and high public support towards the EU integration creates the main positive pressure regarding the country’s zealous Europeanization.

Chart 2. Public opinion survey results: Do you think EU membership of Economy would be good, good or bad, bad? Albania, 2023



Source: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>

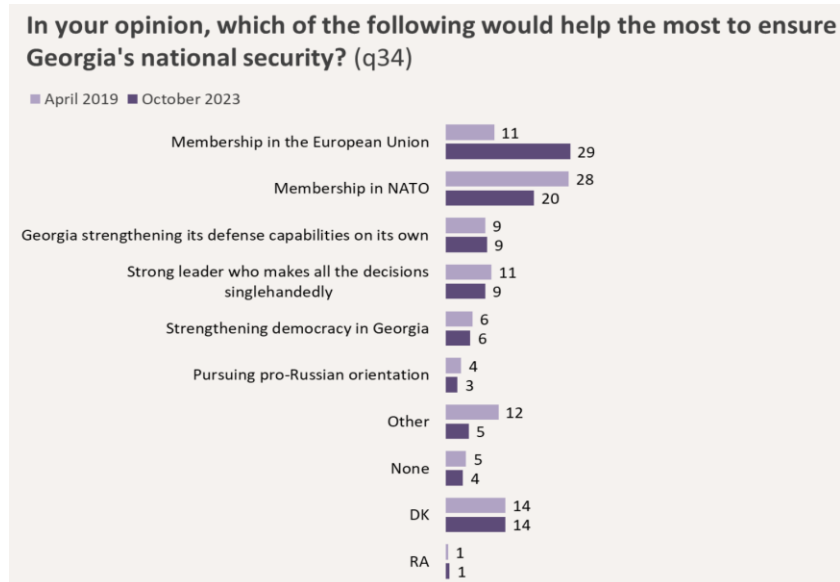
Chart 3. Public opinion survey results: Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU? Georgia, December 2023



Source:

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_GGF%20poll_October_2023_Eng_VF.pdf

Chart 4: In your opinion, which of the following would help the most to ensure Georgia's national security? Georgia, December 2023



Source: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgian-citizens-remain-committed-eu-membership-nation-united-its-dreams-and>

Beyond public opinion surveys, this trend is salient when it comes to public reaction to the threat to Georgia's EU integration. The March 2023 protests exemplify this pattern. In February 2023 the ruling Georgian Dream party was actively advocating for a draft law initiative on the registration of non-commercial legal entities and media outlets in the country as "agents of foreign influence" (Parliament of Georgia 2023). The draft law was criticized in Brussels as a sign of democratic backsliding and an additional obstacle to Georgia's EU integration created by the ruling party (Stano 2023). A mass demonstration of thousands took place in the streets of Tbilisi essentially forcing the government to abandon the legislation (Lomsadze 2023). Thus, when discussing the possible scenarios regarding granting Georgia candidate status, there is a strong opinion circulating in the country, according to which candidacy should be granted to the merit of the "people of Georgia" rather than the "government of Georgia" (GIP 2023). Even though institutionally it is not the practice within the EU, an important part of the Georgian expert circles highlights with this position the importance of vocal Pro-EU public in advancing Georgia's EU integration in December 2023.

While there is a broad public consensus over EU integration in both countries, a deep political polarization makes the political environment uncertain. De-polarization is among the 12 recommendations published for Georgia by the European Commission back in 2022. As the Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, David McAllister, said during his visit to Tbilisi, "unfortunately, when we speak about Georgia, one word always seems to be present, and that is polarization" (Georgia Today 2022). Affective polarization under the principle where "the winner takes it all" erases the inclusive issue-based discussion from the political agenda in Georgia (Silagadze 2023; Samkharadze 2022). The two largest political forces – the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the former ruling United National Movement (UNM) – dominate Georgian party politics with the majority of the electorate divided between them (CEC 2020). De-polarization which is translated into removing a zero-sum game principle from party politics in Georgia has not been fulfilled and remains within the nine steps enshrined in 2023 (The Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2023).

