

How Can the EU Regain Leverage Over Georgia in 2024?

In November 2023, the European Commission issued a favorable recommendation for Georgia's candidate status, subsequently confirmed by the European Council on 15 December. The EU's decision was clearly [geopolitical](#). As Ukraine and Moldova were promised to open the accession talks with the EU, Brussels did not leave Georgia two steps behind. The EU, however, also pointed out that the 12 conditions it had imposed on Georgia in 2022 were still to be fulfilled, with only three qualifying as fully satisfied. This assessment was in line with the evaluation of independent civil society organizations, which [published](#) six editions of "Statusmeter" in 2023 and also claimed that just 3 of the 12 conditions were fully implemented.

While the EU's decision to grant Georgia the candidate status was correct from the geopolitical and pragmatical standpoint, it left a question had the EU lost leverage vis-à-vis Georgia in 2024, a crucial year of elections in both the bloc and Georgia.

Georgia's profoundly polarized elite often instrumentalizes EU accession for political ends, exacerbating

divisions. The ruling Georgian Dream party, for instance, previously [framed](#) EU demands for reforms, such as de-oligarchization and alignment with Western sanctions against Russia, as efforts by the "global war party" to embroil Georgia in conflict with Russia. However, following the attainment of candidate status, the party pivoted its narrative, touting the achievement as validation of its "with honor to Europe" approach and deflecting criticism by claiming its actions were vindicated.

In a similar vein, the opposition, deeply critical of Georgian Dream's pro-Russian policies and discontent with the pace of the EU-demanded reforms, labeled the Government as pro-Russian and anti-European. Thus, during 2023, mutual accusations were abundant. Conversely, the opposition, civil society, and the President, despite staunchly advocating for Georgia's European path, were accused by the Government of undermining the country's progress toward the EU candidacy.

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plement the EU-mandated reforms at a fast pace. With the important 2024 parliamentary elections scheduled in October 2024, the big question remains: whether Georgian Dream will really deliver on the nine steps set forth by the European Union as a precondition to moving further on the accession track, or will it push the reforms after the elections? With the European Parliament elections also forthcoming in June 2024 and the obvious lame-duck status of the current Commission until November 2024, there is a likelihood that the Georgian Dream will not rush with the reforms, especially the ones that could jeopardize their grip on power.

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Therefore, the Georgian Dream's strategy in 2024 might be a replication of the strategy from the previous year – try to maintain power, demonize opponents, attack the EU, and wait for the geopolitical decision at the end of the year. After all, if the Georgian Dream stays in power, why would the EU dare to challenge the credentials of a democratically elected Government and leave it in Russia's den? Also, the EU leadership would be freshly elected, with no prior history of hostile exchanges with the Georgian Dream. So, another episode of geopolitical goodwill could carry Georgia to the next stage – opening the accession talks with the EU.

Changed Prime Minister, Same Policy

At the end of 2023, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream, [returned](#) to the party, occupying a newly created “honorary chairman” position and equipping himself with the official power

to nominate the Prime Minister. He indeed very soon changed the Prime Minister, relegating former PM Irakli Gharibashvili to a “chairman of the party” and promoting Irakli Kobakhidze, former party chairman, to the post of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Kobakhidze was the spearhead of the anti-EU rhetoric in 2023, often talking about the “global war party”, criticizing the EU for insisting on unfair reforms, and blaming European decision-makers for being in cahoots with the opposition parties. After his appointment as the Prime Minister, he visited Brussels, where he met with the HRVP Borrell and EP President Metsola and [returned](#) with the message that the EU was content with how Georgia was advancing on the EU path.

But as the visit was taking place in Brussels, the Georgian Dream [introduced](#) the changes to the Electoral Code, which effectively left the power to appoint the CEC chairman in the hands of the ruling party. Also, as Mr. Kobakhidze was rubbing shoulders with the EU officials, the Parliamentary chairperson was busy attacking the local NGOs with [“poisoned lies”](#), blaming them for being politically affiliated and working for foreign interests. Not just that, the Georgian Dream-affiliated People's Power faction of the ruling majority resumed its anti-Western rhetoric.

