

Georgian democracy needs action from a (geo)political Union now

Open letter to President von der Leyen, President Michel and HRVP Borrell

Brussels, Belgium

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What more should Georgian citizens do, having repeatedly come out to the streets in the hundreds of thousands over the last month, waving European flags and getting beaten up, in an effort to prevent the ruling party from establishing a Belarus-style regime that would enable Russia to regain control over the South Caucasus?

‘Georgian Dream’ has made its intentions clear: in a paranoid anti-West speech on 29 April, Bidzina Ivanishvili has [promised strict punishment](#) for opposition protagonists after October’s elections. The police are responding to peaceful pro-European protests with gradually increasing violence. The ruling party’s thugs are compiling lists of civil society activists, issuing personalised threats and [beating people in front of their homes](#) – all these are well-known steps from a beginner’s guide to building a dictatorship.

The EU’s pleas to the Georgian government not to miss the historical opportunity of the EU candidate status, are falling on the ears of people for whom a democratic European future is not a priority. The ruling party has made a clear choice to prioritise staying in power forever. It is getting ready to rig October’s parliamentary elections and employ as much violence as needed. The law on ‘foreign influence’, [adopted](#) despite massive protests and repeated EU advice, is only one part of the problem.

The [HRVP’s and Commission’s statement](#) urging the Georgian authorities to withdraw the law, goes in the right direction. Attempts to amend the law on ‘foreign influence’ into an acceptable version would be futile, naïve and excessively technocratic. The EU Ambassador has already acknowledged that the law would need to become [completely different](#). It is important for the EU institutions to realise the full scale of the problem (the ruling party’s intentions), to draw the lessons of Belarus’ rigged elections of 2020, and to take relevant political action so that Georgia’s foretold disaster could still be averted.

The Commission has clearly been struggling with assuming a political responsibility and playing a political role vis-à-vis a candidate country. Unfortunately, if the ‘Georgian Dream’ gets its way, Russia will have achieved a significant blow to the credibility of EU enlargement policy. The Commission needs to realise that in the enlargement context, it has a responsibility to help uphold democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries so that the enlargement process does not fall hostage to uncooperative governments and vested interests. Concretely, if EU institutions are serious about [‘speaking the language of power’](#):

- Building on the visit of parliamentarians and foreign affairs ministers from several EU Member States, **some members of the European Council and/or HRVP Borrell should visit Tbilisi still in May and clearly stand with the protesters**, affirming the position expressed by the EU through published statements.
- An unambiguous message should be sent that a **large-scale pre-election monitoring mission** would be organised by the EU as a way to start overcoming Georgia’s political polarisation and returning it to the European path.

- The European Commission should **suspend all direct budget support to Georgia and financing of government-led projects until the ‘foreign influence’ law is dropped and fair elections are held** in October. The suspension and the possibility of resuming EU support should be clearly communicated. In parallel, the EU could explore other ways of supporting Georgian society.
- The HRVP and the Commission should heed, [at long last](#), the [repeated plea](#) of the European Parliament, and **propose targeted financial sanctions and travel bans against the leadership of ‘Georgian Dream’ and their families**, unless the ‘foreign influence’ law is dropped and fair elections are held. Imposing sanctions would be an unorthodox step vis-à-vis the ruling party of an EU candidate country, but the EU’s long standing tactic of trying to persuade the ruling party without antagonising it has clearly proven ineffective.

We appeal to you to take concrete political actions now, to stand with Georgia before it is too late.

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