This trend is common between Georgia and Albania. The European Commission reports in 2023 that the political scene continues to be marked by political polarization, against the background of persistent deep divisions within the largest opposition party (European Commission 2023c). As some of the experts note, polarization in Albania is the highest as it has ever been (Krisafi 2023). The OSCE report on the 2023 local elections describes "continued polarization between the main political parties and deep division within the opposition" (OSCE 2023; Gjipali 2023). The opposition strategies of boycotting or disrupting the parliament damage the process of building inclusive political debates over EU integration (APnews 2023). The problem in Albanian modern party politics is also that the largest opposition, the Democratic Party, is passing through a leadership crisis with Sali Berisha a leader of the DP under investigation over a corruption deal and sanctioned by the US (US Department of State 2021) which leaves the Albanian opposition fragmented and unable to compete efficiently (Taylor 2023).

In both countries the trend is similar: EU integration itself has never been a cleavage between party powers neither in Georgia nor in Albania. What the opposition is usually questioning is how the governments are managing the necessary reforms (Horvath 2023; Parulava 2022). But the European integration as a potential party cleavage, maintain power and affecting the competitor is a key pattern of the political polarization in both countries which is already a threat to eventual EU integration. Damaging the prospects of constructive and healthy political debate, political polarization makes the advancement of the countries towards fundamental democratization and Europeanization.

Judiciary Reform: Achilles heel of Georgia and Samson's Hair for Albania

Georgia had traditionally been considered a champion in implementing reforms necessary to achieve a degree of approximation with the EU. The country recorded swift and rigorous progress in terms of anti-corruption conduct, economic transition and good governance reforms after the 2003 Rose Revolution. However, in terms of institutional and democratic reforms, the judiciary had always been a primary challenge for the country to transform in line with the EU standards. According to the recent EU reports, ensuring the full independence, accountability, and impartiality of judicial and prosecutorial institutions are still the subject of further reforms in Georgia, recording “limited progress” in this area (European Commission 2023b). In contrast, as the EU assesses, Albania is “moderately prepared” on the functioning of the judiciary and “good progress” in this regard. Interviewed Albanian experts are unanimously naming judiciary reform as the major achievement of Albania throughout the years. Having amended more than one third of its constitution, Albania can be considered a reform front-runner when compared with other EU candidate countries in the region (Nela 2021). This is why judiciary reform is a particular focus in this part of the research.

Among the 12 recommendations assigned to Georgia in June 2022 “a transparent and effective judicial reform” was named as recommendation number three (European Commission 2022). Since the assessment monitoring implemented by different CSOs and the EU Commission itself did not report important progress in this regard (EU Candidacy Check 2023; Borrell 2023), this component was maintained among the nine conditions in December 2023 (European Commission 2023b). In contrast, successful judiciary reform is regularly mentioned by experts and the EU reports when talking about Albania's key progress areas (European Commission 2021). Judiciary reform is the main area where Tirana and Tbilisi are passing through two fundamentally different paths. This is why it is important to scrutinize key patterns in this area of approximation.

According to internal reports provided by the Georgian CSOs, Recommendation number three from the European Commission 2022 report is among the most problematic ones in Georgia (EU Candidacy Check 2023; Papuashvili 2023; GFSIS 2023). Different sets of reforms were criticized by the Venice Commission, reporting that “important previous recommendations are not addressed” (Council of Europe 2023). Thus, by November 2023, the EU Commission report assessed Georgia's performance at “some level of preparation” with “limited progress” (European Commission 2023b).

Throughout the year of 2023, when Georgia was waiting for membership status, a set of controversial reforms, appointments or political decisions were observed, which leaves the issue of independent judiciary under question. Judges who are identified members of the influential group (dubbed as the “clan”), were appointed in the High Council of Justice before the reform of the appointment procedure (EU Candidacy Check 2023). The issue of the “clan”-related system in Georgian court was lustrated in April 2023, when the US Department of State designated five Georgian judges under visa restriction sanctions, stating that “these individuals abused their positions as court Chairmen and Members of the High Council of Justice, undermining the rule of law and the public's faith in Georgia's judicial system” (US Department of State 2023). Concerningly, the ruling Georgian Dream party backed the sanctioned judges: as the then party chairmen Irakli Kobakhidze insisted “Sanctioning judges without evidence is a gross violation of the constitution” (Kobakhidze 2023). This sequence indicated not only the drawbacks of institutional reform

in judiciary, but also a lack of political will to address the issue to move smoothly toward the next step of the EU integration.

