

Research Briefing

16 October 2024

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# The impact of Georgia's 'foreign influence' law



## Summary

- 1 Political overview
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- 3 Domestic opposition
- 4 International reaction
- 5 Where next?

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## Summary

Georgia is a small country in the Caucasus region whose development is watched closely because of its geopolitical importance to both Russia and the West.

## Recent political developments

The Georgian Dream party has been in power since 2012 and currently holds a majority in Parliament. Georgian Dream-endorsed candidates have also held the Presidency since 2013, although President Salome Zourabachvili has been increasingly at odds with the ruling party in the last few years.

There are [longstanding concerns](#) over the willingness of those in power to accept genuine democratic competition. Questions are also asked about [Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), the billionaire backer and founder of the Georgian Dream Party, and former Prime Minister. Despite not always having a formal political position, [Ivanishvili is considered to wield significant power behind the scenes](#) of the Georgian Dream party, and is often described as Georgia's "de facto leader" and as having pro-Russian sympathies.

The last few years have been characterised by civil unrest and anti-government protests as the Government has attempted to tread [a fine line between its aspirations to join the EU, which is supported by much of the population, and increasing rapprochement with Russia](#).

## Return of Ivanishvili

At the end of 2023, [Bidzina Ivanishvili was elected as Honorary Chair of Georgian Dream](#) in an unscheduled party congress. A newly created post, the role of Honorary Chair allows Ivanishvili a semi-formal political role, one which he describes as being "[forced to take](#)" to provide stability and "a new centre of gravity" to the ruling party.

In early 2024 then Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili also resigned and was replaced by Georgian Dream party Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze. Critics of the ruling party accused Ivanishvili of "[reshuffling his pack to tighten his grip on power as elections approach](#)". Kobakhidze is regarded as a divisive figure having [previously demonstrated pro-Russian sympathies](#).

## Introduction of a 'foreign influence' law

In April 2024 Georgian Dream introduced its [Draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#) (PDF) which will require nongovernmental organisations and print, online and broadcast media that receive more than 20% of their annual revenue from “a foreign power” to register with the Ministry of Justice as “organisations serving the interests of a foreign power”. A previous attempt to introduce the bill was made in March 2023, although the government later withdrew it after [two days of mass protests](#) and international criticism.

Bidzina Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Kobakhidze have been vocal supporters of the law (also referred to as the ‘foreign agents’ law), calling it necessary for [strengthening the sovereignty of Georgia](#) and for [putting an end to radicalism and the polarisation of the country artificially imposed from abroad](#).

[Opponents often refer to it, however, as the “Russia law”](#) being similar to a law introduced in Russia in 2012, and expanded in 2022, that has been [used to take action against Russian civil society and increasingly silence domestic dissent](#). They argue that the new law will be used by the government to silence opposition parties and voices ahead of the parliamentary elections in October 2024 and is [intended to derail Georgia’s aspiration to join the EU](#).

[President Zourabichvili vetoed the bill](#) but was subsequently overruled by a further vote in Parliament. The Speaker of the Georgian Parliament [signed the bill into law](#) on 3 June 2024 and it entered into force at the beginning of August.

Demonstrations against the law, involving tens of thousands of protesters, [continued for nearly two months](#) and were increasingly met with excessive force by the Georgian security forces.

Several opposition parties collectively [announced a boycott of Parliament](#).

## International reaction

The UN, the EU, NATO and several countries including the UK and the United States, along with human rights organisations have all condemned the latest legislation, suggesting that it is a step in the wrong direction for Georgia and takes the country further away from its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The US has [imposed sanctions on individuals associated with undermining democracy in Georgia and announced a review of its future relationship with the country](#).

The EU has also said that passage of the legislation is [contrary to EU core norms and values and would “negatively impact Georgia’s EU path](#). At the European Council meeting in June 2024, EU leaders indicated that [Georgia’s EU candidacy was on hold](#) (PDF) unless the Georgian government changed course. [EU military assistance to the country has been suspended and broader EU financial aid is under review](#). Germany and France have announced the suspension of bilateral aid to the country.

## What next: legislative elections, 26 October 2024

The Georgian government has given [no indication that it intends to change course](#), despite domestic and international pressure to do so. Observers are now looking to the legislative elections which will be held on 26 October 2024 and whether, as feared, the new law on transparency will be used to silence domestic dissent.

The election has been widely [portrayed as a referendum on Georgia’s future and its commitment to a pro-European path](#) and several opposition parties have said that they will work together to provide a pro-European platform. At the end of May 2024, 17 opposition parties and five independent MPs signed [a Charter](#), proposed by President Zourabichvili, that aims to [“rebuild trust and forge a new political reality”](#), ahead of the elections.

In the meantime, President Zourabichvili has lodged an appeal with Georgia’s Constitutional Court calling for the foreign influence law to be overturned on the basis that it contravenes the obligations in the constitution to seek greater Euro-Atlantic integration. In early October [the court ruled that certain parts of the appeal warranted further examination](#) but rejected a request for the law to be suspended pending a final ruling.

# 1 Political overview

“Once the poster child for progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration and democracy, Georgia is a reminder that a country’s ‘progress’ is neither linear nor inevitable”.

James Nixey, Director Russia and Eurasia Programme, [Chatham House](#), May 2024

Georgia is a small country in the Caucasus region whose development is watched closely because of its geopolitical importance to both Russia and the West.

The Georgian Dream party has been in power since 2012 and currently holds a constitutional majority in Parliament. Georgian Dream-endorsed candidates have also held the Presidency since 2013.

In the last few years, however, there have been increasing concerns over the willingness of those in power to accept genuine democratic competition.<sup>1</sup> Questions have also continued to be asked about [Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), the billionaire backer and founder of the Georgian Dream Party, and former Prime Minister. Despite not always having a formal political position, Ivanishvili is considered to have wielded significant power behind the scenes of the Georgian Dream party.<sup>2</sup> He has often been described as Georgia’s “de facto leader” and as having pro-Russian sympathies.<sup>3</sup>

The last few years have been characterised by civil unrest and anti-government protests as the Government has attempted to tread a fine line between its aspirations to join the EU, which is supported by much of the population, and increasing rapprochement with Russia, which is seeking to maintain influence in the former Soviet country.<sup>4</sup>

The Georgian government’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for example, has been described as “cautious” and “ambivalent”, for fear of

<sup>1</sup> See Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [Divided Georgia: A hostage to polarization](#), December 2021 and Freedom House, [Georgia](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ivanishvili was Prime Minister and Chairman of Georgian Dream after coming to power in 2012. He resigned just over a year later. He was re-appointed Chair of Georgian Dream in 2018 and then resigned in 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Mallinson, [Georgia’s Presidential Campaign Damages Its Democratic Credentials](#), Chatham House, 10 December 2018; [Broken dream: the Oligarch, Russia and Georgia’s drift from Europe](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 21 December 2022 and [“Georgia’s revenant oligarch”](#), Eurasianet, 18 January 2024

<sup>4</sup> [“Playing with fire: Georgia’s cautious rapprochement with Russia”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 July 2023 and [Between Russia and the EU: Europe’s arc of instability](#), Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, 30 May 2024. Russia recognises and supports the de-facto independence of the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia supports both regions politically and economically and maintains a permanent military presence there, including strategic access to the Black Sea, after a conflict between Georgian and Russian forces over the territories in 2008. Over the last fifteen years, Russia has been accused of gradually annexing both territories, through a policy of Russification (see [“Abkhazia is losing last vestiges of autonomy vis-à-vis Russia”](#), Caucasus Watch, 7 September 2022)



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“Georgian Dream pays lip service to the goal of joining the EU. In practice, it is multi-vectoring between the West and Russia – as well as China”.

