Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 29.11.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Georgia is suspending its EU integration process

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On 28 November, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would not initiate accession talks with the EU until 2028. During this time, the country will also refuse to accept any EU funds, as "European politicians and bureaucrats use grants and loans as a means of blackmail", while for Tbilisi, "it is unacceptable to treat integration with the EU as a form of alms". According to Kobakhidze, Georgia aims to strengthen its economic position by the end of 2028, enabling the country to commence EU accession negotiations on its own terms and achieve membership by 2030. This timeline for potential membership was mentioned a few weeks ago by the leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Meanwhile, the Speaker of Parliament questioned the very purpose of pursuing EU membership.

Outgoing President Salome Zourabichvili criticised the decision, describing it as the culmination of an ongoing "constitutional coup" and a definitive shift towards a pro-Russian course. She reiterated her refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the parliament and government formed after the 26 October elections (see '*Georgia: awaiting a turning point*') and declared herself the sole legitimate representative of power in Georgia. She held urgent consultations with members of the diplomatic corps and the opposition, calling for unity and cooperation regardless of differences between individual parties. The government's decision was also opposed by about 100 members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In response to the Prime Minister's statement, thousands of people spontaneously took to the streets in Tbilisi and other cities, including Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori, and Zugdidi. In the capital, where President Salome Zourabichvili participated in the initial phase of the protest, events took a turbulent turn. The crowd assembled outside Parliament repeatedly clashed with the police, who attempted to push the demonstrators away from Rustaveli Avenue. In the early hours of 29 November, special forces dispersed the crowd using water cannons. Reports suggest that the water contained chemical agents, as protesters complained of burns on their faces and bodies. Authorities detained 43 people, with reports of injuries to 32 Ministry of Internal Affairs officers and at least 15 journalists. According to the ombudsman, the measures used by police were disproportionate to the situation, affecting not only instigators and aggressive individuals but also peaceful protesters, who constituted the majority. More rallies have been announced for Friday evening.

The government's decision escalates the conflict between Tbilisi and the West, raising questions about a strategic shift in Georgia's foreign policy and deepening domestic tensions. A compromise between the ruling party and the opposition appears unlikely, particularly concerning the full composition of parliament, which commenced its sessions

on 25 November despite Zourabichvili's protest and in the absence of all opposition MPs, who refused to take their seats. Furthermore, it is highly improbable that the government will be willing to address concerns over the conduct of the recent parliamentary elections (see '*The post-election deadlock in Georgia*').

Commentary

- **The Prime Minister's statement effectively means freezing Georgia's relations with the EU**, marking the first verbal confirmation of a shift from Tbilisi's previously formal pro-European course, although a cooling of relations has been evident for several years. Government-level interactions with the EU are expected to be reduced to a minimum, while Western support for civil society and independent media in Georgia is likely to increase. Georgia has officially been an EU candidate country since December 2023, but accession talks, unlike those with Moldova and Ukraine, have not yet started.
- **The suspension of negotiations with the EU has provoked greater outrage among citizens than electoral irregularities**, as according to polls approximately 80% of Georgians support membership in the organisation. Whether street demonstrations will force the government to make concessions will depend on the scale of the protests, the determination of participants, and the loyalty of the public administration to the ruling class. The authorities are likely to continue violently suppressing any smaller demonstrations. The coming days, and possibly the forthcoming weekend, could be pivotal for the future of the protests. The scale of the demonstrations on the night of 28–29 November and the protesters' resolve indicate that Georgians are ready to defend the country's pro-Western course, rather than expressing support for any particular political force. This is also due to the fact that the opposition is weak, fragmented, and has so far failed to produce a prominent leader or present a concrete plan of action in response to what it considers fraudulent elections.
- **Georgia appears poised to draw closer to Russia**, although diplomatic relations severed in 2008 are unlikely to be restored. An informal deal between Tbilisi and Moscow regarding some form of reintegration of Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) into Georgia's political orbit cannot be ruled out (see '*Abkhazia: the parastate's leader steps down*'). On 28 November, Vladimir Putin stated that Russia, unlike the West, does not interfere in Georgia's internal affairs. He also remarked that he "admires the courage with which the Georgian leadership defended its positions on recent legislative acts" (referring to the law on the transparency of foreign influence, also known as the foreign agents law).
- **The polarisation of the political scene could escalate to the point of dual power**, as the ruling Georgian Dream party has announced indirect presidential elections for 14 December – the first of this kind in the country's history. The president will be chosen by a 300-member electoral college comprising all MPs (with the opposition boycotting the vote) and 150 local government representatives. The sole candidate, and likely winner, is Georgian Dream's nominee Mikheil Kavelashvili, a former professional footballer and co-founder of the People's Power movement, which collaborates with the ruling party. The opposition, contesting the legitimacy of the elections, will likely refuse to recognise the new president, viewing him as elected by MPs lacking a democratic mandate. In this scenario, Salome Zourabichvili may continue to regard herself as the head of state, a

stance likely endorsed by the opposition, leading to unpredictable legal and protocol-related consequences.