
GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND ITS FEATURES IN GEORGIA, ARMENIA AND TÜRKİYE

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Abstract

This article explores government policies toward European integration in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye, focusing on their unique challenges. Despite public support, Georgia faced setbacks as the EU suspended its accession due to government stances and a policy design-implementation gap. Türkiye, hindered by internal human rights issues and freedom restrictions, faces policy conflicts stemming from political turbulence and EU criticisms. Armenia's situation is complex, Armenia

seeks EU alignment through democratic reforms while maintaining ties with Russia but faces capacity and security challenges. The study presents detailed analyses of these three cases using document analysis and expert interviews.

Key words: EU expansion, EU accession, Government actions, Foreign policy, Europeanisation.

INTRODUCTION

The government policy towards European integration remains highly relevant in international academia and national scholarly discussions. Also, international society demonstrates a profound interest in the enlargement of the European Union.

This research aims to study the pivotal features of government policy towards European Integration in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye, each presenting a unique case in its relationship with the European Union. The article examines the government actions and policies in the mentioned states, focusing on the design and implementation of these policies, including laws, government ordinances, and decrees. By analysing the efforts made by these governments in the context of European integration, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the actions they have employed, the challenges they face, and the outcomes they have achieved.

The study involves an in-depth examination of documents coupled with expert interviews that enrich the empirical and explanatory parts of the research. This study is based on three distinct cases, selected through purposive sampling to highlight the features of European integration among the countries: 1) Georgia, which holds candidate status, 2) Armenia, a country that has recently exhibited clear European aspirations despite its complex historical relationship with the EU and 3) Türkiye, with its frozen candidate status. The paper answers three questions: What are the pivotal features of government policy towards European integration in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye? What factors determine these policy features in each of the three countries? And what challenges are identified in the context of Euro integration according to the government policies in these states?

The article is organised into several parts: the first part presents a literature review that provides the theoretical foundation for the study. The subsequent three parts each focus on the government policies towards European integration and their specific features in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye, respectively. Finally, the last part of the article presents the main findings, offering a conclusion that synthesises the insights gained from the research.

The research adhered to ethical standards by following the five guiding principles of the American Psychological Association (APA), ensuring informed consent from all respondents. Personal beliefs and opinions were not disclosed during the interviews, maintaining objectivity and impartiality. Data from participants is represented with appropriate anonymity protection. All sources and documents used in the study were obtained following relevant intellectual property rights.

By employing social science qualitative research methods, including document analysis and in-depth interviews with experts, this study provides a nuanced and detailed examination of the cases. Through its comprehensive analysis, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the features and challenges of Euro-integration in these countries, offering insights for both scholars and policymakers engaged in the field.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since gaining independence (1991), Georgia has undergone a significant transition. Historically part of Europe, the country shares common European values and identity. As former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania once said upon Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe: "I am Georgian, therefore I am European" [Kapanadze, 2004; Mestvirishvili & Mestvirishvili, 2014; Tsintskiladze, 2019]. Despite the current situation, where the ruling party 'Georgian Dream' adopts an ambivalent and increasingly Eurosceptic stance, these words still reflect the Georgian people's commitment to EU integration. Georgia's official relationship with the EU began in 1992 when Georgia regained its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After this, The European Commission (EC) established its Delegation in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1995 [Chitadze, 2014]. On April 22, 1996, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the European Union and Georgia was signed in Luxembourg. The agreement aimed to enhance political dialogue, support Georgia's democratic and economic development, promote harmonised economic relations, and provide a framework for cooperation across multiple sectors [Gabrichidze, 2014]. On February 17, 2004, the Georgian government established the post of State Minister for Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, marking a significant step towards deeper ties with the EU. This effort led to Georgia joining the EU's Neighborhood Policy on June 14 of the same year. On November 14, 2006, the EU-Georgia European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan was adopted, setting eight priority areas for reform over five years. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia's plan emphasised democratic development, justice, governance, poverty reduction, economic and social policy,

migration, cross-border crime, foreign policy, security, conflict resolution, energy, transport, environment, culture, education, and science [Eisele & Wiesbrock, 2011]. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership was launched, allowing Georgia to deepen its bilateral relations with the EU. This led to the adoption of the EU-Georgia Association Agenda in 2014 [Torun, 2019]. Despite government changes since independence, the goal of joining the EU and NATO has consistently remained a top priority [Chochia, 2013]. During this period, Georgia benefited from political, administrative, and economic support from the EU. Additionally, the EU played a crucial role in strengthening civil society and supporting Georgian democracy and governance, particularly following the Rose Revolution [Khuroshvili, 2021]. After this was The Association Agreement (AA) on 27 June 2014, and Georgia managed to sign it [Morari, 2014]. The AA between the European Union and Georgia seeks to strengthen political and economic connections, improve democratic governance, enable economic integration, support sectoral collaboration, and aid in aligning Georgian reforms with EU standards [Fix, 2014; Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, 2015; Irena & Markozia, 2015]. Since 2014, following the Association Agreement, Georgia has implemented significant reforms, including anti-discrimination and anti-corruption measures, and included European and Euro-Atlantic integration in Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia. However, since 2022, anti-European rhetoric has intensified, and the government's stance has become more ambivalent. Although outwardly pro-European, Georgian authorities have increasingly opposed EU actors, with this opposition becoming more aggressive following Russia's invasion of Ukraine [Tsuladze, Abzianidze, Amashukeli, & Javakhishvili, 2024].

