

European Neighbourhood Watch

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Thinking ahead for Europe

CEPS European Neighbourhood Watch monthly newsletter focuses on the EU's relations with its geographical neighbours: those in its midst, those included in the enlargement process, countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy and Russia. Each month the newsletter offers a round-up of the previous month's major developments with links to the full text of each corresponding news item, analysis or official document. These links are presented in chronological order. This overview is complemented by an editorial note that focuses on a current development or a more long-term trend pertaining to the EU's relations with its neighbours.

Table of Contents

Editorial: "Free and fair? A challenge for the EU as Georgia and Ukraine gear up for elections"

General

Eastern Neighbourhood

Armenia
Azerbaijan
Belarus
Georgia
Moldova
Ukraine
Russia

Southern Neighbourhood

Egypt
Israel
Jordan
Lebanon
Libya
Morocco
Occupied Palestinian Territories
Syria
Tunisia
Albania
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Croatia
Kosovo
Macedonia
Montenegro
Serbia

Index of European Neighbourhood Watch Editorials

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Editorial

Free and fair? A challenge for the EU as Georgia and Ukraine gear up for elections

In an important test for democracy, Georgia and Ukraine will go to the polls for parliamentary elections on the 1st and 28th October 2012, respectively. The political leaders of these two Eastern Partnership countries have committed themselves to European values and principles – rhetorically. In reality, the promise of their colour revolutions is unrealised and they have shifted further towards authoritarianism, albeit following different paths in their respective post-revolution periods. Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili has championed a number of important reforms, such as fighting criminality and improving public sector services. But democracy is in decline in the country, with an increasingly over-bearing government, a weak parliament, non-independent judiciary and semi-free media. Unlike Saakashvili, who is still at the helm of Georgian politics, the protagonists of the Ukrainian revolution have either been imprisoned (Yulia Tymoshenko) or discredited (Viktor Yushchenko). Ex-president Yushchenko's attempts to neutralise his former revolutionary ally Tymoshenko resulted in the electoral victory of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010, who was quick to consolidate his reign.

An uneven playing field

The parliamentary elections in Georgia come at a critical juncture for the country, because the constitutional changes to be enforced in 2013 significantly increase the powers of the prime minister – effectively transforming this election into 'king-maker'.

If the Ukrainian president is to secure a constitutional majority in parliament, there are indications that Yanukovych will push for an amendment to enable presidential election by parliament rather than by direct popular vote. This would allow Yanukovych to abolish term limits altogether and also to avoid possible defeat in the 2015 presidential elections.

Recent legislative amendments in both Georgia and Ukraine have laid the ground for the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The reintroduction of the mixed proportional and majoritarian representation system in both countries favours the incumbent parties, which are in a stronger position to secure the support of elected officials. Georgia's electoral constituency map is also drawn up to blight the opposition. The Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform and Svoboda (Freedom) opposition parties were not allocated a single representative seat in any of the 225 electoral district commissions, and raising the threshold to 5% for parties to enter the Parliament is detrimental to all the smaller parties.

The judiciary, administrative resources and the media

Besides tampering with the electoral rules, Saakashvili and Yanukovich have utilised the entire state apparatus to their benefit. Their administrations have consistently manipulated the key components of democracy, namely the judiciary, the civil service, and the media.

Political competition in both countries has been stifled by selective justice at the behest of the government. In Georgia, the courts colluded in depriving the opposition leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, of Georgian citizenship, after he announced his intention to stand for election. Only after special legal amendments had been passed was he allowed to take part in the elections. Georgian authorities also seized the opportunity to fine Ivanishvili for millions of dollars. In Ukraine, Tymoshenko and Yuri Lutsenko, the jailed opposition leaders, were denied the right to register for election by the Central Election Commission. A number of other Ukrainian opposition figures, such as Arsen Avakov, are in exile and thus unable to campaign.