[Carnegie Europe](#), June 2024

similar consequences.<sup>5</sup> The Georgian government has expressed solidarity with Ukraine (most recently at [the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin](#) in June 2024), provided humanitarian aid and support for refugees and supported the votes in the UN General Assembly condemning the Russian attack and the attempted annexation of Ukrainian territory.<sup>6</sup> However, the government has also been reticent to publicly criticise Russia and has not provided lethal military assistance to Ukraine or implemented Western-led sanctions against Russia suggesting that it would “only damage our country and populace more.”<sup>7</sup> In the first year following the invasion, Georgian trade with Russia increased by a reported 22%.<sup>8</sup> More recently the Georgian government has been accused of repeating Russian narratives over the events leading up to the war.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict did, however, prompt the Government to [speed up its application to join the EU](#), despite initially saying that such a move would be “counterproductive”.<sup>10</sup> Announcing the decision, then Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said “we have proved that we are a part of the European family and the EU path is an irreversible choice for the Georgian people”.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.1

## Return of Bidzina Ivanishvili

At the end of 2023, Bidzina Ivanishvili was elected as Honorary Chair of Georgian Dream in an unscheduled party congress.<sup>12</sup> A newly created post, the role of Honorary Chair allows Ivanishvili a semi-formal political role, one which he describes as being “forced to take” to provide stability and “a new centre of gravity” to the ruling party.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequent changes to the Charter of Georgian Dream describe the Honorary Chair as “the main political adviser” of the party and give him the right to

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<sup>5</sup> [“We are not our government: Georgians slam Ukraine war response”](#), Al Jazeera, 5 April 2022 and Centre for Eastern Studies, [Having your cake and eating it. Georgia, the war in Ukraine and integration with the West](#), 7 June 2022. See also footnote 4 on Russian occupation of Georgia’s breakaway territories.

<sup>6</sup> EU External Action Service, [Press release](#), 2 March 2022, [UN News Centre](#), 12 October 2022 and [UN News Centre](#), 23 February 2023. See also [“Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze participated in Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin”](#), The Messenger, 12 June 2024

<sup>7</sup> [“We are not our government”: Georgians slam Ukraine war response”](#), Al Jazeera, 5 April 2022. Georgia has provided some non-lethal assistance to Ukraine (see [“Georgia supports Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence – at all levels”](#), Agenda.ge, 15 November 2022)

<sup>8</sup> [“Leaking Russia sanctions sends floods of cash to ex-Soviet countries”](#), Politico, 26 April 2023

<sup>9</sup> [“Georgian Prime Minister’s ‘Maidan’ comments draw strong condemnation from Ukraine”](#), Caucasus Watch, 1 June 2024

<sup>10</sup> [“Georgia speeds up EU application in policy U-turn”](#), The Guardian, 7 March 2022

<sup>11</sup> [Irakli Garibashvili](#), @GharibashviliGe, X (formerly Twitter), 3 March 2022 (accessed 13 June 2024)

<sup>12</sup> [“Ivanishvili elected GD Honorary Chair”](#), Civil Georgia, 30 December 2023

<sup>13</sup> [“Bidzina Ivanishvili returns to “protect the Government from human temptation”](#), Civil Georgia, 30 December 2023

appoint the party's nominee for Prime Minister (a responsibility previously held by the Chairman of Georgian Dream).<sup>14</sup>

A few weeks later, in late January 2024, the then Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili resigned saying that he wanted to allow his replacement time to prepare for parliamentary elections, which are due in October 2024 (see [Where next?](#)).<sup>15</sup> He has been replaced by [Irakli Kobakhidze](#), who had held the position of Chairman of the Georgian Dream party since 2021. Garibashvili has subsequently succeeded Kobakhidze as Chairman of Georgian Dream.

Garibashvili said the move was part of the party's "internal democratic principle of rotation" and would allow other successful leaders within the party to be given an opportunity.<sup>16</sup> However, critics, including members of the opposition United National Movement party, have accused Ivanishvili of "reshuffling his pack to tighten his grip on power as elections approach".<sup>17</sup> Garibashvili is considered one of Georgia's most popular politicians, while Kobakhidze is regarded as a more divisive figure having previously demonstrated pro-Russian sympathies.<sup>18</sup> As commentary from the organisation Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has observed:

Ivanishvili's selection of Kobakhidze for prime minister was not a random choice. The popular Garibashvili was a threat, and with the party's electoral victory seemingly already in the bag, the billionaire apparently prefers to have a more polarizing figure at the helm. It will help preserve his grip on Georgian politics.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ["According to the new Charter, the political council will approve the candidacy of the Prime Minister upon submission by Ivanishvili"](#), Publika, 8 January 2024

<sup>15</sup> ["Georgian PM Gharibashvili resigns ahead of elections later this year"](#), Radio Free Europe, 29 January 2024

<sup>16</sup> ["Georgia PM Irakli Garibashvili resigns"](#), Politico, 29 January 2024

<sup>17</sup> As above

<sup>18</sup> [Kobakhidze was forced to resign as the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament](#) in 2019 after allowing a Russian lawmaker to address MPs, in Russian, from the Speaker's chair. The incident prompted widespread anti-government protests.

<sup>19</sup> ["Why Bidzina Ivanishvili is returning to Georgian politics- again"](#), Carnegie Politika, 23 February 2024

## 2

## Foreign influence legislation

In March 2023, there were widespread protests in Georgia after the People's Power Party (a faction formed by previous members of Georgian Dream), and supported by the ruling party, introduced a Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (referred to as the "Foreign Agents law").

The law would have required organisations that received more than 20% of their funding from overseas to register as "foreign agents".<sup>20</sup> Coming amid broader concerns over backsliding on political rights and civil liberties, the independence of the media and corruption,<sup>21</sup> opponents argued that it was similar to a law introduced in Russia in 2012, and expanded in 2022, that has been used to take action against Russian civil society and increasingly silence domestic dissent.<sup>22</sup>

Opposition MPs criticised the measures saying they would jeopardise democracy and Georgia's integration into the EU. Several MPs also suggested that the measures were being introduced under the influence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and were yet another attempt to bring Georgia back within Russia's sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup> Georgian President, Salome Zourabishvili also stated her opposition to the bill saying that she would veto it, should it become law.<sup>24</sup>

The EU called the draft legislation incompatible with EU values and standards and said "it goes against Georgia's stated objective of joining the European Union, as supported by a large majority of Georgian citizens".<sup>25</sup> The EU Ambassador in Georgia, Pawel Herczynskia, said the proposals contravened at least two of the 12 priorities for Georgian candidate status outlined by the Commission in June 2022.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> ["Parliament in Georgia Gives Initial Approval to 'Foreign Agents' Law](#). VOA news, 7 March 2023

<sup>21</sup> NGO Reporters without Borders ranks Georgia 103 out of 180 countries in its [2024 World Press Freedom Index](#), down from 77<sup>th</sup> in 2023. Freedom House rates Georgia as only 'partly free' in 2024 citing judicial interference, corruption and curbs on media freedom and illegal surveillance. In May 2022, Nika Gvaramia, a Georgian pro-opposition journalist was sentenced to three and a half years in jail on charges of abuse of power. Amnesty International described it as a ["politically motivated sentencing of a dissenting voice"](#). He was subsequently [pardoned by President Zourabichvili](#) in June 2023. [Allegations of politically motivated interference](#) in the judicial system have also been levelled at the government over the treatment of former President Mikheil Saakashvili who is also currently in prison on corruption charges.

<sup>22</sup> See ["Russia: New restrictions for foreign agents"](#). Human Rights Watch, 1 December 2022

<sup>23</sup> ["People's Powers tables draft law on foreign agents"](#). Civil Georgia, 15 February 2023

<sup>24</sup> [Address by the President on the 'foreign agent' law](#). 7 March 2023

<sup>25</sup> EU External Action Service, [Statement by the High Representative](#). 7 March 2023

<sup>26</sup> ["EU ambassador on foreign agents bill"](#). Interpress News, 27 February 2023

The law passed its first reading in the Georgian parliament in March 2023, but the government later withdrew the Bill after [two days of mass protests](#) and international criticism, citing the need to “reduce confrontation in society”.<sup>27</sup>

The decision to drop the law was subsequently welcomed by the EU which encouraged the Georgian government to resume “pro-EU reforms”.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.1 Reintroduction of legislation in April 2024

Just over a year later, in April 2024, Georgian Dream reintroduced its [Draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#) (PDF). The legislation is virtually identical to the draft bill introduced in 2023, the only change being a difference in the terminology used to describe those entities affected by the bill, as opposed to its fundamental purpose.<sup>29</sup>

The legislation requires nongovernmental organisations and print, online and broadcast media that receive more than 20% of their annual revenue, either financial support or in-kind contributions, from “a foreign power” to register with the Ministry of Justice as “organisations serving the interests of a foreign power”. Annual financial declarations must be also filed by registered organisations and the Georgian authorities will have the power to monitor any organisation it considers necessary.