The years 2023–2024 have seen the largest waves of protests in Georgia, known as the Gen-Z protests. Several hundred thousand citizens opposed the “Law on the Registration of Foreign Agents” and the Law of Georgia on the transparency of foreign influence. In the first instance, the parliament withdrew the law. Due to the stability of the situation and the efforts of the Georgian people, civil society, and the President, Georgia was granted candidate status for the European Union. In the second case, one year later, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the law in its third reading on May 28, 2024. This so-called “Russian Law” aims to undermine Georgian civil society and the non-governmental sector, distancing Georgia from its pro-European aspirations [IDFI 2022; 2023].

Armenia's government policy towards European Integration has become a focal point of academic inquiry due to the country's strategic position between Europe and Asia amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics. This literature review aims to

synthesise key themes, debates, and trends in understanding the pivotal features, determinants, and challenges of Armenia's government policy towards European Integration. Scholars have highlighted the intricate challenges Armenia faces in navigating its foreign policy orientation amidst competing pressures from the European Union and Russia. [Paronyan H., Elamiryan R., 2021] emphasise the complexities of Armenia's multi-vector foreign policy strategy, while [Terzyan A., 2019] underscores the constraints posed by Russia's continued economic and political influence on Armenia.

The literature explores Armenia's government policy toward European Integration, shaped by geopolitical factors, historical ties, economic dependencies, and domestic politics. Armenia seeks to align its legislation with European standards to enhance economic autonomy and EU relations [Paronyan H., Elamiryan R., 2021]. Positioned between the EU and Russia, Armenia balances its foreign policy through a multi-vector approach [Paronyan H., Elamiryan R., 2021; Aliyeva A., 2022]. Despite tensions, Armenia engages in both Eurasian and European integration models, joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) while negotiating the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU [Terzyan A., 2020; Khvorostiankina A., 2021].

Several studies highlight the challenges and constraints faced by Armenia in its pursuit of European integration. These include tensions between the EU and Russia, Armenia's membership in the EAEU, and the legacy of historical alliances. [Terzyan A., 2019] underscores the challenges posed by Russia's economic and political grip on Armenia, hindering the effective implementation of European integration policies. Influential studies by authors such as Aram Terzyan, Hayk Paronyan, and Chiara Loda [Loda, C., 2017] have provided comprehensive analyses of Armenia's foreign policy choices, shedding light on the complexities of EU-Armenia relations. Despite these issues, the literature also identifies opportunities for Armenia to deepen its engagement with the EU. The Eastern Partnership framework is seen as a platform for Armenia to enhance cooperation with the EU while maintaining its ties with Russia. [Paronyan H., Elamiryan R., 2021] suggest that Armenia's commitment to European standards in specific areas signals a desire to increase economic autonomy and strengthen relations with the EU. While existing scholarship provides valuable insights, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced dynamics of Armenia's integration process. Further research could explore the role of domestic political actors, civil society organisations, and public opinion in shaping Armenia's foreign policy orientation. Additionally, examining the impact

of recent geopolitical developments, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, on Armenia's European integration efforts could enrich the scholarly discourse. Limited focus on specific policy instruments and their impact on EU-Armenia relations, as well as the perspectives of various stakeholders, presents opportunities for further research [Terzyan A., 2020; Khvorostiankina A., 2021]. Thus, the literature reviewed highlights the complexities, determinants, and challenges of Armenia's government policy towards European Integration while acknowledging persistent opportunities and gaps for future inquiry.

In the last fifty years, Türkiye's integration with Europe has significantly shaped its foreign policy, with its pursuit of full EU membership driving political, economic, and societal transformations. Academic studies in this field emphasise Türkiye's longstanding interest in European integration, dating back to the Republic's establishment [Ercan, 2021, p.78]. The concepts of the West and Europe have always guided Türkiye's goals since its foundation, and since the War of Independence, the Republic of Türkiye has advocated a Western-oriented foreign policy axis [Turan, 1998, p. 303]. Following World War II, Türkiye aimed to strengthen its presence in Europe by joining international organisations like the Council of Europe in 1949 and NATO in 1952. Türkiye's 1959 application for association with the European Economic Community is often cited as a key step in its European integration [Yolcu, 2008, p. 37].

Existing literature emphasises milestones in Türkiye's European integration process that influenced government policies. Key turning points include the Ankara Agreement (1963), the Additional Protocol (1975), the Association Council Decision (1995), and the start of EU accession negotiations (2005) [Bilici, 2006, p. 44 & Sönmez, 2018, p. 154]. The year 2005 is noted as a milestone in the full membership and integration process [Ökmen & Canan, 2009, p. 143 & Çokoğullar & Bozaslan, 2017, p. 198]. Studies highlight various obstacles, such as Türkiye's size, prejudices, double standards, and the Cyprus issue, which have disrupted and slowed the process [İnaç, 2016, p. 230]. Additionally, domestic political events, including historical military coups, have strained relations between Türkiye and the European Union [Çalış & Metkin, 2017, p. 14].

During the Justice and Development Party (AKP) period, the Turkish government pursued reforms to harmonise with EU standards, enacting new laws in line with the Copenhagen political criteria [Efe, 2012, p. 153] and consulting institutions aligned with EU norms [Kaya, 2011, p. 78]. Between 2013–2017, the Syrian refugee crisis notably influenced government policies towards European integration, with

Türkiye's efforts shaped by the influx of refugees and a perceived lack of full EU support [Ercan, 2017, p. 19]. Since 2017, Türkiye's volatile relationship with the EU and its evolving government policies persist. Despite extensive studies, the literature generally does not provide detailed information on the most recent government policies or the underlying dynamics that have guided Türkiye's integration efforts over time.

2. GEORGIA IN FOCUS

Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia declares that 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 [Constitution of Georgia, 1995], although the fact is separate. With what efforts the government is trying to achieve the latter.

The interviewed experts have critical assessments in this discourse: *“The main feature of the government policy in the direction of European integration in Georgia is to bring the legislation and bureaucratic system as close as possible to the European model, which in many cases is not perceived as a serious step by the population, since in practice there are problems with the implementation of the legislation and in many cases the lack of political will. As a result, we get changes that have only a small impact on the country's European integration process”* (Expert, 1).

“Unfortunately, the implementation of such reforms that contribute to the creation of a strong and democratic government, which in turn is a step forward in the European integration process, has been neglected” (Expert, 3).

“We have seen numerous examples of attacks on civil society, NGO sector, political parties and media and restrictions on their activities, which makes us think that the country's democratic course has been completely changed. It is also worth noting the attitude of the Georgian government regarding the criticism from the European Union, which makes us think that the European integration is less of a priority for the ruling party today” (Expert, 2).

On 23 June 2022, the European Council recognised the European Perspective for Georgia. The European Union outlined twelve key recommendations that Georgia needed to implement to achieve candidate status. These recommendations focused on addressing political polarisation by encouraging cross-party cooperation, ensuring the full functionality and accountability of state institutions, and strengthening democratic oversight. Additionally, Georgia was urged to reform its judicial system to guarantee independence, accountability, and impartiality and to

tackle high-level corruption by enhancing the independence of its Anti-Corruption Agency. Other priorities included combating organised crime, safeguarding media freedom, and ensuring the protection of human rights, particularly for vulnerable groups. The EU also mentions the importance of involving civil society in decision-making and ensuring that Georgian courts consider European Court of Human Rights judgments. Finally, the process for nominating a new Public Defender was to be transparent and independent, reinforcing the institution's autonomy. These measures were aimed at aligning Georgia with European standards and advancing its path toward EU membership [European Commission, 2022].

“In 2022, when the European Union limited itself to the European perspective for Georgia and did not give it the status of a candidate out of the associated trio, it caused heavy passions in the society, a feeling of hopelessness and a kind of depression” (Expert, 1). “It was as if there was a consensus in the nation that we had to do everything we could to get candidate status, and that meant fulfilling these 12 priorities as well” (Expert, 3). “The government took steps as if it knew very well that the fulfilment of these 12 points was the order of the society. This process was actively advocated by the president and civil society” (Expert, 2).

On November 8, 2023, the European Commission recommended granting Georgia candidate state status, influencing the European Council's upcoming decision. However, the recommendation included reservations tied to the June 2022 European Commission conclusion. As part of the 2023 enlargement package, the European Commission's detailed report assessed Georgia's current situation and progress.

Out of 12 priorities, the European Commission determined that Georgia fulfilled 3 of them, which were related to the election of the public defender, proactive consideration of the decisions of the Strasbourg court by the Georgian court, gender equality and violence against women.

The report evaluated the implementation of 12 priorities. Key findings included the need for reduced political polarisation, improved cooperation with opposition parties, and enhanced parliamentary oversight. While some judicial reforms and legislative changes were recognised, further comprehensive reforms, especially regarding the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor General's appointment, were deemed necessary.

Anti-corruption efforts were noted, but the independence of related institutions requires strengthening. The report notes the importance of continuing de-oligarchisation efforts with broad involvement. Progress in fighting organised crime

was acknowledged, but more work is needed, particularly in implementing Moneyval recommendations.

Media freedom remains a concern, with recommendations for ensuring regulatory independence and protecting journalists. Human rights protection, especially for vulnerable groups, must be enhanced, with attention to recent legislation potentially limiting assembly rights. Finally, the involvement of civil society in decision-making should be strengthened, ensuring their effective participation in policy-making processes [IDFI, 2023].

The experts interviewed by Beside This noted that: *“There is a serious problem between declared policy and its practice, for example, the association agreement mentions education and youth development and promoting their involvement in political life, although we have seen in the last 2 years that the government does nothing more than marginalise youth and confront them”* (Expert, 3). *“In general, it is typical for Georgia to declare ambitious values and goals, the latter is done as if to show the government to its partners that we truly want to do something, although the implementation part is often completely inappropriate, and an example of this is the anti-discrimination law and its practice, which does not protect the rights of minorities in any way today”* (Expert, 1). *“Also, when we talk about the implementation of the remaining 9 priorities out of 12, where de-oligarchisation is declared as a priority, how can it be implemented when the honorary chairman of the ruling party is an oligarch himself? Or how should judicial reform be implemented when the people who are supposed to implement it today are themselves clans? And this has been a rooted problem in the judicial system for years”* (Expert, 2)

Expert evaluations point to a gap between policy design and its implementation, which may be explained by the type of Georgian political and administrative culture. Several problems were not included in the report of the European Commission, although the remaining nine priorities reflect public and most pressing issues, the fulfilment of which is a pre-requisite for European integration.

Also, one of the experts mentioned the case when the government's ambivalent positions and propaganda seriously misled the citizens, and as a result, the Georgian dream kept the electorate. A relevant example of this is their communication language, style and content in the last two years, which are widely distributed among the population through social networks and banners.

One of the main slogans of the Georgian Dream is “To Europe with dignity”. With this, the ruling party confuses the population and openly rejects the pro-Russian aspiration. However, this “Dignity” implies non-interference in internal political

activities by the European Union, neglect of minority rights, and discrediting of civil society and opposition parties. Also, two concepts are often brought to the Georgian dream and their representatives in the same discourse: tradition and family. They try to validate and justify their policy actions with the motive of protecting the said non-formal institutions. Also, the recent steps of the ruling party serve to polarise the society and divide society.

For the parliamentary elections of October 26, 2024, the main slogan of the Georgian Dream is: Only with Peace, Dignity and Prosperity To Europe. The latter is also an ambivalent statement, where the political party tries not to lose the pro-European voters, although he introduces the concept of “Peace”, which in this context means that outside forces and the opposition encourage war in Georgia and the opening of a second battlefield. The party claims that it is the only guarantee that war with Russia will not happen. Also, this application is a message to their “traditional” voters that the ruling party wants to join the European Union only with the guarantee of these three concepts. Therefore, if there is no Peace, Dignity and Prosperity, integration into the European Union is refused by the Georgian Dream, and here, Prosperity is a relatively low-key message with no subtext. It is with these tools that the ruling party tries to maintain power, which is far from European values.

Parliamentary elections on October 26 turned out to be a turning point in EU-Georgia relations. “The mentioned election was conducted with irregularities, and there are serious doubts about its falsification, which is being discussed” (Respondent, 1 and 3).

It should be noted that the results of the elections had a large margin of error compared to the election exit polls, which had the lowest margin of error in previous years. For example, as a result of the exit polls conducted by Harris X, “Georgian Dream” received 42 %, and the opposition (4 political parties/coalitions) received 48 %. And according to Edison Research, the “Georgian Dream” – 40.9 %, and the opposition – 51.9 %.

Based on the official data of CEC (Election Administration of Georgia), the ruling party gathered 53,932 % of the votes, unprecedented in recent Georgian history, while the opposition got 37,791 %.

In the first days, the election results were not recognised by the President of Georgia and the opposition, as well as by a large part of the international community.

The winning party received congratulations from only five countries (Türkiye, Armenia, China, Azerbaijan, Hungary, Venezuela), of which 3 are neighbours and 2 are pro-Russian states.

The leader of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, paid an official visit to Georgia on October 28–29 (2024) to strengthen the legitimacy of the ruling party, but following this, Joseph Borrell noted that the Prime Minister of Hungary does not represent the position of the EU during the visit. Against this background, on October 30, the European Union officially suspended Georgia's accession. The report on EU enlargement with Georgia shows a setback in 4 out of 9 steps. The report mentions that “instead of carrying out the necessary reforms, the policy of the Georgian government has caused serious damage to the country's European integration process”.

On November 8 of the same year, Charles Michel stated that there were serious doubts regarding fraud in the elections held in Georgia, which required an investigation. The leaders of France, Poland and Germany also noted, “Until Georgia changes its current path and shows efforts to carry out tangible reforms, we will not support the start of EU accession negotiations with Georgia”.

On November 28, 2024, Irakli Kobakhidze declared: “We are a proud and self-respecting nation with a great history. Accordingly, it is categorically unacceptable for us to consider integration into the European Union as a mercy that the European Union should give us. We see that European politicians and bureaucrats are using the allocated grants and loans for blackmail against Georgia. Today, we have decided not to put the issue of opening negotiations with the European Union on the agenda until the end of 2028. Also, we refuse any budgetary grant from the European Union until the end of 2028”.

On the same day, the European Parliament adopted a resolution deeming the parliamentary elections held on October 26 fraudulent, refusing to recognise their results and calling for sanctions against the leaders of the “Georgian Dream” [European Parliament, 2024]. These developments triggered the largest wave of public protests in the country's history since independence, occurring spontaneously without formal organisation. The protests resulted in widespread strikes, disruptions in the cultural and educational sectors, mass resistance among public servants, and a systemic breakdown of public administrative functions [Khuroshvili, 2023].

Despite using severe measures—including physical punishment, arrests, and violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators—Georgian Dream failed to suppress the ongoing pro-European protests. As of December 18, 2024, the demonstrations persist, underscoring deep public dissatisfaction with the government's decisions and emphasising the pro-European aspirations of the Georgian people.

3. ARMENIA IN FOCUS

The EU's interest in the South Caucasus emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Armenia-EU relations have generally been stable, European integration has never been a political priority due to Russia's influence. In 1996, Armenia and the EU signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) [Kostanyan H., Giragosian R., 2017, p. 4], marking the start of bilateral cooperation. Armenia later joined the EU's Neighbourhood Policy through the Eastern Partnership. Negotiations for an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement (DCFTA), began in July 2010 to replace the old PCA. However, in 2013, Armenia decided to join the Eurasian Economic Union [Paronyan H., Elamiryan R., 2021, p. 260]. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, alongside Russia's broader political influence, has posed key challenges for bilateral relations. After the Velvet Revolution in 2018, there was renewed hope for EU integration, driven by reforms and the government's new approach. Relations deepened further after the Second Karabakh War.

