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# **There's more at stake in the fight against the Foreign Agents Law than liberal NGOs: Why the left should show solidarity with the protests in Georgia**

Wednesday 29 May 2024, by [AROSHVILI Alexandra](#), [ERADZE Ia](#), [ERISTAVI Konstantine](#), [NAKHUTSRISHVILI Luka](#), [REKHVIASHVILI Lela](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2024).

***We co-wrote this article at the beginning of May. On May 28, the Georgian parliament overrode the presidential veto and finally adopted the Law Against Foreign Influence. Although written at an earlier stage of the protests, everything that happened since then has largely confirmed the conclusions we drew back then.***

Since early April, Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, has been the scene of protests on a scale unprecedented in modern Georgian history against the so-called Foreign Agents Law or, as Georgian protesters would call it, the 'Russian Law'. The sheer quantity of people taking to the streets for almost two months - ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands - is a demonstration that large sections of the Georgian population are afraid of being deprived of the most basic democratic rights. Civil society and subaltern actors in Georgia know all too well from past experience that the government didn't need any specific law to accuse them of being 'traitors' and pursuing 'foreign interests'.

So far the analysis offered from the left, such as the article published by [Lefteast](#), and republished by [Jacobin](#), has placed the struggle between the 'powerful' NGOs and the government as well as the donor-dependent nature of much of Georgian civil society, at the heart of the ongoing protests, but also, more broadly, of Georgia's democracy and political economy. Such an analysis ignores how the law, as well as all the repressive measures taken by the government to defend it, consolidates the Georgian government's already existing tools to discredit, undermine and violently suppress opposition to the extractivist political economy subservient to various imperialist powers. At a time when authoritarian and fascist tendencies are gaining strength around the world, the dismissal and ridicule of a sustained mobilization against the tightening grip of Georgia's oligarchic government is a grave error as such an approach could foreclose possibilities for solidarity from the international left. We do not think that we can systematically analyze the situation since everything is still in flux and the worst might still be ahead of us. However, we can at least highlight that there is much more at stake than the challenges of NGO funding, and openly share how we see this fragile juncture in Georgia's socio-political landscape.

**The government versus 'hyperpartisan & well-funded' NGOs? Downplaying the wide-ranging consequences of and broad-based resistance against the Foreign Agent Law**

Framing the ongoing processes solely in terms of a conflict between NGOs and the government sidesteps a number of important factors. First, the government indeed declares 'rich' NGOs" as its

primary target, and claims to fear being overthrown with the support of West-dependent NGOs. However, the government also consistently states that the law is motivated by the need to ward off any opposition to its FDI-dependent and infrastructure-led economic development model. This includes actors far beyond just a few NGOs, as evidenced by the constant attacks by the government on the handful of still remaining critical and independent media outlets or against the subaltern movements [1] of local populations from peripheral regions of the country who are fighting against large infrastructure projects, extractive industries, and land grabbing. Successive Georgian governments have subjected communities in peripheralized parts of the country to long-term material deprivation, enclosure and dispossession, and lack of access to basic services and infrastructure. In the face of their protests, governments have portrayed them as 'uncivil', 'backward', against 'progress and development'. In this way, they have justified the denial of civil and political rights to such groups, regular police violence, imprisonment and incrimination of activists involved in local struggles.

Second, it would not be a handful of NGOs but a significant number of actors, both dependent and independent of Western funding, who would most likely face the consequences if the law is passed. The law stipulates that all non-commercial, non-state organizations receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources must register as "carriers of the interests of foreign power" and submit annual financial declarations. Importantly, to ensure compliance, the state gains the authority to bypass court-approved search warrants to investigate any non-commercial organization, regardless of its funding sources. This includes the right to scrutinize private correspondence of its members, with investigations potentially triggered by information from 'anonymous sources'.

There are thousands of non-commercial organizations with diverse causes and aims, and the livelihoods of a significant portion of the Georgian population depend on their work in these organizations. Moreover, there is barely any source of funding available for most of these organizations besides foreign donor money and remittances from Georgian migrant laborers. For instance, the latter played a crucial role in supporting the largest [grassroots movement](#) of recent years, or even decades – the Rioni Valley movement – which fought against the construction of a mega-dam in Western Georgia. Attacks on such actors as well as on other non-institutionalised popular movements of local populations, is not a new development. The government has already been framing them as foreign agents in the past years. Hence, this law didn't come out of the blue, being a continuation of years of entrenchment of authoritarian politics and deepening centralization of power in the hands of the Georgian Dream party. This law would allow the government to formalize and deepen already existing tools for discrediting and dismantling any opposition to its developmental politics.

