

STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

GEORGIA'S EUROPEAN PARADOX

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia stands on the threshold of gaining candidate status for membership of the EU. Paradoxically, however, this is precisely the moment when Georgia seems to be drifting away from the Union. A few months after applying for candidate status, the parliament sought to adopt the so-called ‘foreign agents’ law, which would have restricted Georgia’s democratic space and jeopardised its European future. After intense popular pressure, the law has been repealed, but the underlying problem has not gone away. The government seeks to de-legitimise domestic and external critics in the run up to elections next year, while taking an ambivalent position concerning Russia’s aggression of Ukraine. These developments are symptoms of deeper flaws in Georgia’s political culture, marked by stark polarisation and illiberal narratives. Domestic and external pressure needs to be sustained for the government to take determined action to achieve EU candidate status. The EU has invested deeply in Georgia’s democracy and should not give up on it. Overwhelming public support for Georgia’s European integration gives the EU leverage to ensure that the government recommits to a path of substantial reform. Progress on this path will be decisive for the future of Georgia and for peace and stability in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood. It will also provide a critical test of the EU’s capacity to support partner countries in accomplishing their European goal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last 20 years, Georgia has never been simultaneously as close to and yet as far away from the European Union (EU) as today. Georgia stands on the threshold of gaining candidate status for membership of the EU. Paradoxically, however, this is precisely the moment when Georgia seems to be teetering the other way and drifting away from the EU. [The momentous events in early March](#) in Tbilisi have displayed the strength of the European aspirations of Georgian citizens. Following massive peaceful protests, the people of Georgia compelled the government to officially repeal the law on 'Transparency of Foreign Influence' which the parliament had adopted at the first reading. If implemented, that measure would have severely restricted Georgia's democratic space and [jeopardised its European future](#). It would therefore have marked a fundamental fracture with the country's stated goal of European integration. If this immediate danger has been averted, however, the future still looks uncertain. Georgia faces a stark choice between on the one side pursuing democratic reforms towards European integration and, on the other side, sliding back towards an illiberal political regime, thus extending Russia's influence on the country. For Georgia, there is no third way ahead between these two courses of action.

2. GEORGIA'S LONG QUEST FOR EU MEMBERSHIP

Following the restoration of its independence, Georgia's road towards European integration has been long and winding, with incremental progress on the reform path often affected by domestic political volatility and geopolitical challenges. However, Georgians have never questioned the direction of that journey since the country began deepening its partnership with the EU under the European Neighborhood Policy 20 years ago. Not even Russia's military aggression in 2008, followed by the occupation of more than 20% of Georgia's territory, could shake the unwavering determination of Georgians to build a free, independent and democratic state, with a view to eventually joining the EU. This commitment endured at both the declaratory and policy levels

despite the change of leadership following the parliamentary elections in 2012. The 2017 revision of the Constitution of Georgia embedded the country's European aspirations at constitutional level, tasking all state bodies to take all necessary measures to ensure the full integration of Georgia in the EU and NATO.

The resilience of Georgia's European choice owes to the fact that it is not merely a project imposed or driven by a political elite. Neither the ruling party nor the opposition have ownership of it. This is an aspiration that has deep roots in Georgian history and culture, and that constitutes today an essential part of national identity. This determination is about the way of life that Georgians wish to embrace, and the rights, freedoms and opportunities that they strive to enjoy under the rule of law. The European choice of Georgians, once again proclaimed on the streets of Tbilisi, is unmistakable, consistent and upheld today by [more than 80% of the population](#), as reported in numerous [opinion polls](#) and [surveys](#).

Georgia has come a long way in the last two decades. Back in 2003, given its geographic location, Georgia fell outside the EU's initial plans to develop a [new approach to its neighbourhood](#). Ten years on, in 2014, it signed, alongside Moldova and Ukraine, an ambitious Association Agreement with the EU, which opened up a new phase of deeper political association and economic integration. Subsequently, the three countries launched the '[Association Trio](#)' initiative to further enhance their political partnership with the EU on the road to membership. Throughout endless negotiations and debates, however, the EU and its member states systematically denied Georgia and the other associated countries the recognition of their membership perspective, if only a distant one and subject to necessary reforms.

