

Internal divisions in Georgia threaten its European dream

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This internal polarisation of Georgia is so tense that it is on the top of the “12 priorities” that the EU wants to see change before it can address Georgia’s accession candidature.

Political in-fighting risks costing Georgia its European dream. The Russian invasion of Ukraine put has shifted international attention to Eastern Europe like never before. This Caucasian republic — which was the birthplace of Joseph Stalin and once part of the Soviet Union — has never been closer to European integration.

Yet, internal political polarisation between the ruling Georgian Dream increasingly taking conservative positions, and its opponents might cost Georgia its chance for a closer integration with the European Union (EU).

For outside observers, the deep polarisation within Georgia might give the impression that this Caucasian country is not one Georgia, but two.

On the one hand, there are the ruling authorities, conservative, authoritarian, nationalist, and increasingly pro-Russian. On the other side, there is myriad opposition: multi-cultural, pro-democratic, for minority rights, pro-LGBT, and pro-Western.

The two sides are in such tense competition that they even disagree on major events of contemporary Georgian history, such as who is responsible for the launching of the 2008 war: Russia or Georgia?

12 EU concerns

This internal polarisation of Georgia is so tense that it is on the top of “12 priorities” that the EU wants to see change before it can address Georgia’s accession candidature, the first of which reads: “Address the issue of political polarisation, ensuring cooperation across political parties.”

The other points the EU is pressing the Georgian government to address are concerns over democratic oversight of state institutions, transparency and reform of the judiciary, strengthening anti-corruption measures, taking measures against oligarchy, and ensuring the independence of the media sector, among others.

Evidently, the internal power struggle is impacting Georgia’s foreign policy, and it might cost its historic chance of closer integration with the European Union.

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For supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) – the party in power since 2012 – the party brought peace, stability, and prosperity to the country. Their main opponent is the former flamboyant president Mikheil Saakashvili.

To GD supporters, Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) are adventurous, unstable, and repressive. Their return to power might even mean a new war, a major risk for Georgia which has a common border with Russia, with which Georgia has had tense relations since the August 2008 war.

“For the last 12 years there was no war in Georgia, this brought foreign investments, tourism, and created lots of jobs”, Fridon Inja, a parliamentarian from the Alliance of Patriots, said.

In his view, there is no polarisation within the Georgian society.

“What you see from the outside is US, UK, Dutch money spent on Georgian media. Some 80% of Georgian media is financed by Western money which supports ultra-liberal groups, and now for 30 years.”

“The nation is drained from its intellectuals. This polarisation is fake,” he added.

On his part, Mikheil Sarjveladze, an MP from the ruling GD, thinks that internal polarisation “is the most important problem in our country.” He attributes this to the revolutionary traditions of Georgian politics.

“We do not have a big tradition of changing governments via elections,” he argued, and added: “They (UNM) are trying to promote a romantic view of revolutions.”

In his view, the Georgian opposition is sidestepping the political system and trying to affect change through street mobilisations and revolution.

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The European dream

Georgian politics has one quirk: the most influential person does not hold a public position and is not elected by the citizens. That’s Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire-turned-politician, who made his fortunes in Russia in the 1990s and later created a large coalition to topple the revolutionary leader Mikhail Saakashvili.

There is no one better than Gia Khukhashvili — once a confidant and advisor to Ivanishvili — to explain how the grey cardinal thinks.

“The GD have their head in Russia and their body in Europe. The message to Europe is: “This is me, take it or leave it. If you don’t like it, then there is Russia””, Khukhashvili says, describing the current GD leadership as “shadow authoritarian rule” where Ivanishvili holds the real power despite having no elected public position.

“Georgia has never been so close to its historic drive to re-integrate into the Western world,” said Giorgi Badridze a former diplomat, and currently an associate researcher at Rondeli Foundation.

“Georgia could actually gain EU membership, yet we have a government that prioritises preserving

its own power.” He adds: “This is a unique moment in history, it may not repeat in a generation. This window of opportunity is closing at the end of this year.”

When asked if political dialogue could ease current tensions, Khukhashvili replied: “Georgia is a country of monologues, there is no space for dialogue.”

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— GIORGI BADRIDZE, FORMER DIPLOMAT

Opposition: Vocal but divided

The ruling GD seems increasingly isolated and unpopular, especially after the massive demonstrations in March against the draft “Foreign Agent Law”.

The draft law was initiated by the ruling GD to better control foreign financial support to Georgian organisations, but it was seen by the opposition as an attempt to silence independent media and NGOs.

Street demonstrations forced the parliament to rescind the law, popularly known as its “Foreign Agent Law” or “The Russian Law”. This was the last in a series of popular demonstrations defending media freedom, and LGBT rights, or expressing opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While the Georgian public is very much anti-Russian, ruling authorities are not only pursuing a neutral stance in a very polarised international context but are trying to enhance relations with Moscow to the extent that they are even silencing Russian dissidents seeking refuge in Georgia.

Earlier in May, Russia declared visa-free travel after which Georgian Airways launched direct flights to Moscow. While authorities portrayed the moves as good for the economy, the opposition was unconvinced. It views the move as yet another sign that the ruling party is pro-Russian and anti-Western.

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Yet, the GD’s hold on power does not seem to be shaken.

“The opposition is busy infighting,” said Badridze. “As a result, they are losing public support.”

Georgian Dream came to power through Ivanishvili — a billionaire who remains largely a mysterious figure — despite being at the centre of Georgian politics for over a decade now. Ivanishvili succeeded to bring together opposing forces — from conservatives to liberals — who wanted to see a change in politics after the revolutionary and erratic ruler Mikheil Saakashvili was in power for eight years (2004-2012).

Ivanishvili criticised Saakashvili for his authoritarianism and promised democracy and more just power distribution, which won him support in impoverished regions. Yet, after his first term in office, Ivanishvili placed his own team in all decision-making positions and soon lost the support of the

liberal parties such as the Republicans and Free Democrats of Alasania.

The GD's recent right-turn is a bid to win over conservative, nationalistic, and religious segments of Georgian society.

“If one looks at identity politics, then Georgia is a very polarised society. But zooming out, Georgia is still firmly centred on the national identity that emerged from the 19 April 1989 demonstrations.”

“UNM is pro-Western and conservative” explains Irakli Pavlenishvili, a member of the political council of UNM, who emphasises the importance of “good relations with the (Georgian Orthodox) Church.” This segment of society that follows the church and adheres to conservative values, seems to be the target of GD propaganda.

Georgian politician Giga Bokeria still believes in the possibility of change through institutions. “The ‘Russian law’ was the spark that ignited the backlash from society. The idea of Europe unites a new generation of activists who value ideals such as freedom of speech, minority rights etc”, he said.

Solid national identity despite divisions

If one looks at identity politics – pro-Western against pro-Russian, conservative or for minority rights, for Ivanishvili or against Ivanishvili – then Georgia is a very polarised society.

But zooming out, Georgia is still firmly centred on the national identity that emerged from the 19 April 1989 demonstrations: Georgia is the land of ethnic Georgians, Russia is feared yet everyone seems ready to do business with it, and the Church is a central institution to Georgian identity.

The struggle between the GD and the opposition is largely in the field of identity politics and symbols, which will only intensify before the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 2024.

Symbols do matter, and the GD has not been very cognizant of the consensus on which post-Soviet Georgia emerged: Russia as the new enemy of the Georgians, and “Europe” and the “West” as the promised land of progress and abundance.

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