EU AMBITIONS UNABATED

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The recent visit to Brussels of Georgia’s President Salome Zourabishvili has highlighted the country’s determination to pursue a very ambitious EU agenda, despite the challenge of the Covid pandemic and the difficult international climate. EURACTIV looks into the details.
Georgian president visits Brussels in push for 2024 EU membership application

Focus on Black Sea, Caucasus highlights Georgia's strategic importance

EU to push Georgia to cut carbon emissions as part of economic recovery

Georgian MP: Mood in Brussels should not prevent EU membership application

Georgia is ready to apply for membership by 2024 – Is the EU ready too?
Georgian president visits Brussels in push for 2024 EU membership application

By Vlagyiszlav Makszimov | EURACTIV.com

The President of Georgia Salome Zourabishvili is paying a visit to all three on European institutions Thursday and Friday (21-22 January) to cement Georgia's bid for an EU membership in 2024.

The visit of the Caucasian country’s head of state comes in the wake of the new government’s reaffirmation that Euro-Atlantic integration remains top priority of Tbilisi, and the departure from politics of billionaire leader of Georgia’s ruling party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is widely seen as the Western-backed country’s most powerful man.

“We seek de-occupation and peaceful restoration of our territorial integrity while continuing to move closer to the US, EU and NATO,” Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia wrote on Twitter.

“Georgia is preparing to apply for full EU membership in 2024,” Gakharia said, announcing that the first piece of legislation reaffirmed Georgia’s top foreign policy goals following the government taking office after heated parliamentary elections.

“The topic of discussion will be how we are preparing for it and what stages Georgia should go through [for the application]. The main focus will be on economic and sectoral integration as a step towards full integration,” the ex-Soviet state’s head of mission to the EU Natalie Sabanadze said in the run up to the visit.

The EU doesn’t treat Georgia as a candidate country, but rather in the less ambitious format of an Associate country member of the Eastern Partnership. This however doesn’t

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discourage Tbilisi from aiming at full EU accession.

European Council President Charles Michel said after welcoming Zourabishvili that the EU continues “to stand by Georgia in its efforts to overcome COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences and to deepen reforms.”

The bloc provided over €183 million to support immediate and short-term needs after the pandemic hit, as well as a €150 million loan to help limit the economic fallout.

“EU’s support to Georgia’s territorial integrity is unwavering,” he added.

Zourabishvili’s visit to Brussels coincided with the release of the European Court of Human Rights’ judgement that found Russia is responsible for human rights violations, including loss of life, torture, disrespect of property and privacy occurring in Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

Zourabishvili described the judgement as “historic.”

“What we need is more involvement from the EU in conflict resolution,” she added on social media after meeting EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell.

The EU has an unarmed civilian monitoring mission dubbed EUMM, deployed since September 2008, following the EU-mediated Six Point Agreement that ended the August war.

Headquartered in Tbilisi, it comprises 200 monitors from EU member states who patrol areas in adjacent Abkhazia and South Ossetia but cannot enter those territories.

Borrell, for his part, “underlined the vital importance of Georgian political parties finding common ground on the current political situation,” referring to contested fall elections that resulted in opposition parties boycotting parliament.

“Georgia needs a fully functioning, representative parliament, enjoying the trust of the population to take resolute action for a speedy, inclusive, green and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 and to advance the wider reform agenda, including in the judiciary,” the Spaniard added.

After meeting European Parliament president David Sassoli, Zourabishvili said “sectoral integration means real results for Georgians. Promoting Georgian students in Europe is a priority.”

She added that “by studying across the EU, they learn the values necessary to build the democracy of tomorrow. They should pay the same tuitions as EU students.”

In 2019, Georgia became the first country where the EU opened a European School of this kind beyond the bloc’s boundaries, with the objective of strengthening relations with Eastern countries.

Zourabishvili is also set to meet with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during her visit in Brussels on Friday. Georgia ambitions to join NATO despite Russia’s position that the enlargement of the alliance close to its borders is a dangerous game. The Biden administration is expected to encourage Georgia’s further NATO integration.
Focus on Black Sea, Caucasus highlights Georgia’s strategic importance

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com

While Georgia’s normalisation with Russia is still in doubt because of the country’s breakaway regions, Georgia has embraced a pro-Western foreign policy, including plans to join the EU and NATO and deepening relations with the US.

“We have seen a new configuration of balance in our region, which shows that now, as never before, the Black Sea and the Caucasus are becoming more important in terms of security and should attract more attention from NATO,” Georgian President Salome Zourabishvili said during a recent visit to Brussels.

After NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg met with Zourabishvili, he confirmed both had addressed the security situation in the Black Sea region and Russia’s continued military build-up.