On the changes to the electoral law, the Venice Commission [said](#) in late 2023 that “there is a higher risk that the ruling party alone could elect the (non-partisan) CEC members and Chairperson” if these changes were passed. The ruling majority seems to be doing exactly that.

Regarding Civil Society Organizations, the EU Ambassador to Georgia [said](#) in February 2024 that “NGOs make a valuable contribution to Georgia's EU integration.” The ruling majority did not seem to care about this assessment, openly attacking the group of Georgian CSOs, who [published](#) their vision of how the nine steps should be implemented,

calling them not credible and politically affiliated and [warning](#) of the “foreign influence schemes” in Georgian politics.

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Many Georgian CSOs are now calling for the Government to start vetting the judges in leadership positions to decrease the political control of the judiciary and ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the Supreme Court and High Council of Justice members, as well as the heads of the City and District courts. Prime Minister Kobakhidze, however, defied the proposal, [claiming](#) that the “purpose of vetting is to exercise political control over the judicial system and encroach on the independence of justice, which is unacceptable.” One of the ruling party MPs [blamed](#) the West for using the vetting to control the judiciary in Albania, Ukraine, and Moldova and called on Georgians to avoid such an intervention from the West.

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What Is the EU's Leverage Now?

The recent past has shown that the Georgian Dream's reforms were just sufficient for not getting a Fail mark from the EU. According to the Commission, only 3 of the 12 conditions from June 2022 were [fully implemented](#), the remaining rolling over to the new nine steps in one form or another. Most notably, the Georgian Dream did not fulfill the key recommendations on the independence of the judiciary, de-oligarchization, and

de-polarization. Neither did it increase the accountability and transparency of the Government, nor did it stop attacking the civil society and media. Despite these shortcomings, the EU's decision on the candidate status appreciated the European resolve of the Georgian people and also considered the geopolitical status quo. Indeed, leaving Georgia behind would have been an excellent present for Russia.

But the non-present to Russia turned out to be a good present to Ivanishvili, who is now formally back to politics and will try to capitalize on the EU candidacy during the election year, highly likely shelving the essential reforms until he ensures that he stays in power. [The Action Plan](#) for Implementing the 9 Steps, developed confidentially and only published after the Council Decision, clearly states that many essential reforms are scheduled for late 2024 or 2025; that is, after the EU's decision on opening the accession talks. The same is true for the [Action Plan](#) on Deoligachization, which was also developed without the participation of civil society and political opposition.

The EU was able to leverage the candidate status against Georgia until December 2023. The issue of EU candidacy was politically susceptible for the Georgian Government, as it felt enormous pressure from the Georgian society and political opposition, both overwhelmingly pro-European, anti-Russian, and pro-Ukrainian. However, with the EU candidate status already pocketed and public satisfaction sinking in, the stimulus for seriously undertaking the remainder of the reforms in the election year appears minimal.

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Therefore, the EU currently does not seem to have any leverage. Opening accession talks in the year when the EU and Georgia both face elec-

tions might not be realistic. In fact, the EU has not yet publicly and loudly made a statement linking Georgia's progress on the nine new steps to the opening of accession talks. Moreover, the decision on whether to start accession talks with Georgia will not be made until November-December 2024, i.e., after the Georgian elections are over and the winner is in the driving seat. From this outlook, the EU's leverage is either non-existent or very weak. However, there are still things the EU can do to "reinvent" the leverage if it plays its cards right.

How Can the EU Reinvent Leverage in 2024?

For the EU to reinvigorate leverage on Georgia, it must undertake a few steps, even if they have certain political ramifications for Georgia's polarized domestic political scene.

First, the EU must clearly articulate that the next step for Georgia is Accession Talks and that this step can be taken in late 2024 only if the reforms are fully undertaken. If the EU at the level of Ambassador, MEPs, and the Commission is vocal and clear that Georgia can start accession talks in 2024, Georgian media and civil society will continue exerting pressure on the Georgian Government to deliver the reforms before the October elections.

