



Feature Article
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Anatomy of Georgia's U-Turn towards Russia

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The recent civil protests against the draft law on “agents of foreign influence” in Georgia raised serious questions about the country’s European aspirations. German Foreign minister Annalena Boerbock, who visited Tbilisi on March 23-24, first met with the Georgian civil society to underline her support to NGOs, which had just won a round against the Government of Georgia. Indeed, Georgia is at a crossroads, as many times before; however, this time, ruling oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili is close to undertaking a u-turn that would distance Georgia from the West and put in Moscow’s lap. It is comparable to what Viktor Yanukovich unsuccessfully tried to do in 2013 in Ukraine. However, unlike Ukraine, Georgia’s u-turn is longer, more fundamental and covertly implemented. The March 6-9 public protests prevented Georgian Dream from passing the Russian-type law, but the u-turn is still underway and in full gear.

During the first years of his rule, Bidzina Ivanishvili carefully hid his intentions by including in his coalition well-known pro-Western politicians and diplomats who spoke English and French and delivered messages that the EU and U.S. wanted to hear. However, from 2014 to 2020, Ivanishvili’s coalition partners known for their Western credentials either left the Georgian Dream coalition or were kicked out. The list includes Free Demo-



crats, Republicans, individual MPs, a former and a current President, two former prime ministers, a foreign minister and a vice-speaker, who all parted ways because of disagreements on

the country’s democratic agenda and foreign orientation. By 2020, a strong party vertical and personal allegiance to Ivanishvili had solidified to the extent that when told to do so, MPs are ready to support a draft bill one day and vote down the same bill down the next day. This is

what happened on the draft law on “agents of foreign influence”.

The U-Turn

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ivanishvili was compelled to make a choice between Ukraine and the West, on one hand, and Russia on the other. He opted for a Russia-leaning position. While Georgia has voted with the West in largely symbolic votes in international organizations, Georgia decided not to join European sanctions against Russia. More worrying, Georgia's PM on numerous occasions criticized Ukraine for being reckless and invoking Russia's aggression. In a funny episode, Georgia's Parliament passed a resolution about Russia's invasion of Ukraine that failed to mention Russia by name even once. Georgian Dream politicians started attacking those European politicians who were pointing out that Georgia had an opportunity for European integration.

Russia's Foreign Minister, Duma MPs, and propagandists have consistently praised Georgia's ability to “resist the West.” In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even proposed to reinstate direct flights with Georgia, something Georgian Dream politicians never challenged. The official response was that because it was Russia that suspended the flights, it needs to be Russia that should restore them. Propaganda channels depicted a picture, in which if the West trades with Russia and buys Russian oil, why should Georgians not be able to fly directly to Moscow? Never mind that no European country has direct air connections with Moscow anymore.

The U-Turn became very tangible in the Spring of 2022, when the director of the critical TV channel Mtavari, Nika Gvaramia, was arrested over an absurd charge of misusing the company's car for family purposes. Nobody has ever been arrested over a similar charge in Georgia. The timing of the arrest made many Georgians and Europeans wonder whether this was done on purpose – right before the decision of the European Commission on whether to recommend granting candidate status for Georgia (together with Ukraine and Moldova). Following the arrest, the European Commission and, subsequently, the European Council, decided to defer the decision on a candidacy until the end of 2023. Georgia was given 12 conditions to rectify its actions in order to obtain candidate status like Moldova and Ukraine.

The U-Turn became further evident in the treatment of the ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, who smuggled himself back to Georgia in October 2021 ahead of local elections, got arrested, went on a hunger strike, and suffered from various illnesses in prison. This led to dramatic weight loss and rapidly advancing dementia. British and American doctors concluded that he had been poisoned with arsenic and heavy metals and warned that his health cannot improve in the Vivamedi clinic, where he is held now. Saakashvili, who led Georgia in resistance against Vladimir Putin's aggression in 2008, is viewed by many as a symbol of anti-Putinism in the post-Soviet world and beyond. The appeal of President Zelenskyi to release Saakashvili and the attempts of the EU leaders to transfer him to a Western hospital have been rejected by Ivanishvili and his party leadership as preposterous interventions into Georgia's domestic policies.

