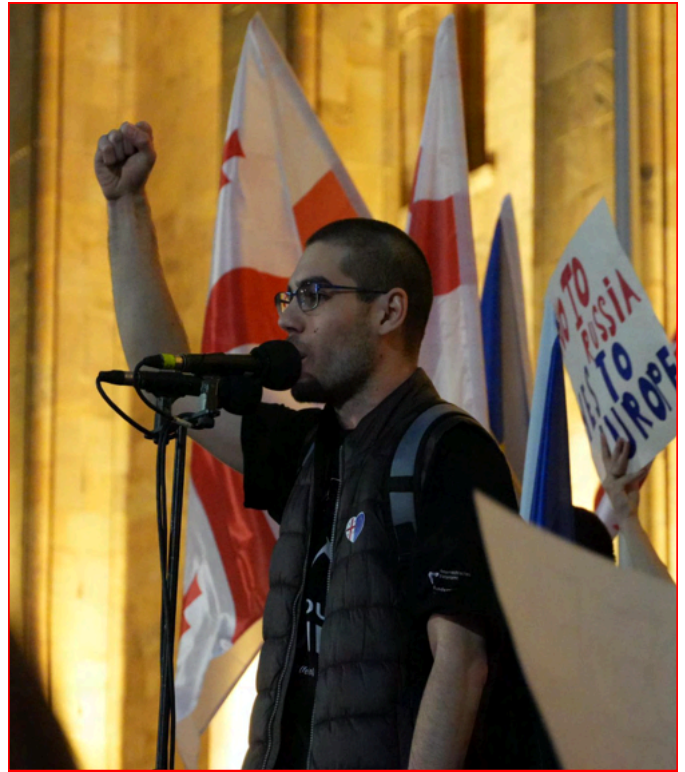


Voices of Youth Resistance

Georgia's Fight for Freedom and a European Future – an interview with a student activist



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In 2024, Georgia witnessed the biggest resistance movement in its modern history. Anti-government protests erupted after the reintroduction of the controversial "foreign agent" law, which had initially been proposed in 2023 but was swiftly abandoned following a wave of popular dissent. This law, seen by many as a step toward Russian-style authoritarianism, reignited fears over the future of democracy and European integration in Georgia. In this interview, we talk to Giorgi Ekaladze, a student activist and a civil society representative from Tbilisi, about the recent developments, the mobilisation of student protest movement and the reaction of the Georgian civil society to the illiberal practices and restriction of basic freedoms.

The new foreign agent law has sparked significant controversy in Georgia and the EU

back in spring 2023 and 2024. Can you explain what this law entails and why it has been so fiercely opposed by so many Georgians?

In May 2024, the Georgian parliament passed a law requiring non-governmental organisations (NGOs) receiving 20% or more of their funding from abroad to register as entities "pursuing the interests of a foreign power." The law also provides for a monitoring mechanism based on an anonymous statement meaning that whenever the Ministry of Justice wishes, it can conduct monitoring and thereby artificially limit the activities of an organisation.

The wording is interesting — when first proposed in 2023, it required NGOs and media to register as "foreign agents." In 2024, the term was changed to

acting in the interests of a foreign power". The word 'agent' has a bad connotation in countries of the former Soviet Union so they changed it. It was a strategic step from them.

What is important is the context this "Russian law" was introduced in. Last year, Georgia was granted EU candidate status and expected to begin EU accession talks. But introducing the law like this was a direct sabotage of Georgia's European future. With this law, we can't continue on our EU integration journey and the integration is halted. This is why people gathered to protest – they wanted to make it clear that they do not wish to go the Russian path.

Where did the name "Russian law" come from, and how has the government justified enacting it?

The law is called "Russian law" because it mirrors legislation introduced in Russia twelve years ago. It is the exact same law, perhaps the wording is different, but the content, context and intentions are exactly the same. This name had a crucial

impact on our winning in 2023 when the bill was introduced. It became clear that passing it would align the country with Russia, an enemy that invaded Georgia and continues to occupy 20% of its territory. This association played a crucial role in mobilising opposition to the law.

The Georgian Dream's (GD) narrative is that if it wasn't for us, there would be another war in Tbilisi. GD claims they are the ones who want to avoid the war at any cost – and that's actually smart. They tried to compare the law to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). They argued that the legislation was not inspired by Russia but was instead a measure to ensure transparency, a fundamental Western value. This was accompanied by some conspiracy theories about how NGOs organise colour revolutions in Georgia. This year, the narrative changed a little – the conspiracy about NGOs funding revolutions was still there, but they stepped up their claims. They claimed that NGOs are corrupt, that they use large amounts of funds to organise training in luxury resorts and that they act on orders from foreign powers. According to them, if a donor



gives funds to a NGO, they also order services from the NGO.