Even though Georgia is unlikely to become a NATO member in the next few years, NATO officials repeatedly acknowledge the country’s efforts to remain the “model” partner of the military alliance, especially through its involvement in the NATO military and stabilisation missions.

Stoltenberg stressed that there would be room for closer cooperation between NATO and Georgia, including the implementation of secure communications projects, continued support to the joint training and enhancing maritime support.

Georgia is currently the largest non-NATO contributor to the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan with 871 soldiers. Georgian officials have explained that in the post-Soviet period, missions abroad have played the role of military academies for the army officers and personnel.

He also emphasised Georgia has to make sure to “continue implementing reforms” and “make sure that we have secure, democratic institutions”.

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“We’re working together in this direction and the key task for Georgia is to continue implementing reforms as it moves towards NATO membership,” Stoltenberg said.

A recent poll by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) shows 80% of respondents support EU membership and 74% approve of the Georgian government’s goal to join NATO (up from 69%).

However, after Russia seized one-fifth of Georgia’s territory in August 2008 – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – this “frozen conflict” remains an obstacle to membership in both organisations.

**ECHR VERDICT AFTERMATH**

In Brussels, Stoltenberg pointed towards a verdict by the European Court of Human Rights, who had recently declared Russia responsible for human rights violations, including loss of life, torture, disrespect of property and privacy occurring in Georgia’s occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as it had effective control of the territories.

“This only strengthens our call for Russia to comply with international law and respect Georgia’s territorial integrity,” he said.

Experts, however, point out that the frozen conflicts are less of an issue for Georgia’s EU membership hopes than for its NATO aspirations.

“The focus for the EU is still about Georgia’s political stability, through strengthening global institutions for support to the economic development of the country and it has less to do with the conditionality around the breakaway regions,” Olesya Vartanyan, Crisis Group’s senior analyst for the South Caucasus region, told EURACTIV.

“In terms of the investment from the EU side, the bloc has been investing a lot in trying to find ways to build bridges between the conflict side,” Vartanyan said.

The ECHR ruling “clearly concludes” that Russia, “exercising effective control” over Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions, “violated several provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights”, EU’s spokesperson for foreign affairs, Peter Stano, said over the weekend.

Georgian top officials have stated that the country’s victory in court is “historic and an enormous victory for the country”.

“What we need is more involvement from the EU in conflict resolution,” President Zourabishvili said after meeting with the EU’s chief diplomat Josep Borrell in Brussels last week.

An EU statement issued after the meeting said the bloc is “fully committed to supporting conflict resolution, which also requires efforts to address the legacy of past conflicts, including through its engagement as co-chair in the Geneva International Discussions, the efforts of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, and the crucial role played on the ground by the EU Monitoring mission”.

It also said the bloc’s “firmly supports the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders”.

The EU’s unarmed civilian monitoring mission, dubbed EUMM, has been deployed since September 2008, following the EU-mediated Six Point Agreement that ended the August war and patrolling areas in adjacent Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but cannot enter those territories.

The EU statement also spoke about ‘achieving justice and accountability is an important part of conflict resolution and the EU calls upon the Russian Federation to ensure the proper follow-up of the ruling’.

“What’s important, and what the Georgian government might be seeing here, is that potentially, when there is a space to proceed with political processes around the breakaway regions, then that ruling can become one of the founding documents to proceed with attempts of restoring territorial integrity,” Vartanyan said.

**HOPE IN NEW BIDEN ADMINISTRATION**

At the same time, the new US administration is expected to encourage Georgia’s further NATO integration.

“I know that President Biden strongly supports the transatlantic bond, and Georgia is part of that transatlantic bond,” Stoltenberg said in Brussels.

Last week, Antony Blinken, Biden’s pick for state secretary, reaffirmed his support for keeping the NATO’s door open for Georgia.

“If a country like Georgia is able to meet the requirements of membership and if it can contribute to our collective security, yes, the [NATO’s] door should remain open,” Blinken stated during US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

Georgia would like the West to treat the status of its occupied territories in the same way as it does the issue of Ukraine’s Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014.
On its path towards the EU, Georgia will be expected to align itself with the EU’s ambitions laid out in the bloc’s Green Deal and reduce carbon emissions as it seeks to boost and modernise its economy, the European Commission told EURACTIV.

“The European Green Deal requires action by the EU and partner countries on the existing and future environmental and climate challenges, to turn these challenges into opportunities,” European Commission spokesperson for enlargement, Ana Pisonero, told this website.

“This is particularly valid for Georgia in a post-COVID era when recovery and modernisation of the economy have to be carried out taking into account the carbon footprint and environmental aspects,” she added.

“Currently, we are working together with the Georgian government and other donors to develop meaningful interventions to support the green transition for the upcoming years,”

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia recently declared that his country is “preparing to apply for full EU membership in 2024”, with the first piece of legislation under the new government, following a heated parliamentary election, reaffirming Georgia’s top foreign policy goals.

