
DOES EU HAVE ROLE IN STOPPING BACKSLIDING IN GEORGIA?

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The EU's eastern neighbourhood is in flux.

The collapse of the pro-reform government in Moldova and the stagnation of anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine was recently followed yet by another political crisis in Georgia.

On 14 November, Georgia's ruling party, the Georgian Dream (GD) backtracked from its major political promise to introduce the proportional electoral system for the next year's parliamentary elections.

The opposition and civil activists hit the street, started picketing the parliament building and demanded snap elections. Both domestic watchdogs and international observers agree that introduction of proportional election system is an essential next step for consolidating Georgia's fragile democracy.

It is not the first time when Georgia finds itself on the brink of authoritarian rollback.

The Black Sea country which is often viewed as a frontrunner of the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) has been struggling to consolidate its weak democratic structures and leave the post-Soviet legacies behind.

As a result of the GD's rule the traditions of single-party dominance, political polarisation and politicised judiciary were further supplemented by informal governance, political interference, executive overreach, the failure to propagate standards of accountability.

Whereas the GD government implemented some socially-oriented reforms it failed to improve socio-economic conditions of the population and as a result its popularity has declined.

Therefore, perhaps out of fear of losing the 2020 elections, the GD decided to stick with the mixed electoral system with half of MP's elected in majoritarian districts.

Compared to the opposition, the GD also possesses asymmetric financial and administrative resources and has significant influence on editorial policy of the biggest nationwide TV channels.

Considering the fact that the last presidential elections were marred by many irregularities and a high degree of polarisation, there is a danger that upcoming parliamentary elections will be even more tense and government may be tempted to win it by any means.

The result of it may be disastrous not only for Georgia's democratic development but also for long-term stability of the country and region. Thus, as never before, Georgia needs assistance from international community to remain on path of democratic and sustainable development.

EU leverage?

The EU, or the West more general, have always had enough leverage over Georgia's political class to push the country in a right direction during critical junctures.

The Western support was crucial in the 2003 Rose Revolution as well as during the 2012 peaceful electoral power transition – two events that at that time prevented Georgia's further backsliding into authoritarian politics.

Moreover, the EU serves for Georgia as a main provider of security and container of Russian threat through the European Union Monitoring Mission Georgia (EUMM).

It provides Georgia with reform agenda, is the biggest trade partner, main sources of remittances and investments. An association agreement, free-trade deal and visa-free regime further anchors Georgia into European system of differentiated integration and makes it a reliable ally in the neighbourhood.

However, at present the EU and member states lack strategic vision towards the wider region and are reluctant to have a role of a democracy promoter. It seems instead of applying democratic conditionality towards association for the trio - Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The EU just supports stability in the region which is not sufficient to real transformation of the region.

What is more, EU's stability-prioritising approach does not result in more stability but rather permanent political crisis and stagnation of democratic reforms.

The problem particularly with Georgia is that whereas the incumbent regimes are interested in keeping power indefinitely, Georgian society has grown enough not to tolerate authoritarian stability.

Trapped by oligarchic interests, the country remains politically divided. Perceptions of the country's direction have hit their lowest levels since 2010.

According to the recent public opinion poll released by the International Republican Institute (IRI) 68 percent of respondents say the country is moving in the wrong direction.

As the safeguarding of Georgian democracy is crumbling, the only way to stabilise country is to support sustainable multi-party political system and institutionalisation of consensus-based democratic processes.

As the strategic context has changed dramatically in the last decade in the region EU needs to rethink on its own strategy by reinvigorating the bloc's commitment to international democratic

norms.

As Georgia's historic transition faces crucial tests in 2020, it also raises the question of whether the country will be able to manage two consecutive peaceful transfers of power.

As Georgia actively pursues European path and embraces European values, the EU's engagement and commitment towards Georgia's electoral transformation is essential.

The EU needs not to be just an observer but should have agency to support democratic consolidation of Georgia.

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