Keeping Saakashvili in jail is part of a wider strategy that Ivanishvili now employs – to demonize political opponents, weaken and divide them, and keep the political agenda and information channels occupied with issues that don't affect the daily lives of ordinary people.

The U-Turn was solidified with the proposed foreign agents draft bill, which is taken directly from the Russian playbook. The law, if passed, would have labeled all NGOs and media that receive more than 20 percent of their finances from foreign sources as agents of foreign influence. Civil society organizations would have to report their finances and spending, and the Ministry of Justice would receive an instrument to regularly monitor the work of NGOs. Such monitoring could even be triggered by an anonymous allegation. Georgians, who suffered significantly the anti-foreign-agents mania under Stalin and Beria, when anonymous reports could lead to sudden arrests, did not respond well to this law and protested vehemently. Mr. Ivanishvili, who is known for playing the long game and whose u-turn is more prolonged and slower, backed down to fight another day. The law was withdrawn, as the Government got frightened of protesting youth, civil society organizations, media, and opposition (in that order).

However, unlike Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich, whose short-lived u-turn was reversed by a public uprising that became the Euromaidan, Georgian Dream continues to finalize its u-turn towards Russia, a trend that is projected to pick up its speed in the 18 months ahead, until October 2024, when Georgia is scheduled to have Parliamentary elections.

EU Conditionality Does not Suit Ivanishvili

It appears that Mr. Ivanishvili has realized that for him to stay in power, he must ignore EU conditionalities and reforms. The 2024 elections will be held with a fully proportional electoral system, meaning that he needs every second vote. This can only happen if he polarizes society to the extreme, as there is currently no political party that would join Ivanishvili in a coalition. Even his former Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia, whose "For Georgia" party stands a chance to clear 5% barrier, is sending messages that he will not allow Georgian Dream to stay in power. Ivanishvili and his party strategists know very well that the only way he can get over 50 percent of the popular vote is to divide the electorate, use violence, vote-buying and polarization. But if he does that, the EU conditionalities of depolarization (priority 1) and free elections (priority 2) will not be considered fulfilled.

For the game-winning polarization, Mr. Ivanishvili needs to destroy critical media and allow his already strong propaganda channels – Imedi TV and PosTV – to be the only voices heard. The arrest of Mr. Gvaramia almost destroyed TV Mtavari, the second most watched TV in Georgia. TV Pirveli and TV Formula both have ongoing court cases against them. The latter one's founder just lost an appeal in the Court of Appeals, and it appears that he will be stripped of the ownership of TV Formula in the next few months. Free and robust media in the run-up to the 2024 elections is the last thing Mr. Ivanishvili needs. But the EU insists that media freedom is essential to progress on the EU path. Condition

No. 7 for the EU candidacy is that Georgian Dream leaves the media alone and investigates cases of violence against journalists.

Further, to achieve full polarization before the 2024 elections, Georgian Dream must discredit and attack civil society, as Ivanishvili feels that independent watchdogs, fact-checkers, election monitors, and human rights protectors will prevent Georgian Dream from receiving over half of the votes. The Russian-type law on foreign agents was a step in that direction. Despite the law being withdrawn, the Georgian Government has not backed down from attacking NGOs. In fact, the party's leaders announced that the law served its purpose – foreign spies have been identified, and people now know who is, allegedly, undermining the country's interests. Needless to say, the EU's priorities for granting candidate status include priority No. 10 – active engagement of civil society (not its destruction). Incidentally, Georgian Dream has several more instruments in its arsenal, including the verbally declared initiatives on blasphemy and libel and disinformation in media.

