

What's Behind Georgia's 'Russian Law'?

By [Leyla Latypova](#)

May 06, 2024



Demonstrators hold placards during a protest against a controversial "foreign influence" bill in Tbilisi.
Vano Shlamov / AFP

The South Caucasus nation of Georgia has for weeks been gripped by mass [protests](#) against a controversial "foreign influence" bill that critics say resembles legislation in Russia used to crack down on independent media and the opposition.

Introduced into parliament last month by the country's ruling Georgian Dream coalition, the bill would force organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as entities "pursuing the interests of a foreign power."

Opponents of the draft law warn that, if adopted, it could hinder Georgia's aspirations to join the EU and push the country closer to Russia, which maintains control over the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Moscow Times spoke with experts to make sense of what is happening in Georgia, what might come next, and whether Russia may be involved.

The “foreign influence” bill’s current advancement through parliament marks Georgian Dream’s second attempt at passing legislation that would scrutinize organizations receiving foreign funding.

Georgia’s parliament [scrapped](#) a similar bill last spring amid mass anti-government demonstrations in Tbilisi, as well as warnings from Western officials over what they described as democratic backsliding in the country.

“I was surprised when they canceled this [bill] last year,” said Tbilisi-based political analyst Archil Sikharulidze. “The introduction of this [bill]...was inevitable, whether by this government or by the following one. This is a general tendency, an attempt to control the external flow of money.”

Other experts told The Moscow Times that they believe Georgian Dream is pushing the bill forward to secure its grip on power ahead of the October parliamentary elections, even though the move might seem counterintuitive in a political climate where nearly 80% of Georgians [support](#) their country’s efforts to become an EU member.

“It seemed clear for quite a long while that Georgian Dream is trying to emulate the Hungarian model in terms of appealing to social conservatism,” said Alex Scrivener, who heads the Tbilisi-based Democratic Security Institute.

Hungary, an EU and NATO member state, [passed](#) its own law on foreign influence law last year.

Scrivener described Georgia’s ruling coalition’s approach to governing as an attempt “to buttress a sort of permanent one-party, semi-democratic, authoritarian state,” adding: “Georgian Dream members are all about maintaining power.”

“Being pro-Western helped them stay in power for the past 10 years. And now, doing the opposite is helping them to stay in power. It’s just pragmatism on their part, or so they think,” the analyst told The Moscow Times.

The ambitions and fears of 68-year-old Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia’s wealthiest man and Georgian Dream’s founder, guide much of his party’s political position-taking, some experts say.

After years in the shadows, Ivanishvili returned to the public spotlight earlier this year, assuming the formal title of an “honorary chairman” of the ruling party.

Eurasia Group analyst Tinatin Japaridze said the billionaire’s comeback came amid rumors that some members of his party were becoming too independent and keeping him in the dark on major decision-making processes.

“He wanted to make sure that this ends, that there are no efforts for anyone to ad-lib on the side, and to do what they want without him being very much in the loop and in full control,” Japaridze told The Moscow Times.

In a rare public [speech](#) at a pro-government rally last month, which saw scores of people bused into Tbilisi from across the country, Ivanishvili accused Western governments of

interfering in Georgia's internal affairs. He claimed foreign-funded NGOs "strengthen" the influence of foreign intelligence agencies in the country's domestic politics.

"He thinks the West is out to get him," said analyst Scrivener. "In his mind, he identifies more with the victims of the so-called 'color revolutions' — the overthrown authoritarians — than he does with the protesters in Ukraine, in Moldova, in Kyrgyzstan...and in Georgia."

However, some believe speculations of Ivanishvili's far-reaching political influence to be greatly exaggerated.

"There is this tendency among Georgian, Russian, Western experts to blame everything on one person, like during the [presidency of Mikheil] Saakashvili...everyone blamed him [for all that was happening]. Now we are aware that half of [those accusations] were lies," said analyst Sikharulidze.

"The same is true here. I don't think Bidzina Ivanishvili is behind every [political] decision and every issue," he added.

"Some people talk about this as a 'Russia bill' because it's essentially a Russia-inspired foreign agent bill, but also because it is one that will place Georgia within Moscow's orbit and away from the Western one," Japaridze said.

But "it's, of course not as if Russia sent a fax to Tbilisi and said 'This is what we would like you to translate into Georgian and then adopt'," she added.

Some in Georgia fear that Georgian Dream, which has increasingly sought to strike a balance between maintaining ties with the West and normalizing relations with Moscow, might turn a looming threat of Russian military intervention into a tool of political manipulation.

"The fear in Georgia is that there will be something like a Kazakhstan or a Belarus scenario if the elections in October are not free and fair and Georgian Dream wins them unfairly," said Scrivener, referring to the 2022 anti-government demonstrations in Kazakhstan that [were quashed](#) with the help of Moscow's troops.

But analyst Sikharulidze argued that Russia's role — if any — in the current standoff between Georgian Dream and anti-government forces has been overblown.

"Somehow we are stuck in this paradigm of the West [and] Russia, turning a blind eye to the fact that plenty of Turkish, Iranian, Azerbaijani, Chinese, and Arabic agents are working here, financing different cultural, non-cultural activities," Sikharulidze told The Moscow Times.

"This is also not controlled, and there are fears [about them] among people," he said.

Georgia's parliament is widely expected to pass the "foreign influence" bill in its third and final reading later this month.

While President Salome Zurbishvili, who has long fallen out of favor with the ruling party, vowed to veto the controversial draft law, Georgian Dream has enough seats in parliament to override such a move.

Some analysts warn that the bill, which would introduce a set of new financial regulations that foreign-funded entities must follow, could affect the outcome of the fall parliamentary elections, thus hindering the political opposition and the work of independent monitors and media, many of whom rely predominantly on funds from foreign donors.

“Georgian Dream believes that if they [the monitors and media] don't have foreign funding...then they are not going to carry much clout and will not be sufficiently well-equipped to continue exposing the government's shortcomings,” said Japaridze of Eurasia Group.

“It would make it easier [for Georgian Dream] to get reelected and also increase the risk of rigged election results,” she added, warning of a deepening rift between Georgia’s government and the general public.

But not everyone believes recent protests to be a precursor for irreversible divisions within Georgia’s society.

“Protests in front of the parliament building in Georgia may sound nice. It may make a good picture. But if you look at what is really happening: the whole process is taking place in one place [in Tbilisi]...It would be incorrect to represent this as an uprising,” Sikharulidze said.

“I think Georgian Dream and the government in general...will have enough power, enough control over institutions to deal with protests,” he added.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/06/whats-behind-georgias-russian-law-a85025>