Expert 1, whom we interviewed based on qualitative research, explains the most significant features of Armenia's government policy towards European integration:

"I want to focus on what I think are the two most significant aspects and/or contexts of the EU-Armenia relationships: 1) Armenia's long-term attempts to balance its relationships with Russia and the EU and 2) Armenia's significant democratisation after the 2018 Velvet Revolution... Armenia's post-2018 democratisation has opened the possibility for Armenia to reconsider its relationships with Russia, especially after the 2020 Second NK war particularly".

Since 2014, Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and its involvement in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) [Terzyan A., 2019, pp. 99] highlights its strategic alignment with Russia. Armenia also maintains a military agreement with Russia, its primary trade partner. Historically, its attempts to balance relations faltered in 2013. After negotiating an Association Agreement with the EU, including the DCFTA, President Serzh Sargsyan announced in Moscow that Armenia would join the Russia-led Customs Union, precluding the signing of the agreement due to regulatory incompatibilities. This marked a significant setback in Armenia-EU relations, and it took several years to renegotiate a new framework. The result was the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in November 2017. While CEPA promotes democratic principles, its scope is less ambitious than the original Association Agreement. Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia initiated democratic changes and a soft EU

integration process, with the Prime Minister building closer relations with European leaders.

Expert 1 noted: *“For example, the Netherlands opened an embassy in Yerevan right after the revolution, justifying its decision by the need to support the revolutionary government’s ‘modernising’ efforts and ‘fighting corruption’. The US invited Armenia to the 2021 and 2023 Summits for Democracy, despite Armenia’s strategic partnership with Russia. According to a resolution passed in January 2022 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, ‘Armenia has made marked progress in its democratic development since 2018’. One co-rapporteur of the resolution announced that Armenia is a shining star of democracy in the region”.*

Democratic reforms have fostered closer ties with the EU and prompted a reassessment of Armenia’s relationship with Russia. In a statement to the EU Parliament, Prime Minister Pashinyan expressed Armenia's readiness to strengthen ties with the EU “as much as the European Union considers it possible” [Pashinyan, 2023]. Following this, Armenia's foreign minister revealed that discussions on EU membership were gaining traction [Politico, 2024]. The EU Parliament's resolution supporting Armenia's potential membership, along with initiatives such as the EU's €270 million plan [European External Action Service, 2024], €10 million in non-lethal military aid [Council of the European Union, 2024], and the start of visa liberalisation talks [European Commission, 2024], highlight the EU’s strategic objectives in the region. Our research shows how the EU's nuanced approach addresses regional challenges and promotes stability and development in Armenia.

During our interview with Expert 2, we discussed the significance of the EU-Armenia CEPA for European integration. CEPA provides a framework for cooperation on strengthening democracy, improving legislation, and fostering economic opportunities, aligning with the EU’s goal of deepening relations with its Eastern neighbours. Expert 2 emphasised the importance of implementing reforms but noted Armenia's challenges, particularly in judicial and anti-corruption efforts, shaped by historical and structural constraints. Armenia’s legacy as part of the Russian, Ottoman, and Soviet empires has created state-building obstacles, and education quality remains crucial. Internal and external issues, including military weaknesses and supply chain problems, further complicate reform efforts. The previous government's multivector policy, which favoured Russian dominance in security and infrastructure, also hindered meaningful reform.

It has become clear that Russia is not a reliable security guarantor but an interested party with its business interests. Expert 2 emphasised: *“Meaningful*

cooperation with the EU was initially unrealistic, given Armenia's geopolitical position and relations with Russia”, the expert explained. “However, with progress in democratic reforms and changes in the EU's approach, relations with the EU are now of a different quality”. Gradual or partial integration with the EU could benefit Armenia by expanding cooperation in specific sectors without full membership. Challenges remain, including a lack of professionalism and institutional memory in governmental agencies and the need to improve higher education to prepare specialists capable of implementing reforms: “In a democratic state, effective communication is crucial as it affects legitimacy and shows respect to the people by involving them in decision-making”, Expert 2 added.

The judiciary remains a critical issue, having yet to undergo significant reform. The political environment, dominated by movements rather than structured parties, undermines stability. Developing pro-European parties and fostering a more coherent political culture are essential for long-term progress. Armenia must also improve higher education and ensure governmental institutions effectively utilise EU expertise and funds. The evolving EU-Armenia relationship, supported by the EU's pragmatic external action, offers growth opportunities. However, challenges such as professionalism, institutional memory, and education quality must be addressed for long-term change. CEPA forms the foundation of EU-Armenia relations and guides ongoing integration. As Expert 2 noted: *“The basis for legal approximation, that is, making Armenian legislation compliant with the legislation of the European Union, is based on CEPA. This agreement not only focuses on legal approximation but also requires the proper implementation or ratification of certain international conventions”.*

One of the key documents referenced in CEPA is the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees that human rights standards in Armenia are not lower than those in Europe. Expert 2 emphasised: *“The convention is binding for Armenia and lies beyond the relations between the EU and Armenia”.* This indicates Armenia's long-standing commitment to human rights, reinforced by decades of implementation. Another milestone in Armenia's legal integration with the EU is the ratification of the International Criminal Court (ICC) statute. According to Expert 2, *“Armenia ratified the ICC statute and is currently a full member of the ICC. This was a requirement in CEPA, and its fulfilment significantly affected Armenia's domestic legal system and its relations with the EU”.* The ratification of the ICC statute underscores Armenia's dedication to international justice and legal standards. Several domestic regulations govern the legal approximation process, with the CEPA

implementation roadmap serving as “the core document”, as Expert 2 describes it. However, the expert also highlights the benefits of adopting a law by the National Assembly to establish a clear institutional framework, defining the institutions, capacities, methodologies, and responsibilities involved in the approximation process.