On the other hand, Albania initiated a deep-cutting reform of its judiciary system since 2014 which helped the decision of the European Commission to recommend the start of accession negotiations with the European Union (approved in July 2016) (Nela 2021). Since then, Albania demonstrated a high degree of approximation. "It's been more than five years, but now the results are visible; and it is the widest and deepest reform taken by any country in the Western Balkans, reshaping all the justice institutions" (Gjipali 2023). The reform included vetting more than 60% of the judges and prosecutors, establishing new institutions governing the judiciary, creating a special prosecution and courts for the fight against corruption and organized crime, and substantially reforming existing institutions. The vetting law for judges and prosecutors in Albania "determines how quickly and expedite will be its accession path to the EU and how much credibility will be gained vis-à-vis the Albanian people over the judiciary system"(GLPS 2017).

Yet, although the formulas were successfully realized, they were not fully appropriated because the judicial system is still affected by various crises, such as corruption, corporatism and politicization of the system (Anastasi 2021). For example, questions had been raised about the doubtful incomes of Administrative Appeal Court Judge Artur Malaj, also his links to corruption and the murky ownership of an upmarket villa. Though, when the senior judge went through Albania's judicial vetting process, the commission in charge confirmed him in office (Bogdani & Likmeta 2018). Thus, the reform still leaves a space for sidelining such accusations. According to criticism, the Albanian justice system needs to still impose efficient mechanisms which can strengthen the independence and transparency of the justice system. The absence of such mechanisms makes the vetting process unqualified and beyond the public trust (Mujkic et al. 2023; European Commission 2023a).

Despite the mentioned drawbacks, judiciary reform as a process fundamentally pushed Albania's EU integration and transformed the country on its path towards the EU (Krisafi 2023; Xhaferi 2018). But at the same time, the Albanian experience shows the crucial factor of political will existing among the domestic political elites of the country. The will of the main political actors was a game-changer in pushing forward institutional reforms in Albania (Nela 2021).

Thus, Albania is passing through an important process of reforming its legal system which is challenged by a set of drawbacks but still recording "good progress" in this area of EU approximation (European Commission 2023a). Facing a certain degree of internal criticism in terms of a successful and fundamental implementation of the judiciary reform, this dimension is still considered key drivers of Albania's membership quest. This contrast between Tirana and Tbilisi puts important lessons to be learnt on the table for the new members of the enlargement package countries like Georgia.

Conclusion

While the judiciary reform is an Achilles Heel for Georgia, the process is one of the main achievements in the Republic of Albania. By scrutinizing the institutional upgrades taking place in Albania since 2016 and sharing this process as a success story, the Georgian government can accelerate its EU integration, embody the country's previous achievements in terms of other democratic reforms taking place since the

2003 revolution and move to accession negotiations. For this, Georgia needs not only to tightly cooperate with Tirana in the judiciary area, but also follow the favorable geopolitical shifts, a positive public pressure in favor of the EU membership, and create a proper political will to reform the state in line with the EU standards.

