

Is Georgia Still on the European Path?

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Georgia's authoritarian governing party is veering away from the country's commitment to EU membership. The plan to pass a Russian-style "foreign agents" law seems to be off the table for now, but the government hostility towards protesters, journalists and civil society runs much deeper. We spoke with journalist Mariam Nikuradze about the situation in Georgia and the prospects for change.

Green European Journal: How would you describe the current situation in the country?

Mariam Nikuradze: The situation hasn't been this tense in a while and society is deeply polarised. The March protests on the draft law on foreign agents were among the biggest protests in the history of Georgia. These Russian-style laws targeted NGOs and civil society organisations that received funding from abroad and would have required them to register themselves as "agents of foreign influence". The Parliament passed one of these laws already in the first hearing, which sparked widespread outrage. In the beginning, media and civil society organisations led the demonstrations against the law, but eventually it turned into a full-scale protest with tens of thousands of participants. There were massive clashes and the police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd.

The government eventually dropped the draft law. But officials and ruling party members keep making controversial, anti-Western statements and they constantly insult protestors. At the same time, another, smaller counter-protest in Tbilisi saw conservative groups tear down the European flag from outside the Parliament and burn it.

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You say that it was conservative groups who were burning the flags, but in the news media they were referred to as far far-right groups.

They are far-right, indeed. It is mainly Alt-Info and its supporters; the same people who were behind the 5 July violence to prevent the Tbilisi Pride in 2021, when more than 50 media workers got injured, and one of them died. They have a TV channel, which is not big, but it was given a national broadcasting license and some of the communication companies are including them in their offer. So, you can watch it all over the country. I think this is problematic because they are promoting violence.

Are they popular?

I would say they are not, but I still think that their presence is problematic and that the four people leading this group should be in jail.

You mentioned polarisation in society. Is it between supporters and critics of the government?

Mainstream media in Georgia is deeply polarised. There are several major TV channels in the country, and they are either pro-government propaganda or they are supportive of the opposition. There are no balanced TV channels nowadays. We have a public broadcaster which still airs some good talk shows, but at the same time, we know that it has a blacklist of people who are not allowed to be interviewed. And the situation is such that government officials boycott opposition channels. They never go to critical media channels to give interviews. And that's the case vice versa. You will never see opposition MPs or leaders talking on the government propaganda channel. So, you cannot get the full picture from television despite it being Georgians' main source of information.

Another part of the problem is that the opposition is currently very weak. The biggest opposition party is still the United National Movement (UNM – the former governing party founded by Mikheil Saakashvili, the former anti-corruption crusader who was president of Georgia and later governor of Odessa in Ukraine; he is currently in prison in Georgia), but their support has shrunk to single digits. The rest of the opposition parties have even less support. The lack of a strong opposition is, in my opinion, one of the reasons why we are where we are now. We don't see many new parties emerging, except for the Greens, who are still very new in the political arena. Hopefully, they will be turning into something stronger. They still don't have many resources, but their member Tamar Jakali is one of the most active organisers of the protests.

Is the lack of independent channels something that is due to the Georgian Dream government or was it like this before?

During Saakashvili's presidency from 2004 to 2013, there were no national opposition channels, only a few regional ones in Tbilisi. So, in that sense the situation has gotten better. These days, we have three big opposition channels: Mtavari, Formula and TV Pirveli. On the other side, we have TV Imedi, a pro-government channel, which has the highest viewership. In addition, we have a public broadcaster with a relatively modest viewership and a fringe propaganda channel.

In the case of Mtavari, it is obvious that there is a political agenda. It is openly supporting Saakashvili and his party. They are campaigning to free him. Formula is, compared to Mtavari, more balanced, but still there are clear political affiliations. From the three of them, Formula is the best. They have good talk shows and very professional journalists. But still, they can't ask both sides due to the boycotts. At the same time, we have real independent media online which are becoming more prominent.

How would you describe the Georgian Dream party?

