



IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE ON GEORGIA

Special Editor: Tatia Chikhladze (Regional Institute for Security Studies and British University in Georgia (Tbilisi))

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The Impact of Russia's War against Ukraine on Georgia

Introduction by the Special Editor Tatia Chikhladze (Regional Institute for Security Studies and British University in Georgia, Tbilisi)

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally changed the regional security environment. Georgia has as a result found itself in a challenging position. The country has faced an influx of Russian citizens seeking shelter in their neighboring country, especially since the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia. Such a swift change has increased societal tensions. Simultaneously, the pro-Russian disinformation that already counted among Georgian national security's key problems, has intensified even further, targeting the most vulnerable segments of society and making the case for alienating Georgia from its Western partners. Despite such an unprecedented set of challenges, Georgia has also been given a unique window of opportunity to advance on its European integration path through receiving EU candidate status.

The first article of this special issue examines new pro-Russian disinformation narratives promoted since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It shows that the main target of such narratives is still the West, but that the content of disinformation messages has been adapted to the new realities created after the 2022 invasion. The second article analyses security, political and economic implications of the influx of Russians in Georgia, as well potential short and long-term implications of controversial decisions such as allowing the restoration of flights to Russia and keeping liberal visa regulations for Russian citizens. Through dramatic security challenges have arisen as a result of the full-scale invasion, unprecedented opportunities have also appeared for Georgia due to the European Union's decision to accelerate the accession process for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The third article offers a perspective on how the government of Georgia responded to this new historical opportunity, making the point that the government is hesitating to fully engage in the EU integration process, since adoption of essential reforms for meeting EU criteria are seen as a potential hindrance to the ruling party's uncontested authority.

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Pro-Russian Disinformation Narratives in Georgia Since Russia's Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Disinformation campaigns have been part of Russia's hybrid warfare against Georgia for years, though their intensity increased even further after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This article explores the key disinformation narratives promoted in the Georgian context since the start of the war. Analysis of key messages shows that the main target of pro-Russian disinformation is still the West, but that the content of the main narratives has shifted to better reflect Russia's interests after the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, with more emphasis on presenting a desirable image of political and war developments in Ukraine while presenting the West as an unreliable partner trying to drag the country into war against Russia. Even though current opinion poll results do not seem to reflect a significant impact of these persistent pro-Russian disinformation efforts on the Georgian society, in the context of lacking systematised state-level counteractions, it remains to be seen what the long-term implications of these actions will be.

Introduction

Ever since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent Western response, the conducting of propaganda and disinformation campaigns has become even more important for the Kremlin. Georgia has been the target of Russian hybrid warfare efforts for decades already. However, since the renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine, Russian propaganda efforts have intensified even further. Moscow's disinformation tactics generally aim to increase sceptical attitudes towards the West and foster sympathies towards Russia. Another key objective is to convince the population that in case of need the West will not stand by their side, and that Georgia should drastically change its policy towards Russia—that is, put aside any Euro-Atlantic aspirations and instead enter into a partnership and alliance with Russia.

To identify the pro-Russian propaganda narratives in Georgia, as well as to observe the gradual developments of these narratives, pro-Russian actors' narratives were studied through thematic analysis. These narratives were drawn from local pro-Russian media channels as well as Russia-based media outlets, such as Sputnik and RIA Novosti, and Georgia's pro-Russian political movements, i.e., the 'Conservative Movement'. As most such actors have created their own social media 'ecosystems', e.g., through Facebook groups, prevalent messages in such ecosystems were also investigated. To recognise how pro-Russian narratives evolve and develop in accordance with the wider national and international political circumstances, the period under study for this research was set from the launch of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine to June 2023. Based on this approach, the article stratifies the Russian disinformation and propa-

ganda effort in Georgia into three main strains: disinformation campaigns against the so-called 'collective West'; the 'second front conspiracy'; and disinformation regarding the combat and political developments in Ukraine.

Anti-Western Narratives

Anti-Western narratives have been part of pro-Russian disinformation in Georgia for decades but these sentiments strengthened even further after the start of the war in Ukraine. As stated by independent journalist and political observer Régis Genté, Moscow's soft power in Georgia is based not on creating a positive image of Russia in the eyes of Georgians, but on the creation of a negative image of the West (Poznyakov 2023). In this context, playing on local sentiments and presenting Western values as contradictory to 'traditional Georgian' ones has been part of the pro-Russian disinformation playbook for quite a long time.

Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the West remained the key target of pro-Russian radical groups in Georgia, but anti-Western narratives have been adapted to the context of the war. For instance, soon after the start of the war, Russian propagandists began promoting narratives that Ukraine had been 'abandoned by the West' and was fighting alone. The hidden message sent to the Georgian audience: in the case their country would also have to face Russia, it would also be left to fend for itself (Gozalishvili/ Kalandadze 2022). The emphasis in this context has been on the insufficiency of the Western military aid provided to Ukraine. The general narrative spread by media actors such as 'Kartuli TV' (Georgian TV), 'Sputnik-Georgia', 'Alt-Info' and 'Obieqtivi' has been that the West is providing Ukraine very few and non-advanced weapons, and that its overall objective is not to empower

the Ukrainian army to end the war, but rather to drag out the war, with the ultimate aim being to weaken Russia at the cost of countless Ukrainian lives (Chandler 2022).

Attacks on the West reached a new height after Georgia failed to obtain candidate status after applying for membership in the European Union (EU); the European Commission decided to grant Georgia a 'European perspective', stating that candidate status would follow once the 'outstanding priorities' are addressed. Four former deputies of the 'Georgian Dream' party, who left the ruling party in June 2022, founded the public movement 'People's Power', which since then has been making openly anti-Western statements and has declared its mission to be 'protecting Georgia from Western pressure' (Machaidze 2023). Soon after, the movement was joined by several other members of 'Georgian Dream' and by pro-government journalists and experts. Conspiratorial anti-Western messages spread by this group aim to undermine Georgia's established pro-Western foreign policy course. Its members have also regularly been downplaying the importance of gaining candidacy status from the EU. Beyond their EU-sceptic messaging, members of 'People's Power' have also been making openly aggressive statements towards the US Embassy, accusing diplomats of disrespecting Georgian sovereignty and state institutions (Kakachia/ Samkharadze 2023). According to 'People's Power', the US finances 'harmful projects' in Georgia and instructs the population on how to prepare a revolution (Machaidze 2023).

