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Sovereignty, foreign influence, and the search for the Georgian dream

Monday 17 April 2023, by [JAPARIDZE Sopiko](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2023).

In an effort to regulate foreign influence in Georgia, the Georgian parliament, People's Power, as it is called, introduced two bills in late February, "[On the registration of foreign agents](#)" and "[On the transparency of foreign influence](#)." People's Power broke away from the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD) so it could be more open about expressing certain viewpoints. The first bill proposed establishing a public transparency database in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets would be required to register and disclose their funding and would be considered "foreign-influenced agents" if they received more than 20% of their funding from a foreign power. If they did not register, they would be fined. The second bill was stricter than the first but softer than the United States Foreign Agents Registration Act ([FARA](#)). FARA is used to limit foreign influence in the US by requiring those who work in the service of foreign governments and entities to register and report their activities to a federal agency. FARA's purview is not limited to non-governmental organizations or the media but applies to individuals as well; it also includes prosecution, which the first Georgian bill does not. While the first bill requires almost all Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and media organizations receiving funding to register in the database, the second bill only applies to anyone working on behalf of a foreign government or entity, however, the consequences are far more severe.

Following the introduction of the first bill, the larger CSOs created and disseminated the narrative that it was "a Russian bill." Following the outcry that resulted, the parliamentary fraction People's Power introduced the second bill. They decided to release the American version to criticize the CSOs for naming it Russian. The CSOs did not alter their tactics. They pursued the fact that this was, in fact, a Russian bill. Let us examine this claim more carefully. In a 2013 [study](#), the *Journal of Democracy*, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, found an "upward trend in civil society restrictions that has continued and is increasing pace." Fifty-one of the 98 countries studied either prohibit or restrict "foreign influence." Since 2013, there have been new additions to this list. Most recently, Canada and the EU have announced plans for passing foreign influence bills at the same time as the US and EU issue statements opposing similar foreign agent bills in Georgia. Russia received the most attention when beginning in 2012, it imposed a series of restrictions on foreign funding and CSOs. There were numerous criticisms of the Russian bill that Georgian civil society was well aware of, and they directly used those arguments against the bills in Georgia. According to the same journal, the main reason for countries imposing restrictions is wariness about domestic instability. The country's reliance on foreign partners determines how susceptible it is to yielding to pressure against these restrictions. Because Georgia heavily relies on the EU and the US, the Georgian government dropped both bills due to combined pressure from foreign "partners" and a successful domestic campaign.

Foreign funds are ubiquitous in Georgia. I'm not sure if any research on the impact of foreign funding on all aspects of society has been conducted (and who would fund such a study?). The

government receives significant grants and loans; simply visiting any ministry's website reveals a plethora of foreign "partners." Foreign grants almost entirely support Georgia's civil society. Unions receive grants. Foreign funds are used to fund everything from municipal projects to small farmers and businesses to academic institutions. Foreign governments and funds finance films and culture. Foreign grants also contribute to the funding of political parties, either directly or indirectly - political parties have an NGO wing that receives funding. Many politicians are involved with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). An NGO can be registered in one day. At the same time, many Georgian families get by on [remittances](#) from Russia and EU.

Because of this heavy reliance on foreign funding, including in governmental institutions, foreign influence legislation introduced must have very clear objectives and guidelines regarding the type of foreign influence being targeted, such as lobbying Georgian politicians domestically or lobbying Georgian political parties in the EU parliament and/or the US government. Accepting funding from foreign organizations must be distinguished from representing those organizations. If we want to increase transparency and give citizens more power, we must also increase transparency in domestic lobbying, which includes business, which was blatantly excluded from the first bill. If one is acting in the name of the people, it appears insincere to introduce a bill and then another bill limiting transparency and lobbying without much deliberation or space for citizens to debate and become acquainted with these bills. I recently read a comment on Facebook that said, "I never knew what the bills were about, and I'm not sure why they were protested or withdrawn."

Such a political crisis over these bills would not have occurred if there was not already a narrative that the Georgian government was pro-Russian, or at least would not have been articulated in terms like "Russian law" and parliamentarians as "Russian slaves." In reality, since the political platforms of all the parties are the same (shades of right), neoliberalism, and a Western course (EU, NATO), the only ways the parties can differentiate themselves are by accusing each other of being more pro-Russia. Though UNM has been pushing the line that GD is pro-Russian since the beginning, over the years, a series of [politicized](#) events framed around Russia have contributed to some people believing that the government is pro-Russian, US Politics surrounding Russiagate and the recent invasion of Ukraine have made the government more cautious, and critics more skeptical of the government's caution. Most importantly, if you want to capture the attention of the "international community," which has already imposed a binary worldview on the post-Soviet world, every domestic concern must be expressed geopolitically as pro-Russia or pro-West.

At the same time, if the government had done any education on why they wanted these kinds of laws or why this was important, the accusation of "Russian law" would not have gained as much traction, or at least some of these concerns would have been mitigated. It's easy to be drawn to suspicions and conspiracy theories when there are no explanations, education, or ability to participate.

The government is first and foremost responsible to its people, and in the name of the people, they introduced two bills without consulting its citizens, and as they repeated what they were criticizing NGOs for doing, they decided to send the bills to the Venice Commission for their input without ever asking the broader public what it wanted. Though there was some discussion about how this bill was voted on without deliberation in the first hearing (there must be three hearings before a bill becomes law), that is how every bill is pushed through.

In Georgia, the voices to support public assemblies and inclusive processes involving citizens, as well as basic public hearings, are few and far between. Most NGOs and CSOs invited to participate in parliament working groups to reform laws in accordance with the European integration roadmap never fought for the inclusion of citizens in these discussions. Politicians, "representatives" of "civil society," and businesses have long been understood to collaborate on reforms without the majority of citizens' input. The financed civil society is ostensibly representative of society, but in reality, it

represents special interest groups rather than the people (there can be some overlap, naturally). For example, when I advocated for a more participatory model around a specific reform, I was told by a European technocrat, “We do not want to raise people’s expectations.” They knew in advance that the reforms they would push would be so minor that if people were included and a more participatory model was introduced, it was obvious that people would feel empowered by public assemblies and voice their disapproval, so we must “manage their expectations.”

It is preferable for the government and foreign technocrats to collaborate with civil society partners who rely on them for access to these coveted committee seats and grants. Despite all of the talk about democracy, the only model of democracy that exists is the technocratic model led by “experts.” Participation in committees or legislative processes, for example, is one of the most important things CSOs must demonstrate in order to receive more grants or be taken seriously. Because the government was no longer including CSOs, or cherry-picking who they dealt with, resentment had grown. The government, civil society, and business have an unspoken agreement to exclude people from decision-making, and when the government closes the door to either CSOs, businesses, opposition, or the media, “democracy” backslides. The door to the people has always been closed. At the end of the day, EU just needs a Georgian government that can implement EU association agreement directives with monitoring from CSOs, it needs a capable and professional technocratic government. This situation raises questions as to what role should the government actually have, and what sovereignty looks like for a country going through the process of NATO/EU integration.

What context led up to the introduction of two foreign agent bills?

The fact that Georgia was unfairly rejected for EU candidacy status when it was a front-runner contributed to the increasingly hostile environment and the introduction of the foreign influence bills. Georgia should have been accepted on [merit](#). They were punished in reality because everyone blamed them for “talking back” to EU and US representatives whenever they made statements critical of GD. They were charged with anti-Western and demagogic rhetoric. Instead of being angry at the EU for humiliating Georgia, the opposition and critics blamed the Georgian Dream. The EU does not make mistakes; it had to be the Georgian Dream. When the scorecards issued in February 2023, Georgia has 67 points, Ukraine has 69, and Moldova has 55. Georgia is clearly superior to Moldova according to the EU’s own metric, yet Moldova was granted EU candidate status. Ukraine receives two bonus points for “External Relations” and “Foreign Security and Defense Policy.” Because Ukraine is at war, the arguments are understandable. Georgia lost two points in “Energy,” which GD most likely [attributed](#) to breaking the contract with Namokhvani Dam, which resulted from one of Georgia’s largest and most successful [protests](#). The EU now assigned them 12 tasks to complete before being evaluated again in October of this year. Georgian Dream has a few months to prove that they are deserving of EU membership.

Moreover, the former president, Misha Saakashvili, who was convicted of crimes in absentia and had renounced his Georgian citizenship to pursue politics in Ukraine, snuck back into Georgia illegally in October 2021 of his own volition and was arrested. He has gone on hunger strikes and has used every means available to rally support for himself. His mother had hired lobbyists in the US. Reuters [reports](#), “Massimo D’Angelo, a New York partner at the Miami-based law firm, has been working on Saakashvili’s case since July, according to a Feb. 3 disclosure filed under the *Foreign Agents Registration Act*.”