To stay in power, Ivanishvili needs subservient courts, its main instrument in the political battle. The Constitutional Court is stacked with pro-Government judges – the main reason why nobody challenged the clearly anti-European law on “foreign agents” as anti-constitutional, in spite of contradicting article 78 of the Constitution, which obliges state institutions to pursue European integration. Ivanishvili's personal lawyer and former Prosecutor general now runs the Supreme Court. TV Formula's owner won court cases in lower instances, but the Supreme Court overturned those decisions. In other words, the prosecutor-general, who lost cases in

the courts, then became the Supreme Court chairman and overturned the cases he had lost. Most politicized judges are part of a so-called “clan,” which takes up all politically important cases. “Clan” leaders were reappointed just recently, despite blatant warnings from Georgia's Western partners, including the Venice Commission. Nika Gvaramia's sentencing, the change of ownership of the previously critical Rustavi-2 TV channel (which has now become a Government propaganda tool), the sentencing of TV Formula's owner, decisions against the founder of TV Pirveli, the arrest and sentencing of Tbilisi's former mayor, the refusal to allow Saakashvili to be treated abroad – all these decisions were secured through loyal judges. Georgian Dream has continuously stacked courts and the High Council of Justice with its party loyalists. Meanwhile, the EU requests fundamental reform of the judiciary – the third priority in the list of 12 conditions imposed in 2012.

The list goes on – the EU requests de-oligarchization, but Georgia is run by an oligarch. The EU demands an independent Ombudsman, but the Georgian Dream approves a loyal opposition politician and demonizes previous, truly independent Ombudsmen as “foreign agents.” The EU requests an independent and strong anti-corruption agency, but the Georgian Prime Minister appoints a loyalist as a head of the agency, with no investigative functions.

Therefore, it is clear that the implementation of the 12 conditionalities directly contradicts Mr. Ivanishvili's need to centralize power and further polarize before 2024. The reforms, if truly implemented, would jeopardize his hold on power. Therefore, in the spirit of covert de-

Europeanization of Georgia, the Georgian Dream has now reverted to geopolitical pragmatic tit-for-tat with the EU. Georgia, the talking points say, deserves the EU candidacy more than Moldova, because the EU needs Georgia for energy transit and the sub-Black Sea electricity line. Thus, drop the democracy agenda and embrace geopolitics. If Georgia is not given candidate status, then the Georgian Dream government implicitly threatens to turn towards Russia overtly. And the EU has a track record of caving to such blackmail – it pampered Moldova's oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, afraid that he would turn to Moscow if he was not embraced. Such an approach prolonged Plahotniuc's tenure. Ivanishvili is now desperately embracing a similar strategy.

The “Warmongering EU” vs. the “Peaceful” Georgian Dream

Georgian Dream must have realized by now that Georgia is highly unlikely to be granted EU candidate status without delivering on the 12 priorities. And the government, along with Ivanishvili, clearly fear the likely public reaction to a second refusal. The largest demonstration in the history of Georgia, with over 150,000 people hitting the streets, occurred in July 2022 after it became clear that the European Council did not grant Georgia candidate status. This must have scared even the most loyal Ivanishvili stooges.

Since then, the messaging of Georgian Dream sharpened: it began to argue that the EU, the opposition, the NGOs, and the media want to drag Georgia into a war with Russia. This led to the allegations of outside pressure to “open a second front.” And according to the government, Georgian Dream is currently the only

force preventing this “global war party” from dragging Georgia into conflict with Russia. The message, thus is the following: “dear Georgians, vote for peace and against the EU in 2024.” The penetration of this message, which is now a central line of propaganda in pro-Government TV and social media, is essential to finalization of the U-Turn.

Importantly, Georgian Dream has never had an anti-European election message in the past. In 2012, Ivanishvili supported European integration and vowed to finalize the Association and Free Trade agreements with the EU. In 2016, NATO and the EU were declared government priorities. In 2020, while the Government literally dropped the goal of NATO membership, it made applying for EU membership in 2024 a part of its election campaign. In 2024, by contrast, Ivanishvili will try to finalize what Yanukovich failed to do in 2013 – a u-turn towards Russia backed by Georgian voters.

