

Georgia and the EU – maintaining the momentum

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The Association Agreement (AA) between Georgia and the European Union (EU), signed in June 2014, will enter into force on 1 July 2016 after having been ratified by the parliaments of the 28 member states. The AA, with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), foresees far-reaching political and economic integration with the EU by significantly deepening political and economic ties. Many provisions of the agreement have already begun to be implemented, and some are even beginning to give tangible results, such as the opening up of European markets to Georgian exports. Yet this benchmark moment was somehow overshadowed by the EU's failure to extend visa free travel to Georgians, as had been expected, despite acknowledging that Georgia had fulfilled all the criteria that had been set. Whilst this was quickly explained by the EU as being only a temporary setback, based on reasons more related to other countries, such as Turkey and Ukraine, with which similar arrangements were being negotiated, it exposed the fragility of maintaining the necessary momentum in Georgia-EU relations.

The Brexit crisis is likely to further distract the EU over the next months. It is therefore important that both sides remain focused on the big picture, whilst carefully managing the details.

In the short to medium term, ensuring that the AA and DCFTA are successfully implemented so that Georgia can reap the full benefit of their provisions needs to be a top priority for the Georgian state and society. How to do this in the absence of a membership perspective in the short to medium term will require skill and wisdom on the part of Georgian leaders, and patience and commitment on the part of the Georgian people. The forthcoming parliamentary elections on 8 October 2016 will provide a tangible test for both.

Georgian realities

In 2012 Georgia saw the first transition of power from one government to another through the ballot box, reflecting an overwhelming demand of the Georgian people for change. The process was spearheaded by a broad alliance of political parties who were ready to accept a common leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and put aside their differences – at least for a moment – to achieve the wider objective of securing a change of government. Realism was not often one of the strengths of former President Mikhail Saakashvili, but in 2012 he and his political allies in the United National Movement (UNM) realised that graciously conceding power in the face of an overwhelming electoral defeat was the right thing to do. That decision, whilst resulting in their losing power, ensured that the UNM remained a relevant political force, organisationally intact, even if ideologically somewhat at a loss.

Concerns that Ivanishvili was some sort of Russian proxy, expressed widely in the western media ahead of the 2012 election, proved to be completely groundless. His Georgian Dream (GD) government, whilst managing Georgia's relations with Russia more sensibly than the previous UNM government did, stayed the course and accelerated the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. The emergence in the Georgian parliament of cross-party consensus on the main aspects of foreign policy is a major source of stability for which both the government and the opposition should be given credit. In contrast, GD and UNM have plenty of differences when it comes to domestic and economic policy, and these are bound to play out in the election campaign over the next three months.

A key feature of this campaign is likely to be the emergence of third parties; new populist parties pursuing a very nationalistic or religiously conservative agenda in particular, or in the case of the Labour Party, galvanizing the support of the underclass in the poorer suburbs of Tbilisi.

As things stand it is likely that one or several of these parties may gain enough votes to pass the 5%-threshold that would give them a presence in the parliament. Furthermore, some parties, who in 2012 participated in elections under the umbrella of the GD, will this time face the election on their own. The Republican Party, who remain in government, will contest the election separately. Assuming they

can secure seats in Parliament at the election, the Free Democrats, led by Irakli Alasania, are keeping their options open, hoping they can play the role of power brokers. Both parties are firmly committed to the Euro-Atlantic cause.

Whilst many hope that the elections in October 2016 will be another opportunity for the Georgian people to re-affirm their support for the Euro-Atlantic agenda, there is fear that some of the populist parties may be part of Russia's ambition to maintain a foothold within Georgia. Certainly these parties are much more lukewarm in their support for NATO and EU membership, and several – including some with close ties to Moscow – are outright against. Some fear that the delays in implementing the visa liberalisation decision will play straight into their hands ahead of the election. Western insistence that Georgia fully respects the rights of the LGBT community and of religious and national minorities are also likely to be used in the election campaign to bolster the populist parties. In this regard, the role of the influential Georgian Orthodox Church remains ambivalent. Whilst the much-respected Catholicos Patriarch Ilya II is considered sympathetic to Georgia's western orientation, there are many in the Church who are not.

The elections are therefore an important test for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and commitment.

The EU's engagement with Georgia – generosity tempered with fatigue

Over the years the EU has treated Georgia generously. From the humanitarian aid of the early 1990s to the budgetary support post 2008, and from strong solidarity in the face of Russian aggression in 2008 to completing the process of negotiating, signing and ratifying the AA, the EU has shown a consistent support for Georgia and its people. However, in some corners of EU bureaucracy, and among some member states, one can also detect a certain amount of Georgia-fatigue. Georgian politicians are often reminded in bilateral meetings that they should focus on making the AA work.

As it braces itself to deal with the challenges of Brexit, the EU's priority will be to ensure Georgia is calm and stable. So far, and for the foreseeable future, the EU is not ready to move in the direction of the Georgian end-game: membership of the bloc. However, it is not often that one hears this will never be possible in the future, as one does in the context of some other aspirants. Enlargement is simply not on the EU agenda at the moment.

Despite the difficulties, the relationship between Georgia and the EU has been a successful one. It now enters a new phase where the focus must be on consolidating what has been achieved by making the AA and DCFTA work for the benefit of the Georgian people. Issues will emerge over time that will continue to test this relationship – a result mostly of unfulfilled expectations – but given that the foundation is solid, challenges can be overcome. Having said that, both sides should be ready to maintain a long-term perspective, and set themselves ambitious agendas: to harmonise legislation; extend co-operation especially in the field of education; and develop business to business contacts. Such concrete, sustained initiatives will also define the future.

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