

Western powers threaten Georgia over passage of foreign agents law

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The political crisis engulfing the country of Georgia continues to deepen. The US and its European allies are condemning and threatening the ruling party of the small nation for recently overriding a presidential veto in order to pass a “foreign agents’ law.”

The measure, which requires organizations receiving 20 percent or more of their resources from abroad to declare their funders, is opposed in Washington and Brussels. It has provoked weeks of Western-backed protests in Tbilisi, in which demonstrators have denounced the government for being “Russian slaves” and celebrated the European Union (EU), Ukraine and the US as the embodiment of democracy and liberation.

The south Caucasus country (population 3.7 million), which sits at the crossroads of the Black and Caspian Seas, is being drawn into the maelstrom of the opening stages of World War III. The West deems the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, in power since 2012, to be excessively close to Moscow. While Tbilisi has had extensive ties with NATO for years, GD represents a faction of the Georgian oligarchy which still seeks to balance between Washington and Moscow.

Having emerged out of the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, the Georgian oligarchy, like its counterparts in the region, is being torn by factional infighting over the future course of its foreign policy, which is only deepened by the profound social crisis in the country.

While the immediate targets are opponents of GD within the ruling oligarchy and pro-NATO sections of the middle class, this does not lessen the reactionary character of the “foreign agents” law, which can also be applied to any genuine left-wing opposition to the government.

With the war in Ukraine going badly and NATO moving toward open military conflict with Russia, the passage of the bill has created the opportunity for Washington to bring Georgia into line.

The US Congress is preparing sanctions against Georgia, and the State Department, with extraordinary hypocrisy, just announced visa bans for “individuals who are responsible for or complicit in undermining democracy in Georgia, as well as their family members.” Making clear that the Biden administration is prepared to place Georgia on its enemies list, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has ordered a “comprehensive review of bilateral cooperation between the United States and Georgia” and warned that Washington “will take into account Georgia’s actions in deciding our own.”

The EU, in which Georgia is seeking membership, announced May 28 that the adoption of the foreign agents’ law would “negatively impact Georgia’s EU path.” Brussels went further. “The EU and its Member States are considering all options to react to these developments,” it threatened.

Five days earlier, Georgian prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze reported that EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi had told him, “Look what happened to Fico, you should be very careful.” The reference was to Slovak prime minister Robert Fico, nearly assassinated recently by a right-

wing gunman, possibly assisted by foreign intelligence agencies.

Várhelyi subsequently claimed the Georgian leader had taken his remarks “out of context.” However, his “sincere regret” about any misunderstanding was hardly comforting. The EU official acknowledged having referred to “the latest tragic event in Slovakia [i.e., the Fico assassination attempt],” but that he had merely been trying to warn Kobakhidze “not to enflame further the already fragile situation by adopting this law which could lead to further polarization and to possible uncontrolled situations on the streets of Tbilisi.” In other words, do what we want or be prepared, against the backdrop of civil unrest, to get yourself killed!

Along the same generally threatening lines, NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly (PA) asserted May 26 that it remained “firmly committed to Georgia’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, democracy and aspiration to join NATO.” The implication being that only in so far as Georgia joined NATO could its “sovereignty” and “territorial integrity” be assured.

“Georgia stands at a crossroads,” the military alliance arrogantly went on to claim. The foreign agents’ law “must now be withdrawn,” and should it not be, the EU and NATO would “continue to support [the protesters].”

While Washington and Brussels condemn the foreign agents’ law as anti-democratic and the handiwork of the Kremlin, their central concern is that it would expose and undermine the vast network of Western-financed “civil society” organizations in Georgia through which imperialism exercises influence in the country and the region.

As of 2019, there were 26,000 NGOs registered in Georgia, according to a European Parliamentary Research Service report. This is evidence, the document argued, of a “vibrant and active” civil society. It pointed out that the EU, working with its “2018-2020 Roadmap for engagement with civil society” in Georgia, “liaises with Georgian society on a regular basis” and has “organized extensive consultations.” The authors lamented the fact that only 23 percent of Georgians “fully trust/rather trust” these organizations.

These “soft power” outfits, operating in the fields of education, media, labor relations, human rights advocacy and the like, promote the political agenda and ideology of the US and Europe. Through exchange programs, grants and scholarships and other “joint partnerships” funded by institutions like USAID, the World Bank and the European Commission, they dole out cash and career opportunities, cultivating a pro-Western social base.

In an unexpectedly, perhaps unintentionally frank May 5 comment in the *Moscow Times*, two civil society activists from the south Caucasus noted, “Foreign aid agencies and their local NGO contractors have long colonized most areas of public policy and services” in Georgia. “To give it the appearance of community participation, the aid agency contracts Georgian NGOs to do the everyday footwork.” “Georgian NGOs that receive grants to implement this work may be local, but they hold considerable power over the Georgian population. This power comes from

their access to Western embassies and resources,” they further explain.