Up until recently, Georgia's strategy for progress amounted to consistency and persistence in adopting reforms to fulfil its commitments. Proving itself a credible and reliable partner, Georgia would build trust with EU bodies and member states and stand ready to seize the opportunity for a step-change towards European integration, when the EU's

door would eventually open. But when it did, in Spring 2022, Georgia was not ready to step forward.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been a game-changing event that has created a new geopolitical reality in Europe, compelling the EU to acknowledge the threat posed by Russia and to rethink European security. The fight of the Ukrainian people for their freedom and independence, and for the values that Europe stands for, prompted the EU to accept what was [unthinkable](#) until February 2022 and opened a window of opportunity for the region. The EU's '[geopolitical awakening](#)' led to a drastic shift in the approach of the EU and its member states towards the Eastern neighbourhood and gave new momentum to enlargement.

After their formal request, [the European Council in June 2022](#) granted the status of candidate country to Ukraine and Moldova, breaking years of stalemate. In the case of Georgia, the EU recognised its European perspective but made the candidate status conditional on progress on the twelve priorities listed by the European Commission. Georgia was given a unique chance, together with the task of overcoming the political polarisation that has long dominated the country's political life, to improve the electoral framework, to ensure the independence of the judiciary and to pursue 'de-oligarchisation', among other reform priorities.

However, at the time when the door to the EU finally opened, the Georgian government made its own game-changing move, but in an opposing direction. Instead of doubling down on the reform path, encouraging the involvement of civil society in a national debate over far-reaching reforms, the government tabled a legislative proposal reminiscent of the 2012 Russian law on 'foreign agents'; a law that had become a lever for the repression of independent media and civil society by the Kremlin. Due to its nature and implications, such a law was clearly incompatible with European values and with the democratic standards that Georgia is set to adopt.

3. UNPICKING THE GEORGIAN PARADOX

Georgia's paradox, which consists of the country being as close as it has ever been to the EU, while simultaneously drifting away from it, needs unpicking to better understand the roots of the current crisis and change course. The government's attempt to adopt the so-called 'foreign agents' law has not been an isolated step, but the symptom of a larger problem. The proposed illiberal law fitted a pattern of dwindling commitment by the government to fulfill the necessary conditions for achieving Georgia's European goals. It also aggravated the disconnection between the government and the people's aspirations for reform, and exacerbated political polarisation in the country. The envisaged law matched a mounting sovereignist and anti-Western discourse that, over the last year, has distanced Georgia from its partners. In an attempt to evade responsibility for its own failure to obtain candidate status for Georgia alongside Ukraine and Moldova, the leadership of the ruling party has blamed both the opposition parties and the EU.

The disparaging statements concerning the EU by the ruling party's leadership, alongside controversial political and institutional initiatives, raise questions both at home and [abroad](#) about the deliberate nature of these missteps and over whether the government harboured second thoughts about pursuing Georgia's integration into the EU. While the damaging implications of the illiberal turn of the Georgian government are clear, the rationale behind this move is uncertain and its timing puzzling. Two factors can help shed light on these developments.

First, all politics are local. Attacks on domestic and foreign critics may reflect a toughening stance by the ruling party to secure electoral victory at the next parliamentary elections in Autumn 2024 by de-legitimising political competitors. In Georgia's fragile democracy, civil society and critical media have often posed the main challenge to the plans of successive governments to perpetuate their stay in power. The intimidation of civil society

and media is not a new practice in Georgia, but adopting the 'foreign agents' law would have certainly aggravated this threat. Considering the aspiration of Georgians to join the EU, the easiest way for the government to gain popular support and win the next elections would arguably be by achieving candidate status. However, the full implementation of the reforms required to advance towards EU membership would loosen the ruling party's grip on power. That could in turn pave the way to electoral defeat or to power-sharing and coalitional politics – a scenario that the political elites in the country are loath to contemplate. Since the recent introduction of a proportional electoral system might make this prospect more likely, the ruling party may seek to reduce risks by stalling far-reaching reforms of Georgia's political and judicial system and by discrediting its critics.

