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SafeAbroad Forecast Report

GEORGIA FOREIGN AGENT BILL AND RELATED PROTESTS

SAFETY IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Overview

Travelers should exercise increased caution in Georgia from May 2024 onward due to an increased frequency of demonstrations relating to the country's new foreign agent bill.

In May 2024, Georgia's parliament passed a controversial foreign agent bill requiring organizations receiving over 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as foreign agents. As a result, such organizations are subject to additional scrutiny from the Georgian government via targeted legislation and additional auditing/reporting of operations. This legislation received backlash, with opposition arguing that it stifles freedom of speech and is similar to suppressive Russian laws.

Protests have since erupted with demonstrators clashing with police, who used tear gas and water cannons to disperse crowds. SafeAbroad analysts assess that this has created an unsafe environment for travelers, especially in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi where protests are more frequent and intense.

Key Takeaways

1. **Frequent and intense protests are more likely to occur in Tbilisi, Georgia.** Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia and seats the buildings of major government institutions. As a result, demonstrations are likely to occur near these buildings and in heavily populated areas.
2. **While still generally safe, students should maintain awareness when traveling alone in Tbilisi and other major cities.** Georgia still remains a generally safe country despite the protests; however, it is important to maintain awareness by checking local media to stay informed on protest schedules and areas with a high-security presence.
3. **Demonstrations are highly likely to escalate into clashes with police.** Authorities have demonstrated a strong response to the protests, using water cannons, tear gas, and other measures to disperse crowds. This continuously escalates tensions and leads to unpredictable situations, as even peaceful protests can quickly turn confrontational.

Background

The current protests are in response to the foreign agent bill that the Georgian Parliament finalized in May; however, this is not the first time the government has tried to instate a foreign agent bill.

On March 7, 2023, the ruling Georgian Dream party attempted to pass a bill on the Law of Transparency of Foreign Influence in Parliament.¹ The bill required civil society groups that receive

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<https://apnews.com/article/georgia-parliament-law-foreign-influence-protests-final-66a08ba5ef849b24059ecfcf5420e9f0>

over 20 percent of their funding from abroad to be labeled as agents of foreign influence.² In response, tens of thousands of protestors took to the streets in opposition, believing the bill signifies a shift towards Russian authoritarianism and impedes Georgia's efforts for European Union integration. Protestors flooded around the Parliament building in Tbilisi, with reports of law enforcement being targeted by stones and Molotov cocktails.³ Authorities used water cannons and tear gas to disperse the massive crowds, and 133 protestors were arrested, including two U.S. nationals.^{4,5} On March 10, 2023, the foreign agent bill was formally repealed with a 35-1 vote in response to the widespread demonstrations.⁴ The Georgian Interior Ministry reportedly released all 133 detained protestors.

Georgia's foreign agent bill mirrors Russia's foreign agent law enacted in July 2012. The law requires all non-governmental organizations receiving funds from abroad and engaging in political activities to register with the Ministry of Justice as "foreign agents."⁶ NGOs designated as foreign agents are subjected to annual audits, quarterly financial reports, and biannual activity reports. In 2022, Russia expanded its definition of foreign agent to any person or entity who engages in civic activism or criticizes Russian policies.⁷ Since its inception, Russia has been accused of utilizing the legislation to censor free speech and remove civil rights groups.

Most of the protestors are younger Georgians who desire integration with the European Union. They favor Western democratic values and they fear the foreign agent bill will be the first step to a pro-Russian authoritarian regime.⁸ Many protestors also believe independent groups in Georgia will face the same restrictions on freedoms of association and expression as seen in Russia.⁹

On April 3, 2024, the Georgian Dream party announced they would be reintroducing the foreign agent bill to Parliament.¹⁰ Since the announcement, protestors have filled the streets of Tbilisi on a nightly basis to oppose the bill. Dozens of protestors have been arrested or hospitalized due to authorities deploying water cannons, tear gas canisters, and stun guns.¹¹ On May 18, President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the bill, citing it as a "Russian law."¹² Ten days later, on May 28, the

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<https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-foreign-agent-bill-becomes-law-international-outcry-european-union/>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/parliament-georgia-gives-initial-approval-foreign-agents-law-2023-03-07/>

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<https://apnews.com/article/georgia-foreign-agents-law-protests-parliament-1ab288cb3a3ccf330830ce7cae5603e2>

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/georgia-protests-americans-arrested-eu-russia-foreign-agents-law/>

⁶ https://www.nhc.no/content/uploads/2018/08/NHC_PolicyPaper_6_2014_Russiasforeignagentlaw.pdf

