

CEPS Doubts Georgia's Readiness for EU Membership Application in Released Analysis

By Liza Mchedlidze

Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels published an analysis of Georgia's application for EU membership submitted on March 3, 2022, following Ukraine and Moldova. CEPS refers to Georgia's political standpoint as a 'paradox'.

CEPS article reads that Georgia has suppressed Ukraine and Moldova and some other candidate states in the implementation of economic parts of the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the European Union, calling it 'impressive'.

Analysis reads that Georgia's current political regime has been contradicting the EU's fundamental values of democracy and the supremacy of law, stating that the main problem is 'the concentration of effective political power in the hands of an unelected, unaccountable oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, embodying the paradigm of state capture.'

CEPS also recalls the 2018 elections, when Ivanishvili 'was responsible for the most egregious case of vote-buying in the second round, paying off bank debts of a considerable part of the population.'

Center for European Policy Studies wrote about the heavily criticized arrest and imprisonment of opposition leader Nika Melia and the Media personality Nika Gvaramia:

"A further troubling feature of the political regime has been its interference in high-level court judgments concerning opposition politicians and leading media personalities. There have been recurrent cases of 'politicised justice', criticised widely by Georgia's international partners and civil society.

The latest instance occurred on 16 May, when a court



handed down a judgment and sentence of over three and a half years of imprisonment to Nika Gvaramia, director of TV Mtavari, a channel often critical of the government. The judgment's timing came only weeks after submitting Georgia's application for EU membership, and around three weeks before the European Commission is expected to deliver its Opinion on the application.

"One would have expected the historic decision to apply for EU membership to have been accompanied by signals that Georgia was now resolutely set upon reforming political and judicial practices in line with the highest European standards. Instead, the only observable news is the Gvaramia case, which even appears as an act of provocation that signals the government's apparent inclination to become a troublemaking Member State."

CEPS assesses the Gvaramia arrest as "One could hardly have imagined a more damaging step to take at this

stage."

All these taken into account, CEPS believes that the 'government of Bidzina Ivanishvili' applied to EU membership to satisfy the majority of public opinion who want a European future for Georgia, calling this move a 'superficial tactic':

"The external observer struggles to understand what the government and Mr. Ivanishvili intended. Seeking a rationale, the membership application can be viewed as a symbolic and superficial tactic to try to satisfy the large majority of Georgian public opinion that wants a European future. At the same time, the leadership seems to have no interest in making a success of the accession process and is proceeding in ways that would precipitate its failure."

The analysis reads that Georgia's readiness for EU accession now is 'premature' and is mainly dependent on several factors including a new and more propitious political environment, genuine democratic culture, and independent judiciary in Georgia.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

'Borjomi' Will Continue the Production, PM Gharibashvili Says

Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili told the media that the company Borjomi would no longer have problems in its work and the brand will continue to operate freely.

According to the Prime Minister, the issue will be resolved at the government session:

"We have worked actively on this issue as promised. We have had direct communication with the management company, the owners, and everyone. We know that there is an offer to give a share to the state, the government, and our country, which can be worth about \$ 100 million.

I have already instructed the Ministries of Economy and Justice, I will have a conclusion in a few days and we will approve all this at the next government session. Borjomi will no longer have any problems in operation and will continue to work for our proud brand, of course, all employees should be calm. I want to tell them that the problem will be solved," Gharibashvili said.

The company that owns IDS BORJOMI International is ready to transfer part of the shares to the Government of Georgia free of charge. According to them, after the agreement, the company will be able to resume the production process in the factories and resume economic activities.

The company Borjomi fired 49 employees who did not sign the new terms. Dismissed employees are demanding reinstatement in service and resumption of work under the old contract.

Borjomi suspended production on April 29 due to war and sanctions. IDS Borjomi's controlling stake was purchased by Alfa Group in 2013. The founder of Alfa Group is the sanctioned Russian billionaire Mikhail Friedman.



Special Penitentiary Service Releases Statement regarding Saakashvili and Gvaramia

The Special Penitentiary Service has released a statement regarding the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and Nika Gvaramia, the founder of the Mtavari Arkhi. The statement says that some media outlets spread false information about Saakashvili and Gvaramia.

"Unverified and inaccurate information is spread by some media outlets, which may contribute to the formation of a public perception that is different from reality.

