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Attempts to reintroduce a foreign agent law in Georgia and its restrictions on civil society

European Parliament resolution of 25 April 2024 on attempts to reintroduce a foreign agent law in Georgia and its restrictions on civil society (2024/2703(RSP))

(C/2025/3711)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Georgia,

— having regard to the statement by the High Representative and the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement of 17 April 2024 on the adoption of the 'transparency of foreign influence' law,

— having regard to the European External Action Service statement of 4 April 2024 on the draft law on 'transparency of foreign influence',

— having regard to the European Council conclusions of 14 and 15 December 2023,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 8 November 2023 entitled '2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy' (COM(2023)0690),

— having regard to the Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part ([1]),

— having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,

— having regard to the European Convention on Human Rights,

— having regard to the joint statement by the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Chair of the Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus and the European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Georgia of 18 April 2024 on the reintroduction of the draft law on 'transparency of foreign influence' in Georgia,

— having regard to Rules 132(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the exercise of freedom of opinion, expression, association and peaceful assembly are fundamental rights enshrined in the Georgian Constitution;

B. whereas Georgia, as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as a member of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, has committed itself to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights;

C. whereas the European Union expects Georgia, a candidate country for EU accession, to abide fully by the Association Agreement and other international commitments it has made and, in particular, to fulfil the conditions and take the steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of 8 November 2023; whereas the European Council decided to grant candidate status to Georgia solely on the understanding that these steps would be taken; whereas this recommendation called on Georgia to ensure that civil society was able to operate freely (step 9) and to fight disinformation against the EU and its values (step 1), and whereas the draft law violates both objectives;

D. whereas on 17 April 2024, the Georgian Parliament passed the so-called transparency of foreign influence law at first reading with 83 votes in favour and none against, despite mass protests by Georgian citizens, criticism from the President of Georgia, who called the draft law 'sabotage of the country's European path', national and international condemnation and repeated calls from Georgia's European partners to withdraw the draft law; whereas this law would require organisations receiving over 20 % of their funding from abroad to register within two months as 'organisations pursuing the interests of a foreign power' and label themselves as such; whereas the organisations would be subjected to additional scrutiny, reporting requirements and possibly sanctions, including administrative penalties of up to GEL 25 000; whereas the law would seriously restrict media and civil society organisations' ability to operate freely;

([1]) OJ L 261, 30.8.2014, p. 4.

E. whereas the legitimate aim of ensuring transparency of non-governmental organisations receiving foreign funding cannot in any way justify measures which restrict their activities, especially not in the field of democracy, the rule of law and human rights;

F. whereas this draft law is being proposed at a time of increasing attacks against civil society and independent media in Georgia, as well as against democracy support from international donors in a seeming effort to narrow the civic space and silence critical voices in the public sphere, among other things by cutting access to foreign funding; whereas this draft law is only the latest in a series of pre-election legislative and other initiatives by the Georgian Government, which also includes the announcement of constitutional amendments to fight 'LGBT propaganda' and the reversal of a policy mandating gender quotas for women in parliament, which jeopardise democratic reforms and contribute to spreading disinformation about the EU, its values and policies; whereas the European Parliament has already called in previous resolutions for measures to reduce the destructive role played by oligarchic interests in Georgia's politics and economy, including in the politically motivated persecution of journalists and political opponents such as former president Mikhail Saakashvili, for whom Parliament has called to be released on humanitarian grounds for the purpose of seeking medical treatment abroad;

1. Strongly condemns the re-introduction of the controversial draft law on 'transparency of foreign influence' which would impose debilitating restrictions on civil society and independent media and thereby undermine the possibility of their operating freely, and has therefore been met with massive protests by the Georgian public, civil society organisations, independent media, prominent public figures and the country's European and international partners alike;

2. Underlines that the draft law is incompatible with EU values and democratic principles, runs against Georgia's ambitions for EU membership, damages Georgia's international reputation and endangers the country's Euro-Atlantic integration;