Both the Georgian and Ukrainian governments have made good use of administrative and budgetary resources to manipulate the electoral choices of the population. Saakashvili's 'libertarian' government increased public spending for social security programmes ahead of the elections. Every Georgian family is expected to receive 1000 lari (about €470) to spend on utilities or education in the next four years. Similarly, in April 2012, Yanukovich signed amendments to the 2012 budget increasing social programme expenditure by 3.2 billion hryvnia (about €4 billion). Moreover, in both countries, the police services, local authorities and tax collectors have been instrumentalised to generate votes for the incumbents through intimidation, fines and arrests.

The media is effectively gagged in both countries. Most influential television channels in Georgia are under government control, with the exception of TV channel Maestro. However, the government has made it difficult both for Maestro and Info 9, a channel owned by opposition leader Ivanishvili, to reach viewers. Newspapers and online media are relatively free, but the overwhelming majority of the population, especially in remote areas, relies on television for information about politics. As in Georgia, the Ukrainian opposition's TVi channel, which has been critical of government policies, was squeezed out of the cable networks, and its director persecuted. And when journalists attempted to protest against the authorities at the recent World Newspaper Forum in Kiev, they were brutally silenced by the guards of President Yanukovich. Furthermore, the amendments to the Criminal Code to recriminalise libel proposed by the ruling party are likely to further curb freedom of speech in Ukraine.

Civic activism

Civil society actors have played an important role in monitoring the electoral process and have called the authorities in Ukraine and Georgia to account, sometimes at great personal risk. Georgian civil society recovered somewhat after losing its prominent members to the government following the revolution; a number of NGOs united around the "It Affects You Too" campaign to monitor the electoral process and

regularly exposed violations, especially in the application of electoral law. In Ukraine a coalition called Chesno! (Fair) has been analysing the electoral candidate lists and discloses information about them to the public.

What response from the EU?

For years, the EU has been caught between the unwillingness of Georgian and Ukrainian authorities to pursue genuine democratic reforms and its own inability to send a clear message on the democratic backslide in these countries, although in recent months EU leaders responsible for external relations have been more vocal in addressing this issue. The EU's reaction to the changed law on the functioning of the prosecutor's office in Ukraine is indicative of the trend. However, EU disapprobation appears to have done little to discourage adverse trends in the run-up to the elections. In the face of various pre-election irregularities and suspected wrongdoings before and possibly during the elections – and assuming that the presidential coalitions will maintain their majorities – the EU should brace itself for a damning assessment by the OSCE's election monitoring mission. If, indeed, the OSCE confirms that elections in both countries were neither (entirely) free nor fair, a difficult chapter in the EU's relations with Georgia and Ukraine is likely to begin, probably exacerbated by street protests in both countries.

In October and November, the EU Foreign Affairs Council will assess the elections in Georgia and Ukraine. If and when the scenario outlined above materialises, the EU may first have to further delay the ratification of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine and slow down negotiations on the same agreements with Georgia. Second, the conclusion of a visa facilitation agreement with Ukraine, which has been held up so as not to influence the outcome of the elections, could be frozen for a longer period of time. The ongoing negotiations about visa liberalisation with Georgia might also be prolonged. Finally, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument's conditionality could be triggered, with the EU decreasing financial and technical assistance to both countries. While unpopular with certain member states of the EU, these moves will be necessary if the EU is serious about promoting democratic values and principles in its relations with neighbouring countries.

