

Georgian Dream new bill reveals the government's severe antidemocratic stance

Statement by the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF

Brussels, 4 April 2024

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Forum strongly condemns the re-introduction of the controversial ‘Transparency of foreign influence’ draft law by the Georgian Dream. Considering the nine steps that Georgia should fulfil as part of the EU’s 2023 enlargement package, we urge the Georgian government to immediately withdraw this bill and ensure a genuine enabling environment for civil society and media in the country. A democratic Georgia does not need such a bill, particularly given the public rejection of a similar law through mass protests in March 2023.

On 3 April 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party announced their second attempt to pass a so-called ‘Foreign Agent’ bill, now rebranded as ‘Transparency of foreign influence’, which primarily targets civil society organisations and independent media outlets. The bill is a copy-paste of last year’s largely contested version with the difference that the new legislation would label organisations that receive funding from overseas as ‘organisations carrying out the interests of a foreign power’ instead of ‘agents of foreign influence’ as proposed in 2023. In essence, there is no difference between the two labels.

If adopted, the newly proposed bill would require all those who receive at least 20 percent of their funding from international sources – individuals, civil society organisations and media outlets – to register as ‘organisations carrying out the interests of a foreign power’ with the Ministry of Justice. Evasion of registration or submission of an incomplete declaration can attract fines up to 25,000 GEL (the equivalent of 8,500 EUR). Besides, the status would carry obvious negative connotations and lead to self-censorship. In our view, this bill aims at restricting the work of activists and independent voices within civil society organisations and at curtailing civil society’s ability to hold those in power accountable. It also threatens the existence and functioning of independent civil society and media and harms Georgia’s path towards European integration.

We recall that, in March 2023, the initiation of the Russian-styled ‘foreign agents’ bill sparked massive protests by thousands of Georgians who bravely took to the streets amidst the use, by police forces, of tear gas, water cannon and stun grenades. After several days, the government was compelled to ‘unconditionally’ drop the law. Nevertheless, despite the bill’s withdrawal, throughout 2023 and in the first quarter of 2024, the ruling party and pro-governmental media continued to escalate their rhetoric against civil society, journalists, and donors in Georgia. Back then, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), together with the EaP CSF Georgian National Platform and other civil society actors, stood in solidarity against the reintroduction of any ‘foreign agents’ law in Georgia. Our attempts to raise concerns about democratic backsliding and reform challenges at all levels - from state accountability to the independence of the judiciary - were met with smear campaigns and targeted individual accusations from Georgian Dream representatives and pro-governmental media. Through our [EaP Index](#) assessment, we warned about the imminent dangers to Georgia’s democracy, including symptomatic aspects related to the Government’s persistent

attempts at undermining civil society, limiting our oversight role, and labelling us as ‘enemies’ of the country.

Recalling that “the European Council granted Georgia candidate status on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission’s recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken. Step 9 includes a recommendation for Georgia to make sure that civil society can operate freely, and Step 1 calls on [Georgia to fight disinformation against the EU and its values](#).”

We therefore:

- Urge the Georgian government to immediately and unconditionally withdraw the ‘Transparency of foreign influence’ law, as well as other bills aimed at shrinking civic space;
- Urge the Georgian government to end its attacks on civil society and independent media once and for all and invest in an open dialogue with civil society;
- Stand in full solidarity with the EaP CSF Georgian National Platform leadership and membership in their [call](#) to the Georgian government to put an end to actions that undermine Georgia's European aspirations and in their decision to terminate the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Georgian Parliament;
- Call on the European institutions, EU member states and the international community to unequivocally condemn the re-introduction of the bill and provide staunch political support to Georgian civil society in these difficult circumstances and renewed financial support to ensure the existence of plural views in the country;
- Call on the European institutions to carefully monitor political developments in Georgia, particularly ahead of their upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2024, and make no compromises or concessions when it comes to assessing Georgia’s reform progress in line with the 9 steps set by the EU in its 2023 enlargement package;
- Call upon fellow civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership region and the EU, and international organisations to stand in solidarity with Georgian civil society independent media once again and continue to publicly denounce such legislative attempts whenever and wherever they occur.

“The Georgian Dream’s objective to constrain civil society’s role is an offence to the citizens of Georgia who hope to join the European Union. Georgia’s deeply rooted European aspirations cannot be shelved by a stroke of the pen and we will continue to stand alongside Georgian civil society in this process” said Natia Kuprashvili, EaP CSF Steering Committee member and National Facilitator, Georgia.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum