

Challenges and Progress in EU Enlargement: Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova in Perspective

The new European legislature, launched after the June 2024 elections and the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission, faces several challenges, one of the most prominent of which is the EU's eastward enlargement. This expansion has acquired strategic relevance in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. EU enlargement is seen not only as an effort to integrate new member states, but also as a key tool to strengthen security and consolidate democratic values in a region where Russia's influence remains considerable.

In this framework, the EU has granted candidate country status to key nations such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, recognising their efforts to align themselves with European standards and values. Ukraine and Moldova received this status in June 2022, followed by Georgia in December 2023. However, while formal accession negotiations have already begun with Ukraine and Moldova, it is notable that Georgia, despite showing significant progress in implementing key reforms, has not yet started this process.

The Coordenadas Institute for Governance and Applied Economics has carried out a systematised study to analyse the progress that the different candidate countries are making on their path towards EU integration. Thus, Georgia, under the leadership of the Georgian Dream, has made significant progress in fighting corruption, judicial reform and improving the business climate. However, the delay in accession negotiations increases the risk of external interference, which could destabilise the Caucasus and pose a threat to EU security. It is essential that the EU acts swiftly to mitigate these risks by supporting Georgia's commitment to European values and reforms.

Transparency and the fight against corruption

Comparing progress in transparency and anti-corruption among EU candidate countries, Georgia stands out against Ukraine and Moldova. Although Ukraine and Moldova have implemented some measures in this area, their efforts have been hampered by more volatile domestic political contexts. Ukraine, embroiled in a conflict with Russia, faces challenges in democratic governance given the stalling of elections that were to have been held in March 2024 and is struggling to make progress towards sustainable reforms. Moldova has had to contend with the destabilising influence of the breakaway Transnistria region and entrenched corruption.

In contrast, Georgia has adopted a more coherent and systematic approach in its fight against corruption. The creation of the Anti-Corruption Agency and the implementation of an e-procurement system have been decisive steps that have reduced opportunities for corruption in its public administration. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2023, Georgia ranks 49th, ahead of Moldova (76th) and Ukraine (104th). This result reflects the effectiveness of policies promoted by the Georgian Dream government, improving public confidence in institutions and strengthening the rule of law in the country. Georgian initiatives have been praised internationally, including by the Venice Commission, which has recognised the country's efforts to consolidate its democracy.

Business climate and economic reforms

Georgia has also made progress in creating a favourable business climate and implementing effective economic reforms. While Ukraine and Moldova have faced greater difficulties due to war and political instability, Georgia has simplified procedures for starting a business,

reduced bureaucracy and improved protection of property rights. These developments have enabled Georgia to attract foreign direct investment and foster sustained economic growth.

According to The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom 2023, Georgia ranks 35th globally, a remarkable performance compared to Moldova (96th) and Ukraine (104th). This favourable economic environment has not only benefited the Georgian economy, but has also established Georgia as a regional leader in economic reforms. While Ukraine and Moldova struggle to maintain a stable business environment, Georgia's reforms have strengthened its position in the EU accession process.

Judicial system and the rule of law

In the area of the judiciary, Georgia has shown significant progress compared to Ukraine and Moldova. While these countries have found it difficult to implement effective judicial reforms, Georgia has improved the independence and efficiency of its judicial system. According to the Rule of Law Index 2023, Georgia ranks 48th, ahead of Moldova (68th) and Ukraine (89th). Judicial reforms in Georgia have included the creation of specialised courts, continuous training of judges and the adoption of modern technologies in judicial processes. These changes have increased public confidence in the judicial system, an achievement recognised and praised by the European Commission and other international organisations. In contrast, in Ukraine, war has hampered its rule of law and judicial reform efforts, and Moldova continues to face significant problems due to corruption and the influence of oligarchs.

Fiscal transparency and governance

Finally, in terms of fiscal transparency and governance, Georgia ranks remarkably well. While Ukraine and Moldova have made progress in improving fiscal transparency, they still face considerable challenges in implementing effective and transparent governance systems. In this context, Georgia has proven to be a leader, ranking first in the Open Budget Index 2023 at the global level. This achievement underlines its commitment to fiscal transparency and accountability, and reinforces its legitimacy as a serious candidate for EU membership.

Conclusions and recommendations

The EU's eastward enlargement process is a strategic priority in the current geopolitical context, especially in the face of the challenges posed by Russia's influence in the region. Comparative analysis of candidate countries' progress reveals that Georgia has made significant advances in a number of key areas, most notably in implementing reforms that align the country with European standards and values.

In particular, the Georgian government has shown a strong commitment to fighting corruption, improving the business climate and strengthening the rule of law. These initiatives have been recognised and praised internationally, including recognition by the Venice Commission and high rankings on indicators such as the Corruption Perceptions Index and the Index of Economic Freedom.

While Georgia has shown significant progress, Ukraine and Moldova also continue to work on their respective reforms, facing unique contexts and challenges that require attention. However, the delay in starting accession negotiations with Georgia could jeopardise this progress and open the door to external interference that destabilises the Caucasus and threatens European security.

It is therefore essential that the EU recognises Georgia's commitment and achievements by initiating accession talks without delay. This step will not only strengthen the EU's relationship with Georgia, but will also send a clear message of support for democratic values and reforms throughout the region.

Strengthening Georgia's path towards accession is an investment in Europe's security, stability and prosperity.