Georgia has long relied on foreign aid and investments, and even Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has a history of working with foreign-funded organisations like USAID and Open Society

Georgia. How do you explain this sudden shift in the government's narrative?

My explanation is that they aren't honest. The government knows that the law mirrors Russian legislation and understands its implications. They say that they are preventing war in the country,

but I think their actual interest is to become a corrupt country where they can earn much more money than in a functioning democracy. The narratives change as much as they like in order to please the people – they are populists and they know that some people will buy it.



The government is fully aware that Georgian NGOs are not enemies or revolutionaries; many GD members, including MPs, come from the civil sector. A recent point made by a journalist underscores this hypocrisy — she suggested that everyone involved with foreign-funded organisations since 2000, including Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, who led the

German Development Agency for 17 years, should also register under the new law. She remarked, "I will register, but I will be the third, right after Shalva and Irakli Kobakhidze."

It's interesting that you mention this — according to a poll from December 2023, 79% of Georgians express support for EU membership.

How should we understand this?

We don't understand it either. In fact, over 85% of the population supports European integration. This contradiction is part of how the GD won elections. Their main slogan was "With dignity to Europe," and they still claim that Georgia will achieve EU membership by 2030.

However, they also argue that to avoid war in Tbilisi, Georgia must be pragmatic with Russia. So, they push two narratives: being pro-European and aiming for EU membership, while simultaneously advocating for a pro-Russian stance to maintain peace. And some people really believe this.

when the biggest protest was held in Tbilisi, there were actually two parallel marches coming from the banks of the Kura river. I was leading the march on one bank while other protesters advanced from the other side. We united at the Square of Europe, forming one large crowd. My mother was in

wasn't only the Gen-Z, but multiple generations marching for the same cause, that's what made the protest special.

Let's talk about Gen-Z again. As an outsider, every time I read about the protests or watched videos, young people were at the forefront.

*“The fact that **it wasn't only the Gen-Z**, but multiple generations marching for the same cause, that's what made the protest **special**.”*



With a population of just 3.7 million, the protests of 200,000 people were the largest in Georgia's modern history. The resilience of the Georgian people is remarkable, despite reported cases of intimidation and violence. What do you think are some of the key factors driving this unwavering determination?

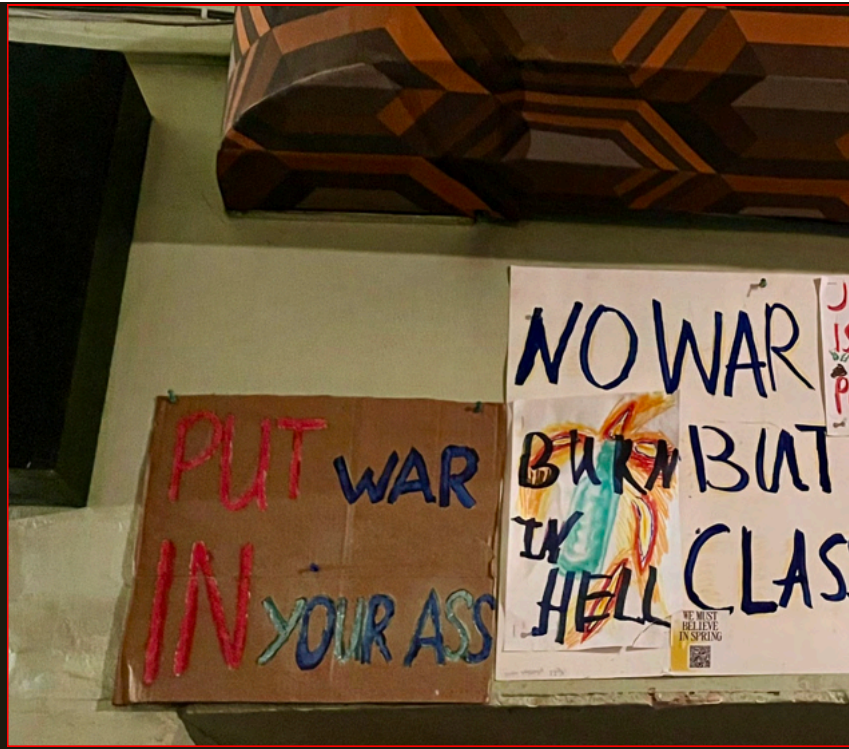
I think what made these protests special was that they were intergenerational. I will share my personal story: on May 11th,

the front of this crowd with me holding the banners. I was standing there, watching my mother holding a banner with a hashtag #whatthechildrenwant and watching other parents standing there with their children. Before the third reading of the law, we stayed outside for the whole night. And during the whole night, my mother was standing next to me. I'm 23 years old and my mother is 50 – it's not easy for her to stand the whole night outside, but she wasn't alone, many young people had their parent beside them and the fact that it

How do you explain that this particular issue resonated so strongly with students and young people?

