Georgia: political parties and the EU

Although majority and opposition differ on national policy issues, the rival political factions agree on Georgia’s European future. In a common resolution, Georgian political parties have unanimously declared that integration into the EU represents the overarching priority of the country’s foreign policy. However, this does not preclude constructive dialogue with the Russian Federation aimed at resolving conflicts and promoting good neighbourly relations.

Background

Georgia and the EU have very close relations. On 27 June 2014 the EU and Georgia signed an Association Agreement (AA), which also includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA). As stated by the European Parliament in a 2011 resolution, the AA is aimed at deepening political and economic ties with the EU within the Eastern dimension of the Union’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The European Parliament approved the conclusion of the Agreement in a resolution of 18 December 2014, a month after the first meeting of the EU-Georgia Association Council, intended to give political direction to the implementation of the Association Agreement.

Since the early 1990s, the EU has been backing Georgia’s efforts to overcome the consequences of internal conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and supporting its maintenance of its internationally recognised borders. EU support takes the form of a monitoring mission in the region and the designation of an EU Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia. Former Deputy Prime Minister Iraklis Baramidze and former President Mikheil Saakashvili have, on separate occasions, both expressed a clear desire for their country to become an EU Member State.

2012 Parliamentary elections

The new Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, defeated the ruling United National Movement (UNM), led by then-President Saakashvili in the parliamentary elections of 1 October 2012, with a 54.97% majority. According to OSCE and EP observers, the elections reflected the will of the people and the electoral process had improved significantly, although some shortcomings remained. The day after the elections both parties claimed victory, but on 3 October Saakashvili conceded defeat. In the ensuing days Saakashvili, Ivanishvili, and other officials from GD and UNM met to plan an orderly transition, including the appointment of a new Cabinet. Saakashvili stated that he would not resign but would observe the constitutional limit of two presidential terms, and would consequently not run in the 2013 presidential elections.

2013 Presidential elections

The presidential elections of 27 October bestowed victory on GD candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili, who got more than 62% of the votes. International observers said that fundamental freedoms had been respected. Besides being a personal victory, this outcome consolidated the GD’s power, as it now held both the presidency and the government, and enjoyed a majority in Parliament. The election of Margvelashvili marked the entry into force of a new constitution, which significantly curbed the powers of the president, while increasing those of the prime minister (currently Irakli Garibashvili). In his victory speech of 28 October, Margvelashvili reaffirmed Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation, including the pursuit of its future NATO and EU membership. At the same time, he reiterated that GD would continue to pursue the normalisation of ties with Russia.
In late July 2014, the Georgian Public Prosecutor filed criminal charges against former President Saakashvili for serious crimes and human rights violations committed in 2005 and 2007, including abuse of power and assault. In a statement issued on 31 July 2014, the EU said that it would closely monitor these and other legal proceedings against members of the former government and current opposition in Georgia, and urged all sides in Georgian politics to move beyond past conflicts and focus on the country’s future.

Saakashvili has remained outside Georgia since the charges were brought, with prosecutors seeking to have him detained and extradited to stand trial.

**Georgia’s political party spectrum**

The Georgian Parliament consists of 150 members, elected in 84 constituencies according to a mixed electoral system. Some 77 members are elected on the basis of party lists. The remaining 73 members, nominated from single-mandate majoritarian constituencies, get elected directly in voting districts in a first-past-the-post-system. All members sit for four-year terms. The next elections will take place in 2016. The Georgian Parliament is the country’s supreme representative body which assumes legislative authority, sets the country’s main domestic and foreign policy course and oversees the government’s activity within the limits defined in the Constitution. Following the last general elections, Georgia’s two main political factions hold seats in the Parliament:

**The ruling party**

**Georgian Dream (GD):** 54.97%, 85 seats. Georgian Dream is a coalition of six opposition parties formed by Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and named after a rap song by his son Bera. The party’s goal had been to compete against the ruling United National Movement in the parliamentary elections of October 2012. Its constituent parties are: Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (Ivanishvili’s own party); the Republican Party, a veteran liberal party; the Free Democrats with pro-Western leanings; the National Forum, a populist party with a regional focus; the Conservative Party and the pro-industry party, Industry Saves Georgia. Georgian Dream built its reputation on the basis of a strong rejection of Mikheil Saakashvili’s rule and on its promises of bringing about change with regard to jobs, education, healthcare, and agriculture. Separately, Ivanishvili also committed to pursuing a pro-Western and pro-NATO foreign policy, but pledged a more pragmatic relationship with Russia.

**The opposition**

**United National Movement – More Benefits to People (UNM):** 40.34%, 65 seats. UNM was founded in 2001 by Mikheil Saakashvili, in opposition to the government of the then president Eduard Shevardnadze. The UNM campaign highlighted the economic successes over the past eight years but also offered a populist programme, pledging investment in road-building, tourism and hydro-electric power and promising Georgian families vouchers worth €750 a month. The UNM’s foreign policy programme has a strong emphasis on Euro-Atlantic integration. UNM has the status of observer party in the EPP.

**Georgian political parties and relations with the EU and Russia**

If GD and UNM seem to be in opposition over domestic subjects, they are unanimous about EU issues. Georgia’s Parliament adopted, on 7 March 2013, a resolution, drafted jointly by GD and UNM, which reiterated the country’s commitment to the pro-European and pro-Western foreign policy course. The resolution, passed unanimously by Parliament, states that integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures represents the country’s overarching foreign policy priority.

The resolution affirms that Georgia will take further steps to build and strengthen its democratic institutions; establish a governance system based on the rule of law and supremacy of human rights; and ensure irreversibly sustainable economic development. Georgia will not join any international organisation whose policies contradict these priorities. Cooperation with the EU within the framework of the ENP will develop in four main areas: democracy and human rights; approximation of Georgian legislation with that of the EU; environmental protection and energy security; and people-to-people contacts. Cooperation in the development of peace processes is also considered a priority area.

The adopted text adds that the goal of a dialogue with the Russian Federation is to resolve conflicts, and establish and develop good neighbourly relations.