It started out as a left-wing party, maybe because initially it was easier for their election campaign to promise healthcare for everyone, create jobs and to build hundreds of factories. In 2012, when they were still new and when the billionaire Bidzine Ivanishvili (who became prime minister from 2012 to 2013) was putting together this new party, he collected people who were popular but who were not necessarily politicians – for example, football players, wrestlers, and judo fighters. This mix of celebrities and left-wing promises turned out to be a successful recipe for victory. In the first years it indeed seemed like they were a leftist party: national healthcare was actually implemented, this was one of the big things that people still remember. They also managed to introduce a labour reform, which was not the best, but it was still better than Saakashvili's libertarian labour legislation, which gave all the rights to the employers and zero rights to the employees. So, we definitely had some positive changes under Georgian Dream in the past decade, but the implementation of their laws, even the well intentioned

ones, was extremely poor. In the early years, the government was also trying to be more neutral than its predecessor. It was friendlier with Russia, nevertheless, it signed an association agreement with the EU – which was actually inherited from the previous government –; in addition, it managed to achieve visa liberalisation and also adopted an antidiscrimination law.

The authoritarian turn became clearly visible only in the past year and a half. It started with the 5th of July aggression against the planned Tbilisi Pride march. Instead of condemning the perpetrators, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili was blaming Pride organisers. In the follow-up, the government started a hate campaign against journalists and civil society, which became more extreme after the full-scale invasion. In the past year, we have seen a lot of conspiracy-theories on attempts by the West and Ukraine to drag Georgia into a war with Russia.

Do they still have support in society?

Their audience is shrinking, but if we had parliamentary elections tomorrow, I think they still could win because there is no real alternative. Some of the electorate would vote for anyone who stands against Georgian Dream. At the same time, a large segment in the population hates the National Movement so much that they would rather vote for Georgian Dream than bring the previous government back. It doesn't help that in the previous campaign the UNM didn't seem to have any program apart from releasing Saakashvili from prison. There was completely no vision.

After two nights of protests, the government decided to drop the controversial bill. Why did they do so?

I think it was the strong resistance. I've been in journalism for 15 years and I've covered probably all the major protests that have taken place in the country in these years. I've never seen such resistance to the riot police. In the past, you would have seen tear gas and water cannons, and then the protests would die out or at least visibly shrink. But this time, the protests grew bigger, and people were resisting the police until six in the morning. Many of the protestors were school kids who hated the fact that the government was jeopardising the country's European path. For many participants, the protest was about more than just this particular piece of legislation.

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What exactly would the foreign agent law mean for the impacted newsrooms and NGOs?

I think the most obvious problem is the foreign agent label, which is an unnecessary stigma for these organisations. The government's main argument for the law was the need for transparency and regulation; but foreign support is already transparent and well-regulated. Government bodies already receive financial statements from the supported organisations, and donors are also required to disclose who they support. It cannot be more transparent than that.

In addition, there were some rather problematic articles in the draft about possible penalties for those

who fail to register as foreign agents and a vaguely phrased section about the rights of the Justice Ministry to monitor newsrooms and NGOs twice a year. The law didn't specify what this monitoring would mean, and according to some lawyers this could have allowed the Ministry to ask for personal information on employees and beneficiaries or the sources that journalists were working with. Or maybe they could use some alleged violations of this law as a pretence to freeze our accounts.

How dependent are media and civil society on getting support from Europe or from the US?

In general, we are quite dependent on Western funding as a country, because there are numerous public projects, such as building roads and renovating schools, which are funded by western institutions and western governments. Media and civil society receive only a small percentage of this funding. But when we look at it from the point of online independent media outlets, we can see that they are completely dependent on donors. There is barely any other source of revenue for them. People are not used to paying for journalism, so we can't dream of being self-sustaining with reader funding alone. We are trying, but reader-generated revenues are limited. At the same time, advertising decreased dramatically during the pandemic. There are some organisations that receive maybe more than 10 per cent from advertising, but they cannot survive on that. In this situation, you have to have donor funding if you want to be independent from the government. Same with civil society. The situation is very similar in the case of human rights organisations, almost all of them are donor funded.

Is there also Russian support coming in for illiberal projects?

There might be, but it is not visible, except in the case of clearly Russian-affiliated outlets like Sputnik. We assume that the Alt-Info party and its media are funded from Russia, because once the war started in Ukraine, many of the leaders of Alt-info went to Moscow, and overall, the party's stance is very pro-Russian. There are also suspicions that the Alliance of Patriots, another right-wing party with its own TV channel, probably receives Russian funding, but it's difficult to find clear proof for that. But as for the pro-government channels, I don't think they have Russian funding. We would probably know about that.

It is also questionable how much attention the Kremlin can pay to Georgia these days. In the case of Alt-Info, we can see that their funding had most likely reduced after the full-scale invasion. Prior to the war, they were actively opening offices all around the country and all of a sudden, their regional activity has completely died out. A lot of the offices were closed and there have been rumours that their TV station might also shut down due to lack of funding.

