



Georgia's future with the European Union

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Introduction

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution subsequent Georgian governments have strongly expressed their ambitions of western integration, specifically membership of NATO and the EU. These aspirations have been welcomed in Brussels and Washington, while membership remained a divisive issue within NATO and off the table in the EU. Since, Georgia has gradually become the spearhead of the EU's eastern Neighbourhood policy, the Eastern Partnership, sealing an Association Agreement in 2014 and obtaining visa free travel to the EU Schengen zone in 2016.

During the 2020 election campaign the incumbent Georgian Dream party made EU membership application by 2024 its core election promise. This has been reiterated frequently after the elections. Meanwhile Georgia has gotten deeply embroiled in a domestic political crisis which increasingly displays fundamental flaws in the democratic progress the country has made.

However, if there is one thing clear in Georgia, both its population and politicians are strongly supportive of EU integration and membership, at least verbally and in official policy if not by actual progression to that goal. The latest IRI survey confirms once more the strong public support for EU and NATO integration.¹ Given the ambitions, this policy memo seeks to address the question/examines how realistic is the election promise of Georgian Dream to apply for EU membership by 2024, and how is this perceived in the EU?

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Reform Commitments

Despite gradual progress within the EU Association framework, the February 2021 Implementation Report of the EU concludes “a number of shortcomings have undermined the trust in the process”. Meanwhile, “a demonstrated reform commitment as regards democracy consolidation and reform of the judiciary will be crucial to further advance on its European path” (European Commission 2021, 18). The report furthermore calls for another essential wave of judicial reforms in 2021. On both democratic and judicial reforms, Georgia is stagnating if not slipping away and it does not seem committed to the ambitious progress needed for its self-declared rapid EU approximation, let alone membership.

The political crisis earlier this year, a fallout of the 2020 general election with opposition parties boycotting Parliament (Civil Georgia 2020a), claiming the “election results were rigged” and “demanding snap elections” (Civil Georgia 2020b), put the Georgian government in a tight spot. In the international spotlight it has to prove both being reform minded and capable of settling a political conflict by compromise with the opposition and move the country forward. There is a pandemic and social-economic crisis to govern. Yet, it took the government a long time to reach a much-needed compromise with the opposition after multiple mediation efforts by the EU (Civil Georgia 2021a).

Instead, the Georgian government threatened to cut state funding of the boycotting parties, a measure the Council of Europe considers “excessive and disproportionate” (Civil Georgia 2021b; Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR 2021, 3). This could be interpreted as a sign of anti-democratic tendencies towards the opposition. It certainly did not help to deescalate the crisis by punishing those with the least power nor to regain collaborative trust.

After a failed attempt earlier in March (Euractiv 2021), the European Union worked out an elaborate proposal, including power sharing between Georgian Dream and the opposition parties on the much needed electoral and judicial reforms (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2021a). This was dismissed by both sides for different reasons, which led to a furious reaction from leading MEPs in Brussels, warning for repercussions in financial assistance from the EU (European Parliament 2021):

“Following the refusal from the political parties to compromise, Georgia’s leaders should not expect a return to business as usual from the European Union. The European Parliament in particular will call for consequences in terms of EU financial assistance, including both a suspension of further disbursements of and an increase in conditionality linked to EU Macro Financial Assistance and budget support programmes.”

A final EU proposal presented by European Council President Charles Michel on 18 April (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2021b) was accepted by both ruling and most opposition parties (Civil Georgia 2021d). While the UNM remained divided, indicating they would only sign after its leader Nika Melia is released according to the agreement (Civil

Georgia 2021e), several of its MPs joined the agreement. This cleared the way for a cross-aisle constitutional majority of MPs participating in Parliament, important for some of the envisioned reforms.

While the European Union and the United States are dedicated to mediation, just like in 2020 to ensure electoral reforms, willingness of the Georgian parties to a compromise is key. This crisis has exposed for the second time in a year Georgia's politicians have difficulties to solve their political stalemates and have to rely on international mediation. The political culture of translating a concession into "loss" and the inability to reach a compromise without external pressure needs to change. This is in the interest of the country and its future outlook in its aspired alliances.

For both the EU and US living up to democratic values also means the willingness to make concessions in order to normalize the political state of affairs. For the Georgian government this situation has become a litmus test how "European" it wants to be. To show whether it can deal with a political impasse and act in the interest of the nation and its higher goals. To do whatever it takes to achieve its expressed goal. Instead, Georgia's leaders have gone on a mission to bloody each other's nose, in the meantime putting the relationship and reputation in the EU at stake and thus inflicting damage on any perspective to get closer to the EU.

