

The Process of Unification of Georgian Parties in European Parties: The Case of Georgian Dream

Abstract

In today's Georgia, one of the central importance in terms of the influence of political issues is given to the integration of Georgia into the European Union and the implementation of the steps to be taken towards it. Nevertheless, in terms of the political initiatives to be implemented, relatively less consideration is paid to the development of cooperation with the European parties by the political parties of Georgia. European parties, the constituent parts of the European Parliament, are ardently endeavoring to form the political culture of the Georgian parties, for the country to eventually join the EU. The significance of the aforementioned matter lies in the fact that the collaboration between Georgian political parties and European parties is seldom scrutinized by both the scientific community and society, thereby posing significant challenges to Georgia's integration with the EU. Considering this factor, it is essential to clarify why Georgian political parties, and in this case, Georgian Dream, commenced to cooperate with European Parties and what factors can corrupt the existing relations between them. Consequently, the article will concentrate on the relations between The Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Georgian Dream in chronological order, spanning from the commencement of a lively dialogue to a profoundly deteriorated attitude, ultimately culminating in the Georgian Dream's departure from PES.

Keywords: European parties, Georgian political parties, Georgian Dream, The party of European Socialists.

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Introduction

European parties are an organizational type of political party operating in the institutions of the European Union. They are regulated and financed by the regulation of the European Union (No. 1141/2014). They are usually made up of national parties and they have the exclusive right to campaign in European elections and to express themselves in cooperation with political groups affiliated to the European Parliament. Historically, the two largest formations in the European Parliament have been the group of European People's Party (EPP Group) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) affiliated with their European political parties. (European People's Party, Party of European Socialists). Political groups and parties in the EU play several vital roles. They represent the views and interests of voters and party members at the foreign level. They offer voters a competitive set of public policy options, recruit and train political leaders, promote the expression and unification of collective goals of various interests in society, lobby for issues at the national level, and more. European institutions, including the European Parliament and, accordingly, European parties represent a kind of instrument for national parties on the way to joining the European Union.

The members of the European Parliament of the modern EU are divided into political groups, though they are not organized by nationality yet by political affiliation. According to political affiliation, there are currently 7 political groups in the European Parliament, including the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). In addition, we should note that individuals can also become members of European parties without joining a national party, for instance, Marian Harkin, was an individual member of the European Democratic Party.

As an outcome of the expansion of the European Economic Community (EEC), the socialist parties created the Confederation of European Socialist Parties² in 1974, and in 1992, after the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the group took the name, the Party of European Socialists (PES). It unites the European Union's socialist, social-democratic, and labor parties. For the Party of European Socialists with a center-left ideology, important issues are inequality, tax policy, climate change, digital revolution, agriculture, migration, etc. The election program of the PES clearly states that one of its main priorities is decent working conditions and improving the quality of life. Based on the principle of equality, all European citizens should be given a chance for a better life. It also supports a sustainable, energy-efficient, and environmentally friendly Europe.

² <https://pes.eu/about-us/history/>

Therefore, PES continues to actively fight for the formation of jobs and the employment of young people.

Motives of Georgian political parties in terms of cooperation with European parties

Despite the absence of guarantees of membership in the EU, internal parties of non-EU countries commence cooperation with European parties of their own free will. Foremost, national political parties (Georgian Dream) want to cooperate with them for reasons of domestic legitimacy and international recognition. In the domestic arena, national parties, as members of the family of European parties, make use of their European affiliation. They aim to increase their reputation within the country by external recognition (Membership in European parties) and use the accumulated trust to control domestic political processes. By affiliating with European partners, national ones try to compensate for their immaturity. According to political parties, their affiliation with the European party directly means loyalty to a reliable and reputable party family. Direct access to European party elites allows national parties to discuss political issues in a personal, credible way. In addition, by cooperating with the European parties, domestic ones have more opportunities to strengthen their aspirations on the EU accession path, since the European parties themselves define the European Union's neighborhood policy. Finally, one of the major motives for cooperation is the transfer of knowledge. Cooperation with European parties on the part of Georgian political parties is one of the prerequisites for joining the European Parliament, which in turn means achieving the ultimate goal, of joining the EU. (STEINMO, 2001, pp. 1-5).