Failure to register, or to submit annual financial declarations, or the commission of any administrative offence (which will be determined in a separate protocol) will result in criminal liability.<sup>30</sup>

Bidzina Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Kobakhidze have been vocal supporters of the foreign influence law. In a speech in April 2024, Ivanishvili justified the legislation by saying that Georgia should be “governed by the authorities elected by the Georgian people”, pointing to the governance of Georgia prior to 2012 (and the election of Georgian Dream) which he said was led by a “foreign-appointed revolutionary committee”, which had come to power “as a result of an NGO-led revolution” and was beset with corruption ([the Rose revolution of 2003](#) which provided for the first post-Soviet era leadership in Georgia).<sup>31</sup> On that basis, he said the new legislation was necessary for strengthening the sovereignty of Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> [“Georgia drops ‘foreign agents’ law after protests”](#), BBC News, 9 March 2023, [“Georgia drops bill on ‘foreign agents’ after two nights of violent protests”](#), The Guardian, 9 March 2023

<sup>28</sup> [EU Delegation Georgia](#), 9 March 2023

<sup>29</sup> The 2024 version refers to “organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power”, as opposed to “agents of foreign influence”.

<sup>30</sup> Venice Commission, [Georgia: Draft law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#) (PDF), Articles 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9

<sup>31</sup> [“Georgian Dream Party Honorary Chair: Georgia should be governed by authorities elected by Georgian people”](#), Newshub, 29 April 2024

<sup>32</sup> As above

In a press conference on 12 May 2024, Kobakhidze said that the law would provide more solid guarantees for “ensuring lasting peace, calmness, and stability in Georgia”, and claimed that over 80% of Georgia’s population supported greater transparency for NGOs. He argued that the law would put an end to radicalism and the polarisation of the country artificially imposed from abroad, pointing to the [political crisis that engulfed the country in 2021](#) after the contested parliamentary elections.<sup>33</sup> Reaffirming Georgia’s aspirations for EU membership, in a press conference on 14 May 2024, he went on to argue that increased transparency is a key EU value and that tackling political polarisation was one of the key recommendations of the European Commission with respect to Georgia’s candidacy.<sup>34</sup> Both Ivanishvili and Kobakhidze have expressed the view that Georgia will achieve EU membership in 2030.<sup>35</sup>

Kobakhidze has also sought to distance the law from similar Russian legislation, suggesting that the new Georgian law only provides for an annual financial declaration by designated organisations and does not impose the stringent measures that the Russian legislation does, such as suspension of an organisation’s activities.<sup>36</sup>

The legislation was introduced shortly after another proposal was announced which [aims to restrict LGBT rights](#) (see Where next?).

## 2.2 Legislation is approved despite a presidential veto

The Transparency of Foreign Influence Law passed its third reading in the Georgian Parliament on 14 May 2024.

From the outset, President Zourabichvili made clear her opposition to the bill, saying it represented “an attempt to return the country to the past” and that Georgia’s survival as a democratic country was now at stake.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, on 18 May 2024, she vetoed the legislation and called for it to be withdrawn.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Government of Georgia, [Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze’s Press Conference](#), 12 May 2024. See also Irakli Kobakhidze, [@PM\\_Kobakhidze](#), X (formerly Twitter), 3 May 2024

<sup>34</sup> Government of Georgia, [Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze’s press conference](#), 14 May 2024 and European Commission, [Georgia 2023 Report](#) (PDF), SWD (2023) 697 FINAL, 8 November 2023

<sup>35</sup> [“Georgian Dream Party Honorary Chair: Georgia should be governed by authorities elected by Georgian people”](#), Newshub, 29 April 2024; Government of Georgia, [Press release](#), 11 May 2024

<sup>36</sup> As above

<sup>37</sup> [“President says Georgia’s survival at stake after controversial law approved”](#), Radio Free Europe Georgian Service, 15 May 2024

<sup>38</sup> [“Georgia President vetoes ‘foreign agent’ law”](#), BBC News, 18 May 2024

However, a presidential veto can be overridden if a parliamentary majority agrees,<sup>39</sup> and on 28 May 2024 the Parliament (in which Georgia Dream holds the most seats) voted to adopt the law, by 84 votes to 30. Most opposition MPs abstained.<sup>40</sup> The Speaker of the Georgian Parliament signed the bill into law on 3 June 2024 and it came into force at the beginning of August 2024.<sup>41</sup>

Many observers had hoped that the presidential veto would offer a potential way out for the Georgian government in the face of increasing opposition.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Prime Minister Kobakhidze had suggested that amendments could be made to the legislation, within the veto framework, once the government had received further legal advice on the new law, including from the Venice Commission, the advisory body to the Council of Europe.<sup>43</sup>

[That urgent advisory opinion](#) was issued on 21 May and called for the law to be repealed “in its current form”.<sup>44</sup> It said that the process through which the law was adopted, without genuine discussion and meaningful consultation with stakeholders, did not meet “the European requirements of democratic law-making”.<sup>45</sup> It also noted that existing Georgian legislation provided for registration and reporting by NGOs and that “no convincing explanation has been given on why the existing obligations would be insufficient for the purpose of ensuring transparency”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Under [the Georgian constitution](#), legislation must pass to the President within 10 days. The President must either sign the law or veto it and return it to Parliament with justification within 14 days (Article 46)

<sup>40</sup> [“Georgia’s EU dream in tatters as “foreign agent” bill becomes law”](#), Politico, 28 May 2024

<sup>41</sup> [“Georgian Parliament Speaker signs ‘foreign influence’ bill into law”](#), Le Monde, 3 June 2024 and International Federation of Journalists, [Georgia: Authoritarian foreign agent law must be withdrawn](#), 1 August 2024

<sup>42</sup> [“Georgia ‘returning to the past’ with foreign agents law, says President”](#), The Guardian, 15 May 2024

<sup>43</sup> Government of Georgia, [Press conference of Irakli Kobakhidze](#), 14 May 2024

<sup>44</sup> Council of Europe Venice Commission, [Georgia: Urgent opinion on The Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#), CDL-PI (2024) 013, 21 May 2024, para.100

<sup>45</sup> As above, para.95

<sup>46</sup> As above, para.99

## 3 Domestic opposition

Introduction of the legislation has been met with fierce domestic criticism from opposition MPs and civil society.

### 3.1 Parliamentary boycott

Georgia's main opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM) has vehemently opposed the law, arguing that it will be used by the government to silence opposition parties and voices ahead of the parliamentary elections later this year and that it is intended to derail Georgia's aspiration to join the EU.<sup>47</sup>

Other opposition parties share this view, including Lelo for Georgia, Strategy Aghmashenebeli and the Citizens Party.<sup>48</sup> During the passage of the bill several fights broke out among opposition and ruling party MPs.<sup>49</sup>

Following adoption of the legislation, UNM and Lelo for Georgia, along with several independent MPs, collectively [announced a boycott of Parliament](#) saying that they would not continue "normal parliamentary work under this regime".<sup>50</sup> Other opposition parties, including the For Georgia party have, however, rejected the boycott highlighting the importance of "maintaining a resolute stance" and to not allow Georgian Dream to pass laws in secrecy.<sup>51</sup>

Several of the opposition parties also indicated that they may seek to work together ahead of the legislative elections in autumn 2024, potentially establishing a European Platform of National Resistance coalition (see [Where next?](#)).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> ["Georgian opposition leaders urge UK to oppose foreign influence bill"](#), BBC News, 13 May 2024

<sup>48</sup> ["Domestic reactions to adoption of foreign agents law"](#), Civil Georgia, 14 May 2024