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention was another significant step, though it was met with mixed reactions. Expert 2 explained that perceptions of the convention vary due to propaganda and a lack of awareness. Despite this, it aligns with EU principles of equality. However, Armenia faces challenges in aligning its legal framework with European standards, especially in judicial reform, as Expert 2 noted: *“From the perspective of approximation to EU standards, judicial reform is the key problem for the government”*. Geopolitical constraints also complicate energy and transport connectivity. Armenia's dependence on Russia for energy and its lack of direct borders with the EU hinder efforts to develop alternative resources and infrastructure. Expert 2 highlighted this difficulty: *“Ensuring transport connectivity with the European Union is very problematic. It is more about the connectivity within the region, but we have many geopolitical constraints”*, including the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan, closed borders with Türkiye, and regional political tensions.

In a recent interview, Expert 3 offered a nuanced perspective on Armenia's cautious approach to European integration. The government pursues pragmatic steps that balance traditional alliances with a gradual pivot towards Europe. *“Armenia's policy is a blend of pivoting, hedging, and multi-polarism”*, the expert noted, emphasising that Armenia's geopolitical reality complicates full alignment. While the expert supports the government's careful approach, they stress formalising Armenia's intent to join the EU. Experts warned that vague statements could be reversed, underscoring the need for clarity and commitment. *“The criticism of liberals is that the government is too timid and too slow”*, the expert added, noting that unrealistic opposition expectations risk undermining Euro-Atlantic integration, as Armenia must meet strict EU criteria through long-term efforts.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has influenced Armenia's foreign policy. Expert 3 rejected the notion that the conflict presented opportunities for strengthening sovereignty or advancing integration: *“What happened in Nagorno-Karabakh and the second war is a complete disaster”*. Attributing failures to mismanagement. However, reduced dependency on Russia and increased cooperation with France and India have opened new avenues in foreign and security policies. Internal politics also matter, with the EU cautious due to past regional experiences. Despite

criticism, Expert 3 believes the Armenian government is genuinely committed to integration, and domestic stability and democratic governance are essential for credibility with European counterparts.

Armenia's economic and energy dependence on Russia remains a significant obstacle. Moving away from the Eurasian Economic Union demands gradual economic reorientation. The persistent threat of military aggression from Azerbaijan poses a serious risk to stability and integration. *"The consistent threat of a new military attack by Azerbaijan is the number one challenge"*, Expert Three emphasised. To reduce reliance on any single bloc, Armenia must develop a diversified and resilient economic strategy. Expert 3 concluded by stressing the importance of consistent, realistic steps toward integration. *"The new partnership dialogue starting in the fall is a positive step towards aligning with European norms and values"*, the expert noted, underscoring the need for a balanced, pragmatic approach where each step is carefully planned for long-term success.

4. TÜRKİYE IN FOCUS

Türkiye's path towards European integration and its relations with Europe have been complex and multidimensional, marked by periods of acceleration, stagnation, and slowdown. Despite occasional halts, the integration process, initiated with mutual enthusiasm, has never completely ceased. Historically, Türkiye's journey towards EU integration began in 1959 with a membership request, aiming for full membership status, a goal pursued continuously to the present day [Köse, 2001, p. 1]. One interviewee, based on qualitative research, explains Türkiye's desire for European integration and government policies in the historical context:

"The main feature of the Turkish government's policy on European integration is to be accepted as a European country. For a century, Türkiye's foreign policy has been against Europe due to its imperialist history and in favour of Europe as being considered a powerful country. Having a dual approach towards Europe and European institutions (being against and also in favour) is the core feature of Türkiye-EU relations. To state a micro approach, the main feature of Türkiye's policy on European integration is to instrumentalise the position of EU candidacy and, if possible, EU membership to follow their foreign policy and use this status as a shield".

Key milestones in Türkiye's EU journey include the 1963 Ankara Agreement, the 1970 Additional Protocol, and the 1995 Association Council Decision [Bilici, 2006, p. 44]. The 1999 Helsinki Summit marked a turning point, with Türkiye officially recognised as a candidate, making EU membership a national objective [Mor, 2010,

p. 501]. A respondent highlighted that Türkiye viewed EU integration as a pathway to a stable, democratic environment amidst regional complexities. During this period, the EU imposed various criteria, setting short-, medium-, and long-term priorities for integration. These prompted Türkiye to intensify reforms in 2000 and 2001 and secure financial support aligned with EU conditions [Köse, 2001, p. 173]. In 2002, Türkiye's European integration process gained momentum with the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Copenhagen Summit in December 2002 encouraged the new government to continue reforms aimed at meeting accession criteria, with the prospect of starting negotiations in 2004. Europe's encouragement was welcomed with excitement in Türkiye, and the Erdoğan government's 'alliance of civilisations' discourse demonstrated Türkiye's commitment to negotiations during this period [Akin, 2018, p. 3; Balcı, 2017, p. 270].