Mikheil Saakashvili, convicted on May 19, underwent a scheduled high-tech examination, during which he was not in the ward. Despite being informed about this, lawyer Shota Tutberidze did not wait for the medical examination to be completed, left the clinic, and, speaking to the media, unjustifiably accused the Special Penitentiary Service of imposing restrictions on his client.

The statement that the convicted Mikheil Saakashvili was not allowed to meet with his daughter Alice Maria Saakashvili during his stay in the penitentiary system is a lie.

No one has applied to the Special Penitentiary Service with such a request until May 18, 2022. The next day after the request for a visit, on May 19, 2022, Alice Maria Saakashvili, together with her mother, visited Mikheil Saakashvili at the Civil Sector Clinic.

Here, we would like to respond to the information spread by some media outlets, as if the convict Nika Gvaramia is in solitary confinement in N12 penitentiary institution.

We emphasize that Nika Gvaramia has been informed about his rights since the day he entered the penitentiary system. He is in a standard cell in the facility alone, based on his own decision, which is confirmed by the relevant documentation.

"The Special Penitentiary Service once again calls on everyone to refrain from disseminating unverified, one-sided, and inaccurate information in order to prevent misleading the public," the statement reads.

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.9036; Euro - 3.0738; GBP - 3.6240; 100 Russian Ruble - 4.7604; Swiss Franc - 2.9919

What is Moscow planning in the Tskhinvali region?

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

Russia involved in the protracted war in Ukraine is leaving for Georgia. In the occupied Tskhinvali region, the de-facto president has been replaced, actively continuing to expand the occupied territories 'borderization' and holding a referendum on 'unification with Russia' on July 17, the 'result' of which is known in advance - the inhabitants of the occupied territories will support 'unification' with Russia.

The response of the current government of Georgia to all this is short and quiet - "we do not know anything about this".

In the Tskhinvali region occupied by Moscow, Moscow played a farce of democracy - the so-called 'Presidential Elections' was held in two rounds (April 10, 2022, and May 8, 2022) and through elections, the president has been replaced.

The current 'president', Anatoly Bibilov, who is also a general in the Russian army, was replaced by Alan Gagloev, the leader of the opposition party Nikhas. In the first election, it turns out, he received 11,099 votes, while the candidate who was declared the winner received

14,505 votes. This is the 'electorate' of the occupied region.

In this region, Russia organized the ethnic cleansing of Georgians by the local "Ossetian" administration, completely destroying many Georgian villages and the small number of Georgians left in Akhagori. They do not have an "Ossetian" passport and neither do "they participate in the elections."

In a word, it was an imitation of elections and the word "democracy" should not be mentioned in mentioning these elections. We must say this because Bibilov used to say in a big story: "More democratically than in South Ossetia, elections are not held anywhere."

In this e. As a result of the elections, Moscow replaced one of its officials, Bibilov, with another, Gagloev. Gagloev is not a new and random 'someone'. He also participated in the 'presidential elections' in 2017 and then won third place. Gagloev admires Putin and considers him "the most exemplary world politician." Changing the ruler of the occupied Tskhinvali region will not change anything for either Moscow or Tbilisi. But in this e. Additional intrigue was

put in the 'elections'.

Bibilov in his e. Suddenly, before the presidential election, there was talk of joining Russia, and for that, he was talking about holding a "referendum" and two referendums - one referendum on "joining Russia" and the other on joining "Ossetia-Alania" in the Russian Federation.

Bibilov made the referendum the main topic of his "election campaign", but judging by the results of this so-called election, he did not cause much excitement among the "voters" and lost the election, but before the transfer of power to the "new president", which should take place on May 24. Reunification with Russia "referendum on July 17.

The question raised in this referendum should also be mentioned separately: "Do you support the unification of the Republic of South Ossetia and Russia?". Yes, "union" and not "union".

Whatever the so-called scheduling of the referendum threatens Moscow with the direct annexation of Georgian territory and puts the current Georgian government in an "uncomfortable" position, which has offi-

cially shifted from the officially declared "non-irritating Russia" policy to the "Russian support" policy.

Both the new 'president' of Tskhinvali and Russian politicians, who commented on the referendum, was "hesitant" about the "unifying" referendum with Russia. Gagloev, of course, supports the "unification" of the occupied Tskhinvali region with Russia, but Bibilov criticized the date of the referendum.