<sup>49</sup> ["Punch up in Georgia's Parliament"](#), Politico, 15 April 2024 and ["MPs clash in Parliament"](#), Agenda.ge, 14 May 2024

<sup>50</sup> ["Several opposition parties, independent MPs announced parliamentary boycott"](#), Civil Georgia, 14 May 2024

<sup>51</sup> ["For Georgia rejects parliamentary boycott, vows to continue fight"](#), Georgian Public Broadcaster, 14 May 2024

<sup>52</sup> ["Opposition parties ponder European platform of national resistance"](#), Civil Georgia, 14 May 2024

## 3.2

### Anti-government protests

The introduction of the draft law in April 2024 prompted mass anti-government protests in the capital Tbilisi. Demonstrations, involving tens of thousands of protesters, [continued for over two months](#) and have been increasingly met with excessive force by the Georgian security forces. There have been widespread reports of unlawful detentions, assault, and intimidation.<sup>53</sup> The government has attempted to depict the protesters as violent youth groups “influenced by a political minority”.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> [“Georgia: ‘Foreign influence’ bill threatens rights”](#), Human Rights Watch, 9 May 2024 and [“Attacks on protesters in Georgia intensify”](#), Caucasus Watch, 10 May 2024

<sup>54</sup> Government of Georgia, [Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze’s Press Conference](#), 12 May 2024 and [Press conference of Irakli Kobakhidze](#), 14 May 2024



## 4 International reaction

Since independence in 1991 Western nations and organisations have been attempting to support Georgia's move towards Western-style liberal democracy, with NATO and EU membership as possible end points. Concerns have often been expressed, however, over the pace of reform, Georgia's human rights record and the effect that political polarisation has in the country.<sup>55</sup>

As outlined above, the attempt to introduce foreign influence legislation in March 2023 had already been met with widespread international criticism. In line with that response, [the UN](#), the EU, NATO, several countries including the UK and the United States, along with human rights organisations have all condemned this latest legislation, suggesting that it is a step in the wrong direction for Georgia and takes the country further away from its euro-Atlantic aspirations. Amnesty International's Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Marie Struthers, said the Georgian Parliament's decision to override the presidential veto demonstrated the Georgian authorities resolve to curtail independent civil society in Georgia, calling it a "tragic day" for the country.<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch accused the ruling Georgian Dream party of intending to "marginalise and stifle critical voices in the country".<sup>57</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry has distanced itself from recent events. In a press conference on 3 May 2024, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zhakarova said:

Russia has nothing to do with Georgian legislation, or with Georgia's European integration plans, or with the dramatic events that the whole world is watching. I saw that for some reason a number of protesters in Georgia apparently turned out to be susceptible to Western propaganda's attempts to find the notorious "Russian trace" where there is none [ ...]

Russia has never interfered and does not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of third countries. We are interested in the peaceful, stable and prosperous development of all countries of the South Caucasus, including Georgia.<sup>58</sup>

In a statement in early July, however, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service accused the US of orchestrating a "comprehensive information campaign"

<sup>55</sup> See for example Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, [Georgia is at a crossroads on its path to European integration](#) (PDF), 3 April 2023, Human Rights Watch, [Georgia](#), and US State Department, [2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia](#)

<sup>56</sup> Amnesty International, [Press release](#), 29 May 2024

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Press release](#), 9 May 2024

<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Press briefing](#), 3 May 2024

aimed at discrediting the ruling Georgian Dream party in an effort to facilitate a change of government at the forthcoming elections.<sup>59</sup>

## 4.1

## Potential impact on Georgia's EU candidacy

Over 85% of the Georgian population support EU membership.

Center for Insights in Survey Research, [Georgian Survey of Public Opinion](#), October 2023

Since 2009 Georgia has been a member of the EU's [Eastern Partnership](#), an initiative intended to achieve closer political association and economic integration. Five years later, and despite hostility from Russia, Georgia signed and ratified the [EU Association Agreement](#), although it did not make Georgia an official candidate for membership.<sup>60</sup>

Georgia [submitted an application to join the EU](#) shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. On 23 June 2022, the European Council confirmed that it was "ready to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia once the [12 priorities](#) specified in the Commission's opinion on Georgia's membership application have been addressed".<sup>61</sup> Many of those conditions were linked to human rights, judicial reform and the "urgent need" to address the political polarisation that exists in Georgian politics, including the "eradication of vested interests" in politics, the economy and public life.<sup>62</sup> The Georgian government's failure to attain candidate status at the time prompted anti-government protests and calls for the Government to resign.<sup>63</sup>

### Granting of candidacy status

Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023, although the EU has not yet formally launched accession talks.

Candidate status was granted on the understanding that further measures, mostly linked to the twelve priority areas for reform that the EU Commission identified in June 2022, be undertaken by Georgia.<sup>64</sup> One of those recommendations was ensuring that civil society can operate freely (recommendation 9). In December 2023, the European Council said Georgia needed to make progress to fulfil the Commission's conditions in an irreversible way and called on political actors in Georgia to overcome polarisation and refrain from actions that could further deepen political tensions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ["Russia warns of revolutionary scenario in Georgia"](#), Caucasus Watch, 10 July 2024

<sup>60</sup> Georgia initialled the Association Agreement at the Vilnius EU summit in 2013 and signed it on 27 June 2014. The Georgian parliament ratified the agreement on 18 July 2014.

<sup>61</sup> European Council, [Conclusions \(PDF\)](#), 23 June 2022

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, [Commission Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union](#), COM (2022) 405, 17 June 2022

<sup>63</sup> ["Tens of thousands gather in pro-EU, anti-government demonstrations in Georgia"](#), Euronews, 4 July 2022

<sup>64</sup> European Commission, [2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy](#), 8 November 2023 and European Commission, [Opinion on the EU membership application by Georgia, 17 June 2022](#)

<sup>65</sup> Council of EU, [Council conclusions on enlargement](#) (PDF), 12 December 2023

## EU response to the foreign influence law

During the passage of the foreign influence legislation, the EU made clear on several occasions that the freedom of civil society and the media were crucial for the accession process and that the law was not “in line with EU core norms and values”.<sup>66</sup> It reiterated that stance following initial adoption of the legislation suggesting that it “negatively impacts Georgia’s progress on the EU path” and calling on the Georgian Government to withdraw the new law.<sup>67</sup>

In a statement on 28 May, the EU High Representative Josep Borrell expressed “deep regret” that the Georgian government had overridden the presidential veto and disregarded the legal advice of the Venice Commission. He said that enactment of the law was in contravention of at least three of the steps set out by the European Commission on Georgia’s candidacy (relating to polarisation, disinformation and the fundamental rights and involvement of civil society) and as such would “negatively impact Georgia’s EU path”. While not committing to an EU response, he indicated that the EU and its Member States were considering all options in reaction to this development.<sup>68</sup> He also criticised recent comments from the Georgian government suggesting this law brought Georgia into line with EU values (see [Foreign influence legislation](#)). In remarks after the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in June 2024, Mr Borrell said:

We have to [express] regret that there is a widespread disinformation about the European Union and its values – coming also from official actors. We heard Georgian voices at the highest level surprisingly stating that this law is bringing the country closer to the European Union.

I want to be clear: No. No, this law and all the negative developments around it are pushing Georgia away from the European Union. I cannot be more clear and more concise [on this].<sup>69</sup>

He also went on to say that “if the government will not change the course of action, Georgia will not progress on its European Union path”.<sup>70</sup>

### European Council meeting in June 2024

At the European Council in June 2024, EU leaders said that the law on the transparency of foreign influence represented a “backsliding on the steps set out in the Commission’s recommendation for candidate status” which had, by default, led to a halt of the accession process.<sup>71</sup>

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Georgia’s EU candidacy is currently on hold.

