

Georgia: the law on foreign agents does not signal the end of the European dream

Description

Despite warnings from the European Union and the United States, and above all despite strong popular resistance, the controversial law on foreign agents was adopted on the third reading by the Georgian Parliament on 14 May 2024. What does this power grab mean for Georgia, its internal political life, and its relations with the EU?

For several weeks, the streets of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, have been filled with the resilience of its people. Large-scale demonstrations, extending far beyond the outskirts of Parliament to cover the entire city, have been a testament to the unwavering spirit of the Georgian population. Some rallies are said to have attracted between 250,000 and 300,000 people, a powerful display of unity and determination, according to figures put forward by independent media based on the analysis of data transmitted by drones.

What the law on “transparency of foreign influence” stands for

A similar law was passed in Russia in 2012, earning the Georgian government-backed text the nickname “Russian law.” [A similar law was promulgated in Kyrgyzstan](#) on 2 April 2024, evidence of President Japarov’s authoritarian drift.

In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party, led by the reputedly pro-Russian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, is finally showing its true colors and current stance towards Europe and the West in general with the promotion of this text. For a long time, the government played a double game, alternating pro-European declarations with initiatives that were hardly in line with these declarations. B. Ivanishvili and his team have borrowed several initiatives from Russian President Vladimir Putin, such as the adoption of an anti-LGBT law in 2023 and the creation of hundreds of fake profiles on the Internet to undermine the arguments of the opposition and Western countries. In 2023, the Georgian government had already tried to pass this law on foreign agents but backed down in the face of the scale of popular mobilization.

This new law will enable the authorities and administrations to monitor newspapers, media, and associations receiving more than 20% of their funding abroad. The entities targeted will have to register as “*pursuing the interests of foreign powers*.” This transparency of funds may, at first sight, seem logical and legitimate. Still, in reality, it opens the door to significant press censorship. It discredits the will of Georgians to choose a European path, suggesting that the population is being manipulated from abroad. In Russia, for example, this law has made it possible to discredit and exclude the opposition media from subjects such as the elections or the war in Ukraine.

On 14 May, the Georgian Parliament voted to adopt this law on third reading, with 84 votes in favor and 30 against. Some MPs even came to blows in the Chamber. At the same time, around 3,000 people, mainly young people, were demonstrating outside Parliament. Thirteen people were arrested for “civil disobedience,” according to the Ministry of the Interior.

The European Union and the United States reacted swiftly, announcing financial sanctions and travel restrictions on government members and their families. The \$390 million package of financial assistance promised by Washington could be in jeopardy. On 18 May, President Salome Zurbishvili vetoed the law, with no illusions as to the effects of the



blockade given the limited powers of the Head of State in Georgia. In her view, the adoption of this text compromises the country's European prospects when Georgia was granted the status of candidate country for EU membership in December 2023. On 19 May, she called on French President Emmanuel Macron to visit Georgia to send a clear signal to the Georgian government and to help bring the South Caucasus out from under Russian influence. On 15 May, [the foreign ministers of Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, and Lithuania](#) traveled to Georgia to meet the authorities and mingle with the demonstrators. The demonstrators saw this as an essential sign of support, while the government denounced it as an attempt to interfere.

The violence of repression

But the other striking fact in the process of passing this law was the violence of the police crackdown on the demonstrators. The forces of law and order did not hesitate to use tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets to push back an overwhelmingly peaceful population. [Amnesty International](#) and its deputy director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Denis Krivosheev, have condemned several cases of abuse, including attacks on three political opponents on the evening of 8 May: Lasha Ghvinianidze, one of the organizers of several marches against the bill, Gia Japaridze, a university professor linked to an opposition party, and Dimitri Chikovani, head of communications for the United National Movement (UMN) were severely beaten, requiring hospitalization, and were subjected to intimidation (telephone threats). According to The Georgian Young Lawyers Association, the government used private data to locate these opponents.

Other abuses recorded include threats by the police against demonstrators who have made speeches containing remarks deemed "offensive." These threats deter criticism and intimidate those who openly oppose the law and the government in power. The government also plans to create a database to record individuals criticizing the government. These individuals would then be deemed to have "*broken the law by using violence*," which would make it possible to place them on a blacklist. This initiative raises serious concerns about freedom of expression and human rights, providing an easy pretext for persecuting political opponents and activists.

The Georgian government's repressive actions during the adoption of this controversial law demonstrate its desire to stifle dissent and strengthen its control over civil society. The use of force against demonstrators and the introduction of surveillance and repression mechanisms are evidence of a worrying drift toward authoritarianism.

The prospect of new electoral deadlines

However, the parliamentary majority could change in less than five months, with the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2024. The party currently in power, Georgian Dream, is not guaranteed to retain its majority in Parliament.

Former president Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement, a liberal party that advocates Georgia's membership in the European Union and NATO, dominated the political landscape until 2012, when it lost the elections to the Georgian Dream. The European Party of Georgia was created in 2017 following a split within the United National Movement due to political differences between influential members. Its leader, David Bakradze, a former Speaker of Parliament, also strongly supports democratic reform and European integration. Finally, the most recent formation was created in March 2024 by Nika Melia, former president of the United National Movement, and Nika Gvaramia, founder of the opposition television station *Mtavari Arkhi*. This party, called Akhali (« new »), has set itself the mission of innovatively promoting reforms in the country, moving away from the perpetual reappraisal of the past to project itself into the future.

With these various opposition forces and in such a context, the legislative elections of October 2024 promise to be crucial for the country's future. The Georgian political landscape could undergo significant changes or even a reorientation in terms of European integration projects and internal reforms.

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Thumbnail: Pro-EU graffiti in Tbilisi, 22 April 2024 (copyright: Jelger Groeneveld/Wikimedia Commons).

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