



## EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS: WAY TO GET THE CANDIDATE STATUS

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On 22-23 June 2022, the European Council took a historic decision on its Eastern enlargement. Yet, while granting Ukraine and Moldova the status of candidate countries, along with the recognition of their European perspective, it awarded Georgia only a European perspective and the status of a potential candidate. All that came with 12 priorities on critical reform issues for Georgia to address as a conditionality to getting candidate-country status. Except for de-oligarchisation, there is nothing new in the list of priorities presented by the EU. Problems with the remaining 11 priorities have been repeatedly emphasized in evaluation reports by the EU, but the government has not displayed any political will to reform. A factor that has changed in the new reality is the granting of status as an EU candidate country. Time will show whether this may become a strong stimulus for reforms.

Following the decision of the European Council, the government of Georgia agreed to the recommendations proposed by the EU for Georgia to be given candidate status and expressed readiness to fulfill them by the end of 2022. The center of gravity for implementing the reforms is in the Parliament of Georgia, and the entire responsibility lies with the ruling party – Georgian Dream.<sup>1</sup> Working groups were set up in the parliament for each priority. This may be assessed as a step in the right direction; however, in addition to formalizing the process, it is essential to show substantive actions. The GD leadership decided to expel International Society Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) from the election group blaming the organization for political statements and calling for the current government's resignation. Demonstrating solidarity, most of the CSOs suspended their participation in working groups as well.

Regarding the opposition parties: LELO, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, and UNM elaborated their vision on fulfillment of 12 recommendations;<sup>2</sup> however, they refused to join GD-led working groups and pledged to work in the committees and plenary of the Parliament. CSOs also elaborated their recommendations in June 2022;<sup>3</sup> however, none of those recommendations were fully adopted by the GD; Despite depolarization being one of 12 recommendations of the EU, GD strengthened its hawkish campaign against civil society and the West recently. There were series on pro-government-

<sup>1</sup> The plan of Georgian Dream on implementing 12 recommendations is available at <https://bit.ly/3DN3tMQ>

<sup>2</sup> ibd.

<sup>3</sup> The plan of CSOs on implementing 12 recommendations is available here <https://bit.ly/3Sdjkcb>

tal TV Imedi and PosTV where the real estate and the income of the heads of CSOs (e.g., ISFED, TI, OSGF) were shown to the audience. TV Imedi depicted people working at CSOs getting rich while being agents of the West and pushing Western agenda, such as dragging Georgia into war with Russia.

To sum up, Georgian Dream will try to window-dress most of the 12 recommendations and present them as fundamental reforms while not addressing major concerns, such as free media, an independent judiciary, de-polarization, and de-oligarchization. In this scenario, GD will focus its talking points on shaming the EU for putting Georgia behind Moldova. EU and the capitals need to have a solid response to this approach.

### **What the EU should do:**

- EU could determine clear performance criteria for controversial conditionalities, such as de-polarization and de-oligarchization. For instance, the EU could fill the de-polarization request with concrete demands, such as releasing politically motivated prisoners, stopping attacks on the NGOs and critical media, and engaging in pluralistic political debates;
- EU needs to realize that the recommendations do not concern only the legislative changes; thus, it is not only the business of the Parliament to deal with the 12 conditions. Some have to be decided politically and require political will, and the progress should be judged on the absence or presence of the political will to reform;
- EU needs to specify a clear implementation deadline with clear benchmarks. This should also include deadlines for each model. The current understanding is that the next assessment might come in Fall 2023, with the subsequent one due around the 2024 elections. Linking the implementation deadlines with the electoral cycle will be how the EU can ensure the successful implementation of the 12 conditions; If by the Fall of 2023, reforms are not undertaken fully, the EU should give Georgia's Government another six months by Spring 2024 and then postpone granting Georgia the EU candidate status until after the 2024 elections;
- EU needs to make it clear to the Georgian Dream publicly and in private communication that window-dressing the reforms and only implementing relatively minor conditionalities while not addressing the primary democracy-related conditions will not be sufficient for the EU to grant Georgia candidate status;
- EU must make it clear to the Georgian Dream publicly and in private communication that taking a more pro-Ukrainian position, joining EU sanctions against Russia, and suspending anti-Western rhetoric is necessary for further steps in European integration;
- EU needs to start seriously considering sanctioning those individuals who are at the forefront of possibly avoiding Russian sanctions or derailing democratic processes in Georgia; this request was made to the EU institutions by the European Parliament in Spring 2022, and the EU needs to take up this issue seriously if it is to use its levers against Georgia efficiently;
- EU could consider linking EU financial assistance to the substantial progress in implementing the 12 recommendations. In the fall of 2021, the EU already refused to give Georgia a loan of 75 million euros, linking it with judicial reform. There is no reason why the same approach could not be applied to other EU financial instruments if the Government continues democratic backsliding.