

Georgia: Local Communities and Labor Movements Under Threat in Sakartvelo: Interview with Left Activists

Tuesday 13 August 2024, by [AROSHVILI Alexandra](#), [SABUROVA Daria](#), [SHENGELIA Mariam](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2024).

In April-May 2024, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets to protest against the new “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence,” which was finally passed by the parliament on May 28th, overturning the presidential veto. This law requires NGOs that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad to declare themselves as “foreign agents.” Why did the proposal of this law cause such massive demonstrations? What are the social and political issues at stake behind the confrontation between the NGO sector and the Georgian state? How is the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West reflected in the local context, and are the Georgian protests somewhat comparable to the Ukrainian Maidan?

Commons spoke to two Georgian activists. Aleksandra Aroshvili is an independent researcher and activist based in Tbilisi. She is the author of multiple publications on social policy, political economy, various forms of inequality, informal and atypical work, women’s migration, extractivism, and ecology. Over the years, she participated in social movements and has founded various public campaigns. Mariam Shengelia is a PhD student in Philosophy and an activist living in France, who participates in multiple self-organized struggles, notably in no-borders and anti-imperialist movements.

For over a month, Georgia has been shaken by massive protests against the “foreign influence” law. Could you say a few words about the content of this law and the context of its adoption? Why did it provoke such a reaction in Georgian society?

Aleksandra: The law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence,” previously known as the “Foreign Agent’s Law,” is identical to the legislation introduced by the ruling party a year ago. It was subsequently retracted amidst significant protests. Despite assurances that the law would not resurface, it was reintroduced a year later and ultimately passed, despite nearly two months of widespread demonstrations in April and May 2024. It even overcame the President’s veto.

According to the law, every form of non-profit association that receives more than 20% of its annual income from a foreign source—whether it is a foreign state, a foreign organization or collective, or a person who is a citizen of a foreign country—is obliged to register as an entity that conveys the interests of a foreign power in the country.

What to bear in mind is that Georgia is one of the most dependent countries on foreign finances in all areas - public sector, economy, political and social life. This can be seen, first of all, in the functioning of state structures: reforms and public initiatives are mostly financed by international

institutions, while the economy heavily depends on foreign direct investment, which leads to an outflow of resources, low-paid and unstable jobs, and the destruction of the environment. Secondly, the survival of many families in Georgia depends on remittances from emigrants who have left the country to work. Furthermore, many public activities, be they educational, scientific, independent media, trade unions, civil society, artistic initiatives, healthcare initiatives, or other services for women and children, rely on associations that are forced to seek foreign grants. If organizations refuse to register as a “foreign agent” and submit an annual financial declaration (which is actually not only financial but is aimed to control the content of the activity), they face large fines and eventually the freezing of their accounts and assets, leading to full liquidation.

Some articles of the law are even more severe. For example, the Ministry of Justice, based on its decision or an anonymous statement, can initiate an investigation against any organization that, in its opinion, may have more than 20% foreign funding. During this investigation, the Ministry can request all types of information, including personal and confidential information, from any person, association, or organization. With the government’s powerful propaganda tools already blackmailing people daily, it’s not hard to see why they might need people’s personal information. In the last two years, everyone who criticized the government, including those who struggled against disastrous economic and infrastructural projects, condemned the repression in the cultural sphere, or raised the issue of social inequality, was already declared a foreign “agent” by the government via its propaganda. This repression is now being institutionalized.

Another issue is that if there is a people’s association whose finances come only from donations, mainly from migrants, this can already be considered foreign funding, as many Georgian migrants are already citizens of other countries. With this, the government blocks the only source of non-donor-dependent funding. For example, Saving The Rioni Valley, a local public movement, existed only on donations from people, mainly migrants. It was this movement that the government most often cited as the justification for passing the law.

This law is often compared to the Russian legislation on “foreign agents” and even labeled as “pro-Russian.” Is this really the case? How can these accusations be reconciled with the government’s engagement with the euro integration agenda?