According to the 2022 report of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the ruling party's lack of opposition to the statements of its former members and, what is more, in some cases the concurrence of messages raises doubts among the public whether the separation of these members of parliament (MPs) from the ruling party is a real one or just a formality. It should be noted that, even after leaving the ranks of the 'Georgian Dream', the supposed 'defectors' have been seen attending the ruling party meetings. The ruling party representatives explained this by referring to their aim to preserve their parliamentary majority through cooperation with their former party members. Pro-government TV channels have also actively been disseminating statements made by the members of the 'People's Power'

movement (Kakachia/ Samkharadze 2023). They were the ones who initiated and drafted the Law 'On Transparency of Foreign Influence', more commonly referred to as a 'foreign agents' law', widely believed to be emulating Russia's repressive legislation. Even though the ruling party approved the draft law in the first reading, following two days of mass protests, the government was forced to withdraw the bill (Seskuria 2023). All this leaves the impression that 'People's Power' is on the one hand serving 'Georgian Dream' interests in domestic politics and allowing the ruling party to retain a relatively moderate foreign policy stance, while the most radical, anti-Western statements are disseminated exclusively by the new faction.

'The Second Front Conspiracy'

Another important line in terms of anti-Western disinformation narratives is accusing the West and Ukraine of attempting to draw Georgia into war by opening a 'second front' against Russia. This position mirrors that of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR). According to Sergey Narishkin, head of the SVR, the West has been pressuring the Georgian government into a military conflict with Russia in order to relieve pressure on Ukraine and further exhaust the Russian military¹ This position has also been mirrored by Russian propagandists² and members of the de-facto government of Abkhazia.³

It should be mentioned that, soon after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were isolated cases of two Ukrainian officials, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov and MP Oleksiy Goncharenko, urging Georgians to take advantage of the situation and regain control over the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (Wesolowsky 2022).⁴ Though this did not reflect the official position of Ukraine and was not shared by the majority of Ukrainian policymakers, these statements were heavily utilised by pro-Russian disinformation sources. Furthermore, Russian propaganda channels have been spreading a video message, allegedly made by the fighters of the Georgian National Legion, threatening to bring the war to the occupied Georgian regions and to slaughter and rape Abkhazians and Ossetians.⁵ The Georgian National Legion has rejected the authenticity of this video and called it a provocation by the Russian security services.

1 'Запад принуждает Грузию к военному конфликту с Россией, заявил директор Службы внешней разведки РФ' (The West is forcing Georgia into a military conflict with Russia, said the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service), Sputnik Georgia, 2023, <https://t.me/SputnikGeorgia/25841> (accessed 18 August 2023).

2 'Симоньян пригрозила ударом по Тбилиси' (Simonyan Threatens with an Attack on Tbilisi), Radio Svoboda, 3 March 2023, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/simonjyan-prigrozila-udarom-po-tbilisi/32311930.html> (accessed 18 August 2023).

3 'Shamba: The West Pushes Georgia for Opening "Second Front" in Abkhazia', Civil Georgia, 11 November 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/514701> (accessed 1 September 2023).

4 'Ruling party, opposition MPs: Georgia on "peaceful path", not getting into war', Agenda.ge, 27 March 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/921> (accessed 1 September 2023).

5 'В сети появилось видео с угрозами от «Грузинского национального легиона»' (A video appeared online with threats from the Georgian National Legion), Telegram channel, 2023, <https://t.me/georgiafacts/9048> (accessed 1 September 2023).

The pro-Russian media outlet ‘Alt-Info’ was quick to spread this narrative, going as far as accusing the US Embassy of coordinating the efforts to draw Georgia into the war.⁶ The ‘People’s Power’ movement has made the same accusations, stating in regard to the US aid: ‘If these funds have been allocated to Georgia in exchange for the opening of the second front in the country, of course, USD 6 billion can never replace the damage that Georgia may suffer in the war with Russia’.⁷ Another wave of disinformation has targeted the European Union with the same accusations. The main message spread in the context of the EU is that Georgia was denied EU candidate status as a punishment for its refusal to join the war in Ukraine (Tsetskhladze 2023). The overall aim of this narrative is to convince the population of the country that the West wants to see war in Georgia.

In July 2022, pro-Russian political activist and Director of the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, linked the British Defence Minister’s visit to Georgia to attempts to convince Prime Minister Garibashvili to initiate a military confrontation against Russia. According to Lortkipanidze, the British Minister even threatened Gharibashvili that the West would not allow Georgia to disobey its wishes. In May 2022, anti-Western newspaper ‘Saerto Gazeti’ linked former president Mikheil Saakashvili’s return to Georgia from Ukraine to supposed Western efforts to open a ‘second front in Georgia’ (Chandler 2022).

It should be emphasised, however, that the ‘second front’ and ‘dragging Georgia into the war’ narrative has been utilised not only by pro-Russian and anti-Western groups, but by Georgian officials more broadly as well. ‘Despite many attempts, provocations, and direct calls, our team avoided the biggest danger that could happen to our people and our country, which is war’, said Prime Minister Garibashvili on 29 July 2022. The Executive Secretary of ‘Georgian Dream’, Irakli Kobakhidze, said the same in March 2022: ‘It is obvious that there is a coordinated attempt to drag Georgia into a military conflict, which we will not allow’.⁸ Kobakhidze has repeatedly referred to the narrative of external and inter-

nal forces (i.e., the opposition and civil society organisations) allegedly pushing Georgia to join ‘the war against Russia’. Even though Kobakhidze has not mentioned the West explicitly, he did link the refusal to grant EU candidate status to the country to Georgia’s refusal to join the war (Chandler 2022).

