

News

UPDATED March 10, 2023



By RFE/RL's Georgian Service

Georgian Parliament Revokes Controversial 'Foreign Agents' Bill That Sparked Protests



Opposition lawmakers in Georgia's parliament celebrate revoking the bill on "foreign agents" with the flags of Georgia and the EU on March 10.

In a dramatic turn of events, Georgian lawmakers have **voted** to drop a controversial "foreign agents" bill just days after its first reading sparked massive protests over fears the legislation, which mirrored a similar law in Russia, would have severely restricted dissent and the activity of civil society groups in the country and push it toward authoritarianism.

Parliament on March 10 voted in the second reading of the draft, a day after the ruling Georgian Dream party announced it was withdrawing the proposed legislation in the face of the protests.

Lawmakers voted 35-1 against the bill, thus canceling it. The legislation can be brought back within 30 days, but only if it contains changes.

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of the Georgian capital over the legislation, and another gathering is planned for March 10, though it is likely to be more celebratory than protest.

Key Moments In Georgians' Fight To Cancel 'Foreign Agents' Legislation

How Georgia's ruling party was forced to stand down on legislation that critics say would restrict the work of independent media and NGOs.

December 29, 2022

The People's Power party, which is allied to the ruling Georgian Dream party, announced plans to register two draft laws that would regulate the activity of "foreign agents."

February 14, 2023

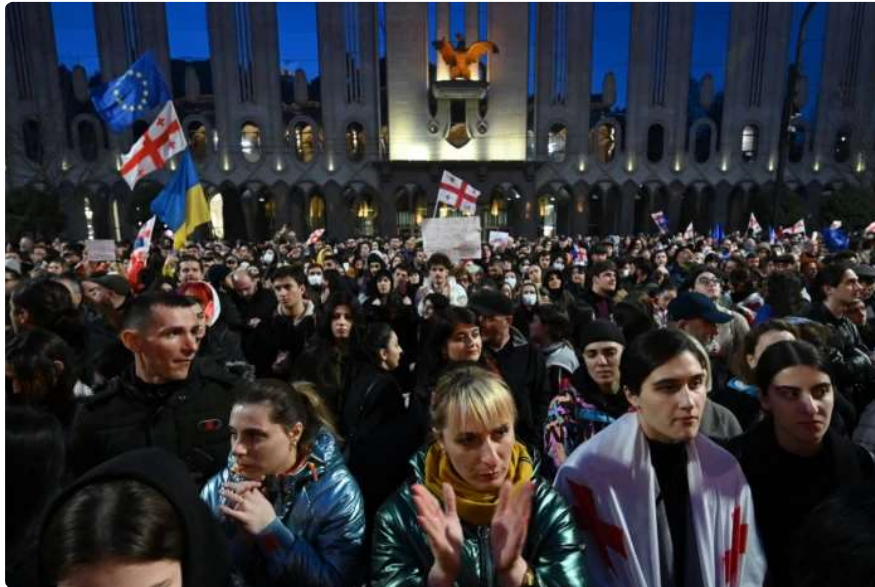
People's Power introduced draft legislation titled "On The Transparency Of Foreign Influence" for debate in parliament.

February 21, 2023

People's Power announced it would soon introduce another draft law, which it claimed would be analogous to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)

March 7, 2023

Georgian Dream passed the initial version of the draft "foreign agents" law in its first reading in parliament. Thousands took to the streets of Tbilisi and protested outside the parliament building. President Salome Zurbishvili supported the protesters, saying the law "must be revoked" and that it "could only have arisen at Moscow's behest."



Vano Shlamov (AFP)

March 8, 2023

Protests and clashes continued, with activists setting up roadblocks and police using water cannons on protesters.





Dato Koridze (RFE/RL)

March 9, 2023

Georgia's ruling party announced it had "unconditionally" withdrawn the controversial "foreign agents" law after days of violent protests against it.

March 10, 2023

Lawmakers in parliament voted against the bill 35-1 in the second reading of the draft, thus canceling it.

