

EU-GEORGIA CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM

12th meeting
17 November 2023

JOINT DECLARATION

The EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform (CSP) is one of the bodies set up under the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia. It enables civil society organisations from both sides to monitor the implementation of the agreement and draw up recommendations for submission to the relevant authorities.

The twelfth meeting of the CSP was convened on 17 November 2023 in Brussels. The members of the CSP presented the progress made as regards the 12 priorities identified by the European Commission in its opinion on Georgia's EU membership published on 17 June 2022 and discussed the new priorities recommended by the European Commission in its Enlargement Package 2023 published on 8 November 2023 and the implementation of both Chapter 14 of the Association Agreement on employment, social policy and equal opportunities, with a focus on labour migration, and Chapter 8 on cooperation in the field of the information society, in light of the new policy on digital transformation.

On the progress made as regards the 12 priorities identified by the European Commission in its opinion on Georgia's EU membership, the CSP members

1. point out that the progress made as regards the 12 priorities identified in the European Commission's opinion on Georgia's membership application published on 17 June 2022¹ has been tangible in some areas, such as the establishment of gender equality, the development of mechanisms for ECHR decisions and the appointment of the Ombudsman, but limited in others, especially tackling political polarisation, the reform of the judiciary and de-oligarchisation. Moderate progress has been demonstrated in achieving the freedom of the media and enhancing civil society involvement in the decision-making processes. In this regard, CSP members fully support and endorse the evaluation of Georgia's progress set out in the European Commission's recent Enlargement Package;

On the European Commission's recommendation to grant Georgia candidate status

2. welcome the European Commission's decision to recommend that the European Council grant Georgia EU candidate status, as stipulated in its Communication on the 2023 Enlargement Package; stress the historical significance of this recommendation for Georgia and its people; underline the beginning of a new and better era for the Georgian people, promising a better future within the European family, while also calling on Georgia's authorities and all its stakeholders to take on more responsibility and devote more efforts to addressing the shortcomings outlined in the report;

¹ Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/Georgia%20opinion%20and%20Annex.pdf>

3. with respect to the traditionally extremely high support by the Georgian people for joining the European Union, call on the European Council to take account of the European Commission's recommendation and grant Georgia EU candidate status at its December Summit;
4. call on the Government of Georgia to lose no time in starting work on delivering the new European Commission priorities and show the political will and readiness to address all issues;
5. call on the Government of Georgia to address and fight disinformation from foreign and internal sources hostile to the EU and European integration, to step up democratic control and parliamentary oversight of the security sector, to continue to strengthen the anticorruption bureau and investigate cases of corruption and to continue to improve the electoral environment, including lowering the electoral threshold, as stated in the 19 April Agreement;
6. underline the importance of guaranteeing the independence of state institutions and the judiciary in order to ensure effective and timely investigations in the event of threats against vulnerable groups, journalists and civil society activists;
7. call on the Government of Georgia to increase convergence with the EU's Joint Statements in the area of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and underscore that in doing so, Georgia demonstrates not only its convergence with EU foreign policy, but also its adherence to the same values as the EU Member States with regard to peace respect of human rights and rule of law in third countries;
8. on civil society engagement, note that insufficient measures have been taken to ensure proper participation by non-state actors in decision making; nonetheless highlight that some progress has been made by signing a memorandum of understanding between the Parliament and the largest platform of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Georgia, whereby both sides undertake to hold two conferences with the participation of CSOs and almost all parliamentary political parties and discuss the delivery of the 12 priorities; underline the need to extend the practice to all other relevant NGOs, including those which are critical of the ruling party;
9. once again call on the European Commission and the Government of Georgia to support the work of the EU-Georgia civil society platform both logistically and financially, as keeping up its activities is becoming increasingly challenging for both the EU and the Georgian side; point out, in addition, that the CSP's work must be further enhanced with a view to Georgia's European future;
10. reiterate concerns regarding the inadequate reform of the judiciary and call on the Georgian authorities to complete the comprehensive and effective reform of the judiciary, including the reform of the high council of judges; emphasise that the reform should be carried out in full compliance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission and conducted in a transparent manner and with the participation of civil society;