Overall, the ‘second front conspiracy’ remains most utilised and far-reaching pro-Russian disinformation narrative in Georgia, attempting to undermine public support for Ukraine and discredit the west in the eyes of Georgians.

Disinformation Regarding the Military and Political Developments in Ukraine

Pro-Russian propaganda outlets have also been spreading disinformation regarding the political and military developments in Ukraine. This disinformation campaign seems to follow the general patterns of Russian propaganda: unlike the other two main narratives, it does not possess any localised elements to fit the Georgian sociopolitical environment.

Pro-Russian actors have put the blame on the West for the war in Ukraine, forwarding the narrative that the war is a protective measure for Russia against the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) since the fall of the Soviet Union.⁹ The same view has been shared by the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, who stated the following at the GLOBSEC security forum in Bratislava: ‘one of the main reasons’ of the conflict ‘was NATO expansion ... the desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO’ (Gavin 2023).

Following the Russian propaganda narratives, local pro-Russian actors have also been downplaying Russian losses and overstating Ukrainian ones. On 23 February 2023, a TikTok channel associated with the pro-Russian outlet ‘Alt-News’ (one of Alt-Info’s aliases it uses to retain social media presence, as its channels are often banned) (Gigitashvili/ Le Roux 2020)¹⁰ as well as government-affiliated channel Rustavi 2¹¹ reported Russian losses to be 18,500 and Ukrainian losses at 157,000.

Other military disinformation campaigns have been directed at the Georgian National Legion, which has been

6 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

7 ‘„ხალხის ძალა“ კმ-ის დაფინანსებაზე განცხადებას აქვეყნებს: „მათთვის ჩვენი ერთადერთი ფუნქცია რუსეთის შეკავებაა“ (People’s Power publishes a statement on US funding: “For them, our only function is to contain Russia”), Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 19 September 2022, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32041223.html> (accessed 8 August 2023).

8 ‘Vice PM: Gov’t won’t allow Georgia to be involved in military conflict’, *Agenda.ge* 15 January 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/145> (accessed 22 August 2023).

9 TikTok page of Altinfo1. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230913111501/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo1?_t=8adgVIPLLLl&r=1 (accessed 2 September 2023).

10 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

11 ‘Disinformation: “According to the data of Israeli intelligence, Russia killed 157,000 Ukrainian troops and over 1,500 NATO military personnel in Ukraine.”, FactCheck, 7 February 2023, <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/41613-disinformation-according-to-the-data-of-israeli-intelligence-russia-killed-157-000-ukrainian-troops-and-over-1-500-nato-military-personnel-in-ukraine> (accessed 7 August 2023).

fighting in Ukraine since 2014 and has been part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2016. The ‘Alt-News’ TikTok channels have been inaccurately portraying the Georgian National Legion as a mercenary force primarily consisting of former members of the Saakashvili government.¹²

Further disinformation campaigns have related to the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Pro-Russian Georgian channels and politicians have been accusing the Ukrainian government of discriminating against Orthodox Christians,¹³ while undermining Ukrainian national identity and sovereignty and presenting the Russian propaganda narrative that Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same people.

Actors Spreading Disinformation and Government Response

Analysis of the disinformation landscape in Georgia shows that key narratives are disseminated by far-right, pro-Kremlin political parties and politicians, such as the ‘Conservative Movement’, pro-Russian NGOs (i.e., ‘Eurasia Choice’, ‘Institute of Eurasia’), and media outlets, such as ‘Alt-Info’, ‘Sezoni TV’, and ‘Obieqtivi’. Pro-Russian NGOs and media outlets are actively utilising various social media platforms to promote their propaganda narratives. However, since Meta restricted such organisations’ activities on Facebook,¹⁴ their preferred platforms have become TikTok and Telegram, which offer limited to no moderation or fact-checking practices. Most notably, Meta has been actively removing pages, accounts and groups guilty of spreading disinformation.

The variety and prevalence of pro-Russian disinformation narratives raises the question—what has been Georgian government’s response to this disinformation? The government of Georgia has to an extent acknowledged the challenge of disinformation in its political statements and strategic documents, and some relevant departments have been established in the frameworks of various public agencies, but official activities aimed against malign actions lack resources and inter-agency coordination, while proactive and preventive initiatives remain even more problematic (Tsitsikashvili 2019).

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According to a Transparency International report, the government does not cooperate with civil society organisations or media (Tsetskhladze 2023), which should be their main allies in this field. Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, the very fact that key disinformation narratives have at times been incorporated in the messages of government representatives raises numerous questions in terms of the Georgian government’s determination to fight against disinformation.

Conclusion

Analysis of pro-Russian disinformation narratives spread after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that even though the general aims of demonising the West in the eyes of the Georgian population and emphasising claimed benefits of closer relations with Russia have stayed the same, the content of these disinformation narratives has changed since after the start of the invasion. More emphasis has been placed on spreading disinformation about the Western aims in Ukraine and accusing the West of trying to drag Georgia into the war, aiming to justify Russia’s actions in Ukraine and present the Kremlin as the one being forced to react to the brutality of Kyiv and provocations from NATO.

Even though we see a very quick adaptation of pro-Russian disinformation narratives to new realities and an abundance of both disinformation messages and channels in Georgia, it remains a question how large the impact of these efforts has been. In a 2022 opinion poll, 91% of respondents put full responsibility of the war in Ukraine on Russia, and 84% of respondents referred to Russia as ‘an enemy’ (Sakevarishvili 2022). At the same time, pro-Western sentiments remain strong in Georgian society. An opinion poll by the International Republican Institute (2023) shows that 89% of Georgians either ‘fully support’ or ‘somewhat support’ joining the European Union. Thus, recent opinion polls do not seem to reflect a significant impact of pro-Russian disinformation narratives at the societal level. However, the long-term impact of such persistent efforts, especially in the context of lacking systematized state-level counteractions, remains to be seen.