Source: Media reports
Wojtek Grojec/Ivan Guterman



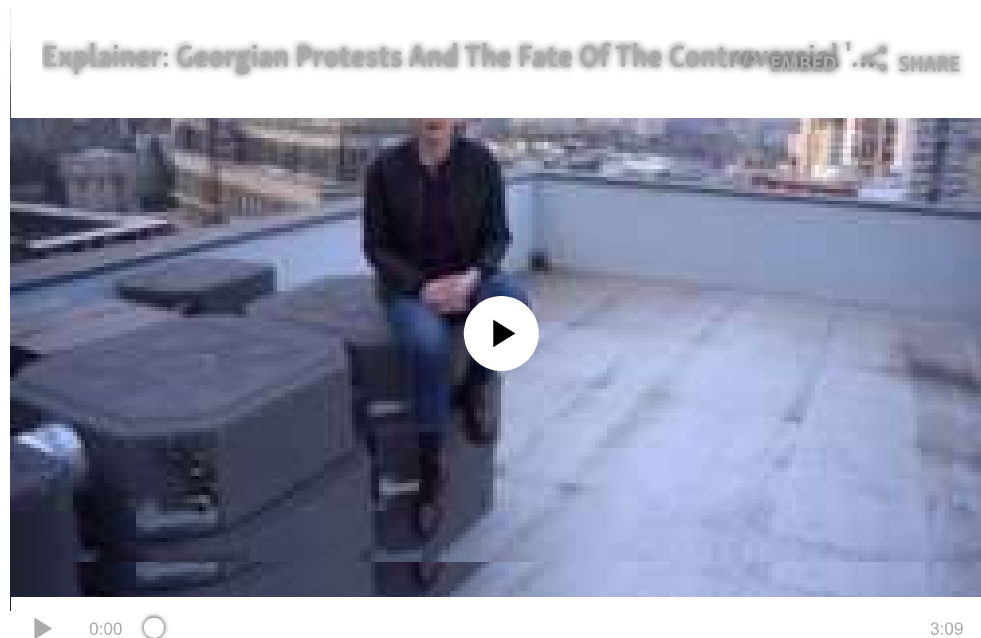
Police had met the demonstrators with tear gas, stun grenades, and water cannons while detaining dozens.

Georgia's Interior Ministry said on March 10 that all 133 people who were detained during the protests had been released. It added that almost 60 police officers were injured in clashes during the demonstrations.

The protests began on March 7 as parliament took up the "foreign agents" legislation despite warnings from critics that the bill, which would force civil society organizations that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad to be classified as "foreign agents," mirrors Russian legislation that has been used to stifle opposition voices and the independent media.

Georgian Dream officials said the legislation was aimed at bringing transparency and that it needed hold consultations to "better explain" the law's purpose in the future.

WATCH: Sophie Datishvili of RFE/RL's Georgian Service explains the background to the controversial "foreign agents" law and talks about why following three days of protests, it's now being withdrawn.



In Georgia, anti-Russian sentiment can often be strong. Russian troops still control around one-fifth of Georgia's territory, most of it taken during a lightning war in 2008 that was ostensibly about breakaway efforts in two northeastern regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By suddenly announcing that the bill was being "unconditionally" withdrawn, Georgian Dream deescalated the current crisis -- but tensions are likely to persist over the ruling party and its opponents' competing visions for the heavily polarized Caucasus country and its nearly 5 million residents.

The opposition has often criticized Georgian Dream for being too closely aligned with Moscow and the Kremlin's current war against another former Soviet republic, Ukraine, has heightened those concerns.

SEE ALSO:

Why The Georgian Government Climbed Down On The 'Foreign Agents' Law

The introduction of the legislation prompted rebukes from several corners, including diplomats from the European Union and the United States.

Georgia has been moving toward joining the European Union but EU officials said the "foreign agents" law would complicate that membership path. Last year, the bloc declined to grant candidate status to Georgia, citing stalled political and judicial reforms.

President Salome Zurbishvili has said she would veto the bill, although parliament could have overridden her veto.

Speaking on March 10, French President Emmanuel Macron said Georgia was under pressure while expressing hope that the country could find a "path towards greater serenity" and that there is a "calming down of regional tensions."

"Georgia is under some heavy pressure and I hope it can find calm," he said at a joint news conference with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in Paris.

Macron dismissed Russian claims that protests in the Caucasus country were orchestrated by the West.

"There is a tendency in the Kremlin, which is not new, to imagine that every public demonstration is a foreign manipulation because the fundamental belief is that there is neither public opinion nor free people," Macron said.

"As an old democracy, we have the right to believe the opposite."

With reporting by Reuters and AFP

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January 10, 2024

By [RFE/RL's Belarus Service](#)

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