Following the EU's positive stance in 2004, the AKP government introduced five harmonisation packages in 2003–2004, aiming to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria earnestly [Çalış & Metkin, 2017, p. 20]. These reforms focused on issues criticised by the EU, such as freedom of expression and assembly, ill-treatment, and civil-military relations, with the goal of substantial improvement [Özer, 2015, p. 147]. One interviewee commented on the government's approach to European integration: *“Türkiye’s governments, since the establishment of the Republic, adjust their policy on European integration according to their internal politics. Most of the issues in internal politics have been related to internal politics, and governments use the ultimate aim of being a European state or a member of the EU as a cover for their internal politics”*.

In 2004, Türkiye adopted a package of constitutional amendments focusing on human rights and democracy, including the abolition of the death penalty, freedom of the press, judicial independence, and steps to enhance democracy [Avrupa Komisyonu Raporu, 2004, p. 146–147]. These constitutional reforms reflected Türkiye's commitment to European integration, with significant amendments to approximately one-third of the 1982 Constitution and changes across 218 articles in 53 different laws [Çalış & Metkin, 2017, p. 22]. During this period, Türkiye adopted EU-backed democratic norms, emphasising religious freedoms, civilian control over the military, and other political reforms aligned with its goals [Özer, 2015, p. 148]. Economic integration also remained a key focus, with Türkiye maintaining the Customs Union and striving to meet the Copenhagen criteria [Akçay, 2011, p. 8]. These reforms were positively received in the EU's 2003–2004

progress reports, culminating in the European Council's decision at the December 2004 Brussels Summit to commence accession negotiations on October 3, 2005 [Açıkmeşe, 2010, p. 141; Özer, 2015, p. 147]. On that date, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül and State Minister Ali Babacan met EU representatives in Luxembourg, marking a significant step in Türkiye's EU accession journey [Hacıtahtiroğlu, 2006, p. 124].

The significant step in 2005 did not yield sustainable gains for Türkiye; instead, it resulted in a slowdown of Türkiye's active harmonisation efforts towards European integration, leading to occasional standstills in the relationship dynamics. Post-2005, Türkiye's reform efforts became limited and less effective, focusing on minor constitutional amendments in 2007, a democratic initiative for the Kurdish minority in 2009, and constitutional changes through a 2010 referendum [Özer, 2015, p. 149]. This loss of momentum was influenced by external factors, including the increasing number of political criteria imposed by the EU and its declining credibility toward Türkiye's membership [Noutcheva & Aydın-Düzgit, 2012, p. 68]. Since 2011, relations between the EU and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government have been fluctuating and regressive compared to earlier years. While maintaining discourse on EU membership, the government's commitment to earlier reform movements has diminished. Erdoğan's vision for Türkiye in 2023, articulated at an AKP congress, notably omitted any reference to European integration or EU membership [Özer, 2015, p. 155].

Analysing Türkiye's policies and relations with the EU since 2011 reveals significant changes, leading to a decline in interactions. The AKP government's shift involved prioritising politically oriented agendas, including restrictions on freedom of expression and the press—key criteria for EU accession. These policies aimed to stifle criticism from domestic and international sources while consolidating political power [Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2004, p. 2]. For instance, the government paved the way for arrests of journalists and Kurdish activists, often using terrorism laws to silence dissent [Tocci & Bechev, 2012, p. 2–3]. Additionally, significant cases such as the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials led to the prosecution and imprisonment of numerous academics, soldiers, and NGO members accused of attempting a coup against the government [Özer, 2015, p. 157]. The Gezi Park events marked a pivotal moment in Türkiye's domestic politics and its relations with the EU. The AKP government, consolidating political power, faced social resistance due to its repressive stance and move toward a presidential system. In response, the government deployed a police force and imposed restrictions on civil

society activities [Gümüüşçü & Keyman, 2013, p. 2]. Measures included Internet restrictions and legal regulations to curb freedom of expression [Özer, 2015, p. 158]. These developments drew criticism from the European Parliament, while countries like Germany and the Netherlands expressed concerns about Türkiye starting new negotiations [Özer, 2015, p. 160]. The EU's 2015 report highlighted discrepancies in domestic policies, particularly concerning individual freedoms and the rule of law, which diverged from EU standards [Avrupa Komisyonu Raporu, 2015, p. 3]. During the AKP's rule, another challenge to EU integration emerged with the Syrian refugee crisis. Beginning in 2013, mass migration deeply affected Türkiye and Europe, with the EU perceiving it as a significant risk [Akın, 2018, p. 7]. Türkiye implemented an open-door policy for Syrians, initially met with caution by the EU. Over time, the EU provided financial assistance to manage the influx [Yanardağ & Yanardağ, 2019, p. 4]. A respondent highlighted migration as a challenge for integration:

"Migration issue has been one of the key dynamics in Türkiye's EU integration. After signing the Readmission Agreement with the European Union in 2013, the EU launched a visa liberalisation dialogue with Türkiye, including a 'roadmap towards a visa-free regime.' On March 18, 2016, the EU reached an agreement with Türkiye on migrants. Upon this agreement, 'Under this agreement, Türkiye would take back migrants heading to Greece, and in return, the EU would provide six billion euros and grant visa-free travel for Turkish citizens by June 2016 if Türkiye met 72 conditions'".