12 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

13 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023); ‘უკრაინაში მართლმადიდებელ ეკლესიას არბევენ’, FactCheck, 13 June 2017, <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/29123-ukrainashi-marthmadidebel-eklesias-arbeven> (accessed 7 August 2023).

14 Facebook deletes pages, groups related to pro-Russian media outlet Alt-Info, Agenda.ge, 28 February 2022, <https://www.agenda.ge/en/news/2022/458> (accessed 8 August 2023).

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An Impact of the Influx of Russians in Georgia

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the regional security environment, increasing insecurity in the Black Sea region. It has also sparked unprecedented tensions in Georgia, where, on the one hand, a majority of the society is supportive of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, but on the other, the government has been restoring some ties with Moscow. The unprecedented flow of Russian citizens into Georgia has caused a heightened sense of dissatisfaction among Georgians and raised security concerns, as well as the country's increasing economic dependence on Moscow. This article analyses security, political and economic implications of the influx of Russians in Georgia. The paper concludes that short-term economic benefits do not outweigh the political and security implications, which may also negatively affect Georgia's prospects for European integration.

Introduction

For decades, Georgia, as a first victim of post-Soviet Russia's full-scale aggression, has been facing a myriad of complex security challenges and has been constantly targeted by Russia through both conventional and unconventional means, including disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has revived dramatic memories of the August War of 2008 in Georgian society; hence, the solidarity towards the Ukrainian people has been very high since the beginning of the war. However, the war has also turned the country into a hub for Russians seeking shelter from their own government as Russia's war against Ukraine escalates further.

The motivation of Russians emigrating to Georgia since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine differs. Some seek to build more comfortable lives, refusing to live under sanctions, while others fear the mobilisation and do not wish to directly engage in Putin's war against Ukraine. There are also those who are against the regime and were forced to leave their country; however, the number of Russians deciding to move to Georgia dramatically increased after Putin's announcement of partial mobilisation in September 2022. According to survey data, most migrants cited the political situation in Russia as the main reason for leaving the country; the war in Ukraine was mentioned as the second most important reason. Partial mobilisation was mentioned as the main reason by 33% of Russian migrants in Georgia; more male respondents named this as their main reason for leaving the country compared to women (Krawatzek et al. 2023). While the exact number of Rus-

sian migrants that Georgia has received since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine remains unknown, in 2022 Russian citizens accounted for the largest group of people entering Georgia.¹ Such an unprecedented influx of Russians into Georgia has increased societal tensions, as well as the dissatisfaction of citizens towards government policies with regard to this issue. According to a poll by the International Republican Institute conducted in April 2022, 83% of Georgians see Russia as an economic threat, while 66% of Georgians support the introduction of a visa regime for Russian citizens.²

A Balancing Act?

The Russian President Vladimir Putin has always seen Georgia as falling within Russia's sphere of influence. Since Georgia started to openly declare its aspirations to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), Russia has been using a variety of measures to keep Tbilisi under control. Russia's full-scale war against Georgia in 2008, involving military intervention as well as the use of hybrid tools such as cyber warfare, turned out to be a prelude for Putin's further military interventions in Ukraine. As a result of the war, Georgia currently has 20% of its territory occupied by Russia—including Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia that were recognised by Russia as independent since the August War of 2008. Yet, the Kremlin also uses various tools to exert further pressure, such as 'borderisation', which entails gradual occupation of the country through illegally pushing its borders and grabbing more land, as well as anti-Western disinformation to shift societal perceptions and economic pressure,

1 'Russians make largest group that entered Georgia in 2022', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/04/28/7399789/> (accessed 20 September 2023).

2 International Republican Institute (IRI) Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia, March 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia/> (accessed 20 September 2023).

such as the imposition of an embargo and banning the export of certain Georgian products to increase Georgia's dependency on Russia (Seskuria 2019).

The war in Ukraine has placed the Georgian government in an uncomfortable position, and its response to the ongoing Russian aggression has made Georgia's relations with its Western partners more complicated. Since the announcement of Western sanctions against Russia, the Georgian government has argued against joining in due to economic damage that it may inflict on itself as well as its existing security threats. In fact, throughout 2022, Russia has remained one of the main trading partners of Georgia, with US\$2.49 billion external trade turnover, as well as one of Tbilisi's top export countries with US\$651.6 million turnover.³ On the other hand, the Georgian government has stressed that it is playing a balancing act by pointing at Georgia's votes in favour of Ukraine in all UN resolutions and its compliance with international sanctions.

Yet, Georgian citizens have grown increasingly frustrated as Russian emigrants have started to dominate the streets of Tbilisi. According to the recent opinion polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center, 69% of Georgians are concerned that the influx of Russians since the beginning of the war in Ukraine will negatively impact Georgia. Many citizens have demanded the imposition of strict visa regulations on Russians limiting their stay up to a few months.⁴ Currently, Russian citizens are able to remain in Georgia up to a year; however, at that point they can simply leave Georgia for a few hours and immediately re-enter the country for another year. The President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, has suggested that there was a need to review the current liberal visa policy towards Russians.⁵

These sentiments have increased further due to the additional influx of Russians following Putin's announcement of a partial mobilisation in Russia to escalate the war in Ukraine. Western sanctions on Russia, as well as the flight ban for Russian airlines, left Russians with very limited choices in terms of escape routes. Due to its proximity and shared border, liberal visa regime and friendliness towards entrepreneurs due to low levels of bureaucracy, Georgia has turned out to

be one of the most popular destinations. Almost immediately after the announcement of the mobilisation, the Georgian–Russian border was overwhelmed by Russian emigrants. In the week after the announcement alone, more than 50,000 Russian citizens crossed the border into Georgia; since then, some have returned to Russia or used Georgia as a transit route to other countries, but many more have arrived to Georgia since. Yet, the government has abstained from introducing any new regulations, and has increasingly argued in favour of the economic benefits that Russian 'tourism' brings to Georgia (Parulava 2022).

