EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 29.04.2024 | Marcel Röthig

A trailblazer on the wrong track

Is Georgia's leadership risking a break with Europe - and its own people?

It is actually not that long ago that the story of Georgia's recent history seemed to have a happy ending: The young democracy in the South Caucasus was one of the first Eastern European countries to sign an association agreement with the EU in 2014 and since then has consistently been seen as a pioneer and role model in its neighbourhood for reforms and good governance. However, this appearance has long since faded.

Although the EU granted Georgia the long-awaited EU accession candidate status at the end of 2023, it ultimately acted primarily out of geopolitical considerations rather than on the basis of real progress, as Georgia had in fact only fulfilled two and a half of the 12 EU conditions that should have been fulfilled to achieve candidate status. For this reason, being granted candidate status was also a vote of confidence in Georgia's population. In hardly any other country is the level of support for EU accession as high as in Georgia; young people in particular see their country's future in Europe, and the desire to join the EU is even written into the Georgian constitution.

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The Georgian leadership under the national conservative 'Georgian Dream' party, whose founder and honorary chairman is the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, had been basking in the glory of the candidate status, being the party that was driving forward all the decisive reform steps on the path to accession since 2012. The party has certainly raised expectations during its long time in government that it is now unable to realise: Anyone who really wants to join the EU must also tackle the really tough nuts and bolts, keyword judicial reform and deoligarchisation, and thus shake up their own power base. The party leader Gharibashvili has finally expressed what many were thinking: The

EU would neither be ready for enlargement, nor Georgia for the EU. Their motivation seems clear: the candidate status is evidently enough for the ruling party.

Russian influence and pressure

Ultimately, the announcement that a law on 'foreign influence' would be taken out of the drawer was the cause of the breach of trust: last year, thousands of people actually brought down this project, which was aimed at Georgia's vital civil society. Its contents are quite something: organisations that receive more than 20 per cent of their project funding from international partners must register as an 'organisation representing the interests of foreign states'. The ruling party justifies this with the requirement for transparency and references European models. That said, Georgia already has a high level of transparency in place and the comparison is also misleading: The only country to have a similar scheme was Hungary, but this was overturned by the European Court of Justice. And frankly, what is the purpose of portraying an environmental organisation that implements a project with international assistance as a stooge of foreign states? Or even better: an anti-corruption NGO that campaigns for the freedom of the judiciary? Are they not acting in Georgia's own best interests?

If the law is waved through, the EU threatens to freeze Georgia's accession process. And that's not all: major achievements such as visa-free travel are also suddenly up for discussion. The entire work of the 'Georgian dream' is in danger of being jeopardised in the wake of the agent law, which is obviously reminiscent of a recipe from the Russian soup kitchen. Georgia would be set back more than 10 years. And this at a time when Russia is redrawing its borders. This too is probably a consideration: The Georgian leadership seems to be speculating that Russia will gain the upper hand in Ukraine in one way or another and engage in other neighbouring countries with strengthened self-confidence. Not going too far with EU integration and antagonising Moscow may therefore also be an expression of a primal Georgian fear.

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However, there is a risk that the 'Georgian dream' has underestimated the dynamic it has set in motion. Thousands of people have been protesting peacefully in the centre of the capital Tbilisi for days. Artists and well-known athletes such as the Georgian national football team, long since national heroes who have finally lifted Georgia onto Europe's football stage, have

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recently expressed their solidarity with the protesters. And Georgia's President Zurabishvili, who was actually brought into office by the 'Georgian Dream', has put herself in front of the protests. Like her, many former officials and dignitaries have turned their backs on the ruling party in recent months and years as it has become increasingly radicalised. There seems to be speculation that the protests will die down, at the latest in the summer, when the streets of the capital are empty anyway and people prefer to watch football. Objectively speaking, the people of Georgia are better off than they have been for a long time. But now even the growing middle class, which actually benefited from the GD years, is on the streets.

On top of all this, the election campaign is underway in Georgia: a new parliament will be elected in the autumn. Given the fragmented opposition, another victory for 'Georgian Dream' was actually considered a foregone conclusion, especially as all state levers, with the exception of the presidency, are in the hands of the ruling party. With the law on agents, the 'Georgian Dream' wanted to unite the national-conservative electorate behind itself and portray the opposition and critical civil society as stooges of the evil (Western) foreign countries. This kind of slanderous propaganda is effective in large parts of the population, but is causing division and increasingly toxic polarisation. Thus, the situation in Georgia is ultimately an expression of the paranoia and fear that one man and his dependent followers will lose power. The victims are those who dream of their country's European future.



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