



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Georgia has been following Russia in stifling political critics



The ruling Georgian Dream party is determined to implement the **controversial law**, aimed at its pro-Western critics from NGOs, political parties, and independent media.

Georgia will once again find itself in the sphere of Russian influence, from which it has only recently emerged, if it persists in its efforts to enact legislation restricting the activities of so-called "foreign agents."

Only 4 months ago, Georgia received the status of **candidate** for membership of the European Union. Today, it is taking a big step back towards a repressive regime modelled on Russia.

Thousands of Georgians protested in the capital, Tbilisi, as the ruling Georgian Dream party resubmitted a law that would label the civil sector, critical experts, and the media as collaborators of foreign influence.

The scene is similar to the one from March last year, when the government first submitted such a law but withdrew it under the pressure of mass demonstrations. This time, they brought practically the same text to the parliament, except that the wording "agents of foreign influence" was changed to "pursuing the interests of a foreign power".

## The government will not back down now

While pro-European protesters are hoping once again to exert strong enough pressure on the government to withdraw the law, as a year ago, the authorities showed no signs of backing down.

"That worked for you last year, but it's not going to work this year", said Shalva Papuashvili, Parliament speaker, to the opposition.

If they really persevere, political life in Georgia will not differ much from that in Russia, given that critics of the government could be

declared subjects "pursuing the interests of a foreign power".

Anyone who spends at least 20% of their money from foreign donations and projects on their activities will risk being under investigation. And that will mean, at the very least, an overwhelming amount of additional reporting to state authorities about the business and possibly administrative and criminal liability, including up to 5 years in prison.

In the case of Russia, which Georgia is now following, it was the laws on the labelling of so-called "agents of foreign influence" among critics that were the prelude to their mass persecution and, in the end, the complete suppression of the opposition scene.

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The European Union sent a warning that this would represent a major blow to Georgia's newly awarded candidacy for full membership. However, it cannot go much further than the public warning and the usual "serious concerns".

Brussels may be disappointed, given that, only 4 months after they "rewarded" Georgia with candidate status, they received a distinctly pro-Russian response from it.

If the European leaders believed in December of last year that granting Georgia candidacy would tie it more tightly to them than Russia would, their assessment appears to have been incorrect based on the most recent action taken by the Tbilisi government.

## Russian safe harbour

The policy of the ruling bloc in Tbilisi has been directed by the oligarch and former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his

fortune in Russia during the chaotic 1990s, and since coming to power, his bloc has promised to normalise relations with Moscow.

His pragmatic political and business interests are often at odds with the prevailing desires of the nation of nearly 4 million to turn to the European Union.

Georgia did not impose sanctions on Russia, as the EU did, and its government justified itself by saying that the effect on Russia would be equal to zero, given the insignificant annual trade exchange of about \$1 billion, but that the Georgian economy would suffer damage.

The pro-Russian position of the Georgian government was strengthened in May last year when flights between the 2 countries **were restored**. In this way, it was easier for many Russians to use Georgia as a hub for their financial and business operations, circumventing international sanctions.

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Even though the government in Tbilisi rejects the responsibility of Georgia being one of the most significant routes for circumventing sanctions against Russia, Georgia does this, along with several other former USSR states in Russia's neighbourhood.

Since the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the introduction of sanctions against Russia, imports of semiconductors from America to Georgia have increased by several thousand per cent, apparently for further sales in Russia.

## Preparation for elections

The restrictive law directed against civil society and critics of the government returns

to the scene only half a year before the parliamentary elections, and this is one of the most important reasons for the government's decision to reactivate the work it abandoned a year ago.

The Georgian Dream party expects to preserve the majority and form the government after the October elections, given that it has a disunited and heterogeneous opposition against it.



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But it needs a mechanism to silence and even completely suffocate critical voices, which accuse it above all of widespread corruption and the poor state of the economy.

Even if the forthcoming elections are the principal reason for the new repressive step of the government in Tbilisi, it would destroy the country's capacity to respond to the trust of the EU, which apparently prematurely bestowed on it the status of a candidate for membership.

However, Russia will support Tbilisi's new shift since it will have a less problematic factor that the EU has been trying to tie itself to in its neighbourhood, at least temporarily.