

# Georgia's U-Turn and Yanukovich Moment

In December 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. What happened next is well-known - Ukrainians stood up for their European future and changed the pro-Russian government. On April 29, 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the informal ruler of Georgia and an honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream, effectively [declared](#) that the country was no longer on the path to joining the EU. Georgians have also responded to this with massive protests. However, the outcome of this resistance to change in foreign policy is yet to be seen.

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Mr. Ivanishvili's seminal "U-turn speech" underscored the importance of Georgia's sovereignty and independence in the face of Western interfer-

ence. He narrated his version of Georgia's recent history, blaming Western powers for dragging Georgia and Ukraine into the wars with Russia and vilifying NGOs, the EU, and the US for running the puppet regime in Georgia before 2012.

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Mr. Ivanishvili made it clear he intended to silence the NGOs and free media and threatened to politically and legally persecute "collective UNM," which in Georgian Dream's lingua means all opposition parties, critical media, NGOs, and activist groups. According to Ivanishvili, there is a "global war party," a scarecrow chimera, which plans to drag Georgia into the war with Russia and plans a coup



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against the Government through its proxy NGOs and political forces. These NGOs are pseudo-elite, nurtured by foreign powers, who have no homeland, who do not love their country or people, and, on the contrary, are embarrassed by them. In the days after his speech, the Georgian Dream leadership engaged in unprecedented verbal attacks against the European and American allies, blaming them for attempting to stage a coup d'état twice from 2020 to 2023.

Georgia's Yanukovich moment is now a reality, and its resolution will determine the country's future for decades.

## Russian Laws and Rhetoric

Turnaround of the foreign policy is based on a very concrete legal basis – the draft laws on foreign agents and anti-LGBT propaganda. These laws, straight from the Kremlin handbook of autocratic governance, are usually used to spread disinformation about the West, to rally people around na-

tionalistic, xenophobic sentiments, and to decapitate civil society and free media.

The Georgian Dream [introduced](#) the anti-LGBT propaganda constitutional package on March 23, 2024. The proposed initiative exclusively recognizes marriage as a union between a genetically male and a genetically female individual at least 18 years old. Adoption or fostering of minors is to be restricted to spouses married according to Georgian laws or by heterosexual individuals. Medical interventions related to gender reassignment are forbidden, and official documents must reflect only the individual's genetic sex. Any decision limiting gender-specific terms is void, and gatherings, distribution of materials, and educational content promoting same-sex relationships, incest, adoption by same-sex couples, gender reassignment, or non-binary terminology are prohibited. In the public discussions of the constitutional changes, the Georgian Dream leaders often criticized the West for imposing gay propaganda on Georgia, arguing that the Georgian public needed to resist this pressure.

On April 3, 2024, the Georgian Dream reintroduced the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” law, which civil society and the international community justly dubbed Russian law. On April 17 and May 1, 2024, the law was adopted with [first](#) and [second](#) hearings despite unprecedented local and international pushback. In March 2023, a similar law was [retracted](#) after tens of thousands of angry Georgians, mainly the younger generation, hit the streets, and the Government tried to disperse them in vain with tear gas and water cannons.

In 2023, the photos of brave Georgian Gen-Z-ers waving European and Georgian flags, resisting the Government’s efforts to silence them, circled the world news agencies. When the law was withdrawn in March 2023, jubilation ensued, comparable to the sense of joy that Georgians felt for two weeks since March 26, 2024, when the Georgian National Football Team qualified for the European Football Championship, until the foreign agents’ law was reintroduced again. This time, the name of the law changed from “foreign agents” to “the transparency of foreign influence,” but the essence and content remained the same as in 2023, very close to what Putin passed in 2012.

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The main similarity between the Georgian and Russian laws is that both oblige the NGOs and media, who receive funding from abroad, to label themselves as servants of foreign interests or face impossible fines. No other Western country has a law that qualifies any organization as the carrier of foreign interest or foreign agent only because of the financing. Another striking similarity is that, just like in Russia, and unlike the US, Israel, or Aus-

tralia, the primary entities against which the law is directed are the European and American funds, donors, and assistance programs. As one opposition MP proposed during the Parliament session, - „specify that the foreign power is Russia, and everyone would support the law“. However, the ruling party’s rhetoric suggests that the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and European Endowment for Democracy (EED) are real threats, not Russia’s Primakov Center or other Russia-funded foreign influence programs.

In May 2018, the author of this article, when serving in the Parliament, introduced the bill to counter Russian propaganda, which envisaged transparency measures for Russian-funded organizations. The Georgian Dream voted the bill down then, arguing that it was not the time to upset Moscow. The time has come to upset the West and please Moscow.

