



TAKING THE ROAD AWAY FROM EUROPE - HOW FAR COULD GEORGIA GO (AND CAN IT BE REVERSED)?



SUMMARY

Earlier this year, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova and Ukraine were granted official EU candidate status... but not Georgia. Instead, Georgia has been left behind on the waiting list, with its application due to be reevaluated by the EU sometime in 2023. Yet Georgia has an extremely pro-European society highly in favour of their country continuing its journey towards closer integration with the EU. So what happened? This CEPS Explainer argues that the ruling Georgian Dream party's anti-Western rhetoric and democratic backsliding has actually diverted Georgia down a road away from its key Western allies. Until this is rectified, Georgia may be stuck on the waiting list for some time yet. But all hope is not lost - regardless of the government's current actions and contradictory statements, Georgia's highly active and pro-European civil society may hold the key in getting their country back on track towards its European future.




Ghia Nodia is the professor of politics in Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia, and leads the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), an independent public policy think tank in Tbilisi.

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Georgia's relations with the EU are in deep crisis. Paradoxically, it was during this low point in relations that the EU decided to recognise Georgia's European ambitions. At least theoretically, the door to Georgia's eventual membership of the EU is now open – as late as this January, this was something one could only dream of.

It is widely understood, however, that Georgia's past achievements in implementing its comprehensive [Association Agreement with the EU](#), real as they are, would not have been sufficient for this significant step. It was Ukraine's heroic resistance to Russian aggression that inspired a profound change in European public opinion; Moldova and Georgia essentially piggybacked off it.

The more important and distressing news for many Georgians was the EU's decision not to grant it EU candidate status, unlike Ukraine and Moldova. The 'association trio', which Georgia had been a proud member of, ceased to exist. However disappointing for Georgia, this verdict was not unexpected.

THE GEORGIAN DREAM TURNS INTO AN ANTI-WESTERN NIGHTMARE

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's relations with the EU (as well as the United States) have hit a new low. From approximately 2018 onwards, the trend had

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already been alarming. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's attitude towards its opponents, not only including the official political opposition but also civil society, the media, and even independent public agencies, has become increasingly abusive; criticism from the West has grown stronger, and the GD's rebukes harsher.

In July 2021, when the GD [unilaterally annulled](#) its political agreement with the opposition that had been mediated by the

EU (with the personal involvement of Charles Michel, the President of the European Council), it showed itself to be an unreliable partner for both the EU and demonstrated a poor understanding of democratic values.

During this unfortunate episode, parts of Georgia's fragmented opposition also exhibited political immaturity by either rejecting the agreement or taking an inconsistent position. But the government, without a doubt, is largely responsible for the agreement's breakdown. Nevertheless, even after this, the GD made an effort to maintain the outward appearance of a partnership with the EU.

Reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine have exposed a deeper chasm between the EU and the Georgian government. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Georgia's refusal to join international sanctions against Russia was not the main cause of the rift. Moldova did not join in on the sanctions either but this did not worsen its relations with the EU. The international community understood that Georgia and Moldova could easily become the next targets of Russian aggression and are more economically dependent on ties with Russia than with Western countries. Their reasons to exercise greater prudence are understandable.

It was the combination of the steps taken (or not taken) and the government's overall attitude that exposed the problem. On the one hand, Georgia has generally expressed solidarity with Ukraine and it voted in favour of the resolution condemning the Russian aggression in the United Nations; its representatives expressed similar positions in other international forums.

At the same time it has repeatedly expressed hostility towards the Ukrainian government and put part of the blame for the war on its shoulders. Most importantly, it created a [narrative](#) of an international conspiracy aimed at ultimately dragging Georgia into the war.