Second, the EU must step up its rhetoric on the necessity of the reforms from the high tribunes. Visits of the HRVP, Commissioner, or MEPs, who "bring the message" of delivering the reforms now, will give the EU more leverage, even if rhetorical. Last year's visits from HRVP Borrell, Commissioner Varhelyi, and various EU foreign ministers played a significant role in moving forward with the stalled reforms. This year, the same needs to be repeated.

Third, the EU must provide an interim assessment of how the nine conditions are implemented. Last year, in July, the Commission only gave an oral

interim evaluation of the progress, and even that proved quite successful. The Georgian Dream accelerated legislative and policy initiatives between the interim assessment and the end of the year. The EU can report in June 2024 in written or oral forms. Such an interim assessment can be instrumental in pushing the Georgian Dream not to delay the implementation of the important reforms after the parliamentary elections.

Fourth, the EU must be less lenient on the non-implementation of the nine steps than it was last year on the failure to implement the twelve conditionalities. The commitment to de-oligarchization was blatantly ignored by the Georgian Dream, which managed to change the discourse about whether the Law on Deoligarchization should have been passed. Retreat from the Law (because of a clear message from the European Commission and Venice Commission) was counted as progress by the EU, without regard to the absence of systemic reforms, which would genuinely contribute to deoligarchization.

In her presentation of the Enlargement report, the Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen, listed the accountability of the Government to the opposition as a success story, while in reality, during the last two years, the Georgian Dream did everything possible to weaken the opposition institutionally, even taking away constitutionally-guaranteed powers to create investigative commissions in the Parliament.

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The EU must stop accepting the window-dressed reforms and needs to push for real steps, whether on the reform of the High Council of Justice, vetting of the judges, reversal of the laws that curbed the independence of the Central Bank, or increas-

ing the powers of the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC). Incidentally, late last year, the Georgian Dream changed the law on broadcasting, equipping the GNCC with more punitive powers. When criticized, GD's response was that the EU endorsed these changes. The civil society actors who follow the media were struck that, indeed, the EU supported the changes, even though no consultations were held with the civil society or affected media.

Similarly, the EU requested the Georgian Dream to fight disinformation and propaganda against the EU values. While the ruling party can tick many boxes formally through the creation of action plans and parliamentary inquiries, the major step it must take is to stop its propaganda machine from anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric. Counting only formal steps will be counterproductive and inefficient as it will further encourage the Georgian Dream to delay or produce half-cooked reforms. Information Integrity Coalition, consisting of highly qualified Georgian civil society organizations, [published](#) a set of recommendations to fight disinformation. The EU can support this initiative and demand the Georgian Dream to follow up.

Fifth, the EU must make it clear that the free and fair competitive elections conducted in an atmosphere of non-violence are essential for opening the accession talks. This demand was incorporated in nine conditionalities. Now, the EU can fill in this condition with specific requests. For instance, lowering the electoral barrier, as was foreseen in the 2021 Charles Michel document, or allowing the Georgian migrants to vote in mass numbers, as well as refraining from massive vote-buying and boycotting the political debates, could be the concrete demands from the EU. Sending an interim long-term observation mission will also be an

important step since the electoral fraud will likely occur well before the elections through vote-buying, something that the short-term electoral mission focusing on the election day will not be able to observe.

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Finally, the EU should insist that the Georgian Dream listens to and cooperates with the civil society – not the organizations it fancies, but the critical ones. The demonization of civil society organizations as radical, in cahoots with the opposition or “foreign agents” and “traitors” has not stopped, neither from official channels nor through online propaganda. The Action Plan on Implementing the Nine Conditions that the Government published in 2024 is inconsistent with the EU's request to keep civil society involved. The Action Plan was not elaborated in consultation with civil society, and the government does not seem to plan to involve the NGOs in the policy-making process. In 2024, the Government will once again try to window-dress its antagonism towards the CSOs through the pro forma cooperation with the EU-Georgia Civil Society platform, a loose group of several hundred NGOs, which has a track record of speaking on behalf of the civil society, without proper authorization. The platform came under the spotlight for concluding a Memorandum with the Georgian Parliament in late 2023, a few months after the Government unsuccessfully attempted to pass the law on Foreign Agents. Most of the NGOs that resisted the Government's actions were neither consulted nor informed about the signature of the Memorandum ■