And overall, how do you see the influence of Russia on Georgian society and Georgian politics?

To be honest, I don't think they are succeeding in influencing society. In fact, the Russian influx of the last year has played a significant role in weakening Russia's position. Most people don't like the fact that they are here, and in the latest poll by the National Democratic Institute, the overwhelming majority said they were for abolishing the visa free-regime of Russians. On paper, the Russian influx has triggered an economic boom. Russians opened businesses, brought a lot of cash, opened bank accounts, bought property, and so on. But despite all this, the people are not feeling well. I can also see that in my immediate surrounding: half of the people in my team lost their flats in Tbilisi. One of them was kicked out three times in the last year because the rent price kept increasing. And usually, the reason for the rent hikes would be that Russians are willing to pay more. For many people, including the middle class, this is becoming a struggle to survive from month to month. When you walk about in Tbilisi, you will see a lot of anti-Russian messages on the walls and there are lots of Ukraine flags, lots of EU supporting messages.

And what about the Russian connections of the Georgian Dream party?

I never know how to answer this question. For sure, there will be people in Georgia who will tell you that the Georgian Dream's latest measures were dictated by Putin, but personally, I am not sure if this is true. I think it is plausible that the government is acting the way it acts because it is scared of the war, and maybe even more scared of losing power. Most of what is happening is just an effort to survive politically.

At the same time, the Kremlin is definitely happy with the way the Georgian government is acting. The Kremlin even praised the Georgian government for not joining sanctions, there have been talks to resume direct flights between Russia and Georgia, and there were also plans to restore diplomatic relations.

Last year, Georgia was granted a potential candidacy by the EU, and was given a list of 12 priorities to implement to catch up. What does this say about Georgia's chances to become an EU member?

I think we lost the opportunity last year. We were much closer to the EU prior to the full-scale invasion, but government sabotage of reforms, the impunity of the violent mob that attacked the Tbilisi Pride March in 2021, and the imprisonment of the director of the Mtavari station have sabotaged this relationship. So, when the EU gave us these 12 priorities, the people in Georgia clearly saw it as a "no". This is why we had such great protests last summer. I've never seen so many people on Rustaveli Avenue before. People are really disappointed, because they want to be part of the EU, part of NATO, and it was seen as a lost opportunity.

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Where does the Georgian Dream party plan to take the country and why?

I think what they are doing now is trying to retain power at all costs and to do that, they are ready to take radical steps for it like further pressuring and marginalising civil society and demonising media. The course they've taken is very visibly anti-Western, to me it looks like they are a bit desperate to stay in power not necessarily taking the country anywhere specific but doing everything to achieve that goal of winning the next election in 2024.

The country passed a new human rights strategy recently, but it completely disregards the rights of sexual minorities, at the same time, there was a successful Pride in 2022. How do you see the progress of LGBTQ rights and the government's role in it?

There was no pride in 2022, at least not a march, just a small festival. In 2019 there was an attempt to organise a Pride march, but it mobilised very few people, who were marching outside the Interior Ministry, far away from the city centre. It was a very positive thing, but I wouldn't say it was a proper Pride. There was an attempt to hold a Pride March in 2021, which did not happen. Instead, we had journalists being beaten up. And then last year there was not even a plan for the march to be held, there was a music festival instead. Of course, it is a positive development that we can hold such a queer event in an open space in Tbilisi, but things could be far better.

Overall, I think some things are slowly changing. We remember that on 17 May 2013, human rights groups and queer rights activists wanted to hold a protest – just a protest, not pride. There were a few dozen of people who were demanding an improvement of the LGBTQ rights situation, and they were attacked by an aggressive mob. The situation has improved a lot since. Last year there was no violence, just some far-right protesters trying to disrupt the festival – without success. However, the progress comes from the effort of activists, civil society, and the community, not the government. The Tbilisi club scene might have played a role as well, as it helps put Georgia on the map in a way.

What can Europe and especially progressives in Europe do to support Georgia now in this situation?

I keep saying that statements of concern might not work with our government anymore. In the past, statements of Western politicians used to have an impact, but those days are gone. In fact, we can see that members of our government constantly accuse MEPs and ambassadors of being part of a radical opposition. I don't want to be dictating how sanctions are applied, but maybe sanctioning some key individuals, such as Ivanishvili, could make a difference.



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