Aleksandra: The introduction of this law coincides with the new geopolitical situation created by the launch of the Russia-Ukraine war and the conservative turn of the Georgian government. Previously, the government had been consolidating a pro-Western course and pursuing a liberal agenda for the past 12 years. It is noteworthy that this government is itself a technocratic one, grown from the liberal NGO class. Labeling the law as “Russian” is primarily related to the authoritarian content of the law. But it should also be noted that the connection with Russia has been a prominent topic on the political and mainstream media agenda of Georgia for decades, with various factions blaming each other for being pro-Russian. Given that our territories are occupied, this topic is particularly sensitive. Post-Soviet Georgia, largely under the governance of neoliberal, economy-driven governments, is a country where political debates and exposure rarely revolve around development issues but rather focus on affiliation with geopolitical actors. In the context of this bipolar geopolitical agenda — Russia versus the West — and the threat of Georgia losing its EU candidate status, received just a few months ago, people on the street tend to see the new law as a signal that Georgia is moving away from the EU and closer to Russia. This becomes a matter of existential importance, as independence is perhaps the only issue on which there is complete social consensus in this post-Soviet-burdened state.

But the situation is much more complex in reality. The government is actually looking for a rapprochement with Turkey, China, and Azerbaijan, with Georgia potentially serving as a future trade and transit corridor between these countries and the European Union. Significant

infrastructural and energy projects are part of this plan and the law explicitly targets groups and individuals who “obstruct energy projects,” such as local activists who oppose the construction of hydroelectric power plants (HPPs). Closer political integration with these countries is supposed to help implement the economic agreements. During a meeting with Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan, Georgia’s Prime Minister said that Turkey and Azerbaijan were exemplary forms of “sovereign governance.” Given Turkey’s repressive policies in recent years, including the construction of large hydroelectric power plants in Anatolia and the suppression of counter-movements, the new law is likely aimed, among other things, at silencing actors in Georgia who oppose these economic plans.

Simultaneously with the adoption of this law, there have been other significant legislative actions taken by the ruling party. These include the adoption of an offshore law, changes to the cumulative pension law, and the signing of energy and economic memorandums with Turkey and China.

For those of us who have been criticizing Georgia’s development policies for years, the trajectory that Georgia is taking is very clear. It should be noted that this trajectory doesn’t imply any significant structural changes in the economy or international trade relations, but rather, suggests an expansion in the degree, intensity, and potential for neo-colonial plunder of Georgia and the extraction of its natural resources, as well as the exploitation of its people.

What is your analysis of the social and political composition of the protests?

Aleksandra: We are talking about the largest mobilization (approximately 100,000 or more people in the streets only in Tbilisi) in recent Georgian history, involving students, professionals, newly formed trade unions in the arts, teachers, and others. However, we cannot ignore that this protest is primarily urban, taking place in Tbilisi and other cities. This doesn’t mean that the protests are predominantly urban middle class, but can rather be explained by substantial internal migration within the country. Villages and small towns, for the most part, stand deserted, with the remaining inhabitants primarily employed in the civil service and their livelihoods heavily reliant on the government. Some of them believe that this law simply seeks more transparency, often accompanied by two more profound beliefs instilled by the propaganda. The first belief is that the law is aimed at preventing the Western powers from dragging us into a war with Russia, while the government is the guarantor of peace. The second belief is that Georgia’s main problem is not the existing social crisis, but the culturally “sensitive” issues, such as “LGBT propaganda” and other issues. In both cases, as the government portrays it, the responsibility lies on the West-funded NGOs. It should also be noted that before its conservative shift, the same government had strong collaborations with the NGOs, enacted liberal laws, and stigmatized those who opposed them as backward. However, it has now begun to sow division among the people by constructing an image of the internal enemy, adopting an overtly authoritarian and repressive stance. This includes defamatory messages on people’s homes, posters, physical assaults, injuries, the mobilization of violent groups, ambiguous criminal charges against ordinary rally participants, and more. While the law aims to destroy any possibility of associative life and solidarity, the portrayal of the protests as exclusively middle-class, ignoring the multitude of factors mentioned above, is an unfair and biased assessment.