According to Gagloev, Bibilov did not agree with him on the referendum, but the referendum is to be held by Gagloev. Gagloev also does not know whether Bibilov agreed on the issue of "unification" with the Russian leadership.

A statement on the referendum was made by Leonid Kalashnikov, the head of the Russian State Duma's CIS Committee, who said that Alan Gagloev was "not in a hurry to hold a referendum."

According to Kalashnikov, the unification of the occupied Tskhinvali region with Russia is Russia's decision - "it depends not on them, but on Russia and whether Russia and Belarus are ready to expand the allied state." Dmitry Peskov, the press sec-

retary of the Russian president, responded to the referendum, saying that "Moscow is not doing any work on this issue at the moment" and that the referendum would only reflect "the attitude of the people of South Ossetia and its predecessor."

Following such comments, there are several options for the development of events: according to one option, Gagloev will cancel or postpone the referendum indefinitely, which the current Georgian government considers a result of its policy - "Moscow does not irritate." According to the second option, which is probably more realistic, a referendum will be held and the result will be known in advance.

Moscow will "not react" and thus create a new threat to Georgia. The Georgian Dream will also be given a new argument for not irritating Moscow. The third option is the annexation of the Moscow-occupied region of Tskhinvali, which, according to a number of experts, may be seen as an attempt to "cover-up" the failures in Ukraine. However, this option will completely destroy the current relations built by the Georgian Dream with Russia.

Switzerland launches Cooperation Programme for the South Caucasus 2022-2025

On 19 May 2022, H.E. Heidi Grau, Ambassador of Switzerland to Georgia, and Danielle Meuwly, Regional Director of Cooperation, presented a new Swiss Cooperation Programme for the South Caucasus 2022-2025. The Programme is a flagship document which defines the key priority areas of Swiss engagement for the period of 2022-2025. The event brought together the representatives of the Government, international and national partners and implementing agencies.

Switzerland, through its Cooperation Office in the South Caucasus with the regional office in Tbilisi, will implement



the regional Cooperation Programme in the course of four years, 2022-2025. The focus of the Swiss engagement will be on four key areas: 1) promoting civic engagement and cooperation in the region, 2) strengthening democracy and public institutions, 3) improving economic development and creation of decent jobs, and 4) strengthening climate

resilience and sustainable resource management. Gender equality and good governance will be considered in all relevant projects.

Switzerland is currently supporting more than 20 projects most of which kicked off within the framework of the previous Swiss Cooperation Strategy 2017-2021. At the end of 2021,

as a result of Swiss-funded projects, more than 150'000 beneficiaries received additional incomes from agriculture, which amounted to about USD 34 million. Digital infrastructure was created in 63 municipalities, making digital public services available for about 1.5 million residents. Important analytical work on gender impact assessments and gender pay gap was undertaken to promote gender equality, for example.

The new Cooperation Programme 2022-2025 will build on past achievements and continue to make an effective contribution to the country's development pathways by initiating new projects in priority areas. In Georgia, Switzerland will continue strengthening the country's economy by providing support to the agriculture sector, focusing on rural SMEs, women's economic development in rural areas and vocational education and training related to agriculture. Governance, in-

cluding migration, and local economic development will remain key areas of Swiss intervention. The Programme will also continue to pursue better climate adaptation and natural resource management focusing on forestry. Apart from these thematic focuses, Switzerland will further engage in conflict prevention, peace promotion, and strengthen human rights. It will also finance small initiatives by local NGOs on topics such as gender equality, environment and climate change, inclusiveness and digitalization. Moreover, Switzerland will support the local Georgian art scene by financing cultural projects, as part of a regional art and culture program. The overall budget for Georgia amounts to CHF 34 million.

Swiss engagement in the South Caucasus dates back to 1988 and has expanded ever since through strong bilateral interventions in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The regional Cooperation Office in Tbilisi was opened in 1996. The overall Swiss investment in development cooperation in the region has so far amounted to CHF 200 million.

Weather

Monday, May 23

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 25°C

Night Rain

Low: 12°C

Tuesday, May 24

Day Mostly Cloudy

High: 20°C

Night Cloudy

Low: 11°C

published by

The Messenger

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All contributions should be submitted by e-mail.