Thus, the 2024 campaign will be about “peace” and Georgian Dream (in one camp) versus the war, the EU, the opposition, and the NGOs (in the opposing camp). This is the only way Ivanishvili can maintain power. To him, EU conditions are more threatening than Russian tanks. Putin will never ask him to give up power, but the EU is asking him to pass democratic reforms – and that jeopardizes his tenure.

If the Georgian Dream stays in power after 2024, that will be the first time in the history of Georgia that a party or a leader campaigned on an anti-Western message and won. If that happens, the Yanukovich switch will have occurred – ostensibly, with a mandate from the Georgian people.

What the West Can Still Do

The U.S. and the European Union can still stop the u-turn from becoming irreversible. For that, the European Commission needs to make it very clear that unless the 12 conditionalities are implemented, there will be no candidate status. Issuing an ambiguous report, or refraining from making its assessments public and loud, would not be steps that serve the interests of Georgia's European aspiration. Such steps would only strengthen the Oligarch. Any ambiguity will be sold by Georgian Dream's propaganda machine as their success. When EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi visited Georgia, his diplomatic statements about the geopolitical importance of Georgia in terms of transit and energy were sold as a justification of not delivering on the reforms, because Georgia was still important geopolitically, and because Georgia deserved the candidate status anyway.

Second, the U.S. and the European Union could – for the first time – differentiate between the Georgian people and the Georgian government. This is something that French President Emmanuel Macron and German Foreign Minister Boerbeck have done in recent statements about Georgia. This means that if Georgia would still, against all odds, be granted candidate status – as many civil society and opposition leaders are still pushing for – the EU would need to make clear that this decision was the merit of the Georgian people's European aspirations, and not their Government's anti-democratic policies. However, if because of the actions of the Georgian Dream Georgia does not get the candidate

status in the end of 2023, the most productive thing the European Council could do would be to defer the decision on the status until the outcome of the 2024 elections is clear. This would empower pro-European forces to push for the EU and democratization agenda in the run-up to the elections.

In this regard, the United States can also play an important role by vocally supporting the EU's decisions, and engaging directly with Georgia to ensure the integrity of the 2024 elections – much like the U.S. did in the past, when it engaged first with the Shevardnadze government and a decade later with the Saakashvili government for similar purposes.

Thirdly, the U.S. and EU will need to resort to personal sanctions against those individuals who hamper European and Euro-Atlantic integration, violate human rights and are architects of Georgia's Russian u-turn. For instance, the initiators and supporters of the foreign agents law could be subjected to selective sanctions – whether entry bans or the cancellation of official visits. Public statements on this could be a wake-up call to some leaders of the Georgian Dream, for whom U.S. and EU sanctions could be very painful. One of the initiators of the “foreign agents law”, Mr. Viktor Japaridze, also runs the outrageous propaganda channel PosTV, a key tool for fostering anti-Western sentiments. Banning him from entering the EU could be a cold shower for many. A convicted sex offender, propagandist Shalva Ramishvili should also end up on such a no-entry list. Sanctions could also be extended to the clan members running the court system and Mr. Ivanishvili personally.

Finally, unfortunately, it turns out that Georgia still needs babysitting. A second episode of high-level EU mediation in Georgia's politics could be a solution to the looming political crisis in the making. The first attempt by European Council President Charles Michel proved ineffective. However, now the situation is different. Every actor has something to lose, and the EU has a leverage on them. For the Georgian Dream the leverage is the prospect of candidate status. For the United National Movement, the well-being of Mr. Saakashvili is at stake. For the opposition at large and the CSOs, the implementation of the 12 conditionalities would bring an election environment that would be more permissive for clearing the threshold and beating Georgian Dream.



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