Third, and most importantly, many of the aforementioned critical media, subaltern movements, trade unions and students are opposing the law with their statements and by mobilizing in the streets. Rochowanski and Japaridze quote in their article workers who might not be convinced by the protests, implying that the working class doesn't support the protest and anyone who does so is being manipulated by the NGOs. In doing so, they dismiss the voices of the working class actors who actually see the law as further undermining their ability to organize, and ignore that a large number of local trade unions would be affected, as they are also registered as NGOs under Georgian law and often receive foreign funding. Similarly, they dismiss the subaltern [movements](#) of local populations from peripheral regions who warn of dire consequences of the law, as well as local leftist initiatives to imbue discussions against the law with [class-based analysis](#) indicating risks of more precarity and [socio-spatial inequalities](#). Once activated, the law will deprive people working for thousands of NGOs, as well as educational institutions, independent trade unions, grassroots activists in Georgia, of their (often already precarious) incomes, communities of the services that NGOs have provided until now, and effectively eliminate opportunities to protest against the ongoing dispossession. They

also dismiss that this long-term protest has been characterized by a profound distrust of all existing oppositional parties. Some of the more influential NGOs often spearhead protests and at points give voice and power to largely discredited opposition parties. Yet, for many weeks they have not been taken as leaders nor followed by the largely decentralized, bottom-up mobilization of diverse groups of mainly students and young people, but also workers and professionals of various kinds.

### **Foreign agent law and geopolitical blackmail**

Rochowanski and Japaridze also ridicule the protests in Georgia for falsely framing the law as Russian-backed and misleadingly blaming the government in changing foreign policy priorities away from EU-integration. While the NGOs are blamed for manufacturing the problem, the rest are patronized for following these lies. Importantly, the authors suggest that the EU should stop blackmailing Georgia with EU-accession over this law.

For one, the Georgian public has every reason to be afraid and angry about closer ties with Russia and the threats to the European integration course. Regardless of what one might think of Georgia's "strategic partnership" with the Euro-Atlantic bloc and the asymmetries inherent to EU's enlargement to the East, including Georgia, for over three decades, Georgia's pro-Western course has been actively promoted by successive governments. It has culminated in the constitutionalization of Georgia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration in 2017 by the current government. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the government's decision to confront the West comes as a shock and is vehemently opposed by many. The Foreign Agent Law is akin to the type of authoritarian consolidation that Russia has pursued and promoted in the region, alongside other tools like the so-called LGBT Propaganda Law that the Georgian government has also already rolled out. Further, while the Government's confrontation with the European and broadly Western actors spiraled in the past few weeks over the Foreign Agent law, the government has questioned Georgia's EU-integration on multiple occasions throughout the past two years. Recently, the prime minister even openly declared that the oligarch behind the Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, [was escalating tensions with Western partners](#) over \$2 billion worth of his personal assets being 'de facto sanctioned in Switzerland'. In other words, the government is risking decades of an established foreign policy line that enjoys tremendous popular support simply because of an oligarch's private financial dealings with the West. The foreign agent law is seen as part of such clandestine bargains.

Second, the EU's going mild on the Foreign Agent law cannot be framed as a remedy to the multiple forms of coloniality that Georgia has been suffering under. Indeed, such a conclusion can only be reached by reducing Georgia's democratic crisis to that of Western-funded NGOs, as Rochowanski and Japaridze do. The EU and other Western actors have contributed not just to creating a dependent civil society but a more generally dependent, deeply unequal, peripheral economy in Georgia. Georgia's consecutive governments, including the current one, have been complicit in the process and have served as primary receivers of Western aid, loans and investments, all the while continuing business relations with Russia and deepening ties with China. The latest manifestation of Georgia's subordination to the needs of the capital is the so-called Offshore Law, approved by the Georgian parliament just a week after introducing the Foreign Agent Law. Many leftist [commentators](#) in Georgia have pointed out how the two laws complement each other perfectly, with the Offshore Law promising large capital low transaction fees, taxes, and beneficial investment environment and the Foreign Agent Law protecting against any opposition to such investments.