The EU-Georgia Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, which is the basis for EU-Georgia relations, represents the equivalent of around 70% of the EU acquis, the bloc's entire legislation, as well as common rights and obligations that are binding for all EU countries, which candidates need to comply with to accede to the bloc.

EU foreign ministers on Monday (25 January) decided to promote a global phase-out of fossil fuels and reaffirm commitments to finance climate adaptation measures, put green diplomacy at the top of their agenda with third countries.

All EU trade agreements, overseas aid and foreign investment strategies will from now on also need to be aligned with the bloc's climate ambition, which also applies to the potential future EU accession candidates.

The EU currently does not treat Georgia as a candidate country, but rather in the less ambitious format of an associated partner, alongside the South Caucasian country’s participation in the bloc’s Eastern Partnership programme.

However, with Georgia’s declared EU ambitions, the Commission expects Tbilisi to fulfil obligations in the chapters on environment and climate. Commitments undertaken in the EU Association Agreement in the field of environment and climate are regularly assessed.

In October, the EU said recent achievements in the field will permit Georgia to accelerate the implementation of the environmental provisions included in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement and to improve its environmental protection system.

“We also count on Georgia’s continued commitment to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement,” Pisonero told EURACTIV, stressing that progressive decarbonisation of the economy, environment and health, with a focus on air and water pollution; sustainable use of natural resources, including circular economy forests and biodiversity will be key for Georgia's further sustainable development.

“We stand ready to support Georgia in “building back better”, including through financial cooperation,” Pisonero said, adding that Georgia would already benefit from a range of activities aiming to support the country in its green transition, including the EU4Environment and EU4Climate initiatives.

The four-year EU4Climate programme, running until 2022, aims to assist Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries to implement the Paris Agreement on climate and help mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects by introducing climate-sensitive policies and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The program is being implemented by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in all six EaP countries, in accordance with bilateral agreements between the EU and each country’s national government.

Georgia has pioneered wind farms in the region, with the first one, the 20MW Kartli Wind Power Plant, having opened in October of 2016.
Georgian MP: Mood in Brussels should not prevent EU membership application

By Vlagyiszlav Makszimov | EURACTIV.com

Enlargement fatigue should not prevent the South Caucasian country from applying for membership of the bloc in 2024, even though the process might cause frustration domestically, Maka Botchorishvili, the newly elected chair of the EU integration committee of the Georgian Parliament told EURACTIV.

Georgia is preparing to apply for full EU membership in 2024, the Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia recently said. The EU doesn’t treat Georgia as a candidate country, but rather in the less ambitious format of an Associate country member of the Eastern Partnership.

Asked if the post-Soviet country is not afraid that starting the application process may lead to the disillusionment of the population, — as we have seen in some Western Balkan countries that have been stuck in the procedure for more than a decade, — the politician answered that not delivering on promises of integration would also cause frustration.

“I don’t think that mood in Brussels should prevent Georgia from applying

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“I myself was promised when I was a teenager that one day we will be part of the European Union ... but I don’t want it to remain a promise for my daughters’ and my kids’ generation without [having] very concrete things done,” the 41-year old politician added.

The newly elected MP from the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia block, who served as deputy head of mission to the EU before the ballot last year, said that the 2024 application date is also symbolic, as it will mark a decade from the signature of the EU-Georgia association agreement (AA) that now serves as the basis for the relationship.

“As the EU, we are focused on cooperating with Georgia on implementing the AA/DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) to the full, in order to reap its full potential,” European Commission spokesperson Ana Pisonero told EURACTIV when asked about Georgia’s intentions.

She said the deal “is one of the most ambitious agreements ever signed by the EU with partner countries, as it represents the equivalent of around 70% of the EU acquis.”

“The decision on membership of the European Union lies with the Member States,” she added.

“The moment, the DCFTA is still at a very initial stage of implementation and it still needs a lot of push to bring it to the level of ordinary citizens, ordinary businessmen,” Botchorishvili said.

The European Parliament’s report from last year found the progress on the implementation of the agreements has been positive overall, though more remained to be done in ensuring judicial independence.

The Georgian lawmaker said that the implementation of the AA will be a priority, bringing Georgia’s legislation as close as possible to the European law in an effort to boost the so-called legislative approximation.

According to Botchorishvili, “it should not be just words or just ticking boxes, it should be implemented and really translated into people’s lives.”

The diplomat-turned-politician said that the changes she sees since coming back from service abroad are promising.

“Because now you see lots of changes, you see mental changes in people’s mind, and you see what people really want.”

Botchorishvili emphasised that it took time to change the Soviet mentality.

“It is painful, change is never smooth that way, but it is happening,” she said.

