

COMMENTARY

Georgia's road ahead: Time for the EU to show some tough love



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Amanda Paul , Iana Maisuradze

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While an EU-brokered deal ended Georgia's political crisis, the country's political polarisation risks impeding its full implementation. It is high time to end the squabbling, put the country first and deliver what Georgian citizens deserve.

The EU-brokered deal reached on 19 April ended Georgia's months-long domestic political standoff. Opposition party members agreed to take their mandated seats in the parliament, which now has a constitutional majority to vote on an amnesty bill and address other political issues. At a time when the EU is short on positive foreign policy stories, this marks an important success. ✕

But signing the deal was one thing, parsing it with the parties giving consistent approaches towards each other and a political culture not particularly open to compromise, implementing the deal may be more difficult. The EU must keep maximum pressure on Georgia's

political elites if the country is not to fall back into turmoil.

Political paralysis

Georgia is a politically polarised country. It has been in a political crisis since the October 2020 parliamentary elections when the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party won a third term. Opposition parties refused to accept the internationally assessed election results and boycotted the new parliament.

The crisis deepened following the February arrest of Nika Melia, leader of the main opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM). He joined his colleague Giorgi Rurua, owner of an opposition-affiliated television station, who was jailed in July 2020. Melia's indictment of inciting violence during the 2019 protests was the latest event in a decade-old feud between the UNM and GD. While the latter sees Melia's incarceration as a fulfilment of its rule of law duties, the former denounced it as state capture. The EU considers this to be the politicisation of justice.

The EU's role

Ever since Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, its goal has been to re-join the West. This is central to its political agenda and is supported across the parties. EU (and NATO) membership is a strategic and popular goal (<https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-april-2019-public-opinion-polls-georgia>), despite the lack of immediate membership perspective. Georgia is currently implementing an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU and is looking to deepen the ties further.

Georgia's desire for closer Euro-Atlantic integration gives the EU important leverage and makes it the natural mediator for the current crisis. The crisis also offers it an opportunity to use this political leverage to resolve a quarrel in a region that is already weighed down by conflict and instability.

The US also played a crucial role. Washington proves to be an equally steadfast friend, helping Georgia shore up its security and democratic transformation. US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly C. Degan worked with the EU hand in glove to bring Georgia's political parties together.

Unfortunately, compromise is not in the political parties' DNA. Georgia is often considered the leader of the EU's Eastern Partnership pack because of its major efforts to align its legislation with EU standards. Nevertheless, it still struggles to consolidate its weak democratic institutions and to ease the Soviet legacies relating to internal power struggles. As the 2021 Freedom House report notes, democratic backsliding (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2021>), including in terms of

freedom of the media and electoral reform – key elements the EU deal – has deteriorated over the past few years.

In early March, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, appointed seasoned Swedish diplomat Christian Danielsson as his special envoy to Georgia. This demonstrates the importance that the EU placed on resolving the political crisis. But two rounds of talks, supported by Washington and Georgian civil society, failed to break the deadlock. The European Parliament also played an important role. Only once a group of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) released a joint statement spelling out that the parties should not expect a return to business as usual with the EU, including financial assistance, did a breakthrough happen.

Barring the UNM, European Georgia and the Labour Party, all the other parties signed the agreement – although some members of the UNM and European Georgia joined the agreement in their individual capacity and agreed to enter the parliament, saying that if no agreement were reached, the only winner would be Russia. The never-ending polarisation works in the Kremlin's favour, as it does not want to see Georgia join NATO nor the EU.

Implementation is key

The deal stipulates that an early parliamentary election must be called in 2022 if GD gets less than 43% in the upcoming local elections. It also sets the rules for power-sharing in the parliament and outlines a plan to raise the vote threshold required to lift parliamentary immunity. Changes to the electoral system – fully proportional parliamentary elections, reforming the Central Election Commission, judicial reform – must also happen. These steps are important because the current system lacks power-sharing tools, meaning that the ruling party governs without constraints. But these reforms will not be easy to implement. Getting the job done will require a constructive attitude and a readiness to compromise from all parties.