What demands do protesters put forward beyond the withdrawal of the law (if any)? What is their strategy now that the law has been adopted?

Aleksandra: While opposition parties, largely linked to the previous government, attempted to shift the focus towards regime change, for the majority of protesters the primary demand remained the repeal of the law. Despite the widespread mobilization, the law was still passed. This disregard of mass protests makes peaceful organization on any issue increasingly difficult in the future.

Some people are now placing their hopes on the October 2024 elections. However, given that the

existing political class lacks the people's sympathy, and that for many of us, there are practically no viable alternatives, the situation is dire.

What is the perspective of the Georgian left on these events? Is it involved in the movement? Are there debates or maybe even divisions within the left concerning the strategy to adopt towards the protests?

Aleksandra: The left in Georgia is indeed small, fragmented, and lacking integration, which hinders its ability to present a unified position or front in the protests with a cohesive agenda. Various individual movements, workers, leftists, and trade unionists have participated in the protests. At the same time, some segments of the left or former left seem to be aligning more closely with the state's conservative narrative and endorsing the government's actions.

Notably, Georgia has just one independent left-wing online media outlet with relatively small coverage. Similarly, left-wing groups involved in the protests have no power to influence the protest's narrative. But leftists who, in recent years, have actively engaged in physical confrontations with the police, defended the environment, participated in mass strikes, fought against evictions, or fought for progressive social initiatives, see the law as an institutionalization of violence. Despite the dominant narrow narrative, which focuses solely on the slogan "not to Russian law," they insisted on their presence in the streets.

Some on the Left suggest that the protests are driven and dominated by liberal NGOs responsible for promoting austerity policies and that the working class has therefore little interest in taking part in them. Do you agree with this view of the situation? How do you evaluate the progressive political potential of the protests?

Aleksandra: Yes, some leftists in the international press aligned with the government's rhetoric and attempted to reduce both the economic and democratic crisis in the country leading to this protest to a problem of liberal NGOs, failing to grasp the context and offer a genuinely critical perspective. But the primary responsibility for consolidating austerity policies and fostering an increasingly wilder neoliberal economy in Georgia lies on the Georgian government. They have not only perpetuated but also exaggerated the libertarian economic approach of the previous administration. A majority of influential NGOs in Georgia during this period supported these economic policies, but there were a few organizations that actively engaged in supporting strikes, ecological and environmental protests, critical scientists, and contributed to the emergence of a left-wing intellectual tradition. It's evident that the rhetoric on "influential NGOs" seeks to silence these dissenting voices, including workers, movements against extraction and exploitation, eco-migrants, residents facing eviction, and others.

To continue the previous question: what does the adoption of this law mean for the progressive, and even more specifically - working-class struggles in Georgia?

Aleksandra: Georgia does not have a strong working class. Its economy, except for a few industrial cities, is based on precarious jobs. Unemployment is still high, and a very large number of our citizens are employed abroad, legally or illegally. The strikes rarely gain any important victories for the workers. In recent years, progressive struggles have been more successful in their battles to preserve the living environment, against large hydropower plants and the privatization of forests. The fact that these movements managed to organize better than the workers is also a structural fact and is related to the regimes of economic accumulation dominant in Georgia. In the previous decade, accumulation was mostly based on privatization and deregulation, which completely disempowered the workers. Today, the mode of accumulation has shifted to logics of dispossession, pushing the exploitation of the natural environment, such as water, forests, and lands to its maximum. Deprived

of their living environment, people have no choice but to resist.

It is not surprising that the government attempts to suppress organizations and movements working on social and environmental issues, and the existing solidarity between them. Drawing from my experience of being involved in the local struggles in recent years, I believe that today the progressive left in Georgia primarily grapples with anti-sovereign and anti-democratic economic and infrastructural projects. In this sense, this law signifies not only repression against NGOs but also against local peoples and workers in alliance with them, the scientists whose expertise these processes require, and the disintegration of their unity, leading to vital damage to their connections.

