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EU-STRAT
research project

EU-STRAT is an international research project that studies the relationship between the European Union and the countries in the European Eastern neighborhood. The project started on **1 May 2016** and will continue until the end of April 2019.

The main ambition of EU-STRAT is to provide an **inside-out analysis and strategic assessment** of the links between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.

EU-STRAT will address **two main questions**:

First, why has the EU fallen short of creating peace, prosperity and stability in its Eastern neighbourhood?

And second, what can be done to strengthen the EU's transformative power in supporting political and economic change in the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries?

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INTERVIEW

“Georgia should consistently knock on the EU’s and NATO’s doors”: An interview with Kakha Gogolashvili

by [Tadeusz Iwański \(OSW\)](#) & [Kamil Calus \(OSW\)](#)



This interview was conducted during EU-STRAT’s midterm conference entitled “The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries: An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment” which took place in Vilnius from October 5 to October 6, 2017.

With membership perspective out of the question and the Association Agreements (AAs) and visa liberalization already under implementation, how can the European Union (EU) incentivize Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries?

Membership perspective is the most important thing. It’s not being discussed at this stage, but I think that in the future, in the medium term perspective, this question will be raised by governments of the states that have signed and implemented AAs. Societies in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are very much awaiting clear indication that they will be taken into the EU.

But what about the EU perspective on this issue?

Well, for the moment, of course the EU is in a relative crisis. There are so many other problems currently in the EU that raising the issue of future enlargement at this moment would be politically damaging for any

government in the EU. That is why they are naturally not inclined to enter in such debates. But that does not mean that EU elites have not kept this issue for the future in some way. I mean political and intellectual elites in the member states.

The very important thing is to encourage closer integration of the EaP countries who are really keen to get closer to the EU and eventually join it. For example, it would be good to encourage creation of a European Neighborhood Community, which would not be about membership, but would serve as a kind of European Economic Area Plus (EEA+). Such an arrangement initially would differ from the original EEA which was created with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, but gradually could deepen and acquire the same features, marking a new stage in integration between these three countries and the EU. It would also serve as an effective tool for regional cooperation/integration between the three associated EaP countries.

Yes, but deepening economic cooperation requires the implementation of difficult reforms. Does it seem that some “big idea” is needed behind the reforms in order to incentivize politicians to carry them out?

That is why it should be clearly and explicitly expressed that even if in this very moment the EU is reluctant to promise anything about institutional integration, the functional integration has no limits. Special formats can be created for this type of integration. You can tell Georgian citizens that “we have been offered an AA, so we must do reforms in order to become compatible with the EU”, but it would be difficult to sell such an approach as something tangible. This is due to the fact that the population cannot foresee exactly the outcome of this whole endeavor. Plus, the EU has AAs with many different countries including Chile, Mexico and south Mediterranean countries. So it’s not easy to explain to people that, let’s say, the free trade arrangements with those countries differs greatly from the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with Georgia, which is in fact much deeper and envisages full liberalization of trade on almost all products. If you would, however, show them that Georgia and the EU are creating a new type of arrangement, which would not be EU membership but rather an EEA+ designed especially for these three EaP countries, then that is already something. They would understand that this is functional integration, and is something new and irreversible. They would also understand this to mean that their country is entering a club which differs from all the other types of arrangements.

So the arrangements thus far have been too technical, and do not serve as enough “political fuel”?

Yes. That is why we need to establish either an EEA+ or a Neighborhood Economic Community. These are not new ideas. Both of them have already been presented in the EU documents and right now we have the opportunity to use these concepts. Then the EU could start encouraging regional integration of those three countries. For the moment, trade between those states is not as large as it could be, but we need to develop trilateral trade within the region in order to create an area which is compatible with the EU, which is integrated and which is homogeneous.

Those three states should help each other, just as it happened in the Western Balkans or Visegrád Group.

The second thing is the connectivity. The EU should work more seriously on this issue, especially with the Georgian government, as this country is far from the EU geographically. It is very important to develop more direct transport links. I would suggest investing as much as possible in ferry connections between Georgian ports and the Black Sea ports in the EU (like Varna, Constanta and others). I simply think that it is important to encourage people-to-people contact. We have the visa-free regime, but that is not all – people should travel. And travel should be easy. People should feel that within 24 hours (by ferry) they can reach the EU coast and enter its territory without visas. There also should be more direct flights from Georgia – and not only from the Tbilisi – to the EU. These things together with the membership perspective could serve as incentives for politicians and societies of the EaP.

So, we know what the EU should do. But what should Georgia do?

Georgia should first of all keep its motivation to integrate with the EU. I've always said that regardless of what the EU says about the membership perspective, Georgia should keep its motivation and should consistently knock on the EU's and NATO's doors. At the same time, Georgia has to restructure and mobilize its society towards membership, which should be understood as the final goal.

Is Georgia doing that? If not, where are the gaps?

I think that not everything is being done, but the idea of the integration with the EU is still quite strong and popular. The gaps are everywhere actually. For example, I would emphasize especially the issue of decentralization and development of regional governments. The democracy is not well supported at the regional level. Also, there should be greater investment in pro-European education so that people feel more ready to join Europe. Gaps are also visible on the political landscape. I would say that the political parties are weak, and in general, the European style of conducting politics is not very well established in Georgia. There is not too much democratic consensus visible in the Georgian parliament, for example.

But is there a political consensus within Georgia that the country should implement the AA and DCFTA and “knock” on NATO's door?

At the level of an idea – yes. There is even certain competition between the biggest parties to try to show which one of them is more “European”. But when it comes to the concrete decisions and steps, not necessarily. On the other hand, while consensus is not a problem for the implementation of the AA and DCFTA (only about 15-20 % of the population still supports some pro-Russian trends), the level of preparation of civil servants and bureaucracy in general is. Georgia copes with the lack of professionalism of this staff, favoritism, lack of fair competition (which would promote the best and more motivated people) in the administration.

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Is this pro-European approach of Georgians and its political class irreversible or it can change under – for example – intense Russian informational campaign?

It is not yet irreversible. You can see from the case of Moldova that even after an EaP country has received something from the EU side (like the visa-free regime), pro-Russian sentiments can still develop. At the same time, we have to remember that Georgian society has always been much more pro-independence, starting from the Soviet times already. The idea of our independence was always been closely linked with the idea of strengthening of our ties with Europe. Even if in Europe it is not fully recognized, we have always had this feeling that this is our place, that we should be with Europe. Of course, everything depends on how strongly Russia might advance with its informational policy and what instrument would be used for this.

Do you think that strategic communication from the EU side is good enough to counter this Russian soft power and propaganda?

It is not good enough. Frankly, the EU was not ready for such attacks from the Russian side. Actually, Moscow started this information war while the EU was not even acknowledging its existence. Even now, there are countries in the EU that are skeptical about fighting with Russia and engaging in information warfare. Fortunately, little by little, this security component of the EU policy is developing. It means that we see more and more communication related to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, especially while treating hybrid threats. The EU is an inertial type of institution, or rather set of institutions, in which decisions are never immediately taken. But if the policies are discussed and planned, then at some point they become effective.