

The Georgian Government's Hungarian Rhapsody

Understanding the Romance between Tbilisi and Budapest

“Georgia is fine. We all love you here!” - Viktor Orbán reassured Georgian journalists waiting for the final decision on the EU candidate status outside the EU Council meeting on December 14, 2023.

The Hungarian Prime Minister was the only EU leader who unconditionally supported Georgia's accession to the EU. But given Mr Orbán's reputation, his advocacy for Georgia's accession looked like the rope's support of a hanged man.

In the end, however, the European Council confirmed the European Commission's geopolitically motivated recommendations of November 8 and granted Georgia

the long-awaited EU Candidate Status, notwithstanding Viktor Orbán's efforts. In fact, Mr Orbán tried to veto the European Council's decisions, particularly on Ukraine's financial aid and accession negotiations with the EU, thus jeopardizing not only Ukrainian but also Moldovan and Georgian chances to advance on the EU track.

The Georgian government's choice of Hungary's Viktor Orbán as its primary, if not sole, ally and lobbyist in the EU may seem curious. Indeed, given his isolation within the European Union and the *cordon sanitaire* around him, this choice looks counterproductive and irrational.



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However, the Georgian government's European strategy is anything but simple and linear. The Georgian Dream government is playing a double game, caught between a broadly pro-European public opinion and the interests of its increasingly explicit pro-Russian leadership.

To stay in power, the Georgian Dream has to reassure public opinion that the country is moving toward the European Union – the reason why the Georgian Dream needed the EU Candidate Status so much. On the other hand, the Georgian government does not aspire to genuine integration and reforms requested by the EU – the reason why Georgia-EU relations are framed exclusively in terms of defending the country's national identity and pride. And this is where Viktor Orbán's support comes in – as a testament that such ideological positioning is not uncommon within the EU and, therefore, not contrary to the popular desire to join it.

Yet, as time passes, rhetorical and diplomatic conflicts with Brussels and their instrumentalization by the Georgian government's propaganda machine risk negatively affecting the Georgian population's

enthusiasm for the EU, a path traveled by several Western Balkan states. Viktor Orbán is the linchpin of this strategy of ambiguity.

There is something in this game for Mr Orbán as well. Georgia and its current government offer many advantages for his strategy of political-ideological crusade against Brussels. This romance, therefore, is neither accidental nor surprising.

Georgia on Orbán's Mind: a Good Match

Viktor Orbán has positioned himself as the leader of the new ideological movement, Illiberal Democracy, challenging the notion that modern European democracy must inherently adhere to liberal ideology. He suggests that Europe should prioritize ethnic patriotism and national sovereignty and adjust democratic frameworks accordingly. To gain the clout of international respectability for these ideas, Budapest has channeled considerable efforts into forging ties with various political entities across Europe as well as with ultra-conservative and alt-right factions within the United States. Mr Orbán's ideological outlook is closely aligned with Russia's and has steered Hungary's foreign policy to converge with Moscow. Given the Georgian Dream's vocal critique of liberalism and its policies of conciliation towards Russia, Viktor Orbán's interest in Georgia is natural and also pragmatic.

Despite similarities, attitude towards the EU distinguishes Viktor Orbán from far-right leaders of Western European countries such as Geert Wilders or Marine Le Pen. Almost all the right-wing populist parties of “old Europe” are rigorously against EU enlargement, viewing it as a threat to prosperity and, in some cases, even favoring their country’s exit from the EU. Mr Orbán, in contrast, staunchly opposes the idea of “Huxit” and even favors welcoming new – preferably ideologically like-minded – members. Instead of leaving the EU, he would rather change it from within and make the EU a club of “sovereign” illiberal nations, a development which the Kremlin would only welcome.

But this strategy can only be viable if more countries who share Viktor Orbán’s values and stance on national sovereignty, minority rights, the rule of law, and freedom of expression are either members of the EU or closely associated with it.

Mr Orbán built friendships with nationalist, pro-Russian, and anti-Western leaders such as Serbia’s Aleksandar Vučić, North Macedonia’s former PM Nikola Gruevski, and the Republika Srpska’s Milorad Dodik. His overtures with Slovakia’s new Prime Minister, Robert Fico, and tandem with Türkiye’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are also testaments to his true priorities.