If the internal legitimacy of national parties (Georgian Dream) is failing, we may have to deal with the issue of cooperation. Indeed, the European parties do not directly finance their affiliated national parties, nevertheless, the cooperation with the European party involves obtaining money through political foundations, for instance, with the aid of German foundations linked to political parties. Even though cooperation between both sides is an act of rational choice, Georgian parties are often less consistent and rational, which is due to the high degree of personalization of politics, weak democratic culture, and issues of intra-party democracy. (LAVRELASHVILI, 2016).

Georgian Dream and Party of European Socialists (PES): Inception of the dialogue

Initially, the Georgian Dream was a coalition of political parties with contrasting ideologies. After its formation as a political party, some members of the European Parliament, including members of the European People's Party (EPP), sent a letter to

then Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, accusing him of distancing Georgia from Europe. (KAKHISHVILI, 2018, p. 9). This case raises a reasonable suspicion that the Georgian Dream would find a reliable European party in the European Parliament to repel such attacks and such a partner turned out to be the Party of European Socialists (PES), which started working on the issue of ideological coherence to deepen relations with the governing party. The Georgian Dream had to establish left-centrist ideological positions, as PES acted around a similar compass. One of the reasons why the Georgian Dream resumed the party's charter and why it defined itself as a left-centrist party was the desire to join PES. As an outcome, in June 2015, the Georgian Dream received the status of an observer member party in PES. (SHAGINA, 2017, p. 181).

On March 6, 2013, in an open letter sent to Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, 23 members of the European Parliament (19 of them from the European People's Party) accused him of a democratic backslide and warned that Georgia's European perspectives were decreasing. The open letter listed several complaints accusing the new government of public pressure on lawmakers and local legislators, restricting Georgian media freedom, and using hate speech. The MEPs³ also accused Bidzina Ivanishvili's new government of blackmailing the opposition party, the United National Movement, warning that such actions were contrary to European values. The remarks of the MEPs were met with sharp criticism in Tbilisi. Georgian Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze accused Western politicians, including the President of the European People's Party (EPP), Wilfried Martens, of being biased towards the Georgian Dream. The so-called "War of Letters" produced numerous outcomes both in the domestic and European arenas. Domestically, the criticism of EPP showed that both sides gave great importance to the perception of Georgia through the eyes of international actors. Secondly, this incident partly led to the Georgian Dream's aspiration to establish its contacts with the European parties. The firm support of the EPP towards the United National Movement led the Georgian Dream to perceive that it also needed a credible European party that would protect its interests at the national and foreign levels. It was only after the "War of Letters" that Georgian Dream announced its plans to join PES. (SHAGINA, 2017, p. 179).

In 2013, representatives of PES met with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. At the meeting, the Prime Minister said that European integration was the cornerstone of Georgia's foreign policy, and it was supported by the majority of the Georgian population. It should also be noted that the delegation of PES visited the administrative boundary line near the so-called "South Ossetia", which was crossed by

³ Member of European Parliament

the Russians after the August 2008 war. During the visit, Georgian Dream focused on deepening cooperation with PES.

The following year, Georgian Dream's International Secretary, Armaz Akhvlediani attended the PES election congress, which was held in Rome. Within the framework of the congress, he met with the President of PES, Sergey Stanishev, with whom he discussed the issue of the Georgian Dream's membership. According to Akhvlediani, PES supported the Georgian Dream's membership in the social-democratic family. (RAMAZASHVILI, 2014).

In the summer of 2014, the Association Agreement was signed between Georgia and the European Union, which further facilitated the process of rapprochement between the parties.

In May 2015, a working meeting of the leaders of PES was held within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Summit (Riga), in which the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili took part. As for the visa liberalization process, PES said that Georgia should receive a visa liberalization as soon as possible. According to the President of PES, Sergey Stanishev, Georgia needed to receive visa liberalization, as the process was the most visible confirmation that Georgia was approaching the EU.

In 2018, Sergey Stanishev stated that Georgia's progress was approaching the European Union's standards. The statement of the President of PES was quite significant, as it noted that they had close ties with the ruling Georgian Dream party. In the statement, Stanishev also mentioned former President, Mikheil Saakashvili, claiming that Georgia commenced from authoritarian rule and resumed to move towards creating a free society, which was one of the main achievements of the Georgian Dream. (Broladze, 2018).

In November of the following year, the appeal of Georgian civil society and activists to the PES was disseminated on social media. The authors of the letter noted that they addressed PES at an important moment in Georgia's history and called for it to take adequate action against the ruling party. The appeal highlighted the promise to change the electoral system (transition to a fully proportional system), which Georgian Dream rejected on November 14. According to the authors of the letter, they did not doubt that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the "informal ruler of the country" was behind the failure to fulfill the promise. The ruling party's irresponsible move pushed the political process to shift from Parliament to the streets, thereby jeopardizing public safety and stability in the country. The civil sector noted that the actions taken by the ruling party were contrary to the fundamental values and principles of PES.