The decision to reintroduce the “Russian Law” was perhaps not unexpected, especially considering that during the last few months, the Georgian Dream stepped up the rhetoric against the NGOs and foreign donors and even introduced the law on countering LGBT propaganda in the best Russian tradition. But those who were surprised had a solid argument, too. After all, in December 2023, the European Union granted Georgia the EU candidate status, a move seen as more geopolitically motivated than solely based on the assessment of reform progress. However, the clear stance that Georgia does not care for the European integration track was more unexpected. Chairman of the GD party, former prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili, [said](#) that Georgia was not ready for the membership and neither was the EU. Georgian Dream propagandists are now pushing the narrative that Georgians want Europe, and not the European Union.

## Direct Breach of the EU Commitments

In December 2023, even though the EU acknowledged that only three of the twelve conditions were fulfilled, it still granted Georgia the candidate status on the understanding that the new nine steps should be implemented. Among these new conditions were the fight against disinformation against the EU, cooperation with civil society, and depolarization.

With Episode 2 of foreign agents' law, the Georgian Dream has fundamentally breached its commitments to the EU, undermining all three of these promises.

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If the law is passed, the Georgian civil society organizations will be labeled as serving “foreign interests,” those who refuse to register as such and disclose their financial declarations will face a substantial penalty of 8000 euros, followed by an additional 3000 euros per month. Moreover, the government will gain the authority to monitor (read - obstruct) the activities of these organizations, including as a result of anonymous reporting. This confluence of requirements will effectively cripple the operations of the CSOs and will lead to many organizations shutting down and leaving the country. This would be especially problematic in the run-up to the October 2024 elections, when the role of the election monitoring organizations, critical media, journalistic investigations, and fact-checkers is vital.

The draft law proposed by the Georgian Dream also runs counter to the condition the EU imposed – to counter disinformation against the EU. The government argues that similar laws exist in the EU, even blatantly lying that the EU requested them to pass such a law.

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The EU indeed plans to enhance the transparency of the organizations receiving funding from Russia and China. However, it plans to target only the activities representing foreign actors' interests. In contrast, the Georgian Dream's legislation targets all NGOs receiving funding from the EU and the United States. Notably, prominent targets of Georgian Dream's steps include the European Endowment for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy, USAID, and other Western donors. This narrative strengthens the government's assertion that the EU is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs. Furthermore, the Government's rhetoric that the EU is dragging Georgia into the war with Russia is the most blatant and vivid violation of the obligation to counter the disinformation against the EU.

Thirdly, this initiative is poised to exacerbate polarization. Last year, a broad spectrum of voices, including political opposition, mass media, NGOs, academics, and even athletes, united in denouncing the proposed law. Students took to the streets, and their resistance was pivotal in prompting the Georgian Dream to retract the legislation. Consequently, the reintroduction of essentially the same law this year, albeit under a different title, is bound to reignite societal divisions.

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The EU already said very clearly that the EU commitments are being breached, and if the law is passed, there will be no advancement on the European integration path. In the statement issued on April 4, 2024, the EU called on Georgia “to uphold its commitment to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and human rights” and pointed out that “Step 9 [of EU commitments] includes a recommendation for Georgia to make sure that civil society can operate freely, and Step 1 calls on Georgia to fight disinformation against the EU and its values.” European leaders made it very clear that Georgia’s passing the law would equally derail the European path. As Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi and HRVP Borel stressed in their joint statement, “this law is not in line with EU core norms and values” and would negatively impact Georgia’s progress on its EU path.”

## Why Now?

The answer to this question remains speculative. However, the interest in knowing what went backstage between Tbilisi and Moscow is very interesting.

Obviously, one cannot discount Mr Ivanishvili’s personal phobias and paranoia following Bidzina Ivanishvili’s formal re-engagement in party politics as the honorary chair of the Georgian Dream. Suppressing NGOs and media, representing one of the few bastions outside the oligarch’s sphere of influence leading up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, may offer Mr Ivanishvili a sense of reassurance. Indeed, by cutting off Western funding to these NGOs, he may perceive a reduction in resistance to his rule, thus bolstering his grip on power.

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There could also be entirely rational justification beyond personal psychological factors, assuming that the ruling party can make decisions based on pragmatic calculations rather than the leader’s whims. The impending polarization, which this law will undoubtedly exacerbate, aligns with the interests of the Georgian Dream as the elections approach. A more polarized electorate increases the likelihood that the ruling party can affix labels such as “global war party,” “UNM supporters,” and “radical opposition” to all opposition factions and NGOs. With the proportional elections approaching, only a polarized society could guarantee the Georgian Dream a win without a coalition partner.

Polarization necessitates a divisive issue. Initially, the Georgian Dream attempted to exploit the topic of “LGBT propaganda” as a polarizing issue, a predictable move in a conservative religious society like Georgia. However, neither LGBT organizations, civil society, nor the opposition took the bait. Consequently, the Georgian Dream reintroduced the foreign agent law, tested and guaranteed to deepen societal polarization.

