



# EU membership or oligarchic rule: The choice facing Georgia

European View  
2022, Vol. 21 (2) 206–213

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858221133254

[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)**Salome Samadashvili****Abstract**

This article reviews the recent developments with respect to Georgia's application to become a member of the EU, filed in March 2022. It addresses the circumstances under which the application was filed, the conditions tabled by the EU for granting Georgia candidate status, the challenges that lie ahead and what the EU can do to help Georgia overcome them. The article argues that without strong external pressure the conditions set by the EU are not likely to be met by Georgia's ruling regime.

**Keywords**

Georgia, EU membership, Oligarchy, EU conditionality

**Introduction**

From the inception of the European project, changing geopolitical realities have had a major impact on the evolution of the EU's foreign and security policy, as well as on the enlargement process. The relationship between the EU and the countries in its eastern neighbourhood is no exception. The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 became the incentive for the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. Faced with the threat of spill-over effects on EU security from the major conflict in its neighbourhood, the EU member states recognised the need to upgrade their policy regarding their Eastern neighbours. While the policy did not envisage the prospect of membership for the partner countries, it offered them a clear path towards greater integration with the EU through Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) treaties, visa-free travel and other instruments of gradual integration into the EU.

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At the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova had been implementing their AA and DCFTA agreements for several years and their citizens enjoyed visa-free movement within the EU. They formed a trio of successful EaP countries ready to ask for more from the EU. However, at no point had the EU indicated that there would be the prospect of membership for any one of these three countries in the foreseeable future. But just as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war had triggered the formation of the EaP, the Russo-Ukrainian war has proven to be an accelerator for the enlargement policy of the EU. To offer an anchor for its Western future to its citizens, on 28 February Ukraine applied for EU membership; it was swiftly followed by Moldova and Georgia on 3 March (Gehrke 2022). However, the European Council's decision regarding the applications of the three countries has led to the trio becoming a duo—Ukraine and Moldova have received the status of candidate countries, while the decision regarding Georgia has been deferred, contingent on the country implementing a set of conditions (European Council 2022a).

This article considers why Georgia has been told to wait for its candidate status, discusses the country's prospects and includes several suggestions for EU policymakers on how to deal with Georgia's case going forward. After considering both the domestic and international political context in which Georgia filed its application for EU membership, the article argues that for the application to succeed, pressure on the Georgian government will need to be applied both by the EU and internally by the opposition, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pro-democracy groups.

## **When war made the impossible possible**

When EU leaders convened for informal meetings of the heads of state and government in Versailles, France on 10–11 March 2022 to discuss the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainians, Moldovans and Georgians awaited their decisions with anticipation, and a mixture of hope and fear. The Versailles Declaration would be the first formal response of the EU to the appeals of the Eastern Partners to become fully fledged members of the Union, filed a few days earlier. While non-committal, the declaration gave a green light to considering the applications of all three, stating that the Council acknowledged the European aspirations and the European choice of Ukraine, and inviting the Commission to submit its opinion on these applications in line with the relevant provisions of the treaties for all three countries. This was a historic breakthrough and marked a new chapter in the relationships of the three Eastern Partners with the EU (European Council 2022b).

The Versailles Declaration was followed by the equally unprecedented commitment of the European Commission to prepare opinions on the applications in an expedient manner. In the process, the EU has demonstrated that, when necessary, it can act with great speed and resolve in response to geopolitical challenges. Just three months after Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova applied for membership, the European Commission produced opinions assessing the capacity of each country to meet the criteria for EU membership set by the European Councils of Copenhagen in 1993 and Madrid in 1995. It also

assessed the implementation of the obligations under the AAs and DCFTAs. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia did not receive a candidate status endorsement from the Commission, or subsequently from the Council. The opinion stated that ‘Georgia should be given the perspective to become a member of the European Union . . . and granted candidate status once the Georgian government meets the conditions outlined . . .’ (European Commission 2022).

### **Political context leading to the EU’s decision**

The 2020 electoral promise of Georgia’s ruling party, Georgian Dream (Qartuli Otsneba), to table an application for EU membership in 2024 had already seemed like a far-fetched idea for a country which was experiencing major setbacks as far as democracy and rule of law were concerned (*Transparency International* 2020). However, the parliamentary elections themselves, barely endorsed as legitimate by the international community (Shaheen 2021), and subsequent political developments—constant political crises, ongoing prosecutions of political and media leaders, and decision of the governing party to unilaterally declare the April 2021 political agreement negotiated by European Council President Charles Michel annulled—had not brought Georgia any closer to its European vocation. Hence, when Ukraine applied for EU membership, the opinion of Georgia’s ruling party was divided as to whether applying for membership would be beneficial for its political future—refusal of the EU to grant candidacy status could be politically too costly (*Civil.ge* 2022b). While some 50,000 Georgian citizens were rallying in the streets to protest the government’s lack of support for Ukraine in February and March 2022, they were also demanding a European future for Georgia (*RFE/RL* 2022b). The Georgian government had no option but to apply for membership together with Ukraine and Moldova—the public outrage had it chosen not to do so would have been too great. However, what has followed this decision can only be described as a consistent attempt to undermine the success of the application by the very government that decided to make it.

