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EU Mediation in Georgia's Political Crisis

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In recent months the EU has engaged at a high level in Georgia's political crisis and sought to break the country's deadlock. The EU has demonstrated that it is strongly invested in Georgia and sees the country's democratization as a matter of strategic importance for European interests. The EU's intervention has been shaped around a process of mediation between Georgia's ruling and opposition political parties, as the bitterness of their rivalry risks a major unravelling of country's democratic reforms. Although the EU's intervention entails many positive elements, it will now need to move beyond mediation and ally this to a careful use of democratic leverage to ensure that necessary reforms are implemented. Otherwise, the EU-brokered breakthrough will remain shallow and another political crisis could easily erupt.

After October 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, opposition parties refused to recognize the results or to take their place in the new parliament. The parties' boycott was accompanied by street protests demanding snap elections and reform of the Central Election Commission. The victorious GD refused to cede on either point. The tension between authorities and opposition deepened further after the government's dramatic decision to detain the United National Movement's [leader Nika Melia](#) on 23 February with a police intervention in the party's headquarters. This was the final straw in a long simmering saga that caused Western powers to see the need for another intervention.

The EU moved quickly to offer itself as mediator. In the framework of a tour of EaP countries, the [European Council president](#) Charles Michel visited Georgia. As a sign of the EU's strategic interest, Michel offered the EU's good offices to stem the political crisis shaped around a six-point plan that envisaged ambitious electoral and judicial reforms, a solution to the issue of alleged political prisoners, the possibility of new elections and power-sharing in the parliament. In cooperation with the High Representative, Josep Borrell, Michel mandated a personal envoy, [Christian Danielsson](#) to engage in political dialogue.

While two initial rounds of EU-mediated talks proved [unsuccessful](#), on 19 April the EU got the government and some opposition parties to agree on '[a way ahead for Georgia](#)'. The most difficult

negotiations were over repeat elections and political persecution. The opposition political parties pushed for new elections and the release of alleged political prisoners. After foreign pressure, the [President of Georgia announced](#) she would pardon the shareholder of a pro-opposition TV station Nika Rurua if opposition political parties took their seats in parliament. The EU proposal envisaged an amnesty law that would see Melia freed.

While smaller opposition parties signed the agreement, the UNM and European Georgia (EG) parties did not – although former EG Chair David Bakradze and UNM’s Salome Samadashvili signed on an individual basis. These opposition parties were unhappy about Melia’s continued presence in jail and the risk that political persecution would continue. Besides, they objected that the agreement promised new national elections only if GD won less than 43 per cent in the upcoming [local elections](#).

The EU-brokered deal stipulates concrete expectations for resurrecting Georgia’s democratization process. It sets ambitious homework for both the ruling and opposition political parties over the rule of law and electoral reforms. Well before the current crisis, EU delegation representatives actively engaged in a special working group tasked to discuss electoral reforms with representatives from governmental and opposition political parties, civil society and experts.

Against the backdrop of febrile and brittle, zero-sum politics, the EU’s Georgia intervention has been a severe test of the Union’s leverage over the country and in the wider region. Although the way ahead for Georgia remains rocky, the EU deserves credit for devising a high-level engagement aimed at heading off possible conflict and more democratic backsliding. The EU’s intervention corrected some of the shortcomings of its previously low-profile engagements in the [Eastern Neighborhood](#) - including previous mediation efforts in Georgia itself. While the EU is often criticized for inaction or ad-hoc responses to crisis events, this intervention can be seen as early evidence of the [more geopolitical](#) EU foreign policy that European leaders have promised.

The speed with which the EU moved suggested it has learned lessons from events in Ukraine and other EaP states, where the Union was caught asleep and acted too slowly to prevent major crises. The EU managed to pull its different instruments together in a more coherent way than on previous occasions.

While the EU is often condemned for offering merely declaratory diplomacy, in Georgia it was highly practical in operationalizing its key strategic concepts. In December 2020, the [European Council](#) agreed a new mediation concept that unveiled an ambition to use mediation in a more proactive and political manner. Crucially, this framed mediation as an essential tool for the EU's external engagement promising that it would become a more fully integral part of the Union's foreign policies. The new mediation concept presents the EU as a value-based actor putting [human rights](#) at the core of its engagement. Its stress on inclusiveness and the role of local civil society makes this mediation policy relevant for democracy – and implies it might be relevant to domestic crises rather than only inter-state conflicts. In turn, the Union's [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024](#) is nominally in line with this new mediation concept to the extent that it envisages a heightened role for EU delegations in fostering dialogues with local authorities and civil society.

After its successful first steps in Georgia, the EU will now need to build a wider range of leverage and policy tools in the country. While the Union has positioned itself with some acumen to use mediation as a democracy-support tool and deepen its direct political engagement in Georgia, this is unlikely to be enough in itself. As the EU reaches the limit of what even-handed mediation can achieve, now it needs to consider other forms of leverage to ensure lasting stability. The EU may need to contemplate democracy-related conditionality to ensure an effective and timely implementation of the envisaged reforms. While the EU can of course not take sides, it may need to be ready to move towards a more political engagement if and when it becomes clear that mediation in itself is no longer serving democracy quite so well.

The EU needs to ramp up funding for the rule of law and electoral reform to help implementation of the agreement. The EU should streamline its civil society funding more tightly to monitor the political class in its commitments to the agreement. The Georgian crisis has shown that civil society is essential in holding political powers accountable to deliver on democratic progress, and that it needs stronger support.

Beyond these very specific policy decisions, the EU will need to step back and draw more general lessons about the role of mediation in its democracy support strategies, in Georgia but also elsewhere. As the EU still declines to offer EaP states direct security backing, mediation is set to be a leading edge of the Union's political interventions. Mediation will be an increasingly important way in which the EU seeks to shape the nexus between democracy and conflict issues. The challenge will be to ensure that conflict mediation contributes to deeper conflict resolution rather than being an end-goal in itself. Mediation is not intrinsically beneficial for democratic reform but has outcomes that depend on the features of each local context; this path-dependency needs to be factored into EU strategies. EU crisis engagement needs to helpfully spur the deeper domestic reform commitment and ownership upon which democratization ultimately depends.

Conceptually the focus on mediation implicitly reflects the EU's preference for relatively consensual forms of political change. This is a long-standing feature of EU democracy support that has tended to prioritize inclusive or 'pacted' transition dynamics over contestation-driven, decisive or dramatic democratic breakthroughs. To the (arguably, modest) extent to the EU has a political model in its external democracy support, it is one of carefully managed, bounded democratization. In a context such as Georgia's dominant-party polarization this approach surely has much merit. The country's rival factions needed to be pulled back towards some kind of agreement on basic rules of the game.

Still, the EU will need to show that mediation does not become a substitute for the widest ranging democracy support possible. To move decisively beyond its current crisis, Georgia will need elite-centered agreement but also more open-ended liberal pluralism. The EU's successful mediation

will need to be launchpad for a much broader reform-oriented agenda as envisaged by the agreement. This will help to ensure that democratization does not depend so heavily on inter-elite trade-offs between Georgia's two long-dominant parties. If it is not, intra-elite mediation risks simply propping up political parties that Georgian society views with increasing disdain. And the EU might inadvertently end up solidifying and reinforcing the very pathologies that caused Georgia's recent turmoil.

A longer version of this memo is published at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494>

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