

Georgia: The End of Illusions and Need for Clarity

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Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it has been impossible to ignore Georgia's dangerous slide towards illiberalism or Tbilisi's growing appeasement of Moscow. For years the West has turned a deaf ear to alarming reports from Georgia's civil society organisations, independent media and political opposition. Brussels and Washington reassured themselves that Tbilisi was still officially seeking rapprochement with the European Union (EU). If Georgia's clear political shift continues to be ignored, the final loss to Moscow of the once the most pro-Western state in the wider region will surely follow. The question is made all the more acute by the fact that the EU will soon have to decide whether to grant Georgia candidate status for membership.

Georgia: Trends for Concern

On 14 February 2023, the 'People's Force' political party,¹ created by a group of parliamentarians most loyal to Georgia's informal ruler, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, initiated a draft law in parliament on 'foreign agents'. The bill directly targeted civil society organisations that subsist thanks to grants obtained from various EU or US agencies. This bill, which was supported by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) leadership and by an aggressive information campaign carried out by the government-controlled media, is reminiscent of the Russian 'Law on Foreign Agents' enacted in 2012. Despite warnings from the EU that the bill would be incompatible with EU candidate status, GD pushed it through its first reading but was forced to withdraw it following mass protests that rocked Tbilisi on 6–9 March. Even so, the government's rhetoric has not changed and it is now focused on demonising protests using hate propaganda.² This attempt to impose a foreign agents law confirms the growing alignment of the ruling party with Moscow and its policies. While the bill targeted NGOs

¹ People's Force was created in August 2022 by former leading members of the GD in order to 'reveal the truth about the pressures exerted by Western partners on the Georgian leadership'. PF retains organic links with the GD but has become its aggressively anti-Western wing.

² Georgia's prime minister used the term 'Satanist' in connection with the protesters.

receiving part of their income from the West, the rapid development in Georgia of pro-Kremlin political groups and NGOs receiving funding from Russia was not obstructed.³ Georgian NGOs are bitter that the government is busy trying to persecute civil society while looking the other way when pro-Kremlin extremist groups incite violence. As a result, Georgia has been the subject of regular criticism from the West, notably in various resolutions adopted by the European Parliament, while there have been increasing endorsements and applause from Putin propagandists and senior Russian officials.⁴

Has Western Policy Been Right?

It is therefore legitimate to ask how Georgia has come to this point and whether there is still time to remedy the situation.

The current trend was foreseeable in 2012 from the first foreign policy pronouncements of Ivanishvili, such as: 'I don't believe that Russia's strategy is to occupy its neighbours' territories' or 'Armenia's policy towards NATO and Russia is a good example for Georgia'.⁵ Europe and the US endorsed Tbilisi's conciliatory policy, however, ignoring the growing influence of Moscow and the increasing shortcomings of Georgian democracy.

Having signed an Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and a visa liberalisation agreement, the EU was running out of ideas for the Eastern Partnership (EaP). France and Germany wanted to pause enlargement and considered new members fundamentally undesirable. Tired of the ongoing tensions between Russia and Georgia, which had already led to war in 2008, Europeans were delighted with the explicit desire of the billionaire oligarch to remove Georgia from the thick dossier of disputes between the West and Russia. The EU even seemed satisfied with Georgia de facto distancing itself from Ukraine's fight to defend its territorial integrity since 2014. Georgian elections, although flawed, were still considered better than those in Belarus and therefore not invalidated.

The GD gradually became convinced that it was in a strong position vis-à-vis not only the opposition, but also the EU, and began to respond to western criticism with ultimately aggressive propaganda. Since February 2022, the constantly hammered official narrative has been to accuse the West of wanting to involve Georgia in a war against Russia. Consequently, the EU's decision not to grant candidate status was explained by GD leaders as a punishment inflicted on Tbilisi by Brussels for not having opened a second front.

The lack of political vision in Europe and the relegation of the EaP solely to bureaucracy and technical cooperation has damaged the process. While the EU continued to pour in hundreds of millions of euros in aid and funding, eight years after the DCFTA came into force it is Russia, not the EU, that has become Georgia's leading economic partner. All the while, the government-affiliated media are adopting Russian narratives and radical pro-government groups burn the European flag outside parliament. No message could be more telling.