The main thing to consider here is that we dislike Russia unconditionally. We are not afraid of fear mongering or the war. We are the first generation born in independent Georgia, the first generation with the freedom to act and to defend our freedom at all costs. We don't know what it's like to lose independence and we do not carry the generational trauma. Our parents and grandparents saw the war, but

*“We know that all those laws on foreign agents and LGBTQ propaganda will be repealed after the election if we win. **And I am pretty sure we will.**”*



our generation was too young back then. Even when they used tear gas or water canons towards us, we were not scared. We understand the true meaning of freedom and we will fight for it.

How did you manage to unite the students and young people and bring them to the streets in 2023 and 2024? What was your role there?

In 2023, I was a Law student at Tbilisi State University. Together with my fellow students, we mobilised people within the university and later joined the big protests in front of the parliament.

I also organised a university protest against Irakli Kobakhidze. Back then, he was the GD's Chairman and a professor at the Law faculty. We decided to organise a protest during his lecture. You know, his specialisation is Constitutional Law and he is the author of the country's current constitution as well. Our constitution says that all constitutional bodies must take all measures to ensure the full EU and



NATO integration. So naturally, this was a huge moral discomfort for us, that this professor teaches us about Constitutional Law and yet he is part of a party that drafted a law on foreign agents.

We organised a silent demonstration – we had to be very careful when choosing our form of protest as we were still at the university and could face repercussions. They could use anything they could against us. So we chose the silent protest – we stood in the hall leading to the classroom, creating a shamecorridor for him. It was actually the biggest protest at the university at that time. But Irakli did not show up. We thought it was our win that he did not show up as it was clear that he was afraid to look in our eyes.

I am taking a gap year so I did not organise any student protests. But being part of an NGO, we formed an informal coalition with other NGOs in Georgia and we organised all of the protests this spring, including the biggest one on the 11th of May.



Has the perception of Georgian NGOs changed in the recent months and have you noticed any negative attitudes?


I would say that people in general now have a better, more positive attitude towards us as we try to show tangible examples and benefits of our work. But this does not mean that everyone supports us – yes, the perception of NGOs is growing, but many people still believe in GD’s “pragmatic” approach that says that this law will help Georgia avoid the war on its territory. There is also this common belief that if NGOs receive funding, they must follow the donors’ orders. They don’t understand that the donors can provide funds just for someone to develop themselves. They say – when there is money, there are intentions. And the intentions are never good.

At the time of this interview in August 2024, the government launched its registry of foreign agent NGOs and media. What is the general reaction to this and is there a consensus among Georgian NGOs and media?

Most NGOs, including two of mine, are resisting and will not register. We are not going to obey the Russian law. There are exceptions to this, for example GONGOs (government-organised NGOs) or organisations that work in the harm reduction sphere, they have to register so that they can provide their services to the vulnerable, and I understand that. But the absolute majority of organisations, and ironically it's the organisations towards which this law targeted, are not going to register.

The Parliamentary Elections are planned for October 26, 2024. The GD has been preparing by amending the electoral code and weakening civil society, and a controversial anti-LGBTQ bill was passed in June. What are the next steps for the resistance movement, and how can international supporters help?

Right now, our priorities include raising funds for information campaigns and observation missions to monitor polling stations across Georgia. We are actively fundraising for this purpose. We also need to mobilise all immigrants

abroad, even the illegal ones. There are many Georgian immigrants abroad – despite the visa liberalisation with the EU, some people overstay and they are scared to vote in the elections. We need to make it clear that if they go to vote at the embassy, they will not be arrested for voting. We need government officials to say this. We know that all those laws on foreign agents and LGBTQ propaganda will be repealed after the election if we win. And I am pretty sure we will. 

About Kristína Dohunová



Kristína is a first-year student of the Master's in Russian, East European and Eurasian studies at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests and professional background involve civil society, democratic transition and elections in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood region. Kristína holds an MA in Politics from the University of Glasgow, with a year abroad spent at the University of Amsterdam.