Initially, the alleged conspiracy implied ties between the Ukrainian government and the Georgian opposition; later, however, it was extended to 'the West' in general. According to this theory, the West wanted Georgia to enter the war, while the GD was the main impediment to this plan. In particular, the collective West (including the US, the EU, and even Swiss bankers), [allegedly pressured](#) Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire founder of the GD (and widely believed to be the real mastermind behind Georgia's policies), to force Georgia to either enter the war against Russia or allow the opposition to do this by conceding power to it. The latter, as well as anybody who criticises the GD's stance, is routinely branded as a member of the 'war party'.

Preposterous as this theory is, it has become central to government rhetoric. It is expressed most directly by a group of GD MPs who, at the end of June, decided to quit their party, arguing that it was the only way for them to speak more freely. Since their resignation, they have been busy exposing alleged 'anti-Georgian conspiracies' supposedly masterminded by the US.

Nobody from the GD leadership has explicitly distanced themselves from the statements being made by the 'defectors'; their official narrative is somewhat more reserved and nuanced but essentially similar. For instance, Irakli Kobakhidze, the GD's chairman, has publicly [linked](#) the EU's decision not to grant Georgia candidate status due to its refusal to join the war. Later, Ivanishvili widely distributed a [written address](#) 'confirming' that Georgia was under pressure to enter the war.

The GD crossed another red line by [repeated attacks](#) against Carl Harzell, the outgoing EU Ambassador, and Kelly Degnan, the acting representative for the US. Both are accused of undermining EU and US relations with Georgia, as well as tacitly or openly supporting forces trying to undermine public order in Georgia (of course, with the ultimate aim to drag Georgia into the war).

This is a fundamental change. Previously, the Georgian government would disagree with specific EU representatives on specific issues but generally expressed respect – and sometimes deference – to the EU as an organisation. Now, the GD increasingly presents the EU or the West in general as forces hostile to Georgia and Georgian interests.

To be sure, important as this is, the government's anti-Western rhetoric is not Georgia's only or gravest problem. Its gravest problem is the continued trend of democratic retrenchment and the unwillingness of the ruling party to recognise the problem and deal with it.

It is this that made the EU decide not to grant Georgia official candidate status. The challenges hindering its rise to candidate status have been summarised in the [twelve recommendations](#) formulated by the European Commission that the Georgian government is expected to address before Georgia's candidate status is revisited in 2023.

Issues linked to the development of democratic institutions in Georgia and attitudes to Europe have, however, always been interlinked. The current government, as well as its predecessors, have also exhibited autocratic instincts and public institutions and civil society have not been powerful enough to effectively contain them.

But widespread recognition of the EU's authority (as well as that of the US) and, sometimes, deference to their opinions partly compensated for this democratic deficit. With the West now being openly presented as a hostile force, such a moderating influence on Georgian politics may wane away; this has already been happening for some time.

The arrest of Nika Gvaramia, the manager of [Mtavari Arkhi](#), was an important case in point. [Independent analysts](#) considered the legal charges against Gvaramia to be flimsy and saw this as a fragrant case of the government persecuting its political opponents. As bad as this was in itself, its timing was also indicative. Gvaramia was indicted by courts that were obviously influenced by the government and this occurred in mid-May, when the country was waiting for the EU's decision on its membership status.

One would have expected that the government would have had the strongest motivation to convince its European partners of its commitment to the norms of democracy and human rights. The GD, however, revealed a dismissive attitude of the values and opinions of the organisation it was actively applying to join. With an attitude like this, skepticism is warranted about whether the GD government has the political will to genuinely deal with the problems listed in the twelve recommendations.

HOW FAR COULD THE GD GO?

This leaves us with the question: how far might Georgia go in its estrangement from the West?

Importantly, despite its rhetoric, the GD maintains its pro-European stance, at least on paper. It celebrated the EU's decision to open up the possibility of future membership as a well-deserved achievement, and unveiled a plan to implement the EU's recommendations. For his part, Bidzina Ivanishvili deemed it a priority for the GD government *'to ensure that Georgia's relations with its strategic partners, the United States and Europe, are not damaged.'*

This makes it unlikely that the GD government plans a Viktor Yanukovich-style U-turn when Ukraine's then-President pulled the plug on negotiations with the EU on its Association Agreement in 2013 in favour of closer relations with Russia. However, the growing chasm between the GD's continued insistence that it is committed to a European future and its actual policies and public rhetoric makes its standing bizarre, if not a little schizophrenic.

