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Between Brussels and Moscow. Georgia is moving closer to Russia

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On 19 May air links between Georgia and Russia resumed after a four-year break. This was met with criticism from the West and public protests in Georgia. The resumption of direct air communication is another step normalising relations between the two countries, which formally still do not have diplomatic relations. It is also another ostentatiously pro-Russian gesture made by Tbilisi over the past several months, in defiance of EU and US policy. However, according to declarations by the Georgian government, the country's primary objective remains accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, first and foremost to the EU. The Union is to decide whether to grant Georgia candidate status by the end of this year. Its decision is likely to be positive – although possibly still subject to reservations – so it is possible that the government in Tbilisi has decided to ignore the criticism of their actions in the name of short-term gains, wanting to benefit from cooperation with both the West and Russia. The less likely option is as follows: it is employing pro-Western rhetoric but has effectively given up aspirations for EU membership, and has already made a strategic turn in foreign policy, or is getting ready to do so. The ultimate test of their intentions – and, at this stage, the prerequisite for preserving their prospects for accession – will be whether the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2024 autumn go off freely and fairly.

Flying Azimuth to Tbilisi

Georgia broke off diplomatic relations with Russia after the two countries fought a brief war in 2008, and Moscow subsequently recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Two years later, however, the two countries resumed direct air communication, and in 2012 Tbilisi exempted Russians from visa requirements. Flights were once again suspended following the events of June 2019 (see '*Antyrosyjskie protesty w Gruzji*'). On several occasions this year members of the government, including Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, have suggested that air links could be restored as a way of testing the reaction from the public and Western capitals. On 10 May, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree lifting visa requirements for Georgians travelling to Russia. At the same time, Moscow withdrew the recommendation that its citizens refrain from travelling to Georgia. In this way it lifted the formal obstacles to the resumption of bilateral air traffic. The first flight took place on 19 May, indicating that both sides were ready to cooperate. The Russian airline Azimuth and the Georgian airline Georgian Airways (which will be joined by the Russian carrier Red Wings from June) have been given permission to run the flights.

Tbilisi's decision has prompted criticism from the US and the EU (albeit at a low diplomatic level: in the case of Washington, only a State Department spokesperson has spoken on the

matter). Georgia's President Salome Zurabishvili also took a negative stance towards the decision, announcing a boycott of Georgian Airways; in response, the airline announced that it would not allow her on board. This deepened the rift between the head of state and the ruling Georgian Dream party, with whose support she was elected in 2018. It can now be said that she is in open conflict with both the government and the parliamentary majority. On 19 May and subsequent days, several thousand people protested in Tbilisi against the rapprochement with Moscow. Demonstrations also took place in Kvareli in the east of the country, where the daughter of Russian diplomatic chief Sergei Lavrov was due to attend a wedding ceremony as a guest (she eventually left the country as a result of the protests). Police briefly detained more than a dozen people, including the leader of the opposition Droa movement Elene Khoshtaria.

A pro-Russian government and a pro-Western public?

According to the Georgian authorities, the decision to resume flights was dictated by business and humanitarian reasons (to facilitate travel for the several hundred thousand-strong Georgian diaspora living in Russia). Tbilisi claims that it will not allow Western-sanctioned airlines to operate flights, indicating that – like, for example, countries of the Global South – it is operating on the principle of 'what is not forbidden is permitted'.

However, Tbilisi's agreement to resume bilateral flight links is the latest in a series of pro-Russian steps it has taken in recent months. Not joining the Western-led sanctions, not closing its skies to Russian aircraft, and increasing trade has made it easier for Russia to function under the restrictions introduced by the West and its allies; they also provide Moscow with a symbolic break from its isolation, in addition to the tangible benefits it gains. One example of this is the launch in April of a cargo ferry service between Batumi and Novorossiysk (after the media publicised the issue, the Maritime Transport Agency of Georgia stated that the service was irregular and purely commercial in nature). As a result, high-ranking Russian politicians, including Lavrov, have already referred to Georgia on several occasions as a friendly country; given the confrontation between Moscow and the West in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, this may be worrying given Tbilisi's proclaimed Euro-Atlantic aspirations. At the same time, representatives of the Georgian government have repeatedly distanced themselves from the West in cultural and moral terms, emphasising their attachment to traditional, conservative values.