When necessary, such forces can be called upon to become the “hard power” of imperialist intervention.

A May 29 *New York Times* article, intended to glorify Georgia’s “democratic” protest movement, describes the months of demonstrations in Tbilisi as having “been mainly organized by civil society groups, many of which receive funding from overseas groups promoting things like democracy and a free media, who fear the country is sliding into authoritarianism.” “Many have coordinated their activities in messaging apps with opposition lawmakers,” it adds. The article’s author obviously did not see the irony of protests against Georgia’s foreign agents’ law organized by said foreign agents.

Among the privileged sections of the middle class currently wrapping themselves in European, Georgian and Ukrainian flags on the streets of Tbilisi, one will find no signs of opposition to the genocide in Gaza. The objections of these layers to “oppression” do not extend to the 21st century’s first genocide. Inasmuch as they know that opposition to Israel’s mass murder in Gaza will bring them into conflict with their foreign supporters, they keep their mouths shut. Furthermore, capitalism is not a swear word for such people, but a system that evokes feelings of eager anticipation.

In a May 16 article reporting on the situation, the *Guardian* describes some of the organizations playing a central role in the Georgian protests. The Georgian Students for a European Future, it explains, is a “centrist” group. Another, Students for Liberty, “has some libertarian tendencies.” “A group called Wave, it reports, “includes environmentalists but vehemently describes itself as ‘not leftist.’” The Franklin Group, named after Benjamin Franklin, it notes, “promotes free markets, private property, and individual liberties.” Meanwhile, the Shame group just “focuses on free and fair elections.” Another outfit, Sunset, “describes itself as liberal nationalist” and has its “members swear an oath of allegiance.”

The gap between this outlook and the concerns of the vast majority of Georgians is undeniable. In October 2023, the Eurasia Foundation, National Democratic Institute and UKAID— agencies allied with the US and British governments—published the results of a nationwide survey titled, “Taking Georgia’s Pulse.”

The authors write:

“The survey shows that poverty and economic problems are identified as main contributors to a sense of insecurity—a finding that transcends party line.” “Every second Georgian says the situation regarding poverty and crime has worsened.” “One in ten Georgians can’t afford food, while one in four can only afford food, but nothing else.” “The majority consider poor quality of education as the leading problem facing the education system, while high cost of drugs and medical services are considered as leading problems in the healthcare system.” “The majority,” 83 percent, “says that depression and anxiety is problematic for Georgian society, with almost every second Georgian (41 percent) saying they don’t know who to address for help.”

In response to a question about the most important national issues facing the respondent and his or her family, topics that are absent from the banners at Tbilisi’s demonstrations come in first. Rising prices and inflation, jobs, poverty, pensions, wages, education and healthcare are among the top eight. “Human rights,” NATO and EU membership, relations with Russia and freedom of speech—all headliners of the anti-government protests—came in ninth place or below. Just 10 percent of Georgians indicated that “Actions by Russia towards Georgia” were

among the most important reasons they feel insecure living in the country.

Contrary to Western claims, a majority support the current ruling party. However, fully “62 percent of Georgians say none of the parties represent their interests.” A breakdown by party support “shows that every fifth GD supporter, almost every second opposition supporter, and the majority of undecided say none of the parties represent their interests.”

The political situation in Georgia is explosive, sharply exacerbated by the endless US and NATO provocations and threats against Russia. Sections of the elite allied to Washington and Brussels are working to undermine the ruling party’s grip on power.

Two hundred NGOs issued a joint statement May 29 insisting they would defy the foreign agents’ law. “The Russian law will not work in our country! It will remain a piece of paper, which nobody will obey,” they declared. The organizations promised to pay the fines, which can run into the tens of thousands of dollars, of anyone found guilty of violating the law. Clearly, they have a great deal of money at their disposal.

President Salome Zourabichvili, who occupies a largely figurehead position but is the commander-in-chief of Georgia’s armed forces, warned at a May 26 Independence Day rally that “the specter of Russia looms over us.”

At the event, she announced the issuing of the “Georgian Charter,” a declaration intended to unify the country’s opposition in the run-up to October’s elections. The plan calls for the repeal of the foreign agents’ law; the withdrawal of all anti-European measures; the structural reform and political purge of all major state agencies; the cancellation of decisions that undermine Georgia’s ability to pay off foreign creditors; and the overhaul of the electoral system. In other words, it is a call for a pro-imperialist house cleaning, with the prospect of many new positions and opportunities for those who sign up.

Whether or not the opposition, made up of dozens of competing, right-wing groups, can or will coalesce around this program remains unclear. Voicing Western concerns that Georgia’s anti-government groups are not up to the task and tacitly admitting that their base of support is narrow, a May 28 comment on Eurasianet noted, “The biggest risk for [the opposition] is losing momentum and seeing a poor turnout on election day.”



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