



GEORGIA

# Opponents Of Georgia's 'Foreign Agent' Law Accuse Government Of Targeting Them In Campaign Of Intimidation

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By Joshua Kucera

TBILISI -- Early in May, veteran investigative journalist Nino Zuriashvili arrived at the office of the news outlet she runs, Studio Monitori, to find the building vandalized. The walls were covered in posters with a photo of her face and the caption "There is no place in Georgia for agents." Spray-painted on the walls was "Agent Headquarters."

The next day, she found a new set of posters on the outside of her apartment building. Her car had also been vandalized, spray-painted with crude images of penises and the word "slut."

The attacks, she says, are due to her outspoken opposition to Georgia's controversial new "foreign agent" law. Just before the vandal attacks, she had started getting threatening phone calls late at night, cursing and insulting her. "You're calling the European law on transparency the 'Russian law,'" one caller yelled at her, she said.

It is a story that has been repeated many times across Georgia in recent weeks, amid what opponents and victims describe as a government-led campaign of intimidation and violence against its opponents.

The campaign has unfolded with dizzying speed and, combined with several new pieces of **repressive legislation** and unprecedented **attacks** on Georgia's traditional European and U.S. partners, bodes a disorientating new direction for the country.

## 'Trying To Shut Us Down'

For 25 years, Zuriashvili's journalism has been a thorn in the side of three successive Georgian governments, earning her death threats as long ago as the era of former President Eduard Shevardnadze. Now, though, she fears that her career is under its greatest threat yet. "They are trying to shut us down," she said.

Several other leaders of media organizations and watchdog NGOs have faced vandalism and threats following the same pattern as the attacks on Zuriashvili. Political opposition leaders have been **physically attacked**. Large numbers of ordinary Georgians who attended protests against the law have reported getting threatening phone calls.

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In the two months since the government introduced the law in parliament, "we have witnessed [human rights] violations that we have not witnessed before," said Tamar Oniani, the director of the human rights program at the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, a legal aid and watchdog group.

At protests against the law, many participants have been **beaten badly** by police, something uncommon before. The officers "even did not wear face masks and they knew that there were cameras, but they were not afraid of this. So, it's a very clear signal that they have guarantees of impunity," Oniani said.

Police and prosecutors have opened investigations into the attacks on government opponents and the threatening phone calls, but they appear to be "shams" that evince little interest in finding or punishing the perpetrators, she said.

## 'We Have A List'

Officials from the ruling Georgian Dream party have denied direct involvement in the attacks and harassment campaign. But senior officials have openly acknowledged that they are compiling **databases** of opponents. One senior police official, asked by a reporter why officers were beating young people at the protests, **replied**: "I don't beat young people, I beat scoundrels.... We have a list, I'll show it to you."

One Georgian Dream member of parliament, Dito Samkharadze, **posted** on May 31 on Facebook a list of organizations and parties that he accused of "bullying" the party. "Whatever you plan against us, we will return to you a thousand times worse," he wrote.

Most of the groups he identified on the list, including Studio Monitor, had already been attacked; others were attacked shortly after his post was published.

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Samkharadze's post amounted to an admission of the government's guilt, Oniani says. "We deem this as state-organized violence," she said. "He openly said it."

Zuriashvili says she forwarded Samkharadze's post to the officer investigating her case, as evidence of who had ordered the attacks. She said the officer was "a young, serious guy" but that she believed that his superiors would prevent him from pursuing the case.

She blamed the attack on "titushky," a word with **origins** in Ukraine's 2013 revolution meaning mercenaries hired by the government to violently attack opponents. The word has gained widespread usage in Georgia as these types of attacks have spread.

## Putin Moment?

At least 17 media organizations and NGOs have had their offices vandalized in the campaign, according to a tally by RFE/RL's Georgian Service. Ten political party offices, representing six different parties, have been similarly attacked. At least five opposition leaders have been physically attacked.

The country's Personal Data Protection Service has referred over 400 cases about threatening phone calls to the Prosecutor-General's Office, though that number is likely a fraction of the total number of calls, given that most people who get the calls don't report them, Oniani says.

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Georgian Dream took office in 2012 promising to improve the human rights record from the previous regime, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, which by the end of its rule also had become repressive, notorious for violence against protesters and intimidation of political opponents.

When Georgian Dream and its founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, were campaigning then, "they were harassed and there was the same kind of intimidation," said Kornely Kakachia, the head of the Tbilisi think tank Georgian Institute for Politics.

Now, as **elections loom in October** in which Georgian Dream will seek a fourth term, the party is following that same pattern, Kakachia says. This repression is an "old tradition of ruling parties, especially when they are ending up their second or third term, they...go with violence because this is the only thing, since they have nothing to offer the voters," he said.

As for the former promises of improving on the old regime's human rights record, "that is history," Kakachia said. Georgian Dream leaders appeared to have been surprised by the size and intensity of opposition to the "foreign agent" law and their rule generally, Kakachia says. Now, they think "the best defense is a good offense. This is how they understand this," he said.

Making matters more unpredictable is the fact that Ivanishvili -- still widely considered to be leading the party behind the scenes, now as its "honorary chairman" -- is apparently isolated and surrounded only by yes-men, Kakachia says. Ivanishvili is "having this [Russian President Vladimir] Putin moment...I think there is nobody in his entourage who can challenge him or tell him that this cannot be accepted by the international community or Georgian society," Kakachia said.

"There is no leverage on this person who is unaccountable to anybody," he added, "he just believes that he has to win this election, at any cost."