In 2016, the July 15th coup attempt posed a significant obstacle for the AKP government and distracted Türkiye from its European integration strategies (Kakışım & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 401). This event prompted sweeping changes in both domestic and foreign policies, initiating a new phase that significantly impacted Türkiye's relations with international actors and the EU [Karabulut, 2016, p. 17]. The EU's wait-and-see approach, coupled with perceived support from some member states for the FETO terrorist organisation, drew strong criticism from the AKP government [Ataman & Shkurti, 2016, p. 61]. Following the failed coup attempt, the AKP government declared a nationwide state of emergency, targeting supporters within state institutions, the judiciary, civil society, and the media. Thousands were prosecuted and suspended, and numerous media outlets and institutions were shut down [Kakışım & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 411]. The EU linked these actions to human rights violations, further straining relations [Akın, 2018, p. 8]. During this period, the AKP government intensified its crackdown on FETO supporters, revisiting the possibility of reinstating the death penalty, which

contradicted EU standards and had been abolished in the early 2000s [Kakışım & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 412]. An interviewee explained the impact of the coup attempt on Türkiye-EU relations:

“Especially, the pressure on civilians and human rights violations following the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 – from the EU perspective – broke Türkiye-EU relations. After what happened during this period, in 2018, the EU Council criticised Türkiye on issues such as the rule of law, freedom of speech, and human rights, noting that the country was moving away from the European Union. Therefore, Türkiye’s accession negotiations were officially stopped in 2019”.

Since 2011, Türkiye’s events and the AKP government's responses have increasingly diverged from the goal of European integration, effectively halting EU negotiations. The 2023 EU Report on Türkiye confirmed that the integration process and negotiations are currently at a standstill, highlighting Türkiye's distancing from EU standards and accession criteria [Avrupa Komisyonu Raporu, 2023, p. 3].

CONCLUSION

This study set out to study the pivotal features of government policy towards European Integration in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye, employing a comprehensive methodology that included nine in-depth interviews with experts from social and political sciences, three in each country, alongside a thorough analysis of relevant documents, laws, and research reports. By undertaking a joint examination of these three strategically selected nations, this paper fills a notable gap in existing literature, offering insights that had not been previously addressed.

Georgia emerges as a case where the primary challenge lies in the significant gap between policy design and its implementation. This discrepancy is largely influenced by the political will of the government, as well as the prevailing administrative and political culture. The study highlights Georgia's ambivalent positions and subtle Eurosceptic attitudes, which may not be immediately apparent. Furthermore, Georgia has struggled to fulfil the nine critical priorities outlined by the European Commission, which encompass essential areas such as reducing political polarisation, judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, de-oligarchisation, ensuring a free and pluralistic media environment, investigating crimes against journalists, and protecting human rights, including those of vulnerable groups. These shortcomings underscore the complexities Georgia faces in aligning its policies with EU expectations despite its outward commitment to European Integration.

In contrast, Türkiye presents a different set of dynamics. The government's policies towards integration have been primarily shaped by the need to address and rectify internal issues that attract EU criticism, including human rights violations, gender inequality, press freedom, and the use of torture, among others. Türkiye's approach has been multifaceted, focusing on both political reforms—such as civilianising politics, strengthening the judiciary, upholding the rule of law, and enhancing individual freedoms—and economic reforms aimed at establishing a knowledge-based economy and ensuring the independence of the central bank. However, Türkiye faces significant challenges, particularly post-2011, due to events like the Gezi Park Protests, the Syrian migration crisis, and the failed coup attempt. These developments have led to the enactment of harsh policies that conflict with EU criteria, thereby hindering the country's European integration efforts. The resulting tensions between Türkiye's internal policies and EU expectations highlight the precarious balance the country must maintain to advance its integration agenda.

Armenia presents a unique scenario characterised by a delicate balancing act between maintaining close ties with Russia and seeking deeper connections with the European Union. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement of 2017 and the democratic reforms following the Velvet Revolution of 2018 are central to Armenia's integration efforts, reflecting an increased focus on democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law. However, Armenia's path is complicated by internal factors such as strong public opinion and active civil society advocating for closer European ties, juxtaposed with external pressures stemming from security concerns, particularly conflicts with Azerbaijan, and economic and energy dependence on Russia. Additionally, Armenia's limited public administration capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and geopolitical vulnerabilities further complicate its integration process. These factors collectively create a challenging environment for Armenia to align fully with EU standards and advance its European integration.

Results reveal both shared and distinct challenges among the three countries. All three nations aspire towards European Integration but encounter unique obstacles shaped by their specific political, economic, and geopolitical contexts. Georgia's primary issue is the implementation gap driven by internal political dynamics, whereas Türkiye grapples with political instability and policy contradictions resulting from significant national events and government actions. Armenia, on the other hand, must navigate the complex interplay of maintaining essential relations with Russia while striving to meet EU integration requirements amidst internal administrative limitations and security concerns.

Despite these differences, a common thread among Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye is the struggle to align national policies with EU standards, each facing its own set of hurdles in this alignment process. Georgia's challenges are rooted in political and cultural impediments to policy execution, Türkiye's in political volatility and policy backlash, and Armenia's in balancing external dependencies and enhancing internal administrative capacities.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. Firstly, it provides an in-depth understanding of the specific characteristics and challenges each country faces in their European integration journey. Secondly, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and relevant agencies in Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye to refine and enhance their integration strategies. By identifying the critical barriers and enabling factors, decision-makers can formulate more effective policies that bridge the gap between design and implementation, address political and administrative inefficiencies, and better navigate geopolitical complexities.

Moreover, this paper serves as a significant academic resource for researchers and scholars interested in European Integration and the distinct pathways of Georgia, Armenia, and Türkiye.

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