The historical destiny of Georgia has often been compared to that of Ukraine: in the 2000s, both countries experienced “color revolutions”; even before Ukraine, in 2008, Georgia faced war with Russia who supported and recognized the self-proclaimed Republic of Abkhazia. Similar comparisons are now being made between the current demonstrations in Georgia and the Ukrainian Maidan: pro-EU protests headed by a liberal-nationalist alliance vs. supposedly pro-Russian government. How accurate would you say these parallels are? Do they help or harm our understanding of the events in Georgia?

Mariam: Georgian society should be considered within its specific Caucasian historical context and geography, cultural and linguistic issues. However, many parallels could be drawn between the geopolitical and economic situations of post-Soviet Ukraine and Georgia. Firstly, for centuries Georgia and Ukraine have shared the same Russian imperial yoke: first Tsarist, then Soviet, and currently Putinist. Since the “color revolutions,” supported by the US, both countries have been subjected to a new form of domination, that of the soft power of Euro-Atlantic neoliberal hegemony. Although the Maidan and the current protests in Georgia cannot be reduced to the manipulative games of territorial Russian imperialism and Western neocolonial hegemony, one must also understand the underlying geopolitical interests at play.

In Georgia and Ukraine, the “revolutionary” governments of Saakashvili and Yushchenko introduced vassal regimes to the Euro-Atlantic bloc, governed by neoliberal principles. However, the pro-Russian turn at the state level occurred in Ukraine under the governance of Yanukovych, while in Georgia, Saakashvili’s neoliberal and police state order was still in full swing, thanks to a repressive and bloody regime without equal. The current protest movement in Georgia recalls Maidan in the sense that it opposes subordination to the Russian imperial regime, while erupting from its own local economic, social, and cultural anchorage, as a radical expression of discontent, anger, and distrust of authoritarian state institutions by the youth and insurgent masses.

These insurrections, which display national and European flags like at Maidan, also feature traditional ethnographic dances and songs in public spaces, expressing a broader sense of being historically suppressed by colonial external forces. It is a form of commemoration, notably of the collective history of subjugation to Tsarism, the annexation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia by the Soviet army in 1921, and finally, the recent history of tumultuous struggles for independence from the USSR and senseless wars, where Russia, just like in Ukraine, presented itself as the “savior of oppressed ethnic minorities.” Thus, the recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic of Abkhazia in 2008 only completes the strategy initiated since the beginning of the Abkhazian war (1991 - 1993), following the old divide et impera scheme, to consolidate its territorial grip.

Today, we are still digesting the collective war traumas — massacres of Ossetians and Abkhazians, ethnic cleansing of Georgians and forced displacements, breaking inter-ethnic and even familial ties — at the same time as we try to move forward, beyond the same murderous regime.

Ukraine and Georgia are both former Soviet republics that find themselves at the crossroads of opposing geopolitical interests. And while the Russian hard power represents a constant threat of armed conflict and descent into authoritarianism, the influence of Western soft power accelerates the disintegration of the social state and puts new pressures on migration policies. How should we interpret the demands for EU integration, largely driven by these protest movements, in this context?

Mariam: The request for integration into the EU must indeed be understood in the context of power distribution between multipolar blocks. For a part of the Georgian population, integration into the EU seems to be a miracle solution for the defense of our territories and integrity. Another part of the population, notably those in exile and migration who have experienced numerous illegal and racist procedures from European institutions, knows that these hopes are illusory.

In reality, the Euro-Atlantic bloc hardly seems willing to act upon its promise of integrating a peripheral, non-border country within Fortress Europe, though it does want to map Georgia under its zone of influence. However, the EU manages to maintain this illusion, thanks to the strategic granting of candidate status for membership (in November 2023), under pressure from protests in Georgia, following the Commission's initial refusal. Rather than becoming a full-fledged member, the EU would rather give us the status of watchdog and military auxiliary of Frontex. These are the EU's border externalization policies, a strategy that endorses control, push-back, detention, and repression measures of exiled populations, thanks to exorbitant military-police mechanisms deployed in third states (such as Balkan countries, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, etc.).