Saakashvili’s party is a member of the European People’s Party, which is a coalition partner in the EU parliament. Members such as Anna Fotyga, a Polish MEP and leader of another right-wing formation within the European Parliament (EP), have been outspoken supporters of Saakashvili and have launched a campaign within the EP to “save” him. In February 2023, a [resolution](#) was passed calling

for Saakashvili's release on humanitarian grounds, citing numerous events and documents, one of which stated that "many key Georgian civil society organizations signed [statements](#) calling on the government to take responsibility for saving Mikheil Saakashvili's life and health." The [Moldovan](#) president then stated that the Georgian government was torturing the opposition leader, and Ukraine issued a [statement](#) comparing the Georgian authorities to the Soviet NKVD: "In the worst traditions of the Soviet NKVD, the Georgian authorities apply psychological and physical violence to Mikheil Saakashvili." A few days ago, the European Parliament hosted a [reception](#) for political prisoners from "Russia, Belarus, and Georgia." The idea that liberal democratic Georgia is somehow linked to Russia and Belarus, and that Saakashvili is a political prisoner akin to those who spoke out against Putin or Lukashenko - not an ex-president with a track record of human rights abuses and police abuse - is reinforced in people's minds. The Georgian government denies all of these allegations, claiming that Saakashvili is being treated properly in a private clinic.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian government has been a major [source](#) of slander for the Georgian Dream. When Saakashvili fled Georgia, the Ukrainian government, including Zelensky, provided him with refuge in the government and among active members of his party. Saakashvili was the governor of Odessa under Poroshenko until he [fell out](#) with him and was arrested, and Zelensky hired him as part of his reform team. Saakashvili's group was in part [responsible](#) for submitting the law that severely restricts labor rights in Ukraine. Zelensky and other top officials have made statements opposing the Georgian Dream, and Saakashvili's ex-adviser, Oleksiy Arestovych, even called for worldwide (read Western) [protests](#) in December of last year. What's more, Oleksiy Danilov, the Ukrainian Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, has called for the opening of a [second front](#) against Russia in 2022. When Georgia refused to join the Russian sanctions, despite [quietly complying](#) with European banking sanctions, Ukraine recalled its ambassador. Russia opened up the Russian market to Georgian dairy, which was seen as a betrayal of Ukraine by the Georgian government. When every single Georgian government since independence has been at war with one or both separatist regions (Ossetia and Abkhazia), Georgian Dream, the only government which has avoided this fate, thinks it's a real possibility to be dragged into war - Russia remains the military guarantor of Ossetian and Abkhazian independence from Georgia. Yet, every time GD has voiced its fear, it has been accused of being a conspiracy theorist.

The EU parliament also called to sanction Bidzina Ivanishvili. Since last year, many politicians and critics, including some from civil society organizations, have called for sanctions against Bidzina. On February 15th, 2023, the EU adopted a resolution to sanction Ivanishvili, saying, "Parliament reiterates its call on the Council and democratic partners to consider imposing sanctions on Mr. Ivanishvili for his role in "The deterioration of the political process in Georgia." The European Parliament has little power, but it contributes to crafting the story of the Georgian Dream. When I asked an EP official why the EP voted so heavily against Georgian Dream, they told me that the EEP, of which UNM is a member, and the more far-right coalition work together and that UNM, which has an office in Brussels, has had to feed them talking points since Georgian Dream came to power in 2012. The right parties practice "political tribalism," defending their own no matter what. Though it is unknown whether money is exchanged - there is little tracking within EP - symbolic exchanges such as giving certain MEP awards or other symbolic capital may occur.

What about the Party of European Socialists (PES) in the European Parliament, of which the Georgian Dream is ostensibly a [member](#)? Raphael Glucksmann, a "leftist" MEP who served as an advisor to right-wing Saakashvili from 2005 to 2012, is a vocal opponent of the Georgian Dream. It's not surprising that Andre Glucksmann's son found himself in Georgia, advising a deranged right-winger. Andre was a leading figure of the New Philosophers, historical revisionists who had broken with Marxism and rewrote the events of May '68 by discarding class struggle and reducing it to "spiritual transformation.," touched by Solzhenitsyn, they became rabid anti-communists and human

rights advocates who cheered for Western empire, as usual. It's not unexpected that his son would advise the anti-communist Saakashvili and marry Eka Zguladze who was Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs with Vano Merabishvili, who is known as the top cop known for abusing his office, bribing voters, and ordering a beating. Eka Zguladze did what many in Saakashvili's administration did after the elections: she fled to Ukraine and became a political official there.