While the parliament is now functional with a constitutional majority, the UNM must fully return to the benches as the main opposition party. Around 40 seats still remain vacant in the 150-member legislature. The UNM's return is dependent on how Melia's case will proceed. Although President Salome Zourabichvili pardoned Rurua on 27 April, Melia's situation is proving more difficult.

Melia must be released if Georgia's political turmoil is to cease. There are two options: paying bail or the amnesty bill. Under the first option, he could pay bail and be released immediately. As he deems his arrest to be politically motivated, he refuses this option, despite MEPs offering to pay on his behalf. He claims that he will only accept the EU's offer if the amnesty bill – one of the conditions to fulfil under the 19 April agreement – is not adopted.

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Or, he could be released via the amnesty bill that the parliament is to pass as part of the 19 April agreement. Parliamentary discussions on the law commenced on 27 April. But neither is this option straightforward. Melia opposes amnesty being extended to law enforcement agents who were arrested for violent acts during the 2019 protests. This means that a special clause would have to be added to the law to prevent their release. As it is unclear how long this process will take, some MEPs have offered to act as a guarantor for Melia, which would allow him to be immediately released. It remains to be seen if this will bear fruit.

As long as Melia's case remains in limbo, the implementation of the agreement is in danger. Still, given that amnesty is part of the broader 19 April agreement, it seems unlikely that members of the Georgian parliament would vote against it, as they could risk serious blowback from Georgia's transatlantic partners. Melia's story will be an important stress test to evaluate the parties' readiness to collaborate in good faith.

Sticks and carrots

Polarisation and confrontation remain the biggest risks in Georgia's future, economic development and resilience. Despite the efforts, implementing the EU-brokered deal will not be straightforward. The EU (and US) may need to use a 'big stick' – withdrawing financial assistance or further sectoral integration – for Georgia to get things done. The West has always had enough leverage over Georgia's political class to nudge the country in the right direction during critical junctures. This is one of those times.

The EU should use all the tools and instruments at its disposal to ensure that the deal is implemented properly. While this will mainly concern ongoing conditionality linked to financial support, opening the door for further integration in other sectoral areas would also be an incentive. In addition, the EU should deploy an observer mission during the upcoming local elections.

Georgia must have an all-inclusive approach to reform, including a transparent consultation process with all the stakeholders, including civil society. Recommendations from the Venice Commission and other experts on safeguarding the impartiality and independence of the Georgian judicial system are of particular importance.

The agreement also stipulates the parties' participation in the Jean Monnet Dialogue for Peace and Democracy. This parliamentary mediation and dialogue instrument developed by the European Parliament aims to strengthen political leaders' ability to develop true interparty dialogue and build the consensus necessary to generate a democratic path forward. Georgia needs all these things to be used.

Furthermore, considering its effectiveness in the mediation process, the transatlantic

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approach should continue in the implementation process. That the EU and US have such influence in Georgia is a victory for the liberal world order.

Delivering for the people

The EU's involvement from the highest level signals that Georgia matters to the Union. Demonstrating its ability to influence developments in Georgia and keep the country on the path towards greater democracy is important. Georgia's political fate has far-reaching consequences for the state of democracy in the region. Without ongoing political and economic support from the West, Georgia may not be able to resist the malign influence of other actors, particularly Russia.

Georgia needs stability, not squabbling politicians and half-cooked revolutions. The political crisis not only damaged Georgia's image but also hindered its ability to deal with COVID-19, the vaccination roll-out and economic recovery. This meant increased hardship for ordinary people. While the EU and US will continue to play important roles in the country's transformation, at the end of the day, Georgians need to help themselves. The first step is for the elected parliamentarians to take their seats on the benches. It is time that they put the country first and deliver what Georgian citizens deserve.

Iana Maisuradze is a Programme Assistant of the Europe in the World programme.

Amanda Paul is a Senior Policy Analyst of the Europe in the World programme.

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