Bumpy Road to EU Membership

Given the exacerbating political impasse, it is very hard to see a way forward and take a look at the European horizon for Georgia. Even Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (European Union Law 2016a) is starting to drift out of sight.

"Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union" (European Union Law 2016b).

In any case, the EU ambitions expressed by Georgian Dream have a strong mismatch with the perspective the European Union has been willing to give for years. In a joint effort with Moldova and Ukraine, the three countries called "on the European Council to open the EU membership perspective at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels" in November 2017 (Civil Georgia 2017). This initiative failed. Despite the Article 49 clause in the EU Treaty, it has been clear from the outset that the Eastern Partnership and its objectives to achieve EU approximation for the participating countries does not warrant EU membership perspectives.

This was also made clear in the Eastern Partnership Myth Factsheet the EU launched prior to the 2017 Eastern Partnership Summit (European Union External Action Service 2017). By explicitly stating the "Eastern Partnership initiative is not an EU accession process" the EU

scaled down any expectation of the three countries seeking membership perspective. There is no reason to think the European Union is going to change its tune on this any time soon, especially related to Georgia in the current political context. Instead of insulting Brussels mediation efforts out in the open, Georgia would have to radically change its attitude. As MEP Michael Gahler expressed in a recent interview:ⁱⁱ

Georgia should make itself incredibly irresistible just so there is no question about its membership.

In other words, the EU should feel it is missing out on a precious jewel if it does not embrace Georgia into the club. Yet, it is by far not that jewel, nor does it currently display the needed mentality to develop the country into that jewel which would make EU members root for Georgia into the Union. In fact, the current political crisis, and the way the Georgian political elite has been handling it, fuels the opposite and endangers Georgia's EU future in a disturbing fashion.

No Real Alternatives and Strategies: Outlook in Limbo

There are not many options for Georgia in lack of a membership perspective. The Eastern Partnership framework will be exhausted after implementation of the Association Agreement and DCFTA. Yet, this would bring Georgia only to roughly 70% of the preparation for a membership application.

A future in one of the other EU frameworks with different degrees of integration, while not becoming an EU member, is a possible alternative horizon. This would not exclude a future membership, yet it would give all parties time to grow to that mentally, politically and above all technically.

The European Economic Area (EEA), European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or the Customs Union would integrate Georgia with the common market and would commit Georgia to rule of law standards. There are challenges with each of these options. Current participants in the EEA and EFTA are not likely to agree to a new member. The only realistic way for Georgia to deeper (economical) integration without actual EU membership might be a set of common trade agreements similarly to EFTA, but remaining outside of it.

But for Georgia the main question to answer is what it exactly wants to achieve with European integration and approximation. And is EU membership the only thing it can live with to achieve those objectives?

Regardless, the Georgian government needs to formulate a clear alternative strategy and communicate this openly to its citizens while having a real national debate. Which it does not have at this point, risking disappointment and disillusionment among its population

when the Georgian government cannot deliver on the EU membership application. A non-delivery that is very likely. And therefore, it necessitates a frank and open debate within Georgia.

The main problem for Georgia's self-declared membership objective is that EU member states are not ready to look beyond the enlargement of the western Balkans. This enlargement in itself is clouded and is not going very smooth, with member states politicizing steps in the accession process outside of technical benchmarks. The EU enlargement is stagnating here, making any (membership) visions on the Eastern Partnership look distant.

Also, among the original EU member states a sentiment of slight regret of the hastened "big wave" enlargement in the early 2000s can be observed. The democratic and rule of law regression in Hungary, Poland and such tendencies in a few other members make even so-called Europhiles weary of enlargement with fragile and underdeveloped democracies prior to a "systematic development of the EU" (Emerson, Blockmans, Cenus, Kovziridze, Movchan 2021, 29-30). The Article 7 clause in the EU Treaty which should keep member states in check with treaty obligations has shown to be an incapable instrument, feeding an anxiety to let new countries in.

Nevertheless, the EU should take Georgia's membership aspirations seriously. The latest IRI survey (International Republican Institute 2021, 71-77) reconfirms the long standing and uncontested support for western integration among the Georgian population. The Georgian government may not act in spirit of its own European ambitions at the moment, there is also a population which should not become a victim of its own government. The EU should use this popular support to call the Georgian government on its responsibility to serve its people and their interests. Reminding them what this means in governance, rule of law and democracy related to its own EU ambitions.