Misha Saakashvili is linked to the EU parliament's left and right. Furthermore, the events of June 20, 2021, in which conservative Georgians held an anti-LGBT rally that quickly turned violent and journalists were beaten up, were heavily criticized. One cameraman died as a result of his injuries, though Georgian Dream stated that he died of other causes. The government was chastised for failing to protect the media crews and allowing the protestors to ransack the office of Tbilisi Pride, an LGBT organization. The government took these protests more seriously the next day, but the damage had already been done. The next day, I saw police on high alert, holding back these same protestors in Round Garden, where they were protesting the UN. Most socialists PES have long [abandoned](#) class struggle, so they place a premium on LGBT rights and identity discourse, and the crisis has contributed to Georgian Dream's alienation from progressives. What was surprising was that the far-right parties, which are usually homophobic, were fully supportive of LGBT people in Georgia, according to an official from the European Parliament. LGBT rights, particularly pride, have increasingly become a litmus test for being Western. Despite Georgia being a conservative society, homophobia is portrayed as Russian propoganda.

There is no one advocating for the Georgian Dream, and they appear to have lost the battleground in the European Parliament to Saakashvili. The transfer of Saakashvili is now linked to EU candidate status. If Georgian Dream abandons Saakashvili, the GD party will perish. GD's most ardent supporters are those who have been victims of Saakashvili's "bloody" rule. Because the Georgian Dream lacks ideological cohesion, they are primarily a party of victims of Misha and his people. There is much speculation about who brought in Saakashvili and whether this was done to destabilize the Georgian Dream.

To make matters even more complicated, prior to Covid, there were 16 US politicians - representatives and senators - sending statements opposing the Georgian Dream, as well as politicians who co-sponsored bills against the Georgian government - all funded by an American company Frontera, which spent over a million dollars lobbying from 2017 to 2020. Open Democracy [reports](#), "This bill proposed that the US president regularly submit reports to Congress on "whether or not the government of Georgia is undermining commitments or contractual agreements made with U.S. business persons operating in Georgia", and that Georgian state officials could be sanctioned if reports found to the contrary." The article also quotes an expert on how Georgia is perceived through the lens of former President Saakashvili, saying that "a company that wants to talk about being mistreated in Georgia can find relatively receptive ears in Washington." All of these rent-a-politicians were featured in Georgian media as part of the serious concern about Georgia's democratic backsliding.

Around the same time, Saakashvili brought in his US lobbyist to Georgia, Christina Pushaw, who was hoping to use her experience to get a better job in the US, which she did. She was hired as the press secretary for Florida governor and presidential candidate Ron De Santis. In 2020, she was "working" on Saakashvili's election campaign in Georgia. She was forced to resign as press secretary in Florida in June 2022 because she failed to disclose that she was receiving money from Saakashvili and failed to register as a foreign agent under US FARA. "The work she was doing for the 2020 elections," Pushaw's lawyer Michael Sherwin told *The Washington Post*, her work included writing op-eds, reaching out to supporters, and "advocating on his behalf in Georgia and across the country." When she was in Georgia, she also shared the statements of US politicians that Frontera had paid for.

She also decided to harass me because I had dared to hold a solidarity action for Black Lives Matter in Tbilisi; she saw this as a dangerous anti-US precedent that needed to be crushed. She reported the action to the US embassy, and I received an email from the US embassy asking me about the rally. She also brought an American neofascist to the action, then arranged an opposition TV channel to try to catch me and accuse me of being a Russian agent. The anchor stated that there was no racism in the United States and that BLM was orchestrated by Putin. They aired a segment containing that material. I also received constant FB harassment from her and her Georgian followers, whom she had persuaded that I was a threat. Then she moved back to the US. She had made a name for herself in the United States as a harasser, and she told her Twitter followers to go after an Associated Press author, who went on to receive death threats. In January 2022, she refused to condemn a neo-Nazi rally.

In recent years, the United States has used FARA which “imposes public disclosure obligations on persons representing foreign interests,” far more frequently. It requires “foreign agents” to register with the Department of Justice and disclose their relationship, activities, and related financial compensation. [Columbia Journalism Review](#) points out that while liberal commentators were decrying Putin’s explanation for instituting foreign influence law was FARA in 2012, the US registered the media outlet “Russia Today” as a foreign agent [in 2017](#). BBC [article](#) on RT registering as a foreign agent ends with, “Registering as a foreign agent doesn’t mean RT will be forced to stop broadcasting, but it will need to label all US material “on behalf of” the Russian government.” The headline of the Rolling Stones [article](#) from 2019 reads, “How an Obscure Anti-Nazi Propaganda Law Is Exposing Trump’s Lackeys.” The comments included in almost all coverage of US FARA are positive. The article mentions how “the DOJ’s more aggressive stance on FARA has led to a greater awareness by people working in and around the foreign influence industry.” Probably how many foreign governments also learned of this law recently.