In 2020, PES responded to the parliamentary elections in Georgia. According to its President, Sergey Stanishev, Georgia held highly competitive elections during such a difficult time. The outcomes showed that the Georgian people remained committed to the Euro-Atlantic path. PES shared the opinion of the OSCE Democratic Institutions and Council of Europe international observers that the elections were held in a competitive environment and as a whole, the fundamental freedoms of voters were preserved (TORADZE, 2020).

In the same year, a statement from PES was released, according to which they assisted in the research of the case of Gigi Ugulava and sent a fact-finding mission to Georgia under the auspices of the European Parliament. A letter published on the official website of PES stated that the initiative belonged to Kakha Kaladze.⁴ PES welcomed this move and stated that it would have a favorable impact on Georgia's justice system. Former Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava was accused of embezzlement of money from the Tbilisi Development Fund and exceeding his powers.

In 2022, PES adopted a resolution supporting the European Union granting candidate status to Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. According to PES, the future of these states was in the EU, and they wanted it to happen as soon as possible after they met all the criteria necessary for membership. Irakli Kobakhidze, the leader of the parliamentary majority, stressed the importance of aid from PES to Georgia, noting that their support was necessary on the path of the country's integration into the EU. (KARTOZIA, 2022).

Georgian Dream and Party of European Socialists (PES): Termination of Relations

In the summer of 2022, various statements were circulated on social media, according to which PES was no longer making statements in favor of the Georgian Dream, as the ruling party was leading Georgia in the improper direction. Moreover, in March of the following year, PES openly condemned the government's endeavor to initiate the "Law on Agents of Foreign Influence" and called on the Georgian Dream to refrain from the rhetoric that was directed against the MEPs.

In April 2023, the rhetoric of PES towards the Georgian Dream changed radically.⁵ Representatives of PES met online and among other things, discussed the developments surrounding the ruling party. PES expressed deep concern over the statements of Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, who planned to attend the ultra-conservative forum and meet with Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban.

⁴ Mayor of Tbilisi

⁵ <https://pes.eu/pes/pes-presidency-focuses-on-action-for-a-fair-and-sustainable-europe/>

Garibashvili met Orban as part of the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in May. According to Mikheil Sarjveladze, one of the leaders of the Georgian Dream, the attitude of PES was incomprehensible, as the Prime Minister did not say anything inadmissible during his meeting. In addition, according to Georgian Dream MP, Nikoloz Samkharadze, he did not know whether it was worth staying in a political group that prohibited participation in a particular conference. PES, in which the Georgian Dream was present as an Observer Member Party, discussed the expulsion from its group in June. A member with this status may be considered a national party representing a political party outside of the EU or a state that strives for membership in the EU, however, it should also be noted that the status of an observer member party is not explicitly created for non-European parties, in return, this type of status may be considered a member of a lower degree, which is characterized by less responsibility. National parties with the status of an observer member party do not have the right to vote. (LAVRELASHVILI, 2022, p. 104). The main reason for raising this issue was Georgian Dream's participation in CPAC in Budapest and the sharing of pro-Russian values. Giacomo Filibeck, Executive Secretary General of PES said that if PM Garibashvili wanted to share values with Orban, then they would have to officially discuss the status of the Georgian Dream in PES. The case of Georgian Dream's status in PES was raised by its president, Stefan Lofven.

On May 11, the Chairman of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the ruling party would not wait for the decision of PES and would leave it by itself. He announced that PES was moving away from a social-democratic ideology towards a pseudo-liberal platform. According to the ruling party, since 2015, when Georgian Dream became an observer member of PES, it has not made any loud statements in support of them. Moreover, according to Kobakhidze, various representatives of PES regularly joined political campaigns supporting Georgia's radical opposition. For instance, Kobakhidze stated that PES supported resolutions that justified the imposition of sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the release of Mikheil Saakashvili and Nika Gvaramia,⁶ as well as the termination of criminal prosecution against Davit Kezerashvili.⁷

Michael Roth, the Chair of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee, called Kobakhidze's remarks outrageous and articulated that the ideological transformation of PES had not occurred. In addition, in his opinion, the Georgian Dream did not represent the European Dream. If a national party fails to match its values with the European Party, its membership status may be questioned. For instance, it was due to ideological

⁶ Founder of Mtavari Arkhi, Broadcasting Company, Former Minister of Justice of Georgia

⁷ Former Minister of Defense of Georgia

separation and value challenges that the Hungarian political party, Fidesz, had to leave the European People's Party (EPP). By the way, President of the Fidesz is previously mentioned, Viktor Orban.