If a less-than-stellar record on democracy in 2020–1 was not enough, just days ahead of the EU’s decision, the government decided to arrest Nick Gvaramia, director of the independent TV station Mtavari Arkhi, who was already the long-standing subject of bogus charges (*RFE/RL* 2022a). Georgia’s chances of candidacy had been slim at best, but this proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. While often criticising the Georgian authorities for democratic shortcomings, the European Parliament has traditionally been reluctant to adopt an ‘emergency resolution’, the parliamentary instrument used to signal a particular concern regarding the state of human rights and rule of law in partner countries. Friends of Georgia across the political spectrum in the European Parliament had always been concerned that adopting such a resolution would damage Georgia’s EU integration process and had historically been reluctant to do so. The arrest of Gvaramia just days before the Council’s decision left the Parliament with no choice. Among all the Parliamentary documents adopted regarding EU–Georgia relations over the years, the ‘Joint Motion for a Resolution on violations of media freedom and safety

of journalists in Georgia', adopted on 9 June (European Parliament 2022), and supported by the overwhelming majority of the Parliament, is the most critical of any Georgian government's record on rule of law and democracy. In addition to expressing serious concern regarding the state of media freedom, the political motivations of the justice system and the lack of rule of law in Georgia, the resolution also broke historical ground when it demanded the sanctioning of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Russian-made billionaire who informally runs the country (European Parliament 2022).

## Georgia's reaction

Public outrage at the authorities following the decision of the Council was considerable, with thousands of Georgian citizens taking to the streets to support Georgia's European future and demand the resignation of the government (*Euractiv.com* 2022). Rather than expressing a clear commitment to reform, the Georgian government produced an anti-Western and anti-opposition propaganda campaign in anticipation of the EU's negative decision. The government and state-controlled media blamed the opposition and NGOs, accusing them of lobbying against EU membership (the author of the current article was declared a national traitor by Prime Minister Garibashvili in a speech to the parliament) (*Pia.ge* 2022). Furthermore, the authorities launched a campaign against Members of the European Parliament (*Georgian Journal* 2022), the EU ambassador to Georgia and others, accusing all of them of undermining Georgia's chances of joining the EU (Gabritchidze 2022b). They also lashed out at the EU for taking an unfair decision, claiming that Georgia was ahead of Ukraine and Moldova in terms of the implementation of its AA and DCFTA and in the harmonisation process, often implying that Georgia was paying the price for not joining the sanctions regime against Russia and refusing to open a second front against Putin in Georgia (Gabritchidze 2022a).

While the propaganda might be persuasive to hardcore supporters of the Georgian Dream, the majority of Georgian citizens expect the government to implement the needed reforms or be accountable. The protest movement has faded for now, but the current situation resembles the calm before the storm as Georgia awaits the next round of assessments from the European Commission, expected by the end of 2022.

## The EU's conditions

The conditions tabled by the European Commission and the Council later in June mostly concerned issues that dealt with alignment with the Copenhagen Criteria. These included taking steps towards depolarisation and securing cooperation across political parties in the spirit of the 19 April political agreement; strengthening the independence of the judiciary and all state institutions; increasing democratic oversight; reform of the electoral system; securing the independence of the office of public defender; addressing media independence and the rights of vulnerable groups; addressing corruption; and taking steps towards 'de-oligarchisation' by eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests on economic, political and public life (European Commission 2022).

## Will the EU's conditions be met?

At the time of writing, almost three months since the publication of the European Commission's opinion and the conditions it set out, there have been no tangible moves towards implementing the necessary changes. The government of Georgia has presented its 'plan' for taking the relevant steps, which can only be described as a promise to create the relevant 'working groups' and a timetable for delivery of the results, without much substance (*Civil.ge 2022a*). As the government-led process has moved forward, the largest part of the political opposition has expressed concern that the process will be another exercise in 'formal compliance', and has refused to participate in the parliamentary working groups. Georgian NGOs have presented a much more substantive vision for implementing the recommendations, and the majority of them have expressed a readiness to participate in the government-led process of preparing the needed reforms. However, as the Georgian Dream has excluded some of the most-experienced NGOs working on election issues from the relevant working groups, the decision of the opposition not to engage with the government has been shown to be valid (*Civil.ge 2022c*).

Over the summer holidays the opposition has created its plan for fulfilling the EU's conditions for granting candidacy status. In the coming months political parties, NGOs and the Georgian government will all be involved in the difficult political process, with the NGOs and opposition groups, which are largely coordinated in their vision, attempting to put pressure on the government to implement the needed reforms. The stakes are high, as are the expectations of the Georgian people, who, according to all polls, remain deeply committed to the country's European future (*Agenda.ge 2022*). Hopes that the government of the Georgian Dream, run from the shadows by the oligarch Ivanishvili, will deliver the reforms demanded by the EU, are low.