How does the left navigate in this context and what strategies can it develop in order to push forward progressive class politics?

Mariam: Faced with the consequences of the economic collapse triggered by the dissolution of the USSR, years of devastating wars, and rapacious neoliberal policies, it is particularly difficult for a handful of left-wing collectives to lead an offensive struggle beyond strategies of collective survival.

Unlike Georgia, in Ukraine, the non-institutional left is much more heterogeneous, with a strong presence of anti-authoritarian and anarchist groups. However, in the context of the polarization of imperialist blocs, both in Ukraine and Georgia, there is a lack of understanding of the neo-colonial, racist, and fascist issues of Euro-Atlantic powers. This is quite understandable, due to the experience of frontal and armed Russian imperialism.

Facing assaults of unleashed privatization, regional and rural popular mobilizations become more effective actors of resistance to both local and external oppression, than proper left-wing collectives. Movements like those in the Rioni valley, as well as many other mobilizations in peripheral regions and villages such as Tchiantura and Balda, defend their living spaces, natural resources, and livability conditions, defying policies of predatory exploitation and extractivism. The imperial domination of third powers, be it Russia, Turkey, or the West, is increasingly reconfigured into extractivist economic hegemony, benefiting foreign and local financial elites. Their new legislative instrument, the Offshore Law, will only accelerate ecological, economic, and cultural devastation. What these movements have highlighted with their forceful actions, and what left-wing movements often fail to do worldwide (with the exception of the Zapatistas and the Kurds), is to adopt a broader worldview and political vision that integrates cultural, religious, and community identity issues with spheres of politics, economics, and ecology, without compromising the ethical and political principles of self-organization.

If current protests destabilize the existing order through mass takeovers of public spaces, this eruption must be fueled by practices of self-organization and daily political organization rooted in

time. For the movement to articulate what the people want beyond rejecting current policies, it is crucial to find ways to create strong bonds of solidarity and political alliances between protesters in urban areas, peripheral mobilizations, over-indebted popular classes, migrant workers, and queer communities.

How do you assess the reactions of the international left to the protests in Georgia? How can international solidarity be built in a multipolar world, where uprisings in the periphery are often marked by contradictory social dynamics and where class conflict tends to be disguised behind geopolitical struggles?

Mariam: With the exception of some internationalist collectives, the far left, especially in Western Europe, struggles to develop positions of anti-imperialist solidarity that do not reproduce the divisive dualism of campism. This weak presence of radical anti-imperialism is, of course, linked to Western colonial heritage, as well as the growing influence of the far-right and neofascist powers in the EU, which intensify border militarization, anti-immigration policies, and police violence, particularly against racialized people.

The issue is not so much a lack of understanding but rather an ideological position critiquing Western colonialism while overlooking the history and current experiences of other forms of peripheral imperialism and territorial colonization. This position is inherently Eurocentric, perpetuating the notion that the West is the only real actor of power distribution.

However, we can mention the no-borders movements, self-organized solidarity and anti-racist groups, as well as squat movements, which create dynamics of solidarity and mutual aid with exiled people, as examples of spaces that manage to overcome the sterility of ideological postures formulated from the standpoint of the center.

Above all, hope lies in constructing alliances and convergence among oppressed peoples and cultures across peripheral regions, from the Caucasus to Ukraine and Palestine. Such solidarities are evident in alliances between social movements and solidarity actions with Palestine, and the presence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis at Tbilisi demonstrations. Certain internationalist collectives in Europe foster spaces where experiences of popular uprisings and resistance from Syria, Kurdistan, or Mexico are shared.

But when facing imperial powers, which are like a hydra with a thousand heads, we need to engage in consistent and continuous action. By doing so, we can recognize that the Mapuche people and guardians of the Rioni valley fight against the same policies of natural resource grabbing, that the same Norwegian company, Clean Energy Group, was involved in major hydroelectric infrastructure projects in Georgia and Chile. That capitalist power, responsible for impoverishment and land dispossession, neocolonialism, and extractivism, is the common enemy we are struggling against. Such understanding forms the basis for building solidarities.

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