This leads us to our third and final point: as left-wing scholars and activists, we should not affirm the legitimacy of the Georgian government's imposition of the Foreign Agent Law, nor should we call on the EU to turn a blind eye to it. Instead of ridiculing protesters for their support of EU-integration, we should also keep in mind the potential ramifications of the unraveling of political relations

between Georgia and the EU. Most plausibly, European institutions as well as European and, more broadly, western capital will find ways to continue collaborating even with an authoritarian Georgia, yet without any prospects of further political integration, therefore without any possibilities of the benefits, safeguards or chances to oppose the devastation that such uneven integration brings along. In fact, this would be quite similar to the way the West has been approaching a range of peripheral economies of the Global South. There is so much to demand from the EU, including the EU's own efforts at [controlling NGOs](#). Yet, this does not mean we should grant legitimacy to Georgia's political elite in their attempt to prevent all sorts of associational life and possibilities for political mobilization.

Nor can we accept the geopolitical blackmail that the Georgian Dream government is currently trying to impose on us: if we do not bow to its full authoritarian turn, the price we will pay will be Russian bombs falling on us. We fully recognize the precarious geopolitical reality in which Georgia finds itself, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and we are under no illusions about the risks of being used as pawns by the West in cynical geopolitical games. However, this recognition should in no way be interpreted as an endorsement of the Georgian Dream government's positioning itself as a guardian against what it sees as an inevitable annihilation orchestrated by the 'global war party' (read: the US) and its local minions. By doing so, the government is effectively undermining any possibility of legitimate political opposition, independent media, associational life, counter-hegemonic resistance, or as the Prime Minister himself stated, "everyone who opposes [their] economic projects".

### **For the people on the streets this is a struggle for democracy**

We have to acknowledge the unprecedented scale of the ongoing protests in modern Georgian history. The sheer quantity of people taking to the streets for more than a month – ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands – is by itself a clear demonstration that large sections of the Georgian population are afraid of being deprived of the most basic democratic rights. To be sure, it would be naive to think that it is only after the Foreign Agents Law will enter into force that things might get difficult for the critically minded. As already mentioned above, both grassroots ecological movements and their allies in critical parts of civil society know all too well from past experience that the government didn't need any specific law to accuse them of being 'traitors' and pursuing 'foreign interests'. An even more disturbing development of the past weeks is that against average protestors, organizers, investigative journalists, and politicians the government has unleashed its repressive arsenal at a hitherto unknown scale on part of this government, be it smear campaigns, forged allegations, intimidations by phone, violent thugs or police forces. With the Foreign Agents Law having become effective, an already well-established practice will thus simply take on an institutionalized form.

The situation is already quite difficult in Georgia and the violence is likely to escalate. There will be a need to reflect on these processes further. For example, we will need to reflect on the implications of the government's recent attempts to deepen cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and to present them as exemplars of the path to sovereign governance. Yet we want to reiterate that the mobilization of tens of thousands of Georgia's citizens cannot and should not be dismissed, especially by analysts claiming to be promoting the interests of workers and ordinary citizens. These protests cannot be discussed without acknowledging their contribution to the effort of defending what little political freedoms still remain in Georgia. They cannot be discussed without noting that the law would serve the Georgian political elite – well-integrated and subordinated to the needs of global financial capital and in the process of establishing an extractivist economy in the country – to continue the cheapening and devastation of the labor of humans and the rest of nature. The government is striking free trade deals with multiple powers, [\[2\]](#) launching massive infrastructure projects, and transforming our nation into a transit hub. These actions set the stage for future

battles as we fight to protect our environment and resist projects that deepen inequality, fuel poverty, drive migration, and increase homelessness. It is in the face of these tendencies that we will be in need of international solidarity from the left.

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**P.S.**

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[https://lefteast.org/theres-more-at-stake-in-the-fight-against-the-foreign-agents-law-than-liberal-ngos-why-the-left-should-show-solidarity-with-the-protests-in-georgia/#\\_ftnref2](https://lefteast.org/theres-more-at-stake-in-the-fight-against-the-foreign-agents-law-than-liberal-ngos-why-the-left-should-show-solidarity-with-the-protests-in-georgia/#_ftnref2)

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## **Footnotes**

[1] We understand subalternity in line with Partha Chatterjee as “shaped in a specific historical context through material and discursive displacement of certain groups from the legal and moral parameters set by the hegemonic order, disconnection from knowledge production, and deliberate deprivation from the opportunity to articulate one’s political voice and interests in the public space”. See also already published work on subaltern politics and civil society in Georgia: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2022.2113033>.

[2] To understand consequences of free trade agreements with the EU and China in terms of persistent trade deficits and unequal ecological exchange please see the publication by Ia Eradze: <https://us.boell.org/en/2021/06/22/imbalanced-foreign-trade-debt-and-investment-developing-countries-case-georgia>