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<sup>66</sup> EU External Action Service, [Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the draft law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#), 4 April 2024 and EU External Action Service, [Statement](#), 17 April 2024

<sup>67</sup> EU External Action Service, [Georgia: Statement](#), 15 May 2024

<sup>68</sup> European Commission, [Statement by the High Representative with the European Commission](#), 28 May 2024

<sup>69</sup> EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the meeting](#), 24 June 2024

<sup>70</sup> As above

<sup>71</sup> [European Council meeting conclusions](#) (PDF), EUCO 15/24, 27 June 2024, para. 36

The Council called on the Georgian Government to “clarify their intentions by reversing the current course of action” and for an end to the increasing acts of intimidation, threats and violence against civil society representatives, political leaders and journalists. It also committed to monitoring the forthcoming elections, calling on the government to ensure that they were free and fair.<sup>72</sup>

### Further measures

The EU High Representative, Josep Borrell has made clear that further measures could also be taken “as necessary” in response to the situation.

In early July 2024, the EU suspended its support to Georgia through [the European Peace Facility](#).<sup>73</sup> The EU has been providing non-lethal assistance to the Georgian Defence Forces since December 2021, to support their modernisation and enhance their ability to participate in EU-led operations. The latest package assistance agreed in May 2023 amounts to €30 million over three years.<sup>74</sup>

The EU’s overall financial assistance to Georgia ([approximately €85 million per year](#)) is also under review.<sup>75</sup>

The suspension of visa-free travel to the EU has also reportedly been under consideration,<sup>76</sup> while some Members of the European Parliament have called for sanctions to be implemented against Georgian Dream leaders and the MPs who voted in favour of the foreign influence law.<sup>77</sup>

However, many have warned against the suspension of visa-free travel which will predominantly target the Georgian population rather than its politicians, calling it “unjust and counterproductive”.<sup>78</sup> The imposition of sanctions is also considered unlikely given Hungary’s support for the Georgian government, having passed a similar law in December 2023.<sup>79</sup> Hungary now holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union until the end of 2024. In May 2024, Hungary and Slovakia also reportedly blocked the release of a statement by the EU Member States condemning the passage of the Georgia

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<sup>72</sup> As above, para. 37 and 38

<sup>73</sup> EU Delegation to Georgia, [@EUinGeorgia](#), X (formerly Twitter), 9 July 2024 (accessed 14 October 2024)

<sup>74</sup> EU External Actions Service, [Press release](#), 4 May 2023

<sup>75</sup> EU External Action Service, [Georgia: Speech by the High Representative in the EP Plenary on democratic backsliding](#), 8 October 2024

<sup>76</sup> [“EU visa-free travel for Georgians at stake amid controversial law”](#). Caucasus Watch, 6 June 2024 and [“EU envoy says visa-free travel for Georgians may depend on free and fair elections”](#). Radio Free Europe, 20 September 2024

<sup>77</sup> [“Georgia defies EU and backs law targeting foreign agents”](#), Politico, 14 May 2024

<sup>78</sup> “EU countries push for sanctions on Georgia over “Russian law”, The Financial Times, 22 May 2024

<sup>79</sup> [“Hungary passes contested laws against foreign influence”](#), Euractiv, 13 December 2023 and [“Hungarian PM’s Political Director says EU should follow Georgia’s lead with foreign transparency law”](#). Civil Georgia, 17 May 2024

legislation.<sup>80</sup> The statement was subsequently released by the EU High Representative and the European Commission.<sup>81</sup>

## Suspension of French and German bilateral aid

Following the European Council decision to put Georgia's EU candidacy on hold, in early July 2024 both France and Germany announced that bilateral aid to Georgia would be suspended.

The French Ambassador to Georgia, Sheraz Gasri, said that aid would be temporarily suspended and support for Georgian civil society and the media would be increased. Aid would only be reinstated, she confirmed, if the Georgian government changed course.<sup>82</sup>

The German government has also confirmed that it is reviewing its relationship with Georgia and that it had decided not to undertake any new financial commitments toward Georgia.<sup>83</sup>

## 4.2

## A review of US aid and sanctions

Following initial passage of the legislation, the US administration said it was ready to “fundamentally reassess” its relationship with Georgia if the foreign influence law was enacted.<sup>84</sup> In a press briefing on 14 May, following a visit to the country, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Jim O'Brien, suggested recent events could be “a turning point in what has been till now a constructive and productive partnership” and that there “would be consequences if the law were implemented as it now stands”. He went on to suggest that there could be a review of [US aid to the country](#) and the imposition of sanctions if the US is to be “regarded as an adversary and not a partner”.<sup>85</sup>

On 23 May 2024 the US State Department subsequently announced a comprehensive review of all US-Georgia cooperation and the implementation of a new visa restriction policy that will apply to individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining democracy in Georgia, and their family members.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> [“Hungary, Slovakia block EU27 statement on foreign influence law adopted by Georgian Parliament”](#), Civil Georgia, 15 May 2024

<sup>81</sup> European Commission, [Statement by the High Representative with the European Commission](#), 28 May 2024

<sup>82</sup> [“French Ambassador: France suspends direct aid to Georgia’s budget”](#), JAM News, 12 July 2024

<sup>83</sup> [“Fischer: Germany abandons new financial commitments, abandons exercises, leaves student visas in force”](#), Civil.ge, 10 July 2024

<sup>84</sup> White House, [Press briefing](#), 14 May 2024

<sup>85</sup> US Embassy in Georgia, [Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien remarks to the media in Tbilisi](#), 14 May 2024

<sup>86</sup> US Department of State, [Press statement](#), 23 May 2024

The State Department did not, at the time, announce specific sanctions designations on any individuals.

The current US aid programme to Georgia (2020-2025) is worth approximately \$373 million.<sup>87</sup> The US administration's budget request for next year (FY2025) also outlines \$116.5 million in US aid to Georgia across multiple programmes.<sup>88</sup>

## First sanctions designations

The US announced its first designations under the new visa restriction policy on 6 June 2024. The State Department said that the first tranche of visa restrictions applied to “between two and three dozen” individuals” including members of the Georgian Dream party, Members of Parliament, law enforcement officials and private citizens.<sup>89</sup> It did not, however, issue a list of names, in line with US visa policy.<sup>90</sup> The action was taken against those determined to be:

responsible for or complicit in undermining democracy in Georgia, such as by undermining freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, violently attacking peaceful protestors, intimidating civil society representatives, and deliberately spreading disinformation at the direction of the Georgian Government.<sup>91</sup>

State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller also confirmed that unless the Georgian government reconsidered its actions, then further steps would be taken.<sup>92</sup> He said this not only applied to the recently adopted foreign influence law but also the government's crackdown on dissent and recent moves away from “the path that Georgia has been on for so long”.<sup>93</sup>

Further sanctions designations were subsequently made in September 2024. Two Georgian government officials in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and two private individuals were designated for their involvement in serious human rights abuses linked to the violent suppression of protests against the foreign influence law (see above). A further 60 individuals, including government officials, business leaders, parliamentarians, law enforcement officers and those involved in the spread of disinformation and the promotion of violent extremism, are also subject to visa restrictions for their role, or complicity, in undermining Georgian democracy.<sup>94</sup>

The US Helsinki Commission, which monitors human rights within the countries of the OSCE, has also called for sanctions to be imposed on Bidzina

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<sup>87</sup> United States Agency for International Development (USAID), [Georgia](#)

<sup>88</sup> [“Biden administration requests USD 117 million aid for Georgia in 2025”](#), Civil Georgia, 12 March 2024

<sup>89</sup> US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 6 June 2024

<sup>90</sup> US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 16 September 2024

<sup>91</sup> As above

<sup>92</sup> As above

<sup>93</sup> As above

<sup>94</sup> US Department of State, [Press release](#), 16 September 2024 and Department of the Treasury, [Press release](#), 16 September 2024

Ivanishvili and his inner circle, whom they believe are “key nodes of corruption and malign influence in Georgia”.<sup>95</sup>

## Suspension of military cooperation

In early July 2024 the US Department of Defense confirmed that joint exercises between US and Georgian forces that had been planned for late July/ early August 2024 (Exercise Noble Partner) would be postponed indefinitely.<sup>96</sup>

## A pause in aid

On 31 July 2024, the State Department announced, as part of the ongoing review, that \$95 million in assistance to the Georgian government would be paused.