Bibliography

- Akobia, Eka. 2023. Georgia's (mis)alignment with the EU Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/542831>
- Anastasi, Aurela. 2021. The Albanian justice reform in the framework of the European integration process. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4316134
- Apnews 2023. Why the Albanian opposition is disrupting parliament with flares, makeshift barricades and fires. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/albania-opposition-politics-government-protest-parliament-ea98da3e4a0612572a920ea19ce93e6f>
- Bogdani, Aleksandra & Likmeta, Besar. 2018. Vetting of Albanian Judge Disregarded Corruption Allegations. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/05/vetting-of-albanian-judge-disregarded-corruption-allegations-11-02-2018/>
- Borrell, Josep. 2022. "Putin's War Has Given Birth to Geopolitical Europe". Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/putins-war-has-given-birth-geopolitical-europe_en
- Borrell, Josep. 2023. Interview with Josep Borrell, EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/interview-josep-borrell-eu-high-representative-european-union-foreign-affairs-and-security-policy_en
- CEC of Georgia 2020. Elections 2020. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/en/archevnebi/2020>
- Chkhikvadze, Vano. 2022. Georgia's Road to the European Union – Can the Country Catch a Train that has Left the Station? Available at: <https://gip.ge/sakartvelos-gza-evrokavshirisken-daeweva-qveyana-dazrul-matarebels/>
- Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2023. 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (extract about Georgia). Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia_en
- Dzananovic, Nedzma. 2020. Foreign Policies in Western Balkans: alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16144.pdf>
- EU Candidacy Check. 2023. State of Implementation of 12 Priorities. Available at: <https://csf.ge/wp-json/wi/validate/v1/file?wifile=wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eng-web.pdf>

- European Commission. 2022. The European Commission Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union, Brussels. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_22_3800
- European Commission 2023a. Key findings of the 2023 Report on Albania. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5612
- European Commission 2023b. COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Georgia 2023 Report. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_697%20Georgia%20report.pdf
- European Parliament n.d. The Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans> Last checked: January 13, 2024;
- Georgia Today 2022. David McAllister: When We Talk About Georgia, Sadly, We Always Remember One Word – Polarization. Available at: <https://georgiatoday.ge/david-mcallister-when-we-talk-about-georgia-sadly-we-always-remember-one-word-polarization/>
- Georgia Today. 2023. Varhelyi: Three of the 12 EU Recommendations Have Been Addressed in Georgia, 3/9 in Moldova and 2/7 in Ukraine. Available at: <https://georgiatoday.ge/varhelyi-in-the-direction-of-de-oligarchization-georgia-has-achieved-limited-progress/>
- GIP 2023. Two Scenarios for the Decision on Georgia’s EU Candidate Status: Implications and Policy Recommendations. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/two-scenarios-for-the-decision-on-georgias-eu-candidate-status-implications-and-policy-recommendations/>
- GLPS. 2017. An Analysis of the Vetting Process in Albania. Available at: <https://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Policy-Analysis-An-Analysis-of-the-Vetting-Process-in-Albania.pdf>
- Gogolashvili, Kakha. 2023. Will Georgia’s European dream become a reality? Available at: https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/european-integration/will-georgias-european-dream-become-a-reality-7181/?fbclid=IwAR1QC9nP3kdIqWJew6xTB_hZ8hhaPtn-cJngb3wQ-jkvC2QccdBL3q3KLCA
- Haas, Devin. 2023. North Macedonia, Albania, and the long march to the EU. Available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/north-macedonia-albania-and-the-long-march-to-the-eu/>
- Kobakhidze, Irakli. 2023. Sanctioning judges without evidence to be gross violation of Constitution, GD Chair says. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/sanctioning-judges-without-evidence-to-be-gross-violation-of-constitution-gd-chair-says/>
- Lehne, Stephan. 2022. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/04/14/making-eu-foreign-policy-fit-for-geopolitical-world-pub-86886>
- Lomsadze, Giorgi. 2023. Georgian protesters win a battle, war may still be ahead. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-protesters-win-a-battle-war-may-still-be-ahead>

