

## Georgia's 'Foreign Agent' Bill Sparks Widespread Protests and International Concern

Since mid-Apr 2024, the streets of Tbilisi have witnessed a burgeoning wave of protests led primarily by the youth, challenging Georgia's proposed "foreign agent" bill. This legislation requires NGOs and media organizations receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as "organizations serving foreign interests." Critics liken this policy to authoritarian measures seen in Russia, arguing it threatens the pillars of free speech and transparency.

The bill has attracted sharp rebuke from Western entities, with both the EU and the US warning that its implementation could undermine democratic norms and jeopardize Georgia's recent EU candidate status, granted in Dec 2023. However, the ruling Georgian Dream party, influenced by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, asserts the bill is a stride towards greater transparency.

The legislative process accelerated with the parliament endorsing the second reading of the bill on 01 May 2024. Despite Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili's opposition and her threat to veto, her largely ceremonial role post-2018 constitutional changes means her resistance might be ineffective against the Georgian Dream's parliamentary majority. The controversy surrounding this bill is pivotal as it could potentially pivot Georgia closer to Russian influences rather than aligning with European standards—a significant concern given the overwhelming public support for EU integration, with about 80% of Georgians favoring EU membership according to a recent poll by the US National Democratic Institute.

This legislation is viewed by many within the NGO sector and opposition as a tactical move to suppress dissenting voices, mirroring crackdowns observed in Russia and other post-Soviet states. The ongoing debates and protests come at a crucial time, preceding both the parliamentary elections in Oct 2024 and the EU parliament elections in Jun 2024. The unfolding events signify a critical moment in Georgia's journey towards Western integration or a potential drift towards Russian influence.

As the international community closely monitors these developments, European leaders have voiced that the bill stands in stark contradiction to the values that define a united Europe. The ongoing demonstrations signify a society deeply entrenched in a battle over its future course, underscoring the high stakes of this struggle for democratic governance and national identity.