However, none of these explanations shed light on why the Georgian Dream changed the foreign policy course, effectively disengaging from the European integration path. After all, if the oligarch wanted to make the NGOs and media dysfunctional, he could have done it through other means, either by concocting the cases or by tasking the prosecution and investigative services to drag the opponents into a costly and time-consuming legal battle. If he just wanted to criticize the critical NGOs as foreign spies, that could also have been



done through his potent propaganda machine, which he had been doing for years anyway.

The primary factor appears to be Mr. Ivanishvili's decision to go fully authoritarian, following the examples of Lukashenka and Putin. Fewer people object to fewer problems he will have, stacking the elections in 2024 in his favor. As Comrade Stalin put it – „No Person, No Problem“.

Another big question is whether Moscow played a role in Ivanishvili's decision to reverse Georgia's foreign policy course. For a billionaire who is wary of his personal security and wealth, Moscow is a threat he can not counter with European integration. Neither can he maintain power if he implements the conditions necessary for entering the EU. Independent courts, strong state institutions, a system of checks and balances, and power-sharing are more frightening for Ivanishvili than Russia, which condones the governance style of the Georgian Dream.

Moreover, Russia could have made it clear to Ivanishvili that the European integration of Georgia must stop. We will never know how and through which channels this happened; however, the decision to start attacking the EU Member states' and institutions' leaders, and at the same time trying to pass the laws, which the EU considers against European values, serve precisely that purpose – willingly stopping the European integration path. As the German Foreign minister [said](#), “It is up to the [Georgian] authorities not to deliberately block the way to the future.”

One could argue that forcing the adoption of Russian law would serve the willful purpose of breaking the opponents' resistance and demoralizing the young. They would then sink into depression and either flee the country to the EU or relegate themselves to more passive societal roles. In any case, the Georgian Dream would have a higher chance of maintaining power.

In addition, by the time the law had been reintroduced, the GD leaders believed (and not totally groundlessly) that they had a *carte blanche* from the West. Despite not delivering on the most significant reforms, Georgia was granted EU candidate status, and the government adeptly capitalized on this achievement. While the EU's decision may have been geopolitically motivated, the Georgian Dream interpreted it as an indication that regardless of their actions, they would continue receiving free rides towards the EU accession by bandwagoning Ukraine and exploiting the EU's geopolitical thinking.

Furthermore, to the delight of the Georgian dream leaders, the EU did not commit to evaluating the implementation of the nine new conditions until after the Georgian elections in October 2024. Rumors suggest that even USAID pledged to withdraw its financing from local NGOs, yielding to government pressure. These factors may have encouraged GD leaders to reintroduce all the measures they had sought to implement last year but refrained from doing so to avoid jeopardizing the EU candidate status. Now, they have the candidate status and a feeling of a *carte blanche* from the EU.

## What Can the West (Still) Do?

Let's be clear. The West has said almost everything there is to say. The MEPs, European Council President, EU Commission President, Commissioner for Enlargement, HRVP, the ministers of foreign affairs, and the Foreign Relations committee heads of most of the EU states made it clear that if the law is passed, Georgia will be turning its back to the EU. Many EU states summoned Georgian Ambassadors, and even more wrote letters to the Government of Georgia. Americans went even further. The letter of the [fourteen](#) US senators sent chills as Washington threatened to reconsider bilateral relations. State Department has been issuing warnings almost daily since the crisis broke out.

Four things could still be done in terms of statements and high-level pressure. The Western heads of state could intervene through public statements, bilateral calls for action, and visits. The President of Georgia could invite high-level delegations to mediate the crisis. But the EU should not make the same mistake it did in 2021, when Charles Michel mediated the political crisis. Unlike in 2021, now the role of political parties is minimal; the protest is decentralized and even if the Georgian Dream decides to change its mind, it will not be a reliable partner for the Georgian population. What, therefore, needs to be done is to start treating the Georgian government for what it is – a Government that led the country away from the EU.

More importantly, the West must clarify that it will step up supporting civil society in Georgia. Once the NGOs are threatened with shutting down, their bank accounts will close, and many NGOs will start registering outside of Georgia. They will require assistance legally and financially. The mood in Tbilisi is not to give up but to resist and fight the foreign policy u-turn. The West must support it.

Thirdly, the EU must commit to publishing an in-

terim assessment of the implementation status of the nine steps in June and a final evaluation in October, before the Georgian elections. This would send a clear message to the Georgian citizens and the government that the EU will not hesitate to publicly identify and criticize the government should it impede reform progress.

***Lastly, should the law proceed despite warnings, the EU must resort to imposing personal sanctions against those who hold Georgian democracy hostage, beginning with the de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and extending to any MPs who endorse discriminatory, anti-European legislation.***

Lastly, should the law proceed despite warnings, the EU must resort to imposing personal sanctions against those who hold Georgian democracy hostage, beginning with the de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and extending to any MPs who endorse discriminatory, anti-European legislation. Making this clear at the outset will be the cold shower for the GD's button-pressing majority ■