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UN and Development Partners Recommit to Support the Transformation of Social Protection System for Persons with Disabilities

The United Nations in Georgia, along with various development partners, expressed commitment to further support the transformation of the social protection system for persons with disabilities in Georgia.

A one-day meeting was convened by the United Nations to assess progress in the implementation of the Joint Programme 'Transforming Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in Georgia'.

UN Resident Coordinator Sabine Machl opened the meeting. **Other speakers included** Deputy Minister of MoIDPOTLHSA Tamila Barkalaia, Human Rights Advisor, Prime Minister's Office Niko Tatulashvili, Deputy Chair of the Parliament Legal Affairs Committee Rati Ionatamishvili, and Public Defender Nino Lomjaria.

Using an action-oriented approach, participants discussed the remaining gaps in the social protection system for persons with disabilities and identified areas to further address issues affecting persons with disabilities.

Launched in January 2020 with USD 2 million from the Joint SDG Fund, a multi-sectoral approach has been used to enhance social protection for persons with disabilities. The Joint Programme involves collaboration among UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women, WHO, OHCHR, as well as the Government, civil society and organizations of people with disabilities. The focus of the Programme was to improve the policy environment, advance the accessibility of infrastructure, information and services, promote social inclusion, and increase access to social services for people with

disabilities in Georgia, as well as to support the effective implementation and monitoring of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

"The joint efforts of the UN advanced transformative and lasting change for persons who are too often left behind," said Sabine Machl, UN Resident Coordinator in her opening remarks. "We made good progress in developing more inclusive legislation, reforming the way disability determinations are made - and thereby end the invisibility of persons with disabilities, ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for all persons with disabilities as well as preventing and responding to gender-based violence". She also noted that "today's meeting is an important step in supporting the sustainability of the achieved results and driving change across a variety of interconnected issues".

Since 2020, the Joint Programme supported reforms for enabling legislative and policy environment in Georgia, advocated for adopting the new Law on the Rights of Persons with disabilities which facilitated the process of including bringing Georgian legislation in compliance with UN CRPD standards as well as advocated for ratification of the Optional Protocol to UN CRPD. With support from the Joint Programme, one of the most important mechanisms for CRPD implementation - the Interagency Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - was created, annual action plans on implementation of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (LRPD) and the national regu-

latory framework on accessibility were elaborated.

With the JP support the draft Human Rights Strategy, as well as number of annual action plans on implementation of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (LRPD) and the national regulatory framework on accessibility were elaborated. Relevant national policies and plans and educational platforms that guarantee access to family planning and antenatal care of women with disabilities, as well as mechanisms for identification and management of GBV were updated and developed.

Under this Joint Programme, the process and procedures of the disability assessment and status determination system based on a social model of disability were formulated, piloted and refined to match the needs of various disability groups. Mechanisms for roll-out of the new disability assessment system were developed including (1) a roadmap to create a cadre of professionals necessary for the assessment; (2) the concept for the system's monitoring and professionals' supervision; (3) information management system; and (4) draft legislative changes to support the transformation process. Over 1,500 persons (including children) with disabilities have been assessed using the new assessment methodology, as part of the pilot initiatives.

The Joint Programme also enhanced the capacities of legal professionals with special focus on Legal Aid Service (LAS) as a primary provider of legal aid to persons with disabilities and law-enforcement on international CRPD standards.

An Advisory Committee on disability

assessment and status determination system was formed, comprised of 10 representatives of different disability communities, including parents and children with disabilities. The Committee as well as various organizations for persons with disabilities were supported. In total, over 409,000 people, including women and girls with disabilities, benefitted from improved knowledge on their rights as well as improved policies and public attitudes, and one million people were reached through awareness raising initiatives, including on the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

The Joint Programme improved access to social services and employment, including strengthening social services for persons with disabilities in Akhaltshikhe and Shuakhevi municipalities; establishing Social Inclusion Centers in Ambrolauri and Tsoliskuri; and setting up a rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities in Abkhazia. In addition, the Joint Programme supported the creation of favorable conditions for employment of persons with disabilities and to ensure their living independently, in partnership with state agencies, the private sector and local municipalities.

It is expected that discussions from the meeting will scale up engagement and implementation of the UN Disability Convention and Georgia's Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (LRPD), including effectiveness of newly created Coordination Committee, better access to quality services in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence and transformation of the disability assessment and status determination system.

