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## Georgia's watershed moment

*Protests have swept through Georgia following the government's decision to walk away from EU accession talks. Teona Giuashvili argues the EU must send a strong signal that it stands with the Georgian people.*

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On 28 November, Georgia's Prime Minister **declared that Georgia would stop seeking EU accession** and would reject EU financial assistance until 2028. This amounts to a drastic reversal of the course that Georgia has pursued for over two decades towards European integration.

Despite much domestic political turbulence and successive cycles of democratic progress and backsliding, no government has ever challenged Georgia's European choice. The reason is that this choice was never an elite or partisan project, but a genuine and widely supported popular aspiration embedded in Georgia's history, identity and, as of 2017, constitution.

Following Georgia's October parliamentary elections, **widely regarded by international monitors as suffering from substantial irregularities**, and amidst a grave political crisis in the country, the disruptive move of the Georgian Dream government to break relations with Europe triggered seven consecutive nights of mass protests across the country. The violent repression of these self-organised demonstrations attests to the increasingly authoritarian nature of Georgian Dream's rule, and to the fracture between the government and the people of Georgia.

## A crisis long in the making

The current crisis marks the peak of a drift that has long been in the making and that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has accelerated. The illiberal turn of Georgian Dream has markedly intensified in the last three years, leading to the erosion of democratic institutions, deepening societal polarisation, assaults on political opponents, a "foreign agents" law designed to

intimidate civil society organisations receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad, restrictive legislation on LGBTQ+ rights and increasingly overt anti-western rhetoric.

While still paying lip service to the goal of EU accession, **especially during the electoral campaign leading up to the recent parliamentary vote in October**, it was increasingly clear the government was doing everything to sabotage that objective. Until recently, it pretended to be the victim of global conspiracies, implausibly driven by the western partners that have supported Georgia for twenty years.

In practice, the government has been loosening relations with the EU and hedging its bets through transactional relationships with other powers. The Prime Minister's recent statement has the merit of clarity, simultaneously wrecking relations with Brussels and exposing how Georgian Dream misled the people ahead of the elections.

## Why now?

It is of course a major paradox that the Georgian government veered away from the EU accession process right after the prospect of EU enlargement, that Brussels had long denied, opened up, with Georgia receiving candidate status in December 2023. The root cause of this dramatic shift has been the Georgian government's intent to consolidate its grip on power. EU membership carried with it the obligation of far-reaching reforms to, among other dimensions, assure the rule of law and the separation of powers, which would directly challenge Georgian Dream's patrimonial conception of the state.

Additional factors might be at play, however, to explain the decision to openly turn Georgia's back on Europe. Hubris could be one of them. Having reasserted its power through fraudulent elections, Georgian Dream might have felt over-confident about its ability to simply impose its will on the country, silence opposition and suppress all dissent, revealing the true face of the regime.

The ruling party might also have calculated that the West is on the back foot. Europe would not be prepared to stand up to yet another challenge in the region, at a time when Russia seems to have gained the upper hand in the war against Ukraine and incoming US President Donald Trump might seek a swift conclusion to the conflict, having showed little interest in European security.

Another explanation points to possible pressure from, or convergence with, Russia. The longstanding ties between Moscow and Bidzina Ivanishvili – the oligarch that runs Georgian Dream and the government – as well as the Georgian government's illiberal narratives and tactics that mirror those in Russia's playbook, have nurtured doubts about collusion. Georgia's dramatic turn away from the EU has already earned the Georgian government Putin's praise for its "**courage and character**". What is certain is that an authoritarian Georgia would be back in Russia's orbit, whether by choice or by necessity.

## A watershed moment

The coming days will be decisive for determining the course of events and, therefore, the future of the country. The dire struggle of the Georgian people against the government's decision to break ties with Brussels, and in support of their European aspirations, poses a serious test for the EU as well, challenging the credibility of its much-celebrated "geopolitical awakening".

EU diplomats and leaders have taken a cautious attitude to the current crisis, given the volatility of the situation in the country and in the wider region. However, caution is not the same as inaction. The EU's response can no longer be limited to declarations of "serious concern" and "deep regret", expressing solidarity with the people and condemning the repression of demonstrations.

Those responsible for state capture and widespread violence against the people must face accountability. Imposing costs on them would send a tangible signal that the EU stands with the people of Georgia. Top EU and national officials should also pay high-profile visits to Georgia at this watershed moment, to manifest Europe's commitment to the principle that the future of country must be determined by the people, and not hijacked from them.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [George Khelashvili / Shutterstock.com](#)*

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