- Marusiak, Sinisa Jakov. 2021. Bulgaria Again Blocks North Macedonia, Albania, EU Accession Talks. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/bulgaria-again-blocks-north-macedonia-albania-eu-accession-talks/>
- Mujkic, Semir; Karaj, Vladimir; Maglesho, Vasko; Veljkovic, Jelena. 2023. Albania's Justice Vetting Raises Uncomfortable Questions for Balkan Peers. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/09/albanias-justice-vetting-raises-uncomfortable-questions-for-balkan-peers/>
- Nela, Inva. 2021. Lessons learned from the justice reform in Albania. Available at: <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/lessons-learned-from-the-justice-reform-in-albania/?lang=en>
- OSCE 2023. Albania's 2023 local elections: ODIHR election observation mission final report. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/553975>
- Parliament of Georgia. 2023. THE COMMITTEES ASSIGNED TO THE CONSIDERATION OF THE DRAFT LAW ON REGISTRATION OF FOREIGN AGENTS ACCORDING TO THE DECISION OF THE BUREAU. Available at: <https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/biuros-gadatsqvetilebit-kanonproekti-utskhoeli-agentebis-registratsiis-shesakheb-gansakhilvelad-komitetebis-gadaetsa>
- Parulava, Dato. 2023. Georgians fear their government is sabotaging EU hopes. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgian-fear-government-sabotaging-eu-hope/>
- Papuashvili, Ana. 2023. Judicial Reform and European Integration - The state of fulfilling the European Commission's 3rd recommendation and future prospects. Available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en/products/sasamartlo-reforma-da-evropuli-integratsia-evrokomisiis-me-3-rekomendatsiis-shesrulebis-mdgomareoba-da-samomavlo-perspektivebi>
- Politico.eu. 2023. Charles Michel: Get ready by 2030 to enlarge EU. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-council-president-charles-michel-eu-enlargement-by-2030/>
- Samkharadze, Nino. 2023. Georgian Dream's Populist Conservatism: Fight to Legitimise and Hold On to Power. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/georgian-dreams-populist-conservatism-fight-to-legitimise-and-hold-on-to-power/>
- Samkharadze, Nino. 2022. What Does the Polarization in Georgia Look Like and How to Measure it? Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/what-does-the-polarization-in-georgia-look-like-and-how-to-measure/>
- Silagadze, Givi. 2023. PARTISANSHIP AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN GEORGIA. Available at: https://crrc.ge/uploads/tinymce/documents/Projects/ENG-Partisanship%20and%20Affective%20Polarization_NED.pdf
- Skara, Gentjan. 2020. The Rocky Road of Western Balkan Countries Toward European Integration: The Need for a Credible and Effective Approach. Available at: https://www.weasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-rocky-road-of-Western-Balkan-countries-toward-European-integration-the-need-for-a-credible-and-effective-approach_Gentjan-Skara.pdf

- Strati, Nino. 2023. Cluster 1 Negotiations of EU Integration. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/20704.pdf>
- Taylor, Alice. 2023. Divided Albanian opposition in crisis, MPs expelled as elections approach. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/divided-albanian-opposition-in-crisis-mps-expelled-as-elections-approach/>
- US Department of State, 2021. Public Designation of Albanian Sali Berisha Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption. <https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-albanian-sali-berisha-due-to-involvement-in-signific> Available at: <ant-corruption/>
- US Department of State, 2023. Public Designations of Mikheil Chinchaladze, Levan Murusidze, Irakli Shengelia, and Valerian Tsertsvadze, Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption. <https://www.state.gov/public-designations-of-mikheil-chinchaladze-levan-murusidze-irakli-shengelia-and-valerian-tsertsvadze-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>
- Xhaferi, Jeton. 2018. Albania's Challenges to European Aspiration, Bringing the Justice System to Justice. Available at: https://revistia.org/files/articles/ejss_v1_i1_18/Xhaferi.pdf

Appendix 1: Interviews Conducted

- Gjipali, Gledis. 2023. Executive Director. European Movement in Albania. Online Interview;
- Horváth, Gellért, Dr. 2023. EU Expert · Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania; Online Interview;
- Krisafi, Ledion. 2023. Senior Researcher, The Albanian Institute for International Studies; Online Interview;
- Xhafa, Florian. 2023. a senior lawyer and policy expert; Key expert 2 at EU funded project "Support to the EU Integration of Albania". Online Interview.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Gentjan Skara of Epoka University, Tirana, for his generous help throughout conducting the research, hosting the WEASA Peer-to-Peer field trip in Tirana as well as the qualified consultations which have been an invaluable support to fulfil the present research.

Disclaimer: *The publication was carried out with the financial support from the Warsaw Euro-Atlantic Summer Academy (WEASA) in the frame of the Peer-to-Peer Professional Meetings initiative designed for WEASA alumni members.*

WEASA is an annual summer school for mid-career professionals from the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans and Poland. WEASA is carried out in partnership with the College of Europe in Natolin, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), The Polish American Freedom Foundation.