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Viktor Orbán and other like-minded illiberal rulers see the current configuration of the EU as the immediate threat to the survival of their regimes. Gaining allies around the Council’s table will help him defuse the pressure from the EU. With Robert Fico currently being the only possible ally at the European Council, Mr Orbán expects to see more peers soon. Therefore, inside the EU, he bets on the Rassemblement National of France, La Lega in Italy, the Dutch PVV, the Czech Freedom and Democracy party, and other similar groups. Outside the EU, he bets on the countries with socio-culturally conservative and radical right governments, like Serbia. Mr Orbán supports Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream from the same playbook of building the “Illiberal International.”

For similar reasons, he wants Ukraine away from the EU and bogged down in an impasse, blocking Brussels’s efforts to deliver military and financial aid to Kyiv. A conclusive victory for Kyiv would be a triumph of liberal solidarity and, therefore, damaging to Mr Orbán’s national and international political project.

The year 2024 is a crucial one for Viktor Orbán. Donald Trump's return to power could give him and his allies an ascendant position in European and international politics. But before that, there are European Parliament elections in May 2024, which traditionally favor center-right and center-left parties. The success of illiberal parties in the Europe-wide elections could also boost Mr Orbán's European stance.

However, the international influence and hopes for grandeur are only one facet of Viktor Orbán's rule, which is subordinate to the critical task of retaining power. The ideology of Christian ultra-conservatism, instead of security considerations, re-emerges as a glue to galvanize voters and build international alliances. But as the lines between the national interests and the interests of Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, become blurred, this ideological mantle is just a cover for political pragmatism for the Hungarian Prime Minister, retaining power and wealth.

Here, too, Budapest and Tbilisi are on the same page. In the case of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz, as in the case of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream, ideology is instrumental for financial security and the regime's survival. Neither the Georgian Dream nor Fidesz were initially far-right parties. Until 2023, the Georgian Dream was part of the Socialist International and affiliated with the Party of European Socialists (PES). Just a few months before the

great leap to the far right-wing identitarian parties, the Georgian Dream's General Secretary Irakli Kobakhidze was literally begging European center-left leaders like Olaf Scholtz for selfies at the European Socialist Congresses so that he could proudly post them on social networks. Similarly, Fidesz was a long-time member of the EPP (the European family of center-right parties) before being excluded and realigning with European far-right parties. Thus, the choices of both parties for the "defense of traditional values and Christianity" appear highly instrumental and tactical.

During his three-day official trip to Georgia in October 2023, which included numerous visits to churches and monasteries and joint prayers with bishops close to the government, Viktor Orbán passionately endorsed the main postulates of the Georgian Dream narrative. He supported Georgia's candidate status and described the EU's conditionality and past decisions concerning Georgia as "immoral and unfair." He repeatedly [praised](#) "Georgia's unwavering commitment to preserving the Christian heritage" and noted that Georgia's Prime Minister "not only advocates for family values but also embodies them." The parties have signed several documents and memoranda on cooperation, including in the "protection of families" field. At the end of this visit, the leaders temporarily dropped spiritual communion to talk about more earthly matters such

as energy transit (the Black Sea Strategic Submarine Electric Cable) and investment opportunities for Hungarian businesses whose very significant part happen to be supporters of Mr Orbán and Fidesz.

Georgia now appears to showcase Viktor Orbán's foreign policy because it contains all the elements of his influence and network-building strategy. Since his return to power in 2010, the intellectuals close to the regime started to [promote](#) the idea of Hungary being a Eurasian country, "not the east of Europe but the west of Asia." Georgia also fits well in this narrative.

Using Viktor Orbán for Domestic Georgian Consumption

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For Georgia's ruling party, having Viktor Orbán in the EU is a gift from heaven, an excellent alibi proving that the ultra-conservative, sovereigntist agenda is compatible with Europe. In the months and weeks preceding the European Council's decision, the Georgian Dream's propaganda media channels were actively projecting the narrative that "Mr Viktor," as Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili calls

him, would block any decision by the 27 member states if Georgia was not granted the EU candidate status.

This conscious lie was intended to reinforce the idea that Viktor Orbán was the country's only true friend, capable of heroic solo efforts for Georgia's sake. The Georgian Dream's propaganda, obviously, never mentioned that a relatively small Hungary, with only 2.5 percent of the EU's population, only 12 MEPs out of 705 and only 1% of the EU's GDP, heavily depends on the EU's agricultural subsidies and structural funds and is not such a superpower that can singlehandedly decide Georgia's European integration bid. But propaganda does not like facts; it only uses pragmatically lucrative narratives to mislead the domestic population.