Economic and Security Implications

That there has been a positive economic effect of the influx of Russians into Georgia is beyond a doubt, especially given the broader economic context of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a 9.3% decline in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 and a sharp rebound to above pre-pandemic levels in 2021, Georgia's GDP in 2022 increased by a further 10.1% compared to previous year.⁶ Such unprecedented growth was largely due to the arrival of Russians into Georgia, who brought their savings to the country and increased consumption. According to the National Bank of Georgia, in 2022, more than US\$2 billion was transferred from Russia to Georgia, this being the main reason behind the unprecedented economic boost that the country has experienced.⁷ Remittances from Russia also sharply increased in 2022, reaching US\$2.068 billion, which was five times higher than in the previous year.⁸ The short-term economic boost is clear; however, this is not a sustainable way to grow the economy. If Russians decide to leave Georgia en masse one day, this may have a considerable shock effect on the Georgian economy.

According to a report by Transparency International, Georgia's economic dependence on Russia increased further in 2022. Growing dependence on Russia raises security and political concerns. Georgia has repeatedly become a victim of Russian attempts to weaponise such dependency. The Kremlin has a history of using economic leverage against Tbilisi: between 2006 and 2013, Russia introduced a trade embargo against Georgia that targeted the import of Georgian wine and sparkling water across Russia.

3 'Turkey, Russia, China Georgia's top trading partners in 2022', *Agenda.ge*, 20 January 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/223> (accessed 8 August 2023).

4 Caucasus Barometer, NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/> (accessed 8 August 2023).

5 'Georgian President calls for visa requirement for Russian citizens after Kremlin revokes visas for Georgian nationals', *Agenda.ge*, 10 May 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/1836> (accessed 20 September 2023).

6 'Georgia's GDP Up by 10.1% in 2022', *Civil.ge*, 22 March 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/532918> (accessed 8 August 2023).

7 'Georgia's National Bank Says More Than \$2 Billion Was Transferred From Russia Last Year', Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 17 January 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-2-billion-russian-bank-transfers/32227284.html> (accessed 20 September 2023).

8 'Record \$2 billion+ transferred from Russia to Georgia in 2022', JAMnews, 17 January 2023, <https://jam-news.net/record-money-transfers-from-russia/> (accessed 8 August 2023).

Despite the government insisting that Georgians can profit from the Russian migrants, life has become much more expensive for citizens. The immediate effect of the increased migration flow has been most obviously reflected in Tbilisi property prices, which immediately spiked. According to a real estate sector study published by the National Bank of Georgia, average flat prices in Tbilisi increased by an amazing 46% between early 2022 and September 2022. Additionally, it should be mentioned that those cost of living increases most directly related to the influx of Russians (and not mainly to broader war-related economic issues), most notably rent and food price increases, have particularly affected low-income Georgians.⁹

In the meantime, Russian migrants are increasingly trying to build new lives and settle in Georgia. According to the recent data, in total there are 17,000 registered Russian companies in Georgia. It is noteworthy that half of these companies have been registered since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine.¹⁰

Apart from economic factors, Georgians are also worried about broader security and political implications. Russian aggression represents one of the most pressing security challenges for Georgia. Despite the Kremlin's ongoing war effort in Ukraine, Russia has continued its 'borderisation' policy towards Georgia. Thus, the unwelcoming approach of Georgians towards Russian immigrants is a much-expected sentiment. In the aftermath of the announcement of the partial mobilisation, Georgian border guards had to turn some Russians away as they were trying to cross the border carrying pro-war 'Z' symbols (Parulava 2022). This indicates that some of the Russian migrants may support Putin's imperial ambitions, and fuels the public perception in Georgia that such migrants may also have supported Russia's war against Georgia and the subsequent occupation of its territories.

Most importantly, the rapprochement with Russia by maintaining very liberal visa regulations and relaunching direct flights with Russia may alienate Georgia from its allies and partners, who have repeatedly criticised Georgia's current position. Ironically, Russia's war against Ukraine has opened an unprecedented window of opportunity for Georgia to deepen partnerships

with its Western allies and, most importantly, to receive EU candidate status (alongside Ukraine and Moldova). However, despite Georgia once being a frontrunner in its efforts to implement necessary reforms and advance on a European path, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Tbilisi failed to receive candidate status in summer 2022. Simultaneously, pro-Russian propaganda narratives, also promoted by some of the representatives of the ruling party, have been stressing the idea that the West wants to open up a second military front in Georgia in order to weaken Russia.

With a massive influx of Russians, Georgia becomes even more vulnerable towards pro-Russian propaganda (i.e., pushing pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives) and disinformation through Russian agents of influence, who may also provide assistance to radical groups. For many years now, the Kremlin has been investing resources to drive Georgia away from its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, divide Georgian society and support an anti-Western agenda. Now, it is highly likely that Russia has more security service agents on the ground than ever before given the greatly increased number of Russians in Georgia, even if this number also includes many Russian activists, journalists, and other anti-regime exiles (Lomsadze 2022). This creates security risks not only for Georgians, but also for those opposition-minded Russians who moved to Georgia prior to the beginning of the war due to being targeted by the foreign agent law in Russia.

Additionally, such a rapid influx of Russians runs the risk of eventually contributing to increasing the crime rate in Georgia. Poorer Russians without the means to open their own businesses as well as those without Georgian language skills may in the long-term struggle to find employment in Georgia, presenting the risk that some may feel forced to turn to illegal means of survival.

Restoration of Flights

Tensions have flared up even further with the recent decision of Russian President Putin to restore direct flights with Georgia and abolish Russia's visa regime for Georgians.¹¹ In 2019, Putin decided to ban direct flights to Georgia in order to inflict damage on the Georgian economy and punish the country for anti-Kremlin protests

9 'National Bank of Georgia says demand on residential real estate on rise', *Agenda.ge*, 21 February 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/745#:~:text=The%20NBG%20also%20said%20the,the%20Vake%20district%20of%20Tbilisi> (accessed 8 August 2023); 'How the war in Ukraine affects the real estate market in Georgia', *JAMnews*, 28 November 2022, <https://jam-news.net/how-the-war-in-ukraine-affects-the-real-estate-market-in-georgia/> (accessed 18 September 2023).