On June 29, announcement⁸ was published on the official website of PES. According to the unanimous decision, Georgian Dream would no longer be a member of their family. The statement emphasized that the ruling party turned away from the values of PES, so it terminated all relations with them.

Despite its affiliation with PES, Georgian Dream still stumbled to gain unconditional support. PES and Georgian Dream only had working relations, which was not enough. We must state that the Georgian ruling party was not close to PES in ideological terms, and its membership in the European family was more of a strategic step by the party. The party thought that joining PES would balance relations between the United National Movement and the European People's Party (EPP), however, it was obvious that nothing came out of such a move. Georgian Dream did not take international relations seriously and the outcome is relevant. (TSKIPURISHVILI, 2022).

However, it should be noted that the process of rapprochement between the two sides was particularly visible in 2016, which was due to the existence of several formats of cooperation with Europe, although, after the departure of the international group from the Georgian Dream, there was practically no process of deepening cooperation, unless we consider several of the above-mentioned meetings.

In the negotiations process of PES and the International Group of Georgian Dream, there was a feeling that the process of joining the European party would have a positive impact on the development of the ruling party's ideological profile. There was an expectation that observing status in PES would lead to ideological adjustments in matters in which the Georgian Dream did not have socialist views to the end. Nevertheless, the status of the observer membership party did not lead to the development of the ideological profile, as other factors were crucial between the two sides. The ruling party's agenda was to offer voters something that the United National Movement could not offer. On the part of the Georgian Dream, in terms of the desire to join PES, there was no place for a strict verification of the ideological profile, the attention was more focused on social, healthcare, and agricultural reforms. Therefore, it was logical for the Georgian Dream to choose a European party that had a huge influence in the European Parliament on the one hand, and on the other hand, was the main competitor of the European People's Party (EPP), and such a party turned out to be the Party of European Socialists (PES).

⁸ <https://pes.eu/pes/pes-presidency-strips-georgian-dream-of-observer-membership/>

Conclusion

As we specified before, European parties represent the type of party organizations operating within EU institutions. Historically, the two largest parliamentary formations in the EU have been the group of European People's Party (EPP Group) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). European parties represent a mechanism for national parties on the path to EU membership.

As this article emphasized, Georgian Dream established relations with PES due to internal legitimacy and international recognition, reputation building, control of political processes, and above all, strategic motives, to neutralize the power of its central rival, United National Movement, which has been an observer member party of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2008.

Regarding the relations between Georgian Dream and PES, initially, active communication was established in 2013, which extended in the summer of 2015 with the granting of the status of an observer member party from PES. It should be noted that from 2013 to the summer of 2023, several meetings took place between the two sides, which were devoted to various political issues, such as the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU, Visa liberalization, the 2020 parliamentary elections, granting candidate status by EU to Georgia, etc. In addition, the process of active dialogue between the parties took place predominantly due to the international group in the ranks of the ruling party, whereas after the departure of this group from the party, relations began to deteriorate.

As recognized in the article, the situation drastically altered in April-May 2023, when Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili attended the ultra-conservative forum (CPAC) in Budapest and met with Viktor Orban. As it appeared, the issue of ideological disagreement turned out to be fatal between the two sides, it meant that the Georgian Dream lost its central partner in Europe. European parties perceive the issue of value separation from their partners as distressing. We must also announce that there were several problems between the two sides in terms of ideological coherence. For instance, in October 2011, when the Georgian Dream coalition was formed, parties inside were quite diverse in ideological terms. The coalition existed until 2016, while Georgian Dream joined PES (as an observer party) in 2015, which means that back then, the governing party was a coalition and still was not a left-centrist party (like PES), though a very diverse unity.

To sum up, if Georgian Dream had previously hoped that PES would be a vigorous supporter of its policy and reducer of the power of the United National Movement, now it is left beyond its closest European friend, which will negatively affect both the international and local image of the ruling party. Finally, it should be noted that Georgian Dream left without a reliable European partner, will have great difficulty convincing voters that Georgia's EU integration is one of its fundamental goals.

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