Second, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which carries direct and indirect implications for Georgia's security and independence, is a major factor in the country's current political crisis. The Georgian government has voted alongside its Western partners to denounce Russia's aggression in multilateral forums, but it has taken an ambivalent stance on the war in the domestic debate, refraining from openly criticising Russia and showing little solidarity with Ukraine. This attitude, which is in striking contrast with the unambiguous support for Ukraine from [public opinion](#), has perplexed Georgia's Western partners. In addition, representatives of the ruling party have advanced conspiracy theories concerning the designs of Georgia's Western partners, accusing the West of seeking [to drag Georgia into the war](#) against Russia and [to open a "second front"](#) in the country, in concert with the Georgian opposition and the Ukrainian leadership. They even alleged that taking an anti-Russia stance would be a precondition by the EU to [receiving EU candidate status](#). The positioning of the Georgian authorities towards Russia's full-scale war over Ukraine is inconsistent with Georgia's policy. Since 2008, all efforts have been directed to consolidating international support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity,

exposing and condemning Russia's illegal policy of occupation and ethnic cleansing. If it is fear of Russia that is at the heart of the government's choice to tone down Moscow's criticism and perform a [balancing act](#) between the EU and Russia, appeasement has never before ensured Georgia's security and independence. Another possible and widely discussed explanation of the government's stance on the war in Ukraine is that the ruling party assumes that Russia will eventually win, or at least not lose. It is however misleading to claim that the real choice for the government is between pursuing a prudent foreign policy or one actively hostile to Russia. The government should instead be consistent in pursuing its stated goals, be loyal to its strategic partners in the West, and seek peace and stability by working towards security guarantees.

A mix of domestic or external factors can therefore help explain the government's illiberal drift. Yet, the underlying and fundamental problem highlighted by the current crisis is Georgia's unfinished democratic transition, marked by a succession of ["democratic breakthroughs and decay"](#). Political stalemate is rooted in the structural flaws in the country's political system, the recurrent temptation of political forces in government to monopolise power, inadequate institutional checks and balances, and a weak judiciary. The problem is further embedded in an immature and adversarial political culture, where power transitions lead to political retaliation, power is sustained not by delivering on commitments but by deepening political polarisation, zero-sum confrontation prevails over a sound debate between government and opposition, and divergence amounts to 'betrayal'.

4. THE WAY FORWARD

By holding the government accountable when the political class did not prove up to the task, Georgians have once again demonstrated that they are taking full ownership of the country's European choice and reform agenda. However, the EU is unlikely to grant candidate status on the basis of the European aspirations of the people, as opposed to the concrete reforms implemented by the government.

Pressure needs to be sustained not just for the government to forgo any other initiative endangering Georgia's European choice, but for it to take determined action to achieve EU candidate status. The continued active and coordinated engagement of civil society in [monitoring the implementation of the national reform agenda](#), in close consultation with Brussels, is essential.

The withdrawal of the 'foreign agents' law marks a significant victory for the people of Georgia. However, it cannot be considered just as the end point of a one-off political crisis. It should instead mark the beginning of a sustained reform process that the government needs to undertake in the following weeks and months. If the ruling party wants to show that widespread skepticism and mounting questions about its commitment to Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration are misplaced, it can prove so by decisively moving to implement in partnership with civil society the reforms required to achieve candidate status. Georgia is on the verge of losing a unique chance to advance its integration with the EU. A clear change of gear, and direction, is required to fulfil the aspirations of Georgian citizens.

Georgia's progress in adopting the EU legislative acquis and technical regulations, [confirmed by the European Commission](#), is important, but not sufficient. The government should stop discrediting and antagonising civil society representatives and polarising society. It should also stop instrumentalising the threats coming from Russia for political purposes. Nothing facilitates Russia's meddling in Georgia more than deep domestic political divisions, which endanger its partnership with the EU and the US. The threatening reaction by [Russian officials and the propagandists](#) to the protests in Tbilisi proves that Russia continues to operate to keep Georgia away from Europe. The Georgian authorities must stop alienating partner countries and organisations that throughout the years have embraced the cause of Georgian independence and democracy. There is a clear risk of unravelling trust between Georgia and EU institutions and

member states; a trust which took decades to build, and would take several years to re-establish.