## The particular challenge of Georgia: one oligarch rule

While Georgia is not the only country in the former Soviet space to suffer from the influence of oligarchs on the political and economic process, it certainly faces a unique challenge. Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose decision to get involved in Georgian politics in 2012 altered the Georgian political scene, holds in his private wealth economic resources roughly equivalent to 30% of Georgia's GDP (*Transparency International 2020*). An extensive report by Transparency International in 2020 on state capture by his private interests found that

a single person keeps a firm grip on Georgia's executive government that has been made free of democratic checks and balances through weak Parliamentary oversight and an unofficial pact of no interference and mutual support with an influential group of judges in complete control of the judiciary. Without holding any official position of public accountability, Bidzina Ivanishvili has successfully managed to place key Georgian public institutions, including ones supposed to be independent by law, in the service of his private business interests and security. (*Transparency International 2020, 1*)

Securing the independence of the judiciary and other state institutions, increasing democratic oversight and introducing a real anti-corruption policy, all of which form the conditions set out by the EU, amount to putting an end to Ivanishvili's rule in Georgia and to state capture by oligarchic interests, that is, to de-oligarchisation.

In effect, what the EU has demanded from the Georgian Dream government is that it starts the process of self-liquidation. The playbook of Ivanishvili and his party is not that dissimilar to those used by other kleptocratic authoritarian rulers. It involves control over the judicial, prosecutorial and law enforcement services; a powerful propaganda machinery; an election system that always tilts the balance in favour of the ruling party; a reward system for loyal businesses and punishment for independent ones; and scores of government-friendly NGOs. Asking Ivanishvili's party to dismantle this system and take steps towards accountability, transparency and the strengthening of democratic institutions is effectively asking it to cut down the pillars of its power. If anything, the intention of the ruling party seems to be to use some of the EU's demands, for example, the one regarding de-oligarchisation, to reduce the political and media space in Georgia by pushing through the law on oligarchs in a way that is tailored to remove rivals from the political competition and close down independent media. This is why the main demands of the protest rallies held in Georgia following the refusal of the EU to grant the country candidacy status were for the resignation of Ivanishvili's government, the formation of a temporary government of national unity by politically unaffiliated professionals who could secure the reforms needed to fulfil the EU's conditions, and the preparation of the country for early elections, securing the environment needed for free and fair elections. As none of these demands was reciprocated by the government, the ball is in the court of the Georgian Dream, with Georgians waiting for the EU's next assessment, which, if negative, will most likely trigger a new wave of public protest.

## Conclusion

While the relationship between the EU and non-member states seeking to join the EU is always one of asymmetrical dependency, the state of play of Georgia's bid for EU membership has empowered the EU to be the broker of change in the country on an unprecedented level. The European future of Georgia now largely depends on the EU's willingness to wield this power.

Georgia is a strongly and unequivocally pro-Western country in terms of the choices and sentiments of its citizens. Notwithstanding the reservations expressed above concerning the good faith of the current Georgian government to implement the reforms demanded by the EU, the public pressure to deliver results is strong enough to incentivise any political regime to create a positive dynamic with the EU. The country might yet still experience its 'Yanukovych moment' if the Georgian public decides that Ivanishvili's government has given up on efforts to secure a European future for Georgia. However, at this point, the country is waiting for the government to deliver results, and for the European response to these results. The EU's leverage has, therefore, peaked. The decision of the European Council has brought hope to Georgian citizens that down the line

there is the prospect of EU membership—thus, their commitment to Georgia’s European future has strengthened. With a set of concrete conditions to meet, Georgia now has a roadmap for moving forward.

In the coming months, as the EU starts assessing the progress or lack of it in implementing the reforms required, it has very reliable partners to work with to pressure the government—the citizens of Georgia, NGOs, the free media and the pro-democratic opposition. The assessments of the EU should be widely available to the public, framed and explained in clear and sound language, understandable to Georgian citizens and not containing bureaucratic jargon. The assessments must also be delivered at a high political level—with the EU’s political leadership showing both its commitment to Georgia’s European future and a readiness put pressure on the government. If the government delivers even some of the reforms requested by the EU, it will benefit the country as it will entail improvements to the government’s accountability and democratic process. If it fails, the citizens of Georgia need to know who is responsible.

The EU experienced a serious setback in Georgia when the political agreement negotiated by the European Council president in 2021 was undermined by the ruling party. However, the membership application process has different dynamics. Georgians know that it concerns their future; they need to know that the EU is committed to that future. The stakes are high for the EU as well. Georgia is the EU’s stronghold in the volatile Black Sea/South Caucasus region and has a vital transit role in securing the EU’s energy independence—the top EU priority *du jour*. The failure of Georgia’s EU aspirations would be a tragedy for the Georgian nation, but it would undermine the EU’s strategic interests in the region as well.

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