10 'Transparency International—Georgia: A total of 17,000 Russian companies are registered in Georgia, and more than half of them were registered after the start of the war in Ukraine', *Interpressnews*, 8 November 2022, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/122431-transparency-international-georgia-a-total-of-17000-russian-companies-are-registered-in-georgia-and-more-than-half-of-them-were-registered-after-the-start-of-the-war-in-ukraine> (accessed 8 August 2023).

11 'Russia Abolishes Visa Regime and Lifts Ban on Airline Flights with Georgia Starting May 15', *Civil.ge*, 10 May 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/541553#:~:text=The%20decree%20%23335%20signed%20today,educational%20purposes%2C%20the%20document%20says.> (accessed 22 September 2023).

that took place in Tbilisi. Many Georgians are now urging their government not to allow Russian flights to land on Georgian soil due to the reputational damage this may cause to the country, as well as the potential imposition of Western sanctions on Georgia. Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU countries have banned Russian airlines from landing on EU soil. Georgia is not an EU member state; however, as a country that is hoping to receive EU candidate status soon, Tbilisi is expected to align with EU policies as much as possible (Katamadze 2023). The European Commission report on Georgia's application for EU membership notes that Georgia needs to make more efforts to increase its alignment with EU statements and decisions when it comes to foreign and security policy (European Commission 2023).

In order to de-escalate these tensions, the Georgian government immediately clarified that only those carriers that are not under Western sanctions are allowed to operate between the two countries. Georgian Airways has also launched direct flights with Russia. This decision prompted the Ukrainian Government to include the airline, as well as its chairman, in its sanctions list. Soon after the restoration of flights, the Georgian company announced an even more controversial plan to launch transit flights from Moscow to Nice via Tbilisi and allow Russians to travel to Europe more comfortably.¹²

Despite the fact that Georgia has tried so far to operate flights below the Western sanctions' threshold, the controversial decision to relaunch flights has been criticised by EU representatives. EU foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano clarified that this decision raises concerns over Georgia's European path and commitment to align with EU foreign policy as set forth by the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU. The tim-

ing of Putin's surprise decision is also quite important. Currently, Russia needs to prove that it still has allies. Given Georgia's ongoing bid for EU candidacy status, the Kremlin's sudden 'gift' of cancelling the visa regime followed by Georgia's decision to allow direct flights sets the scene well for diminishing chances of Georgia succeeding in its European aspirations.

Conclusion

The unprecedented influx of Russians into Georgia resulting from Russia's full-scale of Ukraine in 2022 has sparked political debates about Georgia's standing with regard to the war in Ukraine and its commitment to advance on its European and Euro-Atlantic integration paths. The controversial decision to allow Russians to settle in Georgia and, more recently, to restore flights with Moscow has widened the gap between the Georgia's government and its citizens. It has also further intensified tensions between Georgia and its Western allies. At a time when Western democracies are trying to cut their links with Russia, if Georgia wants to politically align with the West, Tbilisi should decrease its trade links with Russia, which in any case has never offered true economic stability to Georgia.

Despite a bumpy road, Georgia still has an opportunity to receive EU candidate status; however, any mixed messages, and certainly any attempts to tighten ties with Russia, will ultimately isolate Tbilisi and deprive it of support from its allies. As Ukraine is fighting an existential war, Georgia has an important decision to make. Any attempts at playing a balancing act between Moscow and the West would end in falling into the Russian trap, which would include deepening political and economic dependency on Moscow and cutting Georgia off from the European and Euro-Atlantic path.

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¹² 'From Moscow to Nice via Tbilisi—Georgian Airways opens transit flights for Russians', *JAMnews*, 5 July 2023, <https://jam-news.net/transit-flights-from-moscow-to-nice/> (accessed 8 August 2023).

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Unwrapping the Georgian Government's Reluctance to Align with EU Recommendations

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Abstract

The Russian full-scale war against Ukraine has significantly influenced the European Union's decision to expedite the accession process for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. While Ukraine and Moldova obtained candidate status, Georgia received the 'European perspective', with the condition that it can become a candidate once specific criteria are fulfilled. This article examines the Georgian government's hesitance in taking advantage of this opportunity and implementing the reforms requested by the European Commission. The article offers a perspective on why the Georgian government might be hindering the EU integration process, making the argument that pursuing the required reforms to meet EU criteria could potentially undermine the ruling party's absolute power.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) responded to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine by accelerating the accession process for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. However, Georgia has encountered difficulties in fully aligning with the EU's core principles, encompassing human rights, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. Consequently, the European Commission recommended granting Georgia a 'perspective to become a member of the European Union' and granting candidate status once it implements the 12 EU recommendations by the fall of 2023. These recommendations include political depolarization, emphasizing collaboration between the government and its political opposition, de-oligarchisation (which involves dismantling the vested influences on the nation's political, economic and social life), ensuring the independence of state institutions, implementing judicial reforms, combating corruption, promoting media independence, protecting vulnerable groups' rights, and fostering gender equality, among others (European Commission 2022).

Nonetheless, the Georgian government has been slow in aligning with the EU recommendations. The first EU candidacy assessment, conducted by eight organisations under the leadership of the Open Society Georgia Foundation, indicated that in the period ending April 2023, the government had mainly fulfilled only two criteria: promoting gender equality and fighting against organised crime (Open Society Georgia Foundation 2023a). The second and third assessments revealed that the government had made limited progress, but all requirements other than the previously mentioned two remained partly or completely unfulfilled (Open Society Georgia Foundation 2023b, 2023c).

This article offers potential reasons behind the Georgian government's hesitancy to fully engage in the EU integration process. The argument within posits that the government's hesitation may arise from concerns that the adoption of essential reforms to meet EU criteria could potentially undermine the ruling party's uncontested authority.

