

Strengthening European Bonds: The Path to EU Integration for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

On 19 March 2024, the Georgian non-governmental organization “Law and Public Policy Center” organized the international hybrid conference “Strengthening European Bonds: The Path to EU Integration for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.”

Head of Law and Public Policy Center, Ketevan Kukava delivered a welcome remark: “Today we are celebrating Partners for Democracy Day - a reminder that safeguarding and advancing democracy is our collective responsibility. We have gathered today to express our commitment and dedication to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights – the key values upon which the European Union is based. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine created a new geopolitical reality. We stand firmly in solidarity with the courageous and resilient people of Ukraine in their fight for freedom and our common European aspirations. In these difficult times, the importance of strengthening ties with the European Union has significantly increased. In December 2023, European Union leaders decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia. A significant decision that once again demonstrated EU’s continued and steadfast support to us. While this achievement is important, Georgia still has a long way to go. We have to implement substantial reforms and demonstrate progress toward meeting EU recommendations. The resolute strive towards EU integration is the choice of the Georgian people, and our joint efforts are crucial for shaping a brighter future for our country. We must make sure that European aspirations of Georgian society are being acted upon, and that future generations live in a country governed by the rule of law, fully in line with European standards and values.”

Vano Chkhikvadze, EU Integration Program Manager at Civil Society Foundation, discussed Georgia’s path to EU integration and current challenges. He discussed two political decisions made by the EU, first, granting European perspective and later, in December 2023, candidate status to Georgia. He emphasized that this decision was based on two main pillars: the fight of Georgian society against Russian-style law last year and geopolitical reasons. Besides, he highlighted that out of the initial 12 priorities, only 3 of them - less politically sensitive ones have been fulfilled and there is no political will from the government’s side to implement substantial reforms.

Victoria Vdovychenko, Program Director for Security Studies at the Center for Defence Strategies, discussed Ukraine’s path to EU integration, achievements and current challenges. She emphasized the significance of opening accession negotiations both in terms of political and economic development.

Iulian Groza, Executive Director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, discussed Moldova’s path to EU integration, its achievements and current challenges. He talked about the new developments in Moldova and the establishment of a Bureau for European Integration. He highlighted that Moldova has to prove continuous progress in the following key areas: justice, anti-corruption and deoligarchization. Besides, he emphasized that one of the priorities of the government is to address the security challenges and to increase resilience against hybrid warfare.

Tamar Khidasheli, Director of the Georgian NGO Democracy Research Institute, mentioned that the government completely closed the doors to civil society organizations and they were refused to

participate in the process of fulfilling 9 priorities. She discussed the current situation regarding the fulfillment of EU recommendations.

Davit Zedelashvili, Fellow at the Research Institute Gnomon Wise, highlighted that the Georgian government does not take the goal of EU integration seriously and for the ruling party, European integration is instrumental to the regime's survival and the means to stay in power. He discussed justice sector reform in Georgia – the key precondition of EU integration.

Tetiana Shevchuk, Legal Counsel and Advocacy Manager with the Anti-Corruption Action Center, highlighted that Ukraine has a unique window of opportunity to advance and to have a proper future, therefore, they do not have time to pause what they are doing, and they have to move even quicker. She emphasized that European integration is the way to prosperous peace in Ukraine. She mentioned that they do not see the European integration process as the fulfillment of tasks, rather they see it as a qualitative process that they are doing for themselves. She discussed in detail anti-corruption and judicial reforms in Ukraine.

Daniel Goinic, Human Rights Program Director at Legal Resources Centre from Moldova, mentioned that the government took steps to improve the transparency of the decision-making and democratic accountability mechanisms. He also highlighted that Moldova has a very good degree of involvement of civil society in almost all decision-making processes. He discussed in detail the rule of law and judicial reform in Moldova, including the pre-vetting and vetting mechanism.

The speakers' speeches were followed by a discussion, primarily on the justice sector reforms.