GEORGIA'S GENERAL AUTOCRATIC SLIDE CAN BE LINKED TO THE GOVERNMENT'S FEAR OF LOSING POWER THROUGH FAIR ELECTIONS. ITS MORE RECENT ANTI-WESTERN TURN CAN ALSO BE PARTIALLY EXPLAINED BY ITS FEAR OF RUSSIA

What explains this strange behavior? Georgia's general autocratic slide can be linked to the government's fear of losing power through fair elections. Its more recent anti-Western turn can also be partially explained by its fear of Russia. From the very beginning of the invasion, the GD narrative was that Russia was winning the war and Western support for Ukraine was ineffective – thus its instinct may have been to appease the prospective winner. Moreover,

one cannot rule out the importance of Ivanishvili's [personal and business connections to Russia](#), though admittedly, much of this is just speculation.

Why, then, continue on the path the European integration at all? Maybe, in these difficult times, the GD wants to hedge its bets and simultaneously pursue both pro-European and pro-Russian paths.

But it also matters that the party is faced with an overwhelmingly pro-European society. Georgians laid the blame for the EU's decision not to grant the candidate status firmly at their government's door, expressing this through several especially large [protest rallies](#). These rallies did not achieve their immediate objective – the government did not resign or alter its policies. But they may have reminded the GD that it would be politically prudent to at least keep up the appearance of supporting the country's pro-European course.

One might think the GD's double-edged policy, and especially its attacks against the West, constitute a form of political blackmail. Being annoyed by the Western/European insistence on democratic reforms, the GD may be trying to send a message – *'don't pressure us too much or we may flip to the other side'*. If this is the game, it is a very dangerous one; but one cannot rule out Ivanishvili deciding to play it.

It looks like that for the time being, the Georgian government will continue its policies of harassing its internal critics (and criticising its Western ones) while at the same time pretending to studiously work on the EU recommendations. However, Georgia's pro-European society does not trust it and has continued to express its discontent in different ways. Tensions and uncertainty will remain.

Two of the chief EU recommendations will also contribute to the confusion. One of them is 'deoligarchisation'. Government critics interpret this as a call for regime change – nobody apart from Ivanishvili has ever been called an 'oligarch' in Georgia. Naturally, this will not be the GD's understanding; there are fears that it may use this recommendation to introduce legislation to make it more difficult for Georgian business to support the opposition or the independent media.

The second chief recommendation, that of 'depolarisation', is also ambiguous. It may imply a well-intentioned appeal for the Georgian political parties to work together, though neither the GD nor the opposition (and their respective supporters) see any point in attempting such cooperation. The parties will likely focus on blaming each other for failing to meet this recommendation.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what can one hope for and expect? If this Explainer sounds pessimistic, there are genuine grounds for this.

Judging from its behaviour thus far, the GD will probably try its best to follow the letter of the EU recommendations but avoid their spirit as much as possible. This may prove insufficient for the EU to grant candidate status to Georgia when it reconsiders the issue sometime in 2023. Many Georgians are deeply concerned – and rightly so – that an historic opportunity may be lost.

Georgian society's determination to pursue a European path is the chief ground for optimism. Any government understands that going against this determination is very, very politically risky.

Therefore, there is a chance that the negative trend will eventually be reversed. Georgia's highly active and pro-European civil society, including the opposition parties, may hold the key. However, they have a lot of work to do to get their act together.

The coming months will indeed show whether the country will actually be able to change its current course away from the West and fully embrace its European dream.

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Place du Congrès 1
B-1000 Brussels