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General

President of the European Council addressed the 67th General Assembly of the United Nations on behalf of the European Union
New York, 26 September 2012. [Link](#)

Joint Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the parliamentary elections in Belarus

Brussels, 24 September 2012. [Link](#)

Eastern Neighbourhood

New EU funding to improve border management and regional cooperation in the Eastern Partnership

Brussels, 25 September 2012. [Link](#)

Georgia

Joint statement by High Representative/Vice-President Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle, on EU-Georgia relations and the upcoming elections

Brussels, 03 September 2012. [Link](#)

Armenia

Speech by Štefan Füle: Strengthening the Role of Civil Society in Democratic Governance

Yerevan, 27 September 2012. [Link](#)

Council extends EUMM Georgia for one more year

Brussels, 13 September 2012. [Link](#)

Azerbaijan

Statement by the spokespersons of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the release of Ramil Safarov

Brussels, 03 September 2012. [Link](#)

Local EU Statement on prisoner abuse in Georgia

Tbilisi, 19 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the Spokesperson of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the abuse of prisoners in Georgian Penitentiary System

Brussels, 20 September 2012. [Link](#)

Moldova

Press statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle, following his meeting with Marian Lupu, Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova

Brussels, 24 September 2012. [Link](#)

Belarus

EP's Schulz concerned over Belarus, calls for change

Brussels, 10 September 2012. [Link](#)

Ukraine

Štefan Füle: Ukraine and the World: Addressing Tomorrow's Challenges Together 9th Yalta Annual Meeting

Yalta, 13 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the spokespersons of High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the changes to the Law of the Prosecutor's office in Ukraine
Brussels, 21 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with Egyptian President Morsi: EU and Egypt launch Task Force

Brussels, 13 September 2012. [Link](#)

Stefan Füle and Valeriy Khoroshkovsky take stock of EU-Ukraine relations
Brussels, 25 September 2012. [Link](#)

European Union support for improving access to clean water and sanitation in Egypt

Brussels, 20 September 2012. [Link](#)

Russia

Antitrust: Commission opens proceedings against Gazprom
Brussels, 04 September 2012. [Link](#)

Israel

Statement by the spokesperson of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the deteriorating health condition of Samer al-Barq and Hassan Safadi, Palestinians held in administrative detention in Israel

Brussels, 14 September 2012. [Link](#)

Karel De Gucht European Commissioner for Trade Seizing the Opportunity: EU-Russia Relations beyond the WTO Seminar on EU-Russia Trade and Economic Relations
Helsinki, 7 September 2012. [Link](#)

MEPs recommend easing EU-Israel pharmaceutical trade

18 September 2012. [Link](#)

Catherine Ashton EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Statement on the political use of justice in Russia
Strasbourg, 11 September 2012. [Link](#)

Jordan

Additional EU assistance to reach Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Brussels, 14 September 2012. [Link](#)

Southern Neighbourhood

Delivering on the Arab Spring: Highlights of the Semester | July-December 2011
Brussels, September 2012. [Link](#)

New support for civil society and media in Jordan

Brussels, 18 September 2012. [Link](#)

Egypt

Statement by President Barroso following his meeting with Mr Mohamed Morsi, President of Egypt
Brussels, 13 September 2012. [Link](#)

Lebanon

Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst meets with representatives of the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform

Beirut, 19 September 2012. [Link](#)

Libya

Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the killing of US officials in Libya

Brussels, 12 September 2012. [Link](#)

Syria

Statement by the spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton on her phone call with Lakhdar Brahimi

Brussels, 05 September 2012. [Link](#)

Morocco

EBRD launches first investments in emerging Arab democracies

18 September 2012. [Link](#)

Occupied Palestinian Territories

Local EU Statement on the increasing number and severity of settler attacks against Palestinian civilians

Jerusalem, 05 September 2012. [Link](#)

Worsening crisis in Syria: European Commission increases its emergency aid

Brussels, 7 September 2012. [Link](#)

Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton before the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Gymnich)

Nicosia, 7 September 2012. [Link](#)

Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers (Gymnich)

Nicosia, 8 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton on the situation in Syria

Strasbourg, 11 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with League of Arab States Secretary General Nabil El Araby and Joint Special Representative to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi

Brussels, 25 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the Spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton following the meetings of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee and the AHLC Chair with donors

Brussels, 24 September 2012. [Link](#)