The European Parliament was recently embroiled in a scandal in which their vice president and others were arrested for allegedly receiving money from Qatar. According to a recent New York Times opinion [piece](#), “Even in the more rudimentary elements of statecraft — regulating foreign influence and constraining outside interests — Europe still has a long way to go.” The New York Times admits that limiting foreign influence is “rudimentary statecraft.” Most US politicians, journalists, and pundits believe that foreign influence laws are beneficial to the country(US) and its partners.

Georgian Dream’s logic

After being outmaneuvered in the European Parliament, the Ukrainian government, and the United States, Georgian Dream has concentrated its focus on domestic politics. It has also been outmaneuvered within the official civil society in the United States, which receives funding from Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the government received low energy scores in the EU’s “Progress Report,” leading them to believe that the anti-Dam protestors were supported by Russians, who stood to benefit the most from Georgia’s lack of energy independence. While the Georgian government is wary of Russia, it is clear that the Russian government is too mercurial to have a relationship with, constantly punishing or rewarding Georgia based on arbitrary perception. Georgian Dream anticipates Russian sabotage as well. One of the reasons for the transparency bill, according to GD representatives, was the anti-dam protest and Russian influence.

The government believes it is at war, and its decision to pass either of the foreign agent bills was intended to expose how many political crises are engineered and supported by foreign funding, particularly because they want to reduce the risks of further crises until the EU candidacy decision is made later this year. Maybe they thought they’d just use these bills as a scare tactic to keep the CSOs quiet while they dragged out the legislative process until a decision on EU candidacy was

made. It was an unusual way to introduce these two bills, which had been prepared by another political faction. The fact that two bills – very different from each other – were put out there, and then after the first hearing sending these two to the Venice Commission, which would have taken months, indicates that these bills were not seriously considered, but rather were a short-term tactic to get to the finish line of EU candidacy.

It is more likely that the Georgian Dream saw the need for a transparency law as a result of these events and genuine fears, rather than as a result of Russian usurpation. The EU's candidacy is also on the line, which they believe is being sabotaged on purpose, hence the urgency. It is also clear that the trend of nations has been toward these laws. At the same time that the EU and the US were condemning GE for believing it could defend its national interests, Canada announced that they were starting to work on a Foreign Influence law, and the EU confirmed that they would get one. The US didn't need a new law (they are much better at statecraft and national interest because they are on top of the food chain), they already have one that has resulted in more convictions in the last few years than in the previous 40 years or so.

US promoting the fight against disinformation

In recent years, US counterterrorism efforts have shifted to combating disinformation and propaganda. The United States government has established several programs and initiatives to combat terrorist propaganda online, including the [Global Engagement Center \(GEC\)](#), which is in charge of coordinating and leading efforts to combat foreign propaganda and disinformation. The GEC has worked to combat Russian disinformation as well as other forms of “extremist” messaging. The US government has given grants to organizations and initiatives that are working to counter Russian disinformation. The United States Congress appropriated \$60 million to the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) which was created by [Obama](#) in 2016 during the primaries to combat foreign propaganda and disinformation, with a particular emphasis on countering Russian propaganda, in 2021, the budget was \$138 million. There are also State Department's Global Media Engagement program and the Department of Defense's Information Operations capabilities that also “fight propaganda.”

Since then, the GEC has made numerous grants to organizations and initiatives aimed at combating disinformation, including some that are specifically targeting Russian disinformation. In 2018, for example, the GEC granted the Alliance for Securing Democracy a \$1.5 million grant to develop tools and strategies to expose and counter Russian disinformation. Other organizations that have received GEC grants to combat disinformation include the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project.

The US Embassy in Tbilisi announced in 2021 that it would provide \$225,000 in funding to support Georgian media development, including efforts to combat disinformation. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched a new program in Georgia in 2020 to strengthen the ability of media and civil society organizations to detect, analyze, and respond to disinformation. As part of its efforts to counter Russian disinformation, the US government has also provided funding to various media outlets and organizations in Europe and Eurasia to support independent journalism and promote media literacy (spotting Russian propaganda). An American official told Eurasianet in [2017](#) that “the implementers of the pro-Western campaign acknowledge that there is thus far no proof that Russia is to blame for anti-Western discourse in Georgia, but that future efforts may focus on that.” “I'm sure there's Russian money there,” the American official said, “but I don't have any proof of it.”