The Department said that “the Georgian government’s anti-democratic actions and false statements are incompatible with membership norms in the EU and NATO” and as such assistance that “directly benefits” the government would be suspended. Funding for programmes and activities that benefit the people of Georgia and support the strengthening of democracy, the rule of law, an independent media and economic development, would continue however.<sup>97</sup>

In a press briefing, departmental spokesperson Vedant Patel said that the Georgian government “through its own actions” was moving the country further from the European aspirations of its citizens and that the US urged the government to return “to the path of democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration by repealing the foreign influence law, withdrawing other problematic legislation, ending its disinformation campaign, and committing to conduct the elections and pre-election season transparently and allowing international and domestic monitors”.<sup>98</sup>

He also confirmed that the review of bilateral cooperation remained ongoing and that the US administration “stand[s] at the ready to take any additional and appropriate action should we need to”.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> US Helsinki Commission, [@HelsinkiComm](#), X (formerly Twitter), 31 July 2024 (accessed 14 October 2024)

<sup>96</sup> US Department of Defense, [Press release](#), 5 July 2024

<sup>97</sup> US Department of State, [Press release](#), 31 July 2024

<sup>98</sup> US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 31 July 2024

<sup>99</sup> As above

## 4.3

# Georgia's relationship with NATO

Georgia aspires to be a member of the NATO alliance and it has strong domestic support in Georgia. NATO describes Georgia as one of its closest partners.<sup>100</sup>

Alliance leaders agreed at the Bucharest summit in 2008 that Georgia will, in due course, become a NATO member, provided it meets all necessary requirements. The [NATO-Georgia Commission](#) was established to provide a framework for cooperation and support Georgia in its reform efforts and in its aspirations for NATO membership. Despite US enthusiasm, Georgia was not, however, awarded a [Membership Action Plan](#) at the Bucharest summit, which would have set out clear steps to membership.

At the Wales Summit in 2014, Georgia was granted [Enhanced Partnership Status](#). Alliance members also agreed a [Substantial NATO-Georgia Package](#) (SNGP), which is a package of measures intended to strengthen Georgia's defence capacity and advance its preparations for membership. The SNGP has since become the main vehicle for practical defence cooperation and was refreshed in November 2020 and again at [the Madrid Summit in 2022](#).

Analysts have long argued that part of Russia's motivation to partially occupy the Georgian breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is to prevent Georgian membership of NATO. To be granted a NATO Membership Action Plan, an aspirant country is expected to settle all territorial disputes "by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles and to pursue good neighbourly relations".<sup>101</sup> As Coffey and Carafano, writing for the Heritage Foundation in 2021, observed:

Russia's formula to block countries from ever joining NATO—invade and then partially occupy—has thwarted Georgia's decade-long NATO aspirations [...]

Simply put, Georgia cannot join NATO because the Kremlin wants to keep Georgia out of the alliance more than the alliance wants Georgia in.<sup>102</sup>

## NATO response to the foreign influence law

NATO's Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs, Javier Colomina, has called the legislation "a step in the wrong direction" and one that takes Georgia further away from "its Euro-Atlantic integration", which is a key goal that NATO supports. He called for the Georgian government to "change course" while also respecting the right of Georgians to peaceful protest.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> NATO, [Relations with Georgia](#)

<sup>101</sup> NATO, [Membership Action Plan](#), Part I, section 2.

<sup>102</sup> Luke Coffey and James Carafano, "[Time to end Russia's veto on Georgia's NATO membership](#)", The Heritage Foundation, 9 June 2021

<sup>103</sup> Javier Colomina, [@JavierColominaP](#), X (formerly Twitter), 15 May 2024



In a statement on 26 May 2024, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly said that “shared democratic values are the very foundation of the NATO Alliance and respect for these values is an essential condition for becoming a NATO member”. The NATO PA said the foreign transparency law was “a step backwards for Georgia’s democracy” and “if the government and parliament want to demonstrate Georgia’s readiness to join NATO in the future, they must return onto the path of democratic reform and democratic consolidation”.<sup>104</sup>

Following a meeting of NATO leaders in Washington in July 2024, references to Georgia’s membership aspirations were not included in [the concluding summit Declaration](#), for the first time since 2008.<sup>105</sup>

## 4.4 Position of the UK Government

On 14 May 2024 the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office issued a statement objecting to the introduction of the legislation. It said the law, and the response to protesters was “not in line with the democratic of a NATO aspirant country and fundamentally risk derailing Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations” and urged the Georgian government to withdraw the legislation.<sup>106</sup>

In a statement to the House of Commons on 15 May, Minister for the Armed Forces in the previous Conservative government, Leo Docherty said:

Turning to Georgia, we continue to observe with concern the events in Tbilisi, including yesterday’s violent clashes in and around the Georgian Parliament and the intimidation of peaceful protesters. The United Kingdom, along with our partners, is committed to the right of peaceful protest, and we are concerned about the introduction of the law on transparency of foreign influence. The UK is a close friend of Georgia, and as such, we call for calm and restraint on all sides. We hope to continue to work with Georgia, with which we have a deep and long-standing partnership, and to support the legitimate aspirations of the Georgian people, as they pursue a free, sovereign and democratic future.<sup>107</sup>

On 30 May 2024, the Head of the UK Delegation to the OSCE, Neil Holland, said the UK Government was deeply concerned by the overturning of the Presidential veto and once again called on the Georgian government to withdraw the law “so that it can pursue its Euro-Atlantic trajectory”.<sup>108</sup>

At the end of July 2024, the new Labour government said it was committed to supporting civil society and democracy in Georgia and urged the Georgian

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<sup>104</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, [Statement](#), 26 May 2024

<sup>105</sup> [“NATO Washington Summit Declaration omits Georgia for first time since 2008”](#), Caucasus Watch, 11 July 2024 and [“Political reactions in Georgia to NATO summit in Washington”](#), Caucasus Watch, 12 July 2024

<sup>106</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Press release](#), 14 May 2024

<sup>107</sup> HC Deb 15 May 2024, [Ukraine and Georgia](#), c259

<sup>108</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Speech](#), 30 May 2024

government to “return to its path of progressive democracy, in line with the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of over 80 per cent of the Georgian people”.<sup>109</sup>

In October 2024 the UK Ambassador to Georgia confirmed that UK-Georgia ministerial talks (referred to as [the Wardrop Dialogue](#)) have also been suspended, for the first time since they were established in 2014, amid concerns over “democratic backsliding anti-Western rhetoric”. Talks between defence officials and a cybersecurity programme have also been cancelled.<sup>110</sup> Georgian Dream MP, Archil Gorduladze, said the timing of the Ambassador’s announcement constituted electoral interference.<sup>111</sup>

## UK aid to Georgia

The UK currently provides aid to Georgia under its [Eastern neighbourhood region](#) programme which covers Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova.

In its most recent [annual report](#), the FCDO said it is planning to spend £16.1 million in 2023/24 and £10 million in 2024/25, up from £8.8 million in 2022/23 for the whole region.<sup>112</sup>

For Georgia specifically, [FCDO statistics on international development](#) state the UK spent £4.1 million in bilateral aid in Georgia in 2022, £5.2 million in 2021 and £4.0 million in 2020.<sup>113</sup>

On 14 October the government confirmed that it had allocated £500,000 to the OSCE and Georgian civil society groups to support independent monitoring of the forthcoming legislative elections (see [Legislative elections in October 2024](#)).<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> PQ272, [Georgia: Politics and government](#), 26 July 2024

<sup>110</sup> “British Ambassador: UK suspended Wardrop Dialogue ministerial talks”, Civil Georgia, 15 October 2024

<sup>111</sup> [“Georgian ruling party MP slams British Ambassador’s announcement of freeze in dialogue format as ‘electoral interference’”](#), Agenda.ge, 15 October 2024

<sup>112</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Annual Report and accounts 2022 to 2023](#), P.268

<sup>113</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Statistics on International Development, final UK aid spend 2022](#)

