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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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# Can the EU stop Georgia's anti-European course? If it is in its interest at all

The ruling party in Georgia, Georgian Dream, is appealing to voters to trust it again in the parliamentary elections in October by putting the flag of the European Union on its posters.

However, Georgian Dream does not want to lead the country towards EU membership. Therefore, decorating with its symbols is just one of the manipulations in the run-up to the elections on October 26.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze reiterated on Friday the ruling party's intention to achieve a two-thirds majority in the forthcoming elections in order to trigger a constitutional mechanism to ban virtually all opposition parties in the country.

Georgian Dream's goal is to win at least 113 of the 150 seats in parliament. That would be enough to launch a mechanism to persecute the opposition, resulting in, as they say, a confrontation with the pseudo-liberal ideology.

Given that Georgian Dream is still the country's most popular political force and the opposition is quite fragmented, with some parts barely securing the 5% electoral threshold, there are real chances for such a development.

## Recipe from Russia

With their pre-election platform published earlier this week, the pseudo-Europeans of the Georgian Dream have confirmed that they do not intend to abandon a series of repressive laws but to continue the repression of the pro-democracy movement, now in an institutionalised manner.

The party, which has been in power for 12 years, says in its platform that it sees the forthcoming elections as a referendum between war and peace, between moral decay and traditional values, and serving "external forces" on the one hand and an independent, sovereign state on the other.

When the Tbilisi government passed the law on so-called "foreign agents," which targets independent media and NGOs, in May, it made it abundantly clear that it does not genuinely want to lead the country towards EU membership.

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This recipe comes from Russia, which has been using the same law for more than a decade to persecute government critics suspected of being agents of foreign influence.

This law, which has sparked street protests in Georgia and sharp reactions from Europe, was the most important part of the ruling party's preparations for the October elections in order to suppress the influence of critics in time, i.e., to increase their strength in parliament.

## Few options before the EU

The recent announcement that Georgian Dream will ban any liberal and pro-European opposition if it secures a two-thirds majority in the elections has resolved the final dilemmas regarding the direction of the Caucasus state.

The European Union has only a limited number of options to stop the strong anti-European trend of the authorities in Tbilisi and their clear shift towards Moscow. The measures currently available to the European Union can only be repressive rather than stimulating, as hoped in Brussels just a year ago.

The EU granted Georgia candidate country status in December last year. The EU made a forced decision to resolve a dilemma: either reward a country whose government fails to adapt to European democratic standards or

leave it outside the European spotlight, vulnerable to Russian influence.

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The EU chose the first option and granted Georgia candidate status, apparently hoping that this would strengthen European forces and deter Russia from making claims regarding its small neighbour.

It will soon become clear that Georgia's inclusion in the club of candidates, which Ukraine and Moldova joined for similar reasons, has had no effect. The erosion of democracy in Georgia has only accelerated since it gained candidate status, and it is now on the verge of a final collapse on the eve of the crucial parliamentary elections.

The then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said last June that the Union would reduce political contacts with Georgia and cut financial support.

At the same time, there were unofficial reports of EU diplomatic plans to possibly reintroduce visas for Georgian citizens, which were abolished in 2017, in order to boost pro-EU sentiment among the Georgian population.

European diplomats have also suggested imposing sanctions on certain Georgian officials if repression against protesters, political opponents, the media, and NGOs continues.

## Is Georgia lost to the EU?

The recent announcements by the government in Tbilisi about the possible institutional suppression of the opposition do not require additional proof that the democratic processes in Georgia have been on a strong downward trend.

However, the EU has still done nothing, perhaps due to the long August break when its institutions traditionally do the bare minimum.

If the EU really wants to have an impact on the negative political developments in Georgia, it is time to act in the coming weeks, if it is not already too late to reverse the trend.

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In addition to measures that would mean sanctions against those in power and perhaps against the entire population by abolishing the visa-free regime, the EU should definitely consider withdrawing Georgia's candidate status for full membership.

Georgia received this honour last December, motivated not only by good intentions but also by polls showing a high level of support (around 80%) among citizens for Georgia's EU membership.

However, further developments show that both assumptions were somehow wrong. The "carrot," in the form of granting candidate status, has not brought any positive changes; on the contrary, the situation has drastically deteriorated since then.

However, the poll results on the high level of support for EU accession do not appear convincing either, especially if the ruling Georgian Dream remains in power after the October elections, with all the manipulations

and deceptions it has been using in the election campaign.