On the continuing Russian occupation

11. consider that the decision to locate a Russian military naval base in Ochamchire in sovereign Georgia is unacceptable, and deem it a threat to the security of the region as well as to the transport, energy and economic infrastructure in Georgia's Black Sea region; add that these challenges make Black Sea region highly vulnerable;
12. express concerns regarding the "creeping occupation" of Georgian territories by the Russian Federation in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia which is causing serious problems for the country, including suffering by the local population along the Administrative Boundary Line ; flag up the fact that at any time, there is a danger that local people may be kidnapped or even killed by Russian military patrols, as in the village of Kirbali, when a Georgian citizen was shot dead because he crossed the so-called border established by occupying forces when he visited the local cemetery;
13. recognise the contribution of the EU Monitoring Mission to stabilising the situation and increasing the safety and security of citizens along the occupation line (between the occupied territories and the rest of Georgia), and call for all possible measures to be taken to fully implement its mandate, including in the occupied territories of Georgia;

On climate change

14. point to the increasing number of natural disasters caused by climate change, including the disaster in Shovi on 3 August 2023 which killed 33 people; call on the Georgian authorities to develop a climate change adaptation plan in line with the European Green Deal and the EU's climate adaptation strategy of February 2021 and incorporate it into Georgia's body of legislation; underline the need to develop an early warning system and response plans in cooperation with the European Union;

On labour migration

15. reiterate the joint declaration adopted at the 10th and 11th meetings of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, and in particular the part on labour rights and gender equality, as the issues remain valid and need to be addressed;
16. reiterate their call to ensure freedom of association and revive the stalled social dialogue with a view to promoting decent work and collective bargaining processes and tackling wage setting, to improve compliance with and extend coverage of labour rights (including occupational safety and health) to all workers, to improve coverage and access to social protection and skills development to all workers and jobseekers and to facilitate the transition from the informal to the formal economy, including for digitally mediated occupations. Social dialogue must also contribute to the ratification of ILO Conventions and Recommendations;
17. despite some progress in the area of labour migration legislation, stress the need to further strengthen cooperation between Georgia, the European Union and third countries in order to counter unfair labour mobility practices; refer to recent cases pointing to the need to step up

control of labour mobility, ensure full access by Georgian workers to information, implement fundamental rights and combat social dumping, especially illegal forms of social dumping;

On electoral reform

18. reiterate that the electoral threshold in Georgia remains unchanged at 5% and no electoral blocs are allowed, putting opposition parties at a disadvantage for the 2024 elections;
19. reiterate that according to Georgian CSOs and the Venice Commission, changes to electoral legislation are still needed, including regarding the membership of the Central Election Commission and the improvement of criteria for conducting recounts and annulments; note that the Central Election Commission Chair is not appointed by a two-thirds majority of the Parliament but remains a temporary appointment;

On support to business

20. stress the importance of building the capacity of CSOs and SMEs by stepping up their involvement in and access to EU funding programmes and instruments, including the Digital Europe Programme, the LIFE Programme, IraSME and EUREKA; in this regard, call on governmental bodies, namely the Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, to start consultations with relevant European Commission departments, including the European Delegation in Georgia, on Georgia's timely accession to these programmes;

On harmonisation of the digital market

21. note that a new law on postal services was not adopted within two years from the date of entry into force of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (Article 99 on Postal and Courier Services); call on the Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development to implement it according to the DCFTA annual implementation action plan 2023;
22. consider that it is important to create digital infrastructure building blocks in Georgia, such as cross-border e-Signatures, e-trade, Digital Transport Corridor services and Trade Facilitation Systems between the Baltic and Black Seas; considers that this should allow for harmonised trade in material goods on the basis of interoperable electronic communications, including the exchange of trade-related data and documents in electronic format;

On energy

23. note that the Middle Corridor² makes it possible to transport a variety of energy resources from Central Asia and the South Caucasus to the EU, including natural gas (including in liquified form), oil, green electricity and renewable hydrogen, accelerating the EU's green transition;

² The Middle Corridor is a project of common interest for the European Union, the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the development of which will significantly contribute to regional integration, peace building and security in the region.

24. stress that should the Russian Federation military and naval forces be deployed to the occupied port city of Ochamchire, then Georgia and the Black Sea region as a whole will face significant threats; add that specifically for Georgia, there is a danger that the largest hydroelectric power station, Enguri, could be lost, and the Black Sea Submarine Power Cable project and the development of new sea ports are at risk; therefore urge the countries of the Black Sea region and the international community to respond in a timely and effective manner.