³ The bill contains a clause that exonerates 'organisations and individuals who operate in an honest manner'.

⁴ In addition to Sergei Lavrov, Russian media propagandists, Simonian and Soloviev also publicly expressed their satisfaction with the Georgian position on the war against Ukraine.

⁵ See <https://netgazeti.ge/news/22483/> and <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=26452>

What Could / Should Be Done?

Western reactions are often too late and too weak, and there is still some confusion among European diplomats who only see the solid pro-European aspirations of wider society and the government's official statements about pursuing the goal of EU membership. The same government is also promoting laws and practices incompatible with fundamental principles of the EU. There is every indication that this ambiguity is deliberate, however, as part of a government strategy that allows GD to avoid too sharp a reaction from the West while retaining at least part of the pro-European electorate, which represents the vast majority of the population. This practice resembles Viktor Yanukovich's behaviour in Ukraine in 2010–13.

For this reason, **clarity** should be the key word at this stage of relations between the West and Georgia. For Europeans, this means an end to double-talk and mixed messages. For example, while critical signals from Brussels were multiplying, Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Varhelyi introduced ambiguity by praising the government and refusing to comment on the main problematic issues. Such an attitude blurs the lines and contributes to a deterioration in the situation.

The EU's recommendations on obtaining candidate status must be **more explicit** to avoid misinterpretation. On some points, the GD is even trying to twist the Commission's recommendations against their original intent. Thus, the recommendations on de-oligarchisation are primarily aimed at reducing state capture by Ivanishvili but the government has proposed a bill targeting all financial contributors to pro-Western opposition parties, while exempting Ivanishvili.

Public opinion will support the EU's demands and the blame game by the government, accusing Brussels or Washington of attacking Georgia's sovereignty, will not work. In general, the EU and the US **should engage more directly with Georgian society** to prevent the government from consciously destroying the pro-EU sentiment of the population.

The EU and the US should no longer hesitate to brandish the **threat of personal sanctions**, such as a travel ban on the initiators of the foreign agents bill, most of whom have assets and family members in the EU or the US. Personal sanctions could also include the judges who make politically motivated judgments against personalities from the media, politics and civil society. Indeed, on April 7, the United States has sanctioned 4 particularly influential Georgian judges who are known for their corruption and political bias in favor of the government.

The primary recipient of EU and US messaging must be Ivanishvili, whose financial and personal security is the most important factor in GD policy. Ivanishvili's personal fortune is equivalent to nearly 40% of Georgia's annual gross domestic product. The government as a whole, as well as the parliamentarians in the majority party, have a personal loyalty to Ivanishvili and act as his employees. He must understand that he will have to take the consequences of Georgia's backsliding, including the possibility of personal sanctions.

The country's president should be encouraged to distance herself more from the governing group. Although installed as president only thanks to the – often questionable – efforts of Ivanishvili in the 2018 elections, Zurabishvili has distinguished herself by criticising the brutal shift in the country's foreign policy. Thus far, however, she has not dared to cross the red line of criticising the oligarch directly. Avoiding clear distance from the informal leader maintains ambiguity and the false hope of change.

EU and US **financial aid and technical assistance** to Georgia since 1991 is equivalent to \$25 billion. Two-thirds of this aid has been absorbed by the state; only one-third went to civil society. The EU can therefore put sizeable pressure on the authorities. Brussels could organise a **Team Europe meeting**, bringing together the EU institutions and member states, as well as the financial institutions, to draw the contours of a suspension of aid. This was done in the case of Moldova in November 2018 when the EU cut its annual aid in response to serious rule of law shortcomings. It would be a serious warning that aid to state structures could be reduced and redirected to the NGO sector. It should not be forgotten that one government objective is the monopolisation of European funds by their government-organized non-governmental organizations or control by public law legal entities. This practice is already being extensively implemented by Orban in Hungary and Vucic in Serbia.

The EU needs to change its long-established modus operandi with regard to Georgia. This will require significant effort. Brussels should act more boldly and question the government's sincerity about European integration. It is difficult for bureaucracies to overcome inertia, since they have a natural tendency to prioritise process over outcomes. The European Parliament, which is more political than the Commission, is already actively engaged. The impetus should now come from the EU member states and, if it comes from the EU heavyweights, the chances of the success of Georgia's European project will be dramatically increased.



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