The Rationale behind the EU's Recommendations

Fulfilling the EU recommendations extends beyond mere conditions for EU accession. It aims to create a framework protecting ordinary people from government abuse of power, strengthening the nation's bid to transform into a European society where the fostering of prosperity and security for its citizens prevails. Correspondingly, the European Commission's call for reforms highlights the evident problems.

The first recommendation focused on resolving political polarisation in Georgia stemming from heightened tensions between the ruling party and the opposition. This polarisation has resulted in political instability, undermining the effectiveness of state institutions and diverting attention from serving the people's needs, ultimately leading to societal division. The political crisis reached its peak following the 2020 parliamentary elections. While opposition parties held 60 seats, the ruling party secured a majority of 90 seats, thereby enabling them to shape legislation, implement their policy agenda, and govern the country with relative ease. However, allegations of election fraud by the opposition exacerbated the situation, leading to opposition candidates refusing to participate in parliamentary activities and sparking street protests by thousands of their supporters.¹ In an effort to de-escalate the political crisis, European Council President Charles Michel intervened in Georgia, bringing both sides to the negotiation table and facilitating the signing of the EU-led pact of cooperation.² However, the enforced peace did not last long, and the country continued to experience one political crisis after another. Evident manifestations of this persistent issue were seen in the imprisonment of opposition journalist Nika Gvaramia, who was later pardoned by President Salome Zourabichvili,³ and controversies arising from allegations that the government was responsible for the inadequate medical care provided to imprisoned former president and opposition party leader Mikheil Saakashvili.⁴

Another EU requirement focuses on the autonomy of state institutions, encompassing both the judiciary and anti-corruption bodies. Autonomous state institutions play a pivotal role in monitoring and balancing government authority, thereby promoting transparency,

efficiency, and accountability (Verdzeuli 2022). However, Transparency International states that Georgia's political system is characterised by a notable consolidation of power within a single political faction, leading to an excessive sway over all major public institutions. For instance, in the period leading up to the 2015–2016 parliamentary elections, numerous meetings occurred between influential judges and high-ranking government officials. These meetings resulted in the development of a tacit understanding of non-interference and mutual support between the 'Georgian Dream' party and the so-called group of 'loyal judges' aligned with the government. Transparency International's report also asserted that by the end of Georgian Dream's second term in office, the evidence had accumulated to suggest that corruption in Georgia had evolved into 'state capture', defined as 'a situation where powerful individuals, institutions, companies, or groups, whether from within or outside a country, exploit corruption to shape a nation's policies, legal framework, and economy for their own private interests'.⁵

This concern raises a crucial topic highlighted in the EU recommendations: the process of de-oligarchisation, which aims to diminish the sway of powerful individuals over politics and the economy while promoting economic growth and equitable resource distribution. As noted by the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, oligarchic influence in Georgia manifests as a combination of wielding political power without a proper mandate and unduly influencing parliament, government, the judiciary, and law enforcement bodies, resulting in unfair competition, corruption, and the manipulation of public policy to serve the interests of a select few rather than the broader population (Venice Commission 2022). Transparency International identified oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili as being responsible for the aforementioned processes in Georgia.⁶

As addressed by the Venice Commission (2022), one significant issue concerning oligarchisation is the control of mass media, which led to another recommendation by the European Commission regarding the need for a pluralistic media environment in Georgia. The European Parliament's 2022 resolution highlighted numerous instances of media freedom violations and threats to jour-

1 'Georgian opposition vows 'biggest ever' protests, decries vote fraud', EURACTIVE, 1 November 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/georgian-opposition-vows-biggest-ever-protests-decries-vote-fraud/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

2 'Michel's mediation in Georgia revealed', EURACTIVE, 5 July 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/michels-mediation-in-georgia-revealed/> (accessed 4 September 2023).

3 'Noted Georgian Journalist Gvaramia Sentenced to Lengthy Prison Term', Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 16 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-gvaramia-prison-sentence-corruption/31852799.html> (accessed 4 September 2023).

4 'Georgia: Reconsider Mikheil Saakashvili's Release on Medical Grounds', Human Rights Watch, 2 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/02/georgia-reconsider-mikheil-saakashvilis-release-medical-grounds> (accessed 4 September 2023).

5 'Is Georgia a Captured State?', Transparency International, 11 December 2020, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state> (accessed 4 September 2023).

6 'Is Georgia a Captured State?', Transparency International, 11 December 2020, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state> (accessed 4 September 2023).

nalists' safety in the country.⁷ One such significant event took place during 'Tbilisi Pride' in July 2021, where journalists encountered multiple instances of violence and the police forces made minimal efforts to protect them.⁸

Finally, another prominent concern emphasised in the EU recommendations pertains to the necessity of a vibrant and engaged civil society, which plays a crucial role in democratic governance. Currently, numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operate in the country, representing the interests of civil society and serving as government watchdogs. However, the ruling party harbours animosity towards these organisations. In 2023, they became the primary targets of the government's proposed 'foreign agent bill', which, although not ultimately passed, aimed to marginalise NGOs in Georgia. Those organisations receiving foreign grants, even from Georgian allies and partners like the EU and US, would have been forced to register as foreign agents and disclose finances annually, potentially facilitating state oppression and reinforcing the narrative that these NGOs prioritise foreign interests over those of their own country (Gabrichidze 2023).

Thus, the implementation of the EU recommendations in Georgia could foster transparency, accountability, and democratic values, leading to more inclusive and responsive governance. The government's reluctance to fulfil these criteria raises questions about their true commitment to the well-being of the citizens, and whether their primary aim is indeed to consolidate absolute power.

The Government's Apprehension in Letting Go of Absolute Power

The theory of political democracy describes undemocratic governance as a system that forsakes the importance of checks and balances, leading to the accumulation of absolute authority in the hands of one entity. This enables the ruling party to maintain their rule indefinitely (Rosanvallon 2019). The accusations of undemocratic actions by the Georgian government, including the exertion of oligarchic influence, manipulation of the judiciary with loyal judges, suppression of civil society, and restriction of media pluralism, suggest an attempt to consolidate absolute power, eroding the system of checks and balances. This fosters the perspective that the government's reluctance to meet EU criteria stems from its unwillingness to jeopardize its absolute control over state institutions and its sources of power.