<sup>114</sup> PQ8050, [Georgia: Elections](#), 14 October 2024

## 5

## Where next?

Sporadic anti-government protests continue in Tbilisi and [several opposition parties continue to boycott the Georgian Parliament](#). The Georgian government has given no indication that it intends to change course, despite domestic and international pressure to do so. In his annual report to Parliament on 28 June 2024, Prime Minister Kobakhidze defended the new law, continuing to argue that transparency was a European standard and that the legislation strengthened Georgia's sovereignty.<sup>115</sup>

Observers are now looking to the legislative elections which will be held on 26 October 2024 and whether, as feared, the new law on transparency will be used to silence domestic dissent and help ensure victory for the ruling Georgian Dream party.<sup>116</sup>

## 5.1

## Appeal to the constitutional court

On 15 July 2024 President Zourabichvili appealed to Georgia's Constitutional Court to overturn the foreign influence law. The appeal is based on article 78 of the Georgian Constitution which requires constitutional bodies, including the government, to "take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization".<sup>117</sup> The move was supported by the Public Defender of Georgia and opposition MPs, who also prepared appeals to the court.<sup>118</sup>

A preliminary hearing was held at the end of August 2024 and the court issued its decision on 9 October 2024. The court accepted that certain parts of the appeal warranted further examination but rejected a request for the law to be suspended pending a final ruling. It has been noted that it could take the court months, or even years, to reach a final decision.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>115</sup> ["Georgian PM outlines vision for 2030 amid opposition boycott"](#). Caucasus Watch, 30 June 2024

<sup>116</sup> [Georgia's 2024 Parliamentary election: Pre-election risk assessment](#) (PDF), GMF Transatlantic Foundation, June 2024

<sup>117</sup> [Constitution of Georgia](#), article 78

<sup>118</sup> ["President seeks repeal of foreign agents law in Constitutional Court"](#), Civil.ge, 15 July 2024

<sup>119</sup> ["Constitutional court rejects suspension of agent's law"](#), Civil Georgia, 9 October 2024 and CSO Monitor, [Georgia: Constitutional court rejects suspending law on transparency of foreign influence](#), 9 October 2024

## 5.2

## Passage of a bill restricting LGBT+ rights

In late June 2024 the Georgian Parliament began debating a bill on the Protection of Family Values and Minors which will, among other things, ban LGBT+ “propaganda” in educational settings and in the media, ban public gatherings that promote same-sex relationships, prohibit gender reassignment surgery and prevent LGBT+ couples from marrying or adopting children.<sup>120</sup> The ruling Georgian Dream party said that the bill is necessary to “defend against pseudo liberal values that undermine traditional family relationships”.<sup>121</sup> A [similar law was adopted in Russia](#) in 2022. That legislation was subsequently adopted at third reading on 17 September 2024 by 84 votes to 0.<sup>122</sup>

Championing LGBT+ rights is not universally popular in Georgia.<sup>123</sup> In the last few years societal attitudes have improved, mainly among urban communities and the young, but opinions remain sharply divided in a predominantly conservative country where public discussion and attitudes toward sexual orientation have tended in the past to be negative and viewed as contrary to traditional orthodox Christian values.<sup>124</sup> NGOs and human rights groups promoting LGBT issues have often been accused of trying to impose “un-Georgian values” on the country.<sup>125</sup>

In contrast to the foreign influence law which united the opposition and prompted widespread anti-government protests, the domestic response to the passage of legislation restricting LGBT+ rights has not been as vocal. A group of civil society organisations published a statement prior to the adoption of the legislation which criticised the package of measures and accused the ruling Georgian Dream party of using it to foster fear and manipulate public opinion ahead of the elections. The statement said that while the package of measures targets the LGBT community, it poses an overall threat to society by setting a broader precedent for the restriction of rights.<sup>126</sup> Many opposition parties are also currently boycotting parliament and were not present at the plenary session in September 2024 when the legislation was adopted.

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<sup>120</sup> [“Parliament Speaker presents homophobic legislation”](#), Civil Georgia, 4 June 2024 and [“Georgia passes bills banning LGBT content and gender reassignment”](#), Caucasus Watch, 28 June 2024

<sup>121</sup> [“Georgia to move ahead soon with bill curbing LGBT rights”](#), Reuters, 4 June 2024

<sup>122</sup> [“Georgian parliament passes controversial anti-LGBTQ+ legislative package”](#), Caucasus Watch, 18 September 2024

<sup>123</sup> [“Georgia’s other Russian-style law is fuelling a bitter culture war”](#), Politico, 19 May 2024 and [“Georgia may be the most homophobic country in Europe”](#), OC Media, 27 July 2021

<sup>124</sup> Home office, [Country policy and information note: sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, Georgia, December 2023](#) (accessed 12 June 2024)

<sup>125</sup> [“Georgia’s future path at stake as protests divide nation”](#), BBC News, 19 May 2024 and [“Georgia’s other Russian-style law is fuelling a bitter culture war”](#), Politico, 19 May 2024

<sup>126</sup> [“Georgian parliament passes controversial anti-LGBTQ+ legislative package”](#), Caucasus Watch, 18 September 2024

However, introduction of the legislation has fuelled existing concerns in the UK, Europe and the US over the current direction of Georgian policy making.<sup>127</sup> In a statement on 4 September 2024, an EU External Action Service Spokesperson said that the EU “deplored the rushed adoption” of the legislation and regretted that “legislation with important repercussions on the EU integration path has been passed without due public consultations and a thorough analysis of its compliance with European and international standards”.<sup>128</sup>

In a speech to the European Parliament in early October 2024, the EU High Representative said that the Georgian government needed to start repealing laws that contradict the stated goal of joining the EU, in particular those laws which restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of Georgian society.<sup>129</sup> At a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 October, he went further and indicated that the EU’s review of financial assistance would also be dependent upon Georgia’s forthcoming legislative elections, which he described as “a crucial test for democracy”.<sup>130</sup>

The UK Government said it raised its concerns with the Georgian Foreign Minister, Ilia Darchiashvili, at the beginning of October 2024.<sup>131</sup>

## 5.3 Legislative elections in October 2024

Parliamentary elections are due to be held in Georgia on 26 October 2024. The election has been labelled as an important test of democracy by the European Union, the US and the UK. The OSCE has established [an international election observation mission](#) and is expected to publish its preliminary findings on 27 October 2024. Both the US and the EU have indicated that future aid to Georgia is reliant on the conduct of peaceful and free and fair elections (see above).<sup>132</sup>

### Conduct of the election

Under constitutional changes agreed in 2017, the 2024 elections will mark the move toward a fully proportional system, with a minimum threshold of 5% of the vote for a party to enter Parliament.<sup>133</sup> That threshold has prompted

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<sup>127</sup> [“Georgia: Halt legislative assault on LGBTI rights”](#), Amnesty International, 26 March 2024

<sup>128</sup> EU External Action Service, Georgia: [Statement by the Spokesperson on the legislative package on ‘family values and protection of minors’](#), 4 September 2024

<sup>129</sup> EU External Action Service, [Georgia: Speech by the High Representative in the EP Plenary on democratic backsliding](#), 8 October 2024

<sup>130</sup> EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the meeting](#), 14 October 2024

<sup>131</sup> PQ8246, Georgia: [LGBT+ people](#), 14 October 2024

<sup>132</sup> EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the meeting](#), 14 October 2024; US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 31 July 2024

<sup>133</sup> [“Georgia’s Central Election Commission reveals date, procedures for 2024 parliamentary vote”](#), Agenda.ge, 10 January 2024

concern that the majority of smaller opposition parties may effectively be shut out of the process.<sup>134</sup> The election will also mark the introduction of electronic voting across the country, which the Parliamentary Speaker has said will “remove all kinds of speculation” about “rigged elections”.<sup>135</sup> However, many have argued that one of the main motivations for introducing the foreign influence law prior to the elections is to stifle the work of independent election monitoring organisations, including verification of the results.<sup>136</sup>

The previous parliamentary elections in 2020 were held on a mixed system basis, albeit with a greater emphasis on proportional voting than had originally been anticipated after large pro-democracy demonstrations forced the Government to reach an agreement with the opposition on electoral reform just months before the election was held.<sup>137</sup> Georgian Dream received [48.15%](#) of the vote, giving it a majority in Parliament. The opposition parties refused to recognise the election results however, and announced that they would boycott the new Parliament, sparking a political crisis in Georgia.<sup>138</sup>

In April 2021, after several months of turmoil, the Government and opposition parties, under the mediation of the EU, signed a deal ([A way ahead for Georgia](#) (PDF)), to end the political crisis and for the opposition parties to take their seats in Parliament. [Opposition parties subsequently announced the end to their boycott](#) on 30 May 2021. In July 2021, however, Georgian Dream unilaterally withdrew from the EU-mediated agreement saying it was “harmful to Georgia’s interests”.<sup>139</sup>

## A referendum on Europe?

Within the context of recent political developments, the forthcoming election has been widely portrayed as a referendum on Georgia’s future and its commitment to a pro-European path.