Building a shared future for all life — one protected area at a time

May 22, 2022

As we enjoy the warm weather and savour this spring's first fruit, we probably do not think much about the terrestrial and marine flora and fauna that provide the environmental services we need for our lives.

Every day, human activity and climate change pose an existential threat to our planet's biodiversity. Plant and animal species are being destroyed at unprecedented rates. A recent analysis suggests that their number has declined by a staggering 68% since 1970. The pressures come from deforestation, loss of land and pollution due to mining and industrial operation, agriculture activities, construction or transport. And such losses entail serious economic costs. According to a recent World Bank report, the collapse of such ecosystem services as wild pollination, marine fisheries, or native forests, could result in an annual loss of \$2.7 trillion of global GDP by 2030.

Biodiversity preservation efforts in the EU's Eastern Partner Countries

On 22 May, the world celebrates Biodiversity Day, dedicated to raising awareness about threats to biodiversity and to promoting its conservation.

The Biodiversity Day helps to highlight many initiatives that have already been launched. For example, in Europe, the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (the Emerald Network) helps to protect and preserve species of European importance and their habitats. Launched in 1989 under the Convention



on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (the Bern Convention), the Emerald Network includes more than 4 000 officially recognised sites across the European continent. As many as 705 of these sites are located in the Eastern partner (EaP) countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. These countries are endowed with rich biodiversity distributed in various biogeographical regions. For example, biodiversity in the South Caucasus countries alone constitutes of 411 types of habitats, 341 bird types and 292 types of non-avian species.

But merely setting aside a site and calling it a protected area is not enough. To conserve and nurture species and habitats, protected areas require careful management with measurable objectives, and extensive monitoring and evaluation.

The European Union affirms its steadfast commitment to preserving biodiversity and has engaged to protect the EaP countries' biodiversity and ecosystems through the EU-funded European Union for Environment Programme ("EU4Environment"). This work is implemented by the World Bank.

EU4Environment supports countries to advance their individual Emerald Net-

work goals:

In Armenia, a National Action Plan is being developed to both establish protected areas as part of the Emerald Network and define the conservation objectives, outcomes, and timelines in line with the Bern Convention. Activities also help to strengthen capacity to design, manage, and monitor these sites and to set standards for sustainable eco-tourism and non-timber forest production indicators.

In Azerbaijan, EU4Environment helps with the establishment of three Emerald Network sites.

Improving forest management within the Emerald Network is the main priority in Georgia. This includes data collection and analysis to develop guidelines for managing forest habitats in Emerald sites and enforcement of relevant regulation.

In the Republic of Moldova, EU4Environment is supporting development of a national Emerald Network roadmap with defining steps for management and monitoring of the country's Emerald Sites. Additionally, guidelines for the Emerald Network management plans of three selected sites will be drafted.

In Ukraine, the EU4Environment programme plans to focus on developing guidelines for Emerald sites' impact assessment and mitigation measures, and assist in designing Emerald Site Management Plans for three selected sites.

"Research suggests that nature-based solutions could provide nearly 40% of the cost-effective climate mitigation needed to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. With help from the EU4Environment Programme, Eastern Partner countries will be able to improve

the management of the Emerald Network in order to reduce loss of biodiversity and land degradation, while also addressing climate change. This work will contribute to the negotiations at the Conference of the Parties (COP-15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity in October 2022 Kunming, where countries will have the opportunity to define the path to reversing the dramatic decline of biodiversity and ecosystem services," said Ms Madhavi M. Pillai, Senior Natural Resources Management Specialist at the World Bank.

Nurturing nature across boundaries and into the future

Regional workshops, study visits, and knowledge-sharing events organised under EU4Environment help policy makers and practitioners to exchange with EU member states knowledge gained and lessons learned from the implementation of biodiversity conservation at Natura 2000 sites. This knowledge will contribute to effective biodiversity conservation measures of the Emerald sites that span transboundary areas.

Ultimately, World Bank-implemented activities under the EU4Environment Programme will contribute to the conservation of animal and plant species and stronger communities and livelihoods across the EaP countries. Preserving biodiversity will also bolster ecosystem services and climate change mitigation for a green, resilient, and inclusive future.

(euneighbourseast.eu)