

# [***What is Georgia's 'foreign agents' bill, and why is Europe so alarmed?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C16-HC41-JBSS-S00W-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Joshua Berlinger and Christian Edwards, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Georgia's parliament [*passed a highly controversial*](https://cnn.com/2024/05/14/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-passed-intl/index.html) "foreign agents" bill that has triggered widespread protests across the former Soviet republic nestled in the Caucasus Mountains.

Tens of thousands of people in capital city Tbilisi have been [*protesting the legislation*](https://cnn.com/2024/05/11/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-protests-intl-latam/index.html). Critics warn that it mirrors a foreign agents law already passed in Russia and could jeopardize Georgia's bid to join the European Union.

But Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze succeeded and got it through the parliament on Tuesday, with 84 lawmakers voting in favor of the law and 30 against it in the 150-seat legislature.

President Salome Zourabichvili has vowed to veto the law, but the parliament can easily override her.

Here's what you need to know about the law and the uproar it has caused.

What's in the law?

The law will require organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as "agents of foreign influence" or face crippling fines.

The legislation was drafted by the Georgian Dream party, which along with its allies controls parliament.

Zourabichvili called the bill "an exact duplicate" of its Russian counterpart [*in an interview with CNN*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/europe/georgia-foreign-agent-law-russia-first-reading-intl/index.html).

What happens next?

Zourabichvili has vowed to veto the bill, but that won't mean much.

She now has two weeks to do so. But the Georgian parliament can override her objection with a simple majority.

Georgia's government is a parliamentary system, so Zourabichvili is effectively a figurehead. Real power lies with Kobakhidze, the PM. Georgian Dream's billionaire founder, former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, also wields significant political influence.

[*Speaking*](https://www.cnn.com/audio/podcasts/amanpour/episodes/60a1e2b8-a98c-11ee-9bf2-17bacda48020) to CNN's Christiane Amanpour, Zourabichvili said the upcoming elections in October will give the population a chance to "reverse" the bill.

"We have to use this mobilization of the society and this consolidation of the political parties to go and win those elections because that's the European way," she said.

Why is it so controversial?

A couple of reasons.

The law is modeled after a similar one in Russia that the Kremlin has used to increasingly snuff out opposition and civil society. Many Georgians fear their foreign agents law will be used to the same way it has been in its northern neighbor: to quash dissent and free expression by going after nongovernmental organizations with financial ties overseas.

The law has had a [*devastating impact*](https://cnn.com/2022/12/01/europe/russia-foreign-agents-repression-intl/index.html) on non-profits and human rights groups in Russia, forcing many to cease their activities.

Georgian Dream contends the legislation will promote transparency and national sovereignty and has hit back at Western criticism over the proposal.

But the law's possible passage has touched on a more existential question: whether Georgia's future lies with Europe or Russia.

Georgia has, like Ukraine, been caught between the two geopolitical forces since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Many Georgians feel deep hostility toward the Kremlin, which invaded Georgia in 2008 and occupies about 20% of its internationally recognized territory - about the same proportion that Russia occupies in Ukraine.

Georgian Dream has long been accused of harboring pro-Russian sympathies, especially given that Ivanishvili made his fortune in the Soviet Union.

How do most Georgians feel about it?

Passionately. So much so that lawmakers at one point [*came to blows over the bill.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/15/europe/georgia-punch-parliament-foreign-agent-intl/index.html)

Polling shows that about 80% of Georgians support joining the European Union rather than drifting further into the Kremlin's orbit, and many of those in favor of deepening ties with the West have taken to the streets.

Mass demonstrations against the bill in Tbilisi had been going on nightly for a month before its passing. About 50,000 people [*came out Sunday evening in the capital*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/11/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-protests-intl-latam/index.html), which is home to about 1 million people, to speak out against what they've dubbed "the Russian law."

There have been counter-protests as well. One saw the usually reclusive Ivanishvili deliver a rare speech to a crowd of supporters bussed in to Tbilisi from Georgia's rural regions, where Georgian Dream enjoys more support.

The address showed deep paranoia and an autocratic streak. Ivanishvili claimed that Georgia was being controlled by "a pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country" and pledged to go after his political opponents after October's elections.

Didn't Georgia already go through this?

Yes, just last year.

Georgia's government tried to pass the same law but was forced into [*an embarrassing climbdown*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/09/europe/georgia-bill-protests-withdrawn-intl-hnk/index.html) after a week of intenseprotests, [*which saw citizens waving EU flags buffeted back by water cannons*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/07/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-intl/index.html).

The bill was reintroduced in March, about a month after Kobakhidze became Prime Minister. This time, authorities seem determined to push the legislation through.

What have other countries said?

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan wrote on X that Washington is "deeply alarmed about democratic backsliding in Georgia."

"Georgian parliamentarians face a critical choice - whether to support the Georgian people's Euro-Atlantic aspirations or pass a Kremlin-style foreign agents' law that runs counter to democratic values," he said. "We stand with the Georgian people."

The Kremlin has claimed that the law was being used to "provoke anti-Russian sentiments," adding that protests against it were being stirred by "outside" influences.

"This is now the normal practice of a huge number of states that are doing everything to protect themselves from outside influence, from foreign influence on domestic ***politics***. And all countries are taking action in one form or another, but all these bills have the same goal," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in April. "Once again, there is no way to link this bill and the desire to secure Georgia's internal ***politics*** with some kind of Russian influence; this is not the case."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a statement earlier this month that she was following the developments in George with "great concern" and reiterated Brussels' unease over the law.

"Georgia is at a crossroads. It should stay the course on the road to Europe," she said.

Could the law impact Georgia's ability to join the EU?

Definitely.

Georgia first applied for EU membership in 2022 and was granted candidate status in December, an important but [*still early step*](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a9099136-b301-458e-a846-c6bf8c47d287_en?filename=Factsheet-EU-accession-process-cluster-newlayout-EP2023_0.pdf) in the process of becoming a member of the bloc. However, Brussels [*said last month*](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-and-commissioner-neighbourhood-and-enlargement-adoption_en) that the law's passage would "negatively impact" Georgia's path to EU membership

"Georgia has a vibrant civil society that contributes to the country's successful progress towards EU membership. The proposed legislation would limit the capacity of civil society and media organizations to operate freely, could limit freedom of expression and unfairly stigmatize organizations that deliver benefits to the citizens of Georgia," EU officials said.

"The EU urges Georgia to refrain from adopting legislation that can compromise Georgia's EU path, a path supported by the overwhelming majority of Georgian citizens."

CNN's Anna Chernova contributed to this report.

By Joshua Berlinger and Christian Edwards, CNN

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