In an interview at the beginning of May 2024, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili said the elections would be “a kind of referendum for or against Europe” and resolve the question of “What type of future do we want for Georgia?”.<sup>140</sup> Following the passage of the foreign influence law she urged protesters at a rally to “get down to business” and “do everything to prepare for October 26, which will be our answer to today”.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> [“After foreign agent law defeat, Georgian protesters set sights on elections”](#), Radio Free Europe, 30 May 2024

<sup>135</sup> [“Parliament Speaker: electronic voting for 2024 elections will ‘remove speculation’”](#), Agenda.ge, 9 October 2023

<sup>136</sup> [Georgia’s 2024 Parliamentary election: Pre-election risk assessment](#) (PDF), GMF Transatlantic Foundation, June 2024

<sup>137</sup> [“Georgian Dream, Opposition reach consensus over electoral reform”](#), Civil Georgia, 8 March 2020

<sup>138</sup> [“Defusing Georgia’s political crisis: An EU foreign policy success?”](#), Carnegie Europe, 10 May 2021

<sup>139</sup> AGENDA.GE, [“Ruling Georgian Dream eaves EU-mediated agreement”](#), 28 July 2021

<sup>140</sup> [“Georgia’s next election will be referendum for or against Europe: President Zourabichvili”](#), France 24, 3 May 2024

<sup>141</sup> [“After foreign agent law defeat, Georgian protesters set sights on elections”](#), Radio Free Europe, 30 May 2024

Opposition MP and former ambassador to the EU, Salome Samadashvili, said the election was “the most important moment in Georgia’s modern history”, describing it as an opportunity to build a strong pro-European coalition that can move Georgia irreversibly forward.<sup>142</sup>

In early July 2024, the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Pawel Herczyński, said that it was now for Georgians to decide at the election “if they want to be a member of the European Union or not, if they want to be part of the next big EU enlargement, or if they have other plans for their future”.<sup>143</sup>

On 11 July 2024 President Zourabichvili launched a new public movement “Vote for Europe” which aims to rally civil Georgian civil society ahead of the elections.<sup>144</sup>

## Formation of several opposition coalitions

Opposition MP and current parliamentary leader of the United National Movement (UNM) Tina Bokuchava argues that Georgia’s European aspirations can be “safeguarded only through regime change” and that ahead of the elections “it is essential that opposition leaders rally together”.<sup>145</sup> This is considered particularly significant for those smaller parties which may be disadvantaged by the 5% threshold for parliamentary participation.

Several opposition parties indicated have that they will work together ahead of the elections to form temporary blocs of like-minded parties so that each bloc could pass the 5% parliamentary threshold.<sup>146</sup>

At the end of May 2024, 17 opposition parties and five independent MPs, including the UNM, Lelo for Georgia and Strategy Aghmashenebeli also signed [a Charter](#), proposed by President Zourabichvili, that aims to “rebuild trust and forge a new political reality”, ahead of the elections.<sup>147</sup> One of the main commitments in the Charter is to support an interim government chosen by the President should the opposition be successful in securing a parliamentary majority and ousting the ruling Georgian Dream Party from government.<sup>148</sup>

In early July the UNM announced that it would form a new political platform to fight the elections, Unity – to save Georgia, along with opposition party

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<sup>142</sup> [“Georgia’s future path at stake as protests divide nation”](#), BBC News, 19 May 2024

<sup>143</sup> [“EU halts Georgia’s accession process”](#), Caucasus Watch, 9 July 2024

<sup>144</sup> [“New political movement unveiled in Georgia”](#), Caucasus Watch, 12 July 2024

<sup>145</sup> [“Georgia’s EU dream in tatters as foreign agent bill becomes law”](#), Politico, 28 May 2024. Bokuchava has since been proposed as the next leader of the UNM after Levan Khabeishvili announced his decision in early June 2024 to step down as party leader. Leadership elections will take place in February 2025, after the parliamentary elections in Georgia ([“Tina Bokuchava to replace Levan Khabeishvili as UNM Chair”](#)). Civil Georgia, 8 June 2024)

<sup>146</sup> [“After foreign agent law defeat, Georgian protesters set sights on elections”](#), Radio Free Europe, 30 May 2024

<sup>147</sup> [“Opposition parties ready to join President’s action plan to unify ahead of elections”](#), Agenda.ge, 27 May 2024 and President of Georgia, [Press release](#), 3 June 2024

<sup>148</sup> [“Major Georgian opposition groups sign President Zourabichvili’s charter”](#), OC Media, 4 June 2024

Strategy Aghmashenebeli, European Georgia and representatives from other political parties and civil society.<sup>149</sup>

A second opposition coalition, the Coalition for Change, has been formed by Ahali, Girchi-More Freedom, and Droa.<sup>150</sup>

Lelo for Georgia has also established an alliance (Strong Georgia) with smaller opposition parties: For the People, Freedom Square and Citizens.<sup>151</sup> The For Georgia party of former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia is also reported to have joined the coalition at the instigation of president Zourabichvili.<sup>152</sup>

## 5.4 What about the President?

President Salome Zourabichvili was elected in November 2018 for a six-year term. Her mandate will therefore expire before the end of 2024.

Under constitutional changes agreed in 2017, she is expected to be the last popularly elected President in Georgia. The next President will be elected, for a five-year term, by a 300-member electoral college formed of all Members of Parliament (150) and local and regional government representatives. A person can be nominated for the position of President by a minimum of 30 members of the electoral college. The same person may only serve as President for two terms.<sup>153</sup>

Members of Parliament will form half of electoral college members and therefore the composition of the parliament after elections in October 2024 will be significant.

President Zourabichvili has said she will consider running again and would be “happy and proud” to be nominated.<sup>154</sup> However, the President, despite being endorsed by the Georgian Dream Party prior to the 2018 elections, has become increasingly opposed to the ruling party and their backing is unlikely. Indeed, in early October 2024 the Speaker of the Georgian parliament, which has a Georgian Dream majority, said that impeachment proceedings had been instituted against President Zourabichvili.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> [“Georgian opposition forms new alliances ahead of Parliamentary elections”](#). Caucasus Watch, 9 July 2024

<sup>150</sup> [“Who’s who in Georgia’s parliamentary elections?”](#). OC-Media, 3 October 2024

<sup>151</sup> As above

<sup>152</sup> [“Georgian opposition parties unite following President’s call for ‘positive third center:”](#). Caucasus Watch, 17 September 2024

<sup>153</sup> [“New constitution enters into force”](#). Civil Georgia, 17 December 2018

<sup>154</sup> [“Georgia President tells youth she will be ‘happy’, ‘proud’ to be their candidate for possible re-election run”](#), Agenda.ge, 12 June 2024

<sup>155</sup> [“Georgian Parliament Speaker announces new impeachment bid against President”](#). Caucasus Watch, 8 October 2024



If Georgian Dream win most of the seats in the next legislative elections, then a Georgian Dream-approved candidate for President is the most likely outcome. In the meantime, opposition party For Georgia, led by former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, has called for constitutional amendments to be passed before the autumn, allowing for the return of direct elections for the position of President. Gakharia said such a move would “provide the necessary legitimacy and independence of the president”.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> [“For Georgia party initiates amendment to the constitution to allow Presidential elections again”](#), Georgia Today, 9 January 2024

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