The strong pro-European statement of the people of Georgia against the government's illiberal turn carries two lessons for the EU and its member states. First, when political decisions or infighting seriously threaten the country's reform agenda, they need to speak up at an early stage and make unequivocally clear the repercussions that the lack of reform would have on Georgia's partnership with the EU. Second, they should sharply increase support to non-state actors, including capacity-building, invest in youth, and assist civil society and independent media to counter disinformation and hybrid threats to democracy.

The coming months will be crucial and difficult. The EU's decisions regarding Georgia's candidate status and their timing will play out in the context of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections, with the risk of becoming political tools in domestic power struggles between the ruling and opposition parties. However, these decisions carry broader implications for Georgia's democracy and its European trajectory. Clearly, the EU cannot turn a blind eye on democratic decline in the country. Yet, the risk of [legitimising Eurosceptic narratives in Georgia](#) and weakening the European progressive forces by not granting candidate status is real. Any decision of the EU shall therefore be based on the thorough assessment of the actual progress achieved by the Georgian government in fulfilling the required conditions; an assessment that should be accompanied by visible political engagement as well as more discreet channels of dialogue. EU decisions shall be preceded by seeking clear and public explanations from the authorities about what they have accomplished and what they have not, and about the direction of their course.

The EU has invested heavily in Georgia's democracy and should not give up on it. Overwhelming public support for Georgia's European integration gives the EU leverage

to ensure that the government recommits to keep Georgia on a path of substantial reform. Progress on this path will be decisive for the future of Georgia and for peace and stability in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, and will also provide a critical test of the EU's capacity to support partner countries in accomplishing their European goal.

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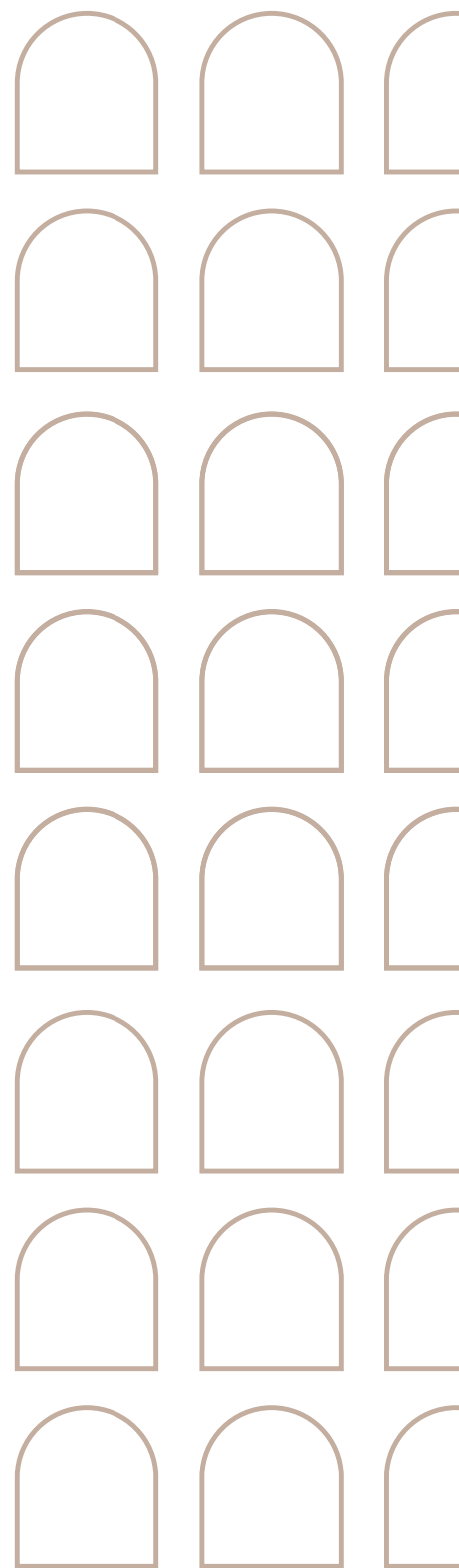
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