

Zurabishvili's Charter: Implications for Georgia

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The highly disputed, Russia-inspired, so-called “foreign agents’ bill” passed in Georgia’s parliament on May 28th after being withdrawn once, passing through three readings in the Georgian Parliament, and overruling a presidential veto, despite facing massive public protests and Western backlash. Unlike last year’s attempt, the government, headed by the Georgian Dream party, did not back down this time around.

Zurabishvili: President Turned Foe

Two days earlier, during an event celebrating Georgia’s Independence Day, President Salomé Zurabishvili proposed a “Georgian Charter,” essentially a document with guiding reforms to reverse the country’s current anti-European trajectory. Initially endorsed by the Georgian Dream government during the 2018 Presidential elections, the French-born President has emerged as one of the most prominent domestic critics of the current government’s escalating violations of democratic and civil rights. The Charter is yet another major break from the Government for the President. Will it be enough to unite the fractured Georgian opposition and win the people’s support ahead of the Parliamentary elections in the autumn?

What Does “The Georgian Charter” Contain?

The proposal by President Zurabishvili is ambitious. In the Charter, four key areas are outlined. These aim to reverse the current, by many considered autocratic, policies pursued by the Georgian Dream government and continue the country’s work to fulfil the 9 steps issued by the European Commission.

All laws “harmful to the European course of the country” are to be abolished, including the “foreign agents’ law,” changes in the election code, “wiretapping law,” and “offshore law.” An amnesty is also promised for demonstrators facing politically motivated cases after protesting against the foreign agent bill.

Trust in the judiciary system will be restored by liberating the courts from “clan rule” and verifying the integrity of judges.

Power is proposed to be deconcentrated by reforming the State Security Service and Ministry of Internal Affairs, granting real independence to the Special Investigation Service. This is to be done by establishing “effective parliamentary control over institutions.” The anti-corruption agency is suggested to be separated from the executive power, and its head appointed by the Parliament.

Lastly, the Charter proposes improving the electoral system to create “conditions for free and fair elections.”

To achieve all this, Zurabishvili, in her speech, called upon any party that “has the pretension to be pro-European” to sign the Charter before June 1st. By doing this, the parties would pledge, if winning a majority in the autumn’s parliamentary elections, to form a technocratic government made up of “distinguished, selected, and professional members of society” rather than politicians. Upon completion, before the end of the Parliament’s spring term in 2025, Zurabishvili pledges to call for snap elections to be held in “a free and fair environment.” However, it should be noted that Zurabishvili does not propose to unite the opposition into one political bloc; rather, the Charter is meant to align the opposition’s aims.

What Does This Mean?

The Charter is a proposed temporary “ceasefire” agreement to get the polarized and fractured opposition to close ranks. Zurabishvili knows that getting the opposition to work together and compromise on policies and a joint political platform between themselves is nearly impossible. The document is meant to discourage any such infighting and convince the parties to focus only on defeating the government in the coming election. The message to the Georgian people is to wait another year for a “real” election and instead focus on repealing Georgian Dream’s undemocratic legislations and getting the country back on track towards EU membership. Several of the biggest opposition parties have already signed the Charter, including Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement, but whether this document will successfully suppress internal strife between them remains to be seen.

The West should voice their support to Zurabishvili’s initiative as it is the only realistic chance of seeing Georgia return to its European path and continue to work on the 9 steps issued by the European Commission. However, the West must also acknowledge its support risks coming at a price. The Georgian Dream government will use it as an attempt to “prove” foreign—in other words, Western—involvement in Georgian internal affairs. The government could also try and use it to legitimise the “foreign agents’ law” and feed into Georgian Dream’s narrative of “GD or war”, implying that without Georgian Dream, the opposition and their Western overlords will reignite the conflict with Russia.

Even if Zurabishvili’s Charter succeeds in getting the opposition to join forces and reduce infighting, it does not solve the long-term issues that have plagued the country since it regained independence in 1991. One issue is the deep political and societal polarization; another is the tendency of all Georgian governments to turn authoritarian. A third issue is the seemingly paradoxical simultaneous popular support for both the EU and Georgian Dream, which frustrates Western leaders and calls into question whether Georgians actually understand what EU membership would entail. Reforming the country to start EU accession negotiations requires long-term structural changes. The content of the Charter is a step in the right direction if implemented, but it needs to be followed up by proving that Georgian

institutions can comply and act accordingly, which will take time.

This Charter reflects Zurabishvili's attempt to alleviate tensions among protesters and channel their frustrations into political action. In her speech, she appealed to the Georgian people to voice their disagreements at the polling station and not elsewhere or in any other form, calling the Charter "our peaceful solution." What is clear is that there is a political force in the current demonstrations. Whether Zurabishvili and the opposition manages to keep the momentum going up until the elections and translate it into political action remains to be seen.



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