

The game of Georgia's EU candidate status

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On 21 June, the European Commission presented an interim oral report to the member states on Georgia's progress towards being granted EU candidate status. It was assessed that, of the twelve recommendations given to Tbilisi by Brussels a year ago, three had been completely fulfilled, seven had been partially fulfilled and one had been fulfilled only minimally. On this last recommendation, concerning media pluralism, no progress had been made (see the Annex). A day later, Georgia's president Salome Zurbashvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, a close associate of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and the head of two television stations, who in May 2022 had been sentenced to three and a half years' imprisonment for abuse of power and embezzlement (the opposition considered him a political prisoner). This decision, which is in line with EU expectations involving the depolarisation of Georgian politics, met with harsh criticism from the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party.

Georgia, as well as Ukraine and Moldova, applied for EU membership in spring 2022 after the Russian invasion. At the European Council summit on 23 June last year, the latter two countries were granted EU candidate status, while Georgia was granted the so-called European perspective. Brussels made its candidate status conditional on fulfilling recommendations in twelve areas. Some of these do not have clear evaluation criteria, so they are quite discretionary (such as the recommendation to 'ensure the cooperation of political forces and political depolarisation'). The European Commission is due to present its final report on Georgia's progress towards EU integration in October this year, and a decision on whether to grant the country candidate status is expected by the end of 2023.

Commentary

- Georgia's bid for EU candidate status has become the subject of a political game in both Brussels and Tbilisi. In the former, the upper hand seems to have been gained by those who favour granting Georgia this status, regardless of the actual progress it has made in fulfilling the recommendations (a choice which is facilitated by the discretionary nature of some of them, as mentioned above). One of the EU's arguments is based on the fear that Georgia will drift towards Russia if it is denied candidate status (see *'Between Brussels and Moscow. Georgia is moving closer to Russia'*). Another is the need to support Georgian society, the bulk of which supports the country's accession to the EU (for more than a decade it has been running at around 80% in all surveys). This status could be granted conditionally: for example, it could be revoked in the event of irregularities in the how the parliamentary elections in autumn 2024 are arranged and conducted. The EU elite's favourable attitude is apparent in the reaction from the President of the European

Council, Charles Michel; after Gvaramia was pardoned, Michel stated that Georgia's future lies in membership of the EU. This point of view is also shared by the Georgian opposition, which believes that a negative decision from Brussels would undo the achievements of recent decades and condemn the country to finding itself in the 'grey zone' of European politics.

- The Georgian government is formally behind EU membership, but it also wishes to maintain its relationship with Russia, which is economically beneficial to the ruling group (on 19 May direct air links between the two countries were resumed after a four-year break). The prospect of real integration poses a threat to these elites, as it would involve the need to introduce transparency both domestically and in foreign policy, including Georgian-Russian relations. None of the recommendations which have been fulfilled (the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)'s judgements, gender equality & combatting violence against women, and the election of an independent ombudsman) undermine the position of the ruling party or limit its ability to informally influence the 2024 parliamentary elections.
- It seems that in this situation, granting Georgia EU candidate status – under threat of revocation – would be disadvantageous for GD, as it would no longer be able to resort to the argument that an 'evil' Brussels does not understand Georgia's specific character and does not want to admit Georgia despite all its efforts (Tbilisi maintains that all the recommendations have been fulfilled). This is evidenced by the reaction of GD's formal leader Irakli Kobakhidze to the pardon of Gvaramia, which has effectively brought Georgia closer to being granted candidate status. Kobakhidze commented that "one agent [had] just pardoned another"; the word 'agent' here refers to the proposed law on so-called foreign agents, i.e. foreign-funded entities, which was not passed after street protests and Western criticism: Kobakhidze was implying that President Zurabishvili is one such 'agent'. (See '[Georgia: a strong political crisis over legislative changes](#)') If Georgia gets candidate status, this will force the ruling camp to take the EU's perspective into account when it acts – and above all, to hold fair parliamentary elections in 2024.
- In this context, the thesis that President Zurabishvili (who was elected with GD's support) has now joined the opposition camp, also seems reasonable – even though she has not joined any existing grouping or founded her own. What stands in the way of the traditional opposition parties (led by the United National Movement) accepting her as their representative is her resistance to pardoning former president Saakashvili. She categorically refuses to take such a decision, maintaining that he abused his power and is now rightfully serving a custodial sentence.

APPENDIX. The EU recommendations and the status of Georgia's fulfilment of them (in the EU assessment of 21 June 2023)

Priority 1: Independent ombudsperson (fulfilled)

Priority 2: Gender equality (fulfilled)

Priority 3: Proactive adoption of the ECHR's judgements (fulfilled)

Priority 4: De-polarisation (partially fulfilled)

Priority 5: Electoral and institutional reforms (partially fulfilled)

Priority 6: Judiciary independence (partially fulfilled)

Priority 7: Anti-corruption measures (partially fulfilled)

Priority 8: Fight against organised crime (partially fulfilled)

Priority 9: Protection of vulnerable groups (partially fulfilled)

Priority 10: Involvement of CSOs (partially fulfilled)

Priority 11: De-oligarchisation (limited progress)

Priority 12: Media freedom (no progress)