One Black Sea Region

Another little elephant in the room for Georgia is its geographic location, on the East ("other") side of the Black Sea. Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia does not border any EU member state, not even at sea. This might seem trivial, but it does seem to have influence. The Caucasus region is geographically disjointed from the EU, with the EU first and foremost interested in integrating the western Balkan countries which are surrounded by the EU (Lokker 2021). Despite Turkey formally still being in accession procedure, it is only a matter of time this will be terminated amidst increasing calls within the EU to do so, reducing the idea of Georgia ever bordering an EU member to nil. That said, as Lincoln Mitchell described (Mitchell 2020) the unique position and geographical location of Georgia

can be a real strategic and economical asset for both the European Union and Georgia to enhance and deepen their relations.

As a Black Sea nation, Georgia has historically been oriented towards Europe for trade and international diplomacy. For Georgia it might therefore be attractive to bridge the Black Sea gap and to promote within the EU the need for a coherent integrated Black Sea strategy of integration and cooperation. Such a strategy would enhance democracy, rule of law, economic development and international security which is of pivotal interest to the EU.

Six out of seven Black Sea countries are either a member of or allied to NATO and the EU. Deeper integration of the non-member allies Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the economical and international security domains serves the geopolitical objectives of the EU in the Black Sea region against an assertive Russia.

Such an integrated approach to the Black Sea region also serves another important issue which then cannot be ignored and which Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia share: the occupied / breakaway territories. Russia occupies these regions with the clear objective to undermine the democratic development and western integration of the three countries. Unresolved territorial conflicts are considered a blockade to either EU or NATO membership. The EU has never developed a coherent counter strategy to these regions. That should change, and it is in Georgia's interest to highlight the need for it within a pan-regional vision and strategy. Also, it is in line with the EU Global Strategy vision (European Union External Action Service 2018).

Georgia should therefore work on a joint effort with Ukraine and Moldova to prioritize conflict resolution in the Eastern Partnership with a common strategy. The Moldovan experience with Transnistria whereby the latter can trade its products with the EU via the DCFTA conditions is an example that could be used in Georgia.

Even though Georgia tried something similar with its "A Step to a Better Future" program (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality 2018, 4), it was a unilateral policy from Tbilisi without consulting the breakaways Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and thus failed to receive a positive response. To make this work, Georgian authorities should try to find an inclusive mode of dialogue with these territories and involve the EU in it. This is certainly not an easy task and a very sensitive one both politically and in society but worth exploring in joint cooperation with the European Union.

Short Term Gains are Not Tomorrow's Pains

So where does that leave Georgia? There is evidently a lack of EU membership perspective, the prospect on alternatives short of membership is very limited, while an integrated and inclusive approach towards the Black Sea region is missing. Yet, developing the latter could lead to a very strong case which serves the geopolitical interests and ambitions of the European Union. And, it would serve Georgia's western oriented foreign policy interests and ambitions uniting both NATO and European Union integration even if that would still exclude membership in the short run. It would further both economic integration and international security in the wider Black Sea region against an assertive Russia and make Georgia an economic bridgehead towards the Middle East and Central Asia.

The political crisis in Georgia is however endangering its European outlook and damaging a positive mood to look at the wider region from a deeply integrated perspective beyond the currently existing frameworks. In the short term the Georgian leadership should radically change its reform motivation, its leadership style and immediately implement the EU brokered agreement without further ado. The country cannot afford to be a hostage of more political machismo. It should also rapidly implement the Association Agreement and DCFTA and address its shortcomings as this will still fall short of being ready for EU membership application. 2024 is just three years away.

Subsequently it should do whatever it takes to move closer to European standards of rule of law and democracy, show to the EU it is serious about approximation and integration. Not just talk European but be European. With intrinsic motivation assistance is always around the corner, but an unmotivated unwilling partner which only frustrates progress will eventually endanger the friendship.

For the membership ambitions to materialize Georgia should be incredibly irresistible for the EU. A shining jewel. A Mount Kazbeg on a glorious sunny day. And for that to happen both Georgia's strongly developed civil society and its citizens should keep their politicians to the election promise, and remind them what is needed to achieve that, as EU Mediator Danielsson reminded Georgians (Civil Georgia 2021c). Brussels only has the final say whether Georgia can and will become a member of the EU. It is Georgian society that gets Georgia ready for that moment. With determination and an open vision on what it takes to walk down that road beyond the horizon.

ⁱ 83% of survey respondents support Georgia joining the EU, with the highest level of “fully supporting” since 2014, and 78% of respondents support Georgia joining NATO. Source: International Republican Institute 2021, 71-77.

ⁱⁱ Michael Gahler (Member of European Parliament, CDU/European People's Party), interview with author, 26 March 2021.

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