According to the EU candidacy assessment conducted by the Open Society Georgia Foundation, de-

oligarchisation, political depolarisation, electoral and institutional reforms, and fostering a pluralistic media environment are the most crucial aspects of a free society which the government struggles to fulfil (Open Society Georgia Foundation 2023c). As a matter of fact, in 2012, the ruling party's electoral victory was significantly aided by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who subsequently assumed the role of Prime Minister. In 2021, the European Parliament's Research Service published a report emphasising that despite Ivanishvili stepping down as prime minister in 2013, his continued informal influence over public institutions remains a major obstacle to democratic functioning (Russell 2021).

The impact of this oligarchic influence is evident in the appointment of individuals associated with Ivanishvili to key state positions even after his departure. For instance, the country's current Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, has been affiliated with Ivanishvili's 'Cartu Bank' since 2004. Likewise, Grigol Luluashvili, the head of the State Security Service, has previously held significant roles in companies owned by Ivanishvili (Ghogoberidze 2023). Hence, requesting de-oligarchisation from the ruling party, whose foundation was built by and whose continuing support comes from the oligarch, essentially implies assigning themselves the task of deconstructing the very system that sustains their power.

Moreover, institutional and electoral reforms encompass the government's responsibility to abstain from exerting influence over specific entities, such as the Election Administration of Georgia or the judiciary. Nevertheless, in recent years, the government has faced allegations of manipulating parliamentary elections to secure a majority (Fix/ Kapp 2023) and appointing corrupt judges to the Supreme Court who display allegiance to the ruling party.⁹ Demanding the government ensure fair elections and reform the judiciary can be perceived as urging them to put their own position at risk — as the saying goes, 'take a saw to the branch they are sitting on'.

Moving on to the next criteria, pluralistic media environment and de-polarisation, it is evident that these do not align with the government's interests. Media outlets aligned with the opposition are demonised by 'Georgian Dream' because they act as a mirror, reflecting the government's wrongdoings and creating public awareness about them. Moreover, the government portrays the opposition as a threatening entity, implying that their intent is to promote chaos and destabilisation. The opposition is held responsible for any unrest

7 'European Parliament resolution of 9 June 2022 on violations of media freedom and the safety of journalists in Georgia', https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0239_EN.html (accessed 4 August 2023).

8 'Georgia: Mass violence against journalists covering Tbilisi Pride', International Press Institute, 5 July 2021, <https://ipi.media/georgia-mass-violence-against-journalists-covering-tbilisi-pride/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

9 'Georgian Judges Sanctioned by US State Department Speak Out Against Accusations', Civil Georgia, 6 April 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/536258> (accessed 5 August 2023).

in the country. For instance, when the Georgian government hesitated to apply for EU candidacy, leading to massive demonstrations, government Officials blamed the opposition for fuelling the unrest, though it was in reality the unbiased will of the Georgian people to have their call for Europe heard (Gegeshidze/ de Waal 2021). Therefore, the anticipation of political depolarisation from the ruling party implies expecting them to forsake the politically advantageous 'image of the enemy' they have constructed of the opposition to suppress their adversaries. However, these opposition groups are also, if inadvertently, contributing to the government's strategy and thus share responsibility for the political crisis in the country (Smolnik et al. 2021). For instance, a significant public majority perceives that opposition parties are not acting in the country's best interests.¹⁰ In the end, this appears to be a never-losing game for the ruling party.

Never-Losing Game of Government?

In June 2022, the Georgian people made their aspirations resoundingly clear as tens of thousands of people took to the streets in a powerful rally, demanding the country's membership in the European Union.¹¹ This display of unity and determination reflected the desire of the Georgian population to align their nation with the values and opportunities offered by the EU. Their European inclination received further validation through the findings of the Caucasus Barometer 2023, which indicated that 82% of Georgians support the country joining the EU.¹²

The deteriorating public trust in the government exacerbates the situation, as there has been a noticeable decline in confidence that the government prioritises the people's interests.¹³ The government's propaganda rhetoric, whether blaming the EU for punishing Georgia due to its reluctance to engage in another conflict with Russia to aid Ukraine or pointing fingers at opposition groups for working against the country's interests, fails to absolve them of their responsibility for Georgia's stalled EU integration.¹⁴

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Nonetheless, the statistics demonstrate that the ruling party continues to enjoy more public support than the opposition groups.¹⁵ The public's aversion to the main opposition party appears to be once again tilting the scales in favour of the ruling party in the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.¹⁶ The government, sensing limited pressure from the public to continue on the country's integration path, apparently does not fear losing enough electoral support to endanger its absolute majority in parliament, especially when state institutions are under its control. Consequently, one might wonder why the ruling party would reject the practice of consolidating absolute power over EU candidacy.

Ultimately, it is the Georgian people who stand to lose if Georgia does not advance toward EU integration. Thus, Georgians must assert their role in shaping their country's European future and ensure EU integration by reminding their government that they are the ones who truly rule Georgia.

Conclusion

Georgia stands at a critical juncture regarding its EU candidacy, a pivotal moment with the potential to shape its European future or lead to further regression into undemocratic governance. Despite the clear and resounding support of the Georgian people for EU membership, this has so far not resulted in sufficient pressure to compel the government to fully adhere to EU recommendations. A choice must now be made between aligning with the will of the people, or persisting in the pursuit of absolute power. The ruling party so far appears to prioritize its authority over the will of the people.

Therefore, civil society should, through all available means, compel the government to pursue candidate status under the threat of taking away its power. Achieving harmony between the aspirations of the people and the actions of the government remains crucial in determining Georgia's future trajectory.

¹⁰ Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2023, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/codebook/> (accessed 7 August 2023).

¹¹ 'Tens of thousands rally in Tbilisi to demand EU membership', Euronews, 20 June 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/06/20/georgia-tens-of-thousands-rally-in-tbilisi-to-demand-eu-membership> (accessed 7 August 2023).

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