

Georgia's democratic future at stake

Russian-style 'foreign agents' bill threatens civil society and independent media



Protests against the 'foreign agents' bill in Tbilisi, May 2024. Photo: Mariam Patsatsia

On 3 April 2024, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party revived the controversial 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence', which labels independent media and civil society groups as foreign agents.¹ The move, coming just over a year after initial proposals were dropped in the face of a massive public outcry, has sparked widespread protests once again. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets in near-daily demonstrations outside the parliament building in Tbilisi, despite facing threats, intimidation, and violent responses from the police involving the use of pepper spray, water cannons, and rubber bullets.²

On 11 May, over 200,000 people took to the streets in a protest march against the draft bill. Dubbed the 'Russian law', the proposed legislation, which aims to suppress dissent and curtail civic freedoms, specifically targets civil society and

¹ Civil.ge, '[BREAKING: GD Reintroduces the Draft law on Foreign Agents](#)', *Civil.ge*, 3 April 2024.

² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, '[Eyewitnesses Say Georgian Police Used Rubber Bullets In Crackdown On Protesters](#)', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 May 2024.

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independent media. By backing the bill, which goes against the fundamental values of democracy, the ruling party is also jeopardising the country's EU accession process.

The proposed legislation would require media outlets and non-profit organisations receiving more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to register as 'organisations carrying out the interests of a foreign power', subjecting them to duplicitous reporting requirements, arbitrary checks and hefty fines. Presented under the guise of increasing transparency, the true purpose of the bill is to assist the government in its efforts to undermine civil society and independent media, burying them in bureaucracy and hindering their vital work in upholding democracy.

'Georgian parliamentarians and government officials formally defend the bill as providing transparency, but they make no secret of its intended purpose,' said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. 'By labelling independent groups and media as serving foreign interests, they intend to marginalize and stifle critical voices in the country that are fundamental for any functioning democracy.'³

Recent escalations in intimidation against critics amid hearings on the 'foreign agents' bill underscore fears that the law could be weaponised against dissenting voices. Over the past week, homes and offices of journalists and human rights advocates were defaced with derogatory posters and graffiti, labelling them as traitors and foreign agents, and over 100 activists and their families, including children, have received threatening communications.

The Speaker of Parliament announced the ruling party's decision to create a public database – a sort of blacklist – of people 'who are involved in violence, blackmail, threats and other illegal acts [or] who publicly endorse these actions,' prompting concerns that the database could be used to target opponents.⁴ At least four government critics have been attacked by unknown assailants in the streets or outside their homes.⁵ Two opposition members of parliament were also severely beaten by riot police.^{6,7} At least 20 media workers were physically assaulted, verbally harassed, or detained while covering the demonstrations.⁸ Executive Director of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, a watchdog and co-host of a civil society programme held at the Asian Development Bank's Annual Meeting in Tbilisi, was attacked

³ Human Rights Watch, '[Georgia: 'Foreign Influence' Bill Threatens Rights](#)', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 May 2024.

⁴ Civil.ge, '[Speaker Announces Launch of Incriminating Database on Opponents](#)', *Civil.ge*, 8 May 2024.

⁵ OC Media, '[Government critics attacked outside their homes in Georgia](#)', *OC Media*, 9 May 2024.

⁶ Civil.ge, '[UNM Chair Severely Beaten by Police During Rally Against Agents' Law](#)', *Civil.ge*, 1 May 2024.

⁷ Tabula.ge, '[TV PIRVELI broadcasts a video of beating of Aleko Elisashvili by policemen during the rally](#)', *Tabula.ge*, 18 April 2024.

⁸ '[Georgian PM urged to withdraw the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, guarantee the safety of journalists and uphold press freedom in Georgia](#)', *International Press Institute*, 10 May 2024.

both verbally and physically outside the Swedish Embassy in Tbilisi shortly after meeting with the Swedish Minister for International Cooperation.⁹

The bill is part of a wider legislative push by the ruling party to impose restrictions on various rights. In March, the party also proposed constitutional amendments aimed at curtailing LGBTIQ+ rights, including bans on what they describe as ‘gatherings aimed at popularising same-sex family or intimate relationships ... and non-use of gender-specific terminology.’ At the Georgian Dream-led public hearings on the bill, discussions descended into anti-LGBTIQ+ vitriol and misogynistic rhetoric, with one of the MPs even remarking that women’s rights to safe and legal abortion as well as the rights of single women to motherhood through in vitro fertilisation warranted heated discussion and debate.¹⁰

The anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation taps into existing prejudices against queer individuals in Georgian society, garnering support from far-right factions and weaponising these biases in the political arena. The contentious bill has also been deployed to sideline critics as the nation approaches the October parliamentary elections.

In a rare public address on 29 April, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire oligarch and founder of the Georgian Dream party, claimed that the introduction of the law was strategically timed to debilitate the political opposition before the elections.¹¹ He also dismissed Georgia’s political opponents and civic groups as ‘having no homeland’ and accusing foreigners of plotting to bring the political opposition to power through ‘non-transparent NGO funding’.¹²

The hate-fuelled speech, along with accusations levelled by ruling party members against civil society groups monitoring elections in Georgia, including the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED),¹³ have fuelled concerns that the law might be deployed to hinder or prevent independent election monitoring activities, paving the way for the government to misuse administrative resources and pressurise voters to influence election outcomes.