3. Stresses that EU accession negotiations should not be opened as long as this law is part of Georgia's legal order;

4. Urges, therefore, the Georgian Parliament to halt the parliamentary proceedings leading to adoption of the law and urges the Georgian Government to honour the commitments it made in March 2023 when it announced that it would unconditionally withdraw its draft law to impose restrictions on civil society and independent media and would not propose such a law again; calls on the Government of Georgia also to abstain from submitting any further legislative proposals that contradict the principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms and which would therefore run counter to the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership;

5. Highlights that the draft law betrays the aspirations of the large majority of the Georgian people to live in a democratic society, continue democratic and rule of law reforms, pursue close cooperation with Euro-Atlantic partners and commit to a path towards EU membership;

6. Emphasises that the rights to freedom of expression and assembly and to peaceful protest are fundamental freedoms and must be respected under all circumstances, particularly in a country aspiring to join the EU;

7. Urges the Georgian Government to respect Georgian citizens' constitutional rights and therefore expresses its concern about reports of riot police using disproportionate force to disperse protesters demonstrating against the controversial draft law; calls on the Georgian authorities to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for the unlawful and disproportionate use of force;

8. Underlines that the public watchdog role exercised by civil society and independent media is essential to a democratic society and crucial in advancing EU accession-related reforms and therefore calls on the Georgian authorities to do their utmost to guarantee an enabling environment in which civil society and independent media can thrive;

9. Denounces the fact that the Georgian Government is taking inspiration from highly controversial similar Russian legislation, such as Russia's 'Foreign Agents Law', which intentionally labels and discriminates against civil society organisations and activists and has also been used to stifle opposition to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and silence any remaining critical voices in the country;

10. Recalls that the European Council of 14 and 15 December 2023 granted Georgia candidate status on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 would be taken; stresses that this recommendation called on Georgia to ensure that civil society was able to operate freely and to fight disinformation against the EU and its values, and that the draft law violates both objectives;

11. Reminds the Georgian Government of the commitments it made and the values and principles it subscribed to when it applied for EU membership and calls on the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement and the President of the Commission to do the same;

12. Invites the Commission to submit an interim assessment of Georgia's progress related to the implementation of the nine steps indicated in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023;

13. Calls on the Commission to promptly assess the impact of Georgia's planned 'foreign agent' law on Georgia's continuous fulfilment of the visa liberalisation benchmarks, in particular the fundamental rights benchmark, a crucial component of the EU visa liberalisation policy;

14. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to assess the impact of this draft law on the EU's role as a donor in Georgia and to communicate clearly to the Georgian Government and Parliament about this possible impact and its consequences for EU funding in general;

15. Urges the Georgian Government to return to its European path, uphold its commitment to respect, strengthen and promote democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and genuinely engage in the full implementation of the steps required to fulfil the conditions for candidate status and EU membership, in a spirit of engagement and cooperation with Georgia's civil society and political opposition;

16. Deplores the personal role played by Georgia's sole oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who returned to active politics on 30 December 2023 becoming 'honorary chairman' of the Georgian Dream party, in the current political crisis and in yet another attempt to undermine the western-oriented course of the country in favour of pivoting towards Russia; reiterates its call on the Council and the EU's democratic partners to consider imposing personal sanctions on Ivanishvili for his role in the deterioration of the political process in Georgia and in working against the interests of its people;

17. Reiterates its unwavering support for the Georgian people's legitimate European aspirations and their wish to live in a prosperous country, free from corruption, that fully respects fundamental freedoms, protects human rights and guarantees an open society and independent media; underlines that the decision to grant Georgia EU candidate status was motivated by the wish to acknowledge the achievements and democratic efforts of Georgia's civil society as well as the overwhelming support for EU accession among its citizens;

18. Urges the Georgian Dream majority to withdraw its proposed constitutional legislation curtailing LGBTIQ rights, which represent an attack not only on the LGBTIQ community, but also on freedom of speech and a free civil society;

19. Reiterates its call on the Georgian authorities to release former President Mikheil Saakashvili on humanitarian grounds and to allow him to receive proper medical treatment abroad; emphasises that his case further highlights the importance of implementing genuine reform of the justice system;

20. Calls for an impartial and independent long-term international election observation mission by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to monitor the country's upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2024;

21. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the President, Government and Parliament of Georgia.