All of this money pouring in to combat Russian propaganda has resulted in every legitimate criticism being labeled as “Russian propaganda.” It has also motivated parts of civil society to focus their

attention on finding connections (often nonexistent) to Russian propaganda, contributing to a more alarmist environment with much of civil society's critical focus being on Russia, assuming that only one type of propaganda exists, Russian, and that if anyone espouses any sentiment other than one strongly favorable to the US and EU, it must be Russian propaganda. Taking no position is also considered pro-Russian. Not surprisingly, the only kind of agents commonly accused are "Russian" or "KGB."

What did the protest look like?

Any leftist should defend the sovereignty of Georgia to be able to make its own laws.

Though, as stated earlier, I believe these bills were deeply flawed in both content and presentation and should not have passed. To complicate things further, a left critique of the bills is not the same as how the opposition to the bills was organized. There was no room or ability to make another case against the bill that wasn't in terms of the Russian bill: either one had to participate in this movement on the terms it was organized, or disengage. What it made clear is that there is a great need for sustainable financing for unions and the dangers that both this kind of politicized civil society and government present for more autonomy. What it also made clear once again is how the country should be more financially sustainable; currently, progressive taxation, or increasing taxes, is [constitutionally banned](#). The same big CSOs that [organized against](#) removing the ban on progressive taxation and limiting social spending during the rewriting of the constitution were the ones leading the protest against the regulation of foreign influence.

The type of opposition to this bill that was mounted was predictably anti-Russian and pro-West. The mass demonstrations reified Europe's civilizational narrative; the false dichotomy of backward RU versus civilized EU was reinforced, as was anti-communism, to a lesser extent. It has given militant Westernism new life. I don't use the word liberal, since many of these pro-Westerners are very right-wing. Civil Society was terrified, believing that they were done because the messaging was that donors would withdraw and stop funding if any of the bills became law—jeopardizing tens of thousands of jobs and benefits.

The example, and it appears the only one presented as a country with foreign agent law, was Russia, which is an extreme version of dozens of foreign agent law countries, which in the imagination of CSOs leaders and movement participants inevitably meant the dissolution of all civil society. The rhetoric was filled with dread. To save itself, civil society had to resort to desperate measures. The images and countless Facebook posts revealed an underlying belief that they needed to impress the EU and the US with their love for the West and hatred for Russia if they wanted them to continue funding GE civil society or accept GE as Europe. The way the EU issued statements during the protest shows that it was very effective. See also the rhetoric on UA. Who deserved to be called a European?

After the bill was removed, the EU posted on Facebook a multi-million grant for CSOs, and someone commented that the EU is supporting us in our time of crisis! This was seen as part of the three-day protest's victory. EU Track ensures that money will flow in for NGOs, farmers, academia, and other organizations. The so-called Russian path is envisioned as something akin to North Korean imagery: everything is grey and dull, and we all wear uniforms and eat gruel.

"EU is not an end in itself," one government politician said, causing an uproar! What? Many people responded, "The EU is an end in itself." He was saying, "I see the EU as a means to an end, not an end in itself," and even that is interpreted as an extremist and pro-Russian stance. The phrase "I am Georgian, therefore I am European" became popular. So, not only must one consider the EU as a source of grants and funding for businesses, but one must also unquestionably believe in it. Love for

Georgia without the EU is suspect.

During this time, a Bulgarian friend sent me a meme that was posted about Bulgarians being more backward than Georgians because Georgians supported the EU while Bulgarians supported Russia. Bulgarians, despite being in the EU for 15 years, are still mocked for their “backwardness” by Bulgarian neoliberals, who look up to pro-EU Georgia. The Bulgarian case reminded me that even if Georgia joins the EU, that doesn’t mean the civilization debate will end. Civilization is lifelong learning, and the self-styled pro-Western vanguard, usually found in civil society and parties left out of government, will constantly tighten the screws on what they deem to be society’s regressive elements. The only left that is allowed in this region has to be articulated as part of the pro-Western vanguard, the left part of it. What seems impossible is to build a working-class movement that isn’t tied to Russia or the West because of geopolitical sense or European supremacy but is committed to anti-racism, internationalism, and anti-imperialism (not just Russian).

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