In an address on 12 May, Georgia’s president, Salome Zurbishvili, a vocal critic and opponent of the proposed law, called on the Georgian government to halt enactment of the law until 1 November, just after the parliamentary election and allow whoever comes to power decide. Speaking at a press-conference one

⁹ Civil.ge, ‘[IDFI Director, TV Formula Crew Assaulted](#)’, *Civil.ge*, 7 May 2024.

¹⁰ Publika, ‘[Mdinardze on IVF: it has become part of a debate whether a single woman should have a child or not](#)’, *Publika*, 23 April 2024.

¹¹ Civil.ge, ‘[Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repressions](#)’, *Civil.ge*, 29 April 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Georgian Dream MP Nino Tsilosani, [Post](#), *Facebook*, 18 April 2024.

day before the bill's third committee hearing, she reminded the government that their words and assault on society mimicked Russia's attack on democracy.¹⁴

Georgia's key strategic partners – the European Union and the United States – have warned against the adoption of the bill. Members of the European Parliament have called for the suspension of Georgia's EU candidate status, a review of EU funding for Georgia's state budget, and an interim assessment of Georgia's progress in implementing the nine steps set out by the European Commission for the opening of accession negotiations.¹⁵ Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives have issued warnings about a potential 'shift in U.S. policy toward Georgia', coupled with subsequent sanctions should the Georgian government undermine the country's democratic development and go against will of the people by adopting the bill.^{16,17}

The president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Odile Renaud-Basso, has also warned that the law could hit Georgia's economy and, with it, investor confidence.¹⁸

As the bill continues to spark international concern, Ivanishvili has moved swiftly to counter potential Western sanctions. On 19 April, lawmakers hastily passed legal amendments waiving taxes and duties on offshore assets repatriated to Georgia. This legislative manoeuvre has drawn sharp criticism from opposition leaders and analysts alike, who warn it could facilitate an influx of illicit funds and help Russian-sanctioned oligarchs to circumvent international sanctions.^{19,20} After his visit to Georgia, the German State Secretary of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action criticised the tax amendments for 'contradicting EU efforts against tax evasion' and expressed concerns over the independence of the National Bank of Georgia.²¹

Additionally, more than 50 human rights organisations from around the world have signed a letter in solidarity with Georgian civil society, condemning the efforts of the Georgian government to introduce the law: 'This kind of legislation has led to reprisals, attacks, red-tagging, imprisonments, abductions and

¹⁴ Civil.ge, '[President Warns Law Enforcement Officials Against Resorting to Violence and Repression](#)', *Civil.ge*, 12 May 2024.

¹⁵ Civil.ge, '[MEPs Call for Suspension of EU Candidate Status for Georgia](#)', *Civil.ge*, 7 May 2024.

¹⁶ Civil.ge, '[U.S. Senators' Letter to PM Kobakhidze Warning of Possible U.S. Policy Shift over Agents' Law](#)', *Civil.ge*, 27 April 2024.

¹⁷ Civil.ge, '[29 U.S. House Members Threaten Sanctions If Agents Law is Not Dropped](#)', *Civil.ge*, 11 May 2024.

¹⁸ Libby George, '[EBRD warns Georgia 'foreign agents' law could hit economy, investor confidence](#)', *Reuters*, 7 May 2024.

¹⁹ Tata Shoshiashvili, '[Georgian Dream eliminates taxes on offshore assets brought to Georgia](#)', *OC Media*, 19 April 2024.

²⁰ Luka Pertaia, '[Offshore law, buying gold and changing the rules of enforcement of sanctions - what Georgia is preparing for.](#)' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 April 2024.

²¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, '[The government's conflicting messages are already threatening investment from the EU - Sven Giegold.](#)' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 May 2024.

killings of human rights defenders, environmental activists, legal professionals, journalists, workers, community leaders and other civil society actors.²²

The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, has also made it clear to the Georgian authorities that ‘threats and intimidation of HRDs must stop immediately and the bill should be withdrawn’.²³

Front Line Defenders strongly condemned the alarming surge of defamation and intimidation assaults targeting Georgian human rights defenders. The organisation has urged the Georgian authorities to investigate the attacks and bring the perpetrators to justice immediately. They have also called for the immediate and unconditional removal of the law and a commitment that it will not be reconsidered.²⁴

The Georgian Dream party has already pushed the bill through two parliamentary readings, setting the stage for a decisive third vote during the week of 13 May 2024. Despite Zurabishvili’s pledge to veto the legislation, the majority party is poised to override her decision, having repeatedly declared their commitment to ensure the bill’s passage.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators in Georgia are facing government violence as they rally against the bill. Support their fight for democracy.

For ongoing updates and detailed coverage, please, refer to English-language news outlets based in Tbilisi – OC Media (<https://oc-media.org/>) or Civil.ge (<https://civil.ge/>).

²² [‘In Solidarity with Georgian Civil Society and the People of Georgia.’](#) *Freedom House*, 10 May 2024.

²³ Mary Lawlor – UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, [Post](#), X, 10 May 2024.

²⁴ Front Line Defenders, [‘Defamation and Intimidation Attacks against Human Rights Defenders in Georgia must be investigated’](#), *Front Line Defenders*, 10 May 2024.