The politician added that while EU’s Eastern Partnership policy — which brings together the bloc and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, — has been important for her country, it “shouldn’t be turned into a wall for those who want to go farther in this relationship.”

Meanwhile, Georgians’ support for EU integration has risen dramatically in the last year.
The absence of the official “enlargement perspective” doesn’t mean that Georgia should be discouraged lodging a membership application. But in order to succeed, Georgia should be more creative in its foreign policy, write Teona Lavrelashvili and Steven Van Hecke.

Teona Lavrelashvili is project Manager of the European Party Monitor, KU Leuven. Previously she worked as a policy officer at European Commission, DG NEAR.

Steven van Hecke is Associate Professor at KU Leuven, Project Coordinator of the European Party Monitor.

Georgia’s foreign policy début of 2021 kicked off in Brussels. On 22-23 January the country’s President, Salome Zourabichvili, met with the Presidents of the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as the NATO Secretary General. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, she did not forget to announce the key message: Georgia prepares itself to officially apply for EU membership by 2024.

This declaration has left many of the EU realists with confusion and bewilderment because of the EU’s current enlargement fatigue. And if the EU would nonetheless welcome new members, the priority is the Western Balkans. Yet, the EU optimists would be less sceptic and ask why not to give this small Caucasus country a chance. After all, its population is vehemently pro-European (with 82% in favour of EU integration), the country has

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scored pretty well in its reform agenda (even better than some countries of the Western Balkans) and the EU could finally show its geopolitical might in its near neighborhood by engaging more seriously with Georgia.

Of course, these arguments are not sufficient and one should look at both the political and technical aspects of its membership. Georgia's current framework of relations with the EU is the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that is less ambitious compared to the countries of the Western Balkans. The latter are granted with EU membership perspective, while the countries of the EaP have never been given such a perspective, despite their repeated requests. This mismatch of expectations is one of the main weaknesses of the EaP policy. Its main deficiency lies in its paradoxical composition of the countries with varying degrees of ambition. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have expressed their readiness to sail far with the EU by signing the Association Agreements, while Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus are adamant to a greater cooperation.

Probably this obsoleteness of the EaP motivated Georgia to awaken EU decision-makers about the expectation gap. In fact, out of three Associated Countries, Georgia seems in the best place to make such a bold step. Ukraine remains entrenched in the struggle between reformers who are willing to overhaul the entire system and the supporters (and beneficiaries) of the old system, while Moldova's newly elected pro-Western President lacks a majority in the parliament to act decisively. Certainly, Georgia is far from being politically perfect. The results of the recent parliamentary elections triggered a political crisis as a big part of the opposition refuses to enter the parliament. Not to mention other challenges, particularly the economic hardships and a high level of poverty.

From the EU's perspective Georgia's EU membership application without first being granted a membership perspective might seem unrealistic. Although Georgia in theory satisfies the formal eligibility criteria enshrined in article 49 of the TEU, over time the EU has developed procedures upstream of the application process. This entails that the European Council first decides whether or not to offer a country the membership perspective. If the decision is successful by an unanimity vote, only then the country becomes a formal candidate.

Does it mean that the absence of this perspective and the lack of Georgia's preparedness should discourage the country of making a membership application? Not necessarily, but in order to succeed, Georgia should display more creativity in its foreign policy agenda, along with intensifying its efforts to strengthen economic reforms and the rule of law.

Georgia's key messages have always been oriented to mobilize the West around its challenges, mainly on its territorial integrity issue. It has always called for 'more EU in Georgia', but has been less active in contributing to the West's political agenda with innovative ideas.

Even the Trio strategy, that aims at intensifying cooperation of three EU Associated Countries, was created top-down, by a few Members of the European Parliament. Georgia continues looking at the EU from the keyhole, without realizing that it should imagine itself as a part of the EU's political architecture and engage politically, here and now. Furthermore, Georgia's foreign policy mechanism should be enriched. For example, the membership in the Europarties could be used in a more strategic way. These Europarties, which possess a significant power to lobby a country's EU prospects in the European Council, are an unique political resource that are not used sufficiently. In other words, it should be the Europarties that have to pick up on this declaration and start making the EU leadership familiar with Georgia's EU membership prospects.

But is the EU ready for accepting Georgia's application? This is not the right question. The EU will never be fully ready per se. The progress from both sides requires action as well as a vision and Georgia's application serves these purposes. Yes, the countries of the Western Balkans are queuing but it is an open secret that some of them, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, will take a lot more time to advance on their EU integration path.

The membership perspective is not necessarily helping much, while for Georgia the membership perspective is a question of national security and for the EU a question of geopolitics. The EU's readiness to accept its application will be a positive spillover and a push factor for Ukraine and Moldova to advance their reform agendas and remain on the West's orbit.
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