New Head of Mission for EUBAM Rafah

Brussels, 25 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the Spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with Palestinian President Abbas

Brussels, 27 September 2012. [Link](#)

Tunisia

Euromed Youth IV launches call for youth activities in Tunisia

11 September 2012. [Link](#)

Albania

Albania: Real progress after delivery on key priorities

Brussels, 18 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle following his meeting with Edmond Panariti, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania

Brussels, 4 September 2012. [Link](#)

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle and Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland on the Road Map for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership application and the execution of the European Court of Human Rights' "Sejdić and Finci"-judgment

Brussels, 3 September 2012. [Link](#)

Croatia

Statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle following his meeting with Neven Mimica, Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia

Brussels, 24 September 2012. [Link](#)

Kosovo

Štefan Füle European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Kosovo's European Future Dinner marking the end of supervised independence

Pristina, 10 September 2012. [Link](#)

Statement by the Spokesperson of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the meeting with Prime Minister of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi

Brussels, 25 September 2012. [Link](#)

Macedonia

Press statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle following his meeting with Gjorge Ivanov, President of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Brussels, 04 September 2012. [Link](#)

Press statement by Commissioner Štefan Füle following his meeting with Nikola Gruevski, Prime Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Skopje, 17 September 2012. [Link](#)

Montenegro

Montenegro: New demanding phase in EU process

Brussels, 6 September 2012. [Link](#)

Serbia

Statement by the Spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton following the meeting with Prime Minister of Serbia Ivica Dacic

Brussels, 04 September 2012. [Link](#)

Index of European Neighbourhood Watch Editorials

Issue n. 85, September 2012

The EEAS and the Eastern Partnership:
Let the blame game stop

Issue n. 84, August 2012

Preparing for a post-Assad Syria: What
role for the European Union?

Issue n. 83, June 2012

History does not move in straight lines

Issue n. 82, May 2012

Implications of the Eurozone crisis
for EU foreign policy - costs and
opportunities

Issue n. 81, April 2012

Do the BRICS make a Bloc?

Issue n. 80, March 2012

The Ukraine Question

Issue n. 79, February 2012

Some European comments Putin's
foreign and security policy

Issue n. 78, January 2012

Putin's faltering return

Issue n. 77, December 2011

The Arab Spring – Is it a Revolution?

Issue n. 76, November 2011

The Responsibility to Protect and Regime
Change

Issue n. 75, October 2011

East goes right, South goes left

Issue n. 74, August-September 2011

The political and legal logic for
Palestinian statehood

Issue n. 73, July 2011

The Timoshenko case and the rule of law
in Ukraine

Issue n. 72, June 2011

The Arab Regatta – a half year report
card

Issue n. 71, May 2011

Review of the Review – of the European
Neighbourhood Policy

Issue n. 70, April 2011

Bringing Democracy Support onto the
Front-burner

Issue n. 69, March 2011

Interculturalism between the twin
hazards of multiculturalism and
assimilation

Issue n. 68, February 2011

Time for change: EU trade policy towards
the Eastern Partners – The case of
Georgia

Issue n. 67, January 2011

Dignity, Democracies and Dynasties

Issue n. 66, December 2010

Time for Justice in Kosovo

Issue n. 65, November 2010

Civil society in the Eastern Partnership

Issue n. 64, October 2010

Rendez-vous with Eastern Europe

Issue n. 63, September 2010

Here is your opinion of the European
Neighbourhood Policy

Issue n. 62, July/ August 2010

What is your opinion of the European
Neighbourhood Policy?

Issue n. 61, June 2010

Turkey and its neighbourhood

Issue n. 60, May 2010

Time for a Tripartite Gas Pipeline
Consortium for Ukraine

Issue n. 59, April 2010

Yanukovich's dubious deal

Issue n. 58, March 2010

Russia in Europe and the West

Issue n. 57, February 2010

Messages from Central Asia for the High
Representative

Issue n. 56, January 2010

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