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Damned if we do, damned if we don't

Visa liberalisation once united Georgia with Europe. Now it risks tearing them apart

Each day in Georgia brings a new wave of authoritarianism. Over the past five months alone, the Georgian Parliament, composed exclusively of MPs elected through the Georgian Dream party list, has adopted nearly 40 laws and legislative amendments. The majority were passed using the so-called expedited procedure, without public consultation or opposition. Most of these changes aim to suppress dissents, restrict civil society, and limit media freedom. Media representatives are no longer allowed to enter courtrooms, with filming and broadcasting banned unless explicitly permitted by the High Council of Justice. After all, the broadcasting of the prosecution of students, doctors, and professionals risks striking a nerve even among the most apathetic segments of society.

These legislative processes have been accompanied by a wave of politically motivated prosecutions. In June, four opposition leaders were sentenced to prison for refusing to appear before a Georgian Dream-led parliamentary commission. Others remain in detention, with more verdicts expected, all for rejecting the legitimacy of a one-party parliament. Critics of the regime, regardless of their affiliation, face repression. Businesses that previously maintained working relations are under attack, and even civil servants loyal to the ruling party have been purged for links to ex-GD politicians.

The message is clear: the Ivanishvili regime will stop at nothing to carry out its goal of silencing dissent, disintegrating Georgia's democratic foundation, and driving the country at light speed away from the West. Among the chaos, visa liberalisation remains one of the key links between Georgia and the EU.

A gift with possibility to be taken back

One of Georgia's biggest achievements in its relations with the EU was the 2017 decision on visa liberalisation, which was celebrated by the Speaker of Parliament at the time, Irakli Kobakhidze:'Our people have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to freedom and democracy

(...) earning a rightful place in the European family. Visa-free travel is not only a privilege but also a responsibility (...) our citizens must become ambassadors of our culture, history, and traditions in Europe.'

Since relations began to deteriorate rapidly in 2024, the EU has repeatedly tried to use visa liberalisation as leverage, torn between not wanting to punish Georgia's pro-Western society and recognising that the current political regime no longer meets the standards expected of a visa-free partner. It also gave time to GD to appeal to the emotions of the public and gradually misinform and desensitise them to the concept of losing visa liberalisation.

Nino Tsilosani, the Georgian Dream parliament vice speaker, wrote on Facebook: 'Visa-free travel is really comfortable, and we earned this comfort during the Georgian Dream government (...) However, if comfort contradicts patriotism, the Georgian people have always remained and will remain patriots of their country.'

During an 17 April appearance on the pro-government IMEDI TV channel, GD Parliamentary Speaker Shalva Papuashvili dismissed the EU's concerns, criticising the German Ambassador's 'arrogant tone' and declaring: 'Is visa-free travel a divine gift?! We also have visa-free travel for Germans, and what?!'

If the EU truly intended to use visa liberalisation as leverage, it might have been more effective before the elections, when it could have translated into a more tangible political result.

In reality, maintaining visa liberalisation was indeed a gift — one of political will, much like the EU candidate status granted in 2023. For years the EU had justifiable grounds to suspend free travel. However, where there is political will, there is a way. The intent was to keep Georgia within the EU's orbit, hoping that the benefits would encourage reforms. But this general approach has backfired. Instead of anchoring the country to Europe, it legitimised Georgian Dream's rule, confused both domestic and international observers about Georgia's trajectory, and weakened the EU's credibility by exposing its inability to follow through on its warnings — leading GD officials to make multiple statements and disseminate the narrative of suspension being 'empty threats.'

Inside Georgia, many, including civil society, have argued that suspending visa liberalisation now would be a strategic mistake. In a joint statement, more than 20 organisations stressed that this policy was not granted to

the government but earned by the Georgian people through years of commitment to a European path. Taking it away at this moment would not punish those responsible for democratic backsliding — it would play directly into their hands. It would hand Georgian Dream the perfect narrative: that Europe is turning its back on the Georgian public, not the regime dismantling democracy.

On the flip side, timing matters. If the EU truly intended to use visa liberalisation as leverage, it might have been more effective before the elections, when it could have translated into a more tangible political result. Now, with the elections behind and public trust already shaken, suspension risks feeding disillusionment rather than resistance. Yes, support for EU membership remains high, but a true understanding of Georgia's support for the EU is that it is multi-faceted and vulnerable in certain areas.

Harsh consequences

In an attempt to find middle ground, the EU tried to introduce a targeted suspension of visa-free travel for Georgian officials with diplomatic passports, avoiding broader punishment for the population. However, due to a legal loophole, many officials also hold regular biometric passports, allowing them to continue traveling freely. This has only fuelled public frustration more, while Georgian Dream representatives smugly continued their activities.

Regardless, it appears that a decisive moment has arrived. The European Commission has sent a letter to Georgia, signalling the possible suspension of the visa liberalisation regime if its recommendations are not taken into account.

In parallel, the European Union revised its visa suspension mechanism, updating the criteria to allow action in cases of serious and rapid deterioration in relations with a third country, particularly where human rights and fundamental freedoms are at stake.

Speaking at the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 July, Kaja Kallas stated: 'This is also a matter of the EU's credibility. If we have certain expectations, and this is a benefit — a bonus — given to a country that doesn't meet the conditions, then there will be consequences, so that the public sees the government is not on a European path and is not taking the candidate status seriously.'

'If the choice is between

Against this backdrop, the foreign ministers of Czechia, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, and

peace and stability or visa liberalisation, of course, we will prioritise peace and stability. This is the choice of the Georgian people — this is how the issue is being framed for us.'

Latvia sent a joint letter to High Representative Kaja Kallas stressing that any suspension should be targeted not directed at the Georgian population but at specific high-ranking Georgian Dream officials. The ministers proposed that, should the mechanism be activated, it should apply selectively to a clearly defined group of officials designated by the European Commission in order to avoid harming the Georgian people as a whole.

Unfortunately, the recommendations of the letter will remain on paper. Much like the standard of proof in court, there is evidence beyond reasonable doubt that Georgian Dream will not only ignore the EU's recommendations but has actively pushed the EU toward the point of suspending Georgia's privileges. Their approach is one of isolation, with GD representative Kobakhidze stating: 'If the choice is between peace and stability or visa liberalisation, of course, we will prioritise peace and stability. This is the choice of the Georgian people — this is how the issue is being framed for us.'

Thus, on the side of the EU, deciding whether or not to suspend the visa-free regime is not for the faint-hearted — it is a 'damned if we do, damned if we don't' scenario. Yet even as this article is being written, nearly 40 civil society organisations have released a joint statement declaring: 'If visa-free travel for Georgian citizens is suspended, full responsibility lies with Ivanishvili's government, which has destroyed decades of hard-earned progress with a single stroke and is deliberately undermining the country's Western future against the will of the Georgian people (...) We call on Ivanishvili to stop sabotaging the European choice of the overwhelming majority of Georgian citizens and the Constitution of Georgia.'

In the end, all scenarios point to the same conclusion: the responsibility lies with one man and those who enable him — and they do not represent the majority of the Georgian people and their aspirations.



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