Most of the Georgian electorate, which favors Europe, is generally not well-versed in foreign policy specifics or the complex details of Hungarian governance. Similarly, they are not well-informed about Hungary's interactions with the European Union or other European capitals. Therefore, the ruling party's media easily cast Viktor Orbán as Georgia's staunch ally. Prime Minister Gharibashvili has [lauded](#) the Hungarian prime minister as an "exemplary leader," "the example to imitate," and a "true friend." In his famous toast to Mr Orbán, the Georgian Prime Minister thanked his host for his fight "for preserving history, culture, identity, loyalty to our

nations, homeland, faith, the sanctity of family and respect for our traditions.”

The Georgian Dream, therefore, found an incredibly useful European leader who, while being an EU and NATO member, still shares ideological views with the Georgian Dream party, levels accusations of partiality and unfairness at the EU, seeks accommodation with Putin, opposes Western punitive measures against Russia, advocates for a neutral stance in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and labels the United States and the EU as warmongers. Furthermore, when such an EU member disregards the core democratic principle of the separation of powers, suppresses dissenting media, undermines the autonomy of academia, marginalizes minority groups, including the LGBT+ community, manipulates the electorate, and ensures that the economic benefits are skewed in favor of business interests close to those in power, such a leader fits like a glove for the Georgian Dream’s propaganda efforts.

These constant public invocations of the Budapest-Tbilisi axis and Viktor Orbán as the model European leader are crucial to the Georgian Dream’s strategy in its battle for Georgian public opinion. Starting from the principle that the latter is both pro-European and conservative (attached to Christianity, to “traditional values,” to a mythologized historical narrative, to particular conceptions of gender, etc.), Georgian Dream strategists have made the

figure of Viktor Orbán their propagandistic centerpiece. They can claim: “We are not anti-European; we want a Europe like Hungary” or “We are not against Ukraine, and for Russia, we act like Hungary, an EU and NATO member state.”

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The Georgian Dream party places a high priority on convincing pro-European voters that their stance is not aligned with Russia but with Europe, contending they are merely challenging a version of liberalism and a European identity that they perceive as being undermined by LGBT+ minorities - main culprits in eroding family and traditional values. The party’s ultimate goal is to hold onto power, making a refusal to engage with the EU on their terms. Therefore, the Georgian Dream propagates the perception that Georgia is progressing towards European integration, yet on a path marked by dignity, sovereignty, and national identity – a path exemplified by Viktor Orbán.

However, Viktor Orbán’s rapport with Vladimir Putin, particularly the fact that he remains in contact with Mr Putin despite international ostracism, is downplayed. The pro-government Georgian media did not report on Hungarian For-

eign Minister Peter Szijjártó's immediate travel to Moscow following his visit to Tbilisi. Neither did the media report that Viktor Orbán's visit to Georgia continued in China, where he met Vladimir Putin in person – a rare encounter of a European leader with a Russian dictator since the invasion of Ukraine.

More “Orbánization” Ahead

Now that the candidate status has been given to Georgia, the nation is gearing up for the pivotal elections in October 2024. However, this new status is unlikely to alter the government's current course, which includes continued, if not intensified, pressure on political opponents, civil society, and the independent media. Objectively, the candidate status is crucial for affirming the EU's long-term commitment to aligning Georgia and as a potential tool for peeling it away from Russian influence. But there is a risk that in the near term, having received EU candidacy may embolden the government to suppress pro-European elements within the country further.

This risk could only be mitigated if the EU takes a principled stance on its values, is firm against any repressive measures by the Georgian government, and imposes more stringent conditions for EU integration. Responding as early as possible to signs of foul play from the Georgian Dream is important. Many bad ideas,

dropped because of the EU and domestic pressure, could resurface. For instance, there have been talks among Georgian Dream-aligned lawmakers about resurrecting the controversial “foreign agents” legislation that sparked extensive protests in March 2023 – this time under the guise of aligning with the EU Directive on Transparency of Interest Representation on behalf of Third Countries.

The campaign for the 2024 Parliamentary elections is set to focus heavily on themes resonant with Viktor Orbán's politics: matters of European integration, national identity, family values, and Christian traditions. Shortly after the EU's decision, the government declared plans for extensive educational reforms, with the Prime Minister vocalizing the need to counter liberal influences purportedly seeking to alter the “DNA of the Georgian population.”

Among other challenges that the pro-European forces in Georgia face, an additional one is now evident – denounce the Budapest-Tbilisi axis and reveal to the broadest public the true nature of Hungarian internal politics and Viktor Orbán's undeniable links with Vladimir Putin. ■