The attitude of Georgian society seems to be just the opposite to that of its rulers, at least at the declarative level. The vast majority of the public wants to join the EU; according to a March 2023 study by the International Republican Institute, 89% of the respondents supported accession (75% of whom fully supported the proposition and 14% partially). A total of 79% were in favour of joining NATO. Russia was mentioned as a country politically threatening to Georgia by 87% of respondents and economically by 76%. An equally high proportion of respondents (79%) opposed visa-free travel with Russia and allowing Russians to open businesses in Georgia.

However, the dichotomy 'pro-Russian government versus pro-Western society' is an oversimplification. On the one hand, the Georgian government insists that achieving EU candidate status and integration into NATO remain its goals. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents to the above-mentioned poll are still more or less in favour of holding a dialogue with Russia. This is due to fear of their neighbour – a consequence of the

trauma of Georgia's loss of control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the war of 2008 – but also from a sense of being a cultural community, independent of their awareness of the existential threat posed by the Kremlin. This primarily concerns belonging to a common, Orthodox civilisational circle and – despite the strong Westernisation of the Georgian elite – the cultural and social conservatism of the majority of the population. Patriarch Ilia II remains the country's greatest authority (he enjoys the support of 91% of Georgian citizens), while the Georgian Orthodox Church, closely linked to that of Russia, ranks second behind only the army in terms of public trust in institutions. The government has learned to play on these sentiments with skill; for example, it explains its non-adherence to sanctions in terms of the desire to avoid another war. According to this narrative, the West is allegedly urging Georgia to open up a second front against Russia.

EU: will Georgia get candidate status after all?

At the European Council on 23–24 June 2022, Georgia was granted the so-called European perspective, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status (all three countries applied for membership at the same time). The Union made granting it to Tbilisi conditional on progress in 12 areas. A report on this is due to be published in October, and a decision is expected by the end of this year. In mid-May, a coalition of Georgian NGOs, most of them critical of the authorities, published their own report, which showed that the EU recommendations had been fulfilled in only three areas (related to the implementation of judgements of the European Court of Human Rights, gender equality and the fight against violence against women, and the fight against organised crime). In the remaining nine, the European Commission's guidelines had to be fulfilled only partially or not at all.

Irrespective of what progress has actually been made – in some areas, such as ensuring the cooperation of political forces and political depolarisation, this can be assessed on a discretionary basis – there are signs from the EU that Brussels is ready to grant Georgia conditional status, albeit with the option of withdrawing from this decision in the future. It is to be presumed, however, that this will not happen in the case of gross violations of human rights or the commitments of the country. Everything points to the fact that it would set a 'red line' for the EU if a law on foreign agents (analogous to the one currently operating in Russia) were to be passed, as nearly happened in March this year (see '*Georgia: a strong political crisis over legislative changes*'); Tbilisi withdrew the controversial drafts under the influence of street protests and a very sharp reaction from Brussels and Washington. Candidate status would probably also be denied in the event of the death in prison of former president Mikheil Saakashvili (see '*Saakashvili and the Georgian opposition. The state of play*'). As it seems, the readiness to grant it this status by 'promotion' is intended to encourage the Georgian government to make real reforms, including holding fair parliamentary elections next autumn, to strengthen Georgian civil society, and to take advantage of the favourable political climate that has arisen in Georgia (and Moldova) resulting from Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

What is the Georgian Dream government up to?

Tbilisi's foreign policy is probably guided by a cynical wish to 'have its cake and eat it too'. The signals from Brussels that it is ready to grant Georgia candidate status despite not fulfilling all the recommendations (this is more about failing to meet their 'spirit' than their 'letter') – regardless of the EU's understandable intentions – only strengthen the ruling team

of Georgian Dream in its belief that it can afford to ignore the warnings and expressions of concern coming from Western capitals. Tbilisi either hushes them up, or (probably to retain the favour of conservative voters) publicly criticises them as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In these circumstances, we should not expect Georgia to make any further real (rather than merely formal) efforts join the EU. If candidate status is not granted to it, the government is likely to blame Brussels, claiming that it has rejected a country that sticks to its values and principles (as recently as December 2022, Prime Minister Garibashvili insisted that Georgia had already fulfilled all the EU's recommendations).

It is less likely, though not impossible, that, while maintaining pro-Western rhetoric, Georgia's rulers have *de facto* abandoned their EU membership aspirations and are intending to make a strategic pivot towards Russia. Standing in the way of this would first and foremost be the Georgian public, which as the pro-EU demonstrations in June 2022 and March 2023 showed is determined to defend the country's course towards EU integration. The ultimate test of Tbilisi's intentions will be how it prepares for the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for autumn 2024. This election will also show whether, at that stage, Georgia will still maintain its prospects for accession.