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/29/world/europe/georgia-protests-russia.html>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c511xrg3g4eo>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgias-ruling-party-says-its-reintroducing-draft-law-foreign-agents-2024-04-03/>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-mark-family-purity-georgia-anti-govt-protests-simmer-2024-05-17/>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-president-vetoes-foreign-agents-bill-tass-reports-2024-05-18/>

Georgian Parliament overrode the veto and the foreign agent bill was enacted as law shortly thereafter.¹³

Western Response

When the bill passed, western countries reassessed their relationships with Georgia. The U.S. is imposing visa restrictions and reviewing bilateral cooperation in response to actions undermining democracy in Georgia, and the European Parliament has halted Georgia's E.U. candidacy due to the new foreign agent bill conflicting with necessary democratic reforms.

Restrictions from the U.S. | With the new legislation, restrictions will be implemented affecting the financial and travel of individuals responsible for its passing.¹⁴ The Department of State is set to implement a visa restriction policy affecting current or former state or non-state actors, as well as their families, who have taken part in undermining Georgia's democracy.^{15, 16, 17} This includes individuals responsible for suppressing civil liberties and freedom of assembly.¹⁵ The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, also reported that due to the bill, there will be a full review of "bilateral cooperation" between the two countries including democracy; defense and security; economy and trade; and cultural exchanges.^{18, 19}

Georgia's E.U. Candidacy Status Paused | On April 25, the European Parliament passed a resolution stating that Georgia will not be granted accession negotiations to the European Union.²⁰ On November 8, 2023, the European Commission recommended nine steps for reform which must be completed to succeed in accession to the European Union.²¹ Georgia's new foreign agent bill violates steps three and nine.¹⁸ The European Commission will continue to pause Georgia's candidacy status until they repeal the foreign agent bill, likely due to the bill's anti-democratic rhetoric, which goes against the European Union's general values.²²

Implications

As of June 2024, protests in Georgia and efforts to reverse the foreign agent bill are ongoing.

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<https://apnews.com/article/georgia-law-foreign-influence-protests-veto-c78329efd301cab289c1ab2d9ae66b41>

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/14/us-georgia-unrest-congress-00157989>

¹⁵

<https://theatlnews.co/politics/2024/05/23/u-s-restricts-georgian-visas-launches-relations-review-over-for-eign-agents-bill/>

¹⁶

<https://www.state.gov/announcement-of-a-visa-restriction-policy-for-undermining-democracy-in-Georgia-and-Comprehensive-Review-of-All-U.S.-Georgia-Cooperation>

¹⁷ <https://osce.usmission.gov/statement-on-georgias-law-on-foreign-agents/>

¹⁸

<https://theatlnews.co/politics/2024/05/23/u-s-restricts-georgian-visas-launches-relations-review-over-for-eign-agents-bill/>

¹⁹ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-georgia/>

²⁰ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12368>

²¹ <https://civil.ge/archives/568417>

²²

<https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-parliament-pass-foreign-agent-russian-law-amid-pro-eu-protest-crackdown-tbilisi/>

Travelers to Guyana should remain cautious of protests while in the country, particularly in the capital Tbilisi, due to the increased likelihood of violent clashes.

What to watch for in 2024:

- **The passing of the foreign agent bill will impact educational institutions in Georgia.** The bill requires that media, NGOs, and other non-profit organizations that receive over 20 percent of their funding be listed as foreign agents.²³ Universities are considered NGOs, and now have to register themselves with the government and provide increasingly detailed financial disclosures.²⁴ Some civil society leaders have stated that they will refuse to comply with the new rules; however, the new law will likely negatively affect universities and international education institutions with partnerships abroad. Institutions may limit said partnerships to avoid triggering the foreign agent bill or otherwise may necessitate budget restrictions affecting exchange and study abroad programs to comply with the new reporting requirements. Travelers in Georgia may experience repercussions of institutional budget changes mid-semester, and future opportunities to study abroad in Georgia may be limited due to downsizing or restrictions
- **Financial sanctions may affect Georgia's access to global banking.** Travelers may face difficulties with credit card usage and ATM withdrawals, necessitating reliance on cash. Currency exchange rates and availability may be impacted as well.
- **Since the bill was passed, opponents will have their next chance to vote out the ruling party in the October election;**²⁵ however, any opposition faces significant disadvantages. A new electoral system requires a party to secure at least five percent of the vote to gain representation, making it increasingly difficult to challenge the current ruling party. The opposition party most likely to surpass this threshold is the former ruling party, the United National Movement (ENM). Nevertheless, Georgian Dream was able to oust ENM in 2012 due to widespread dissatisfaction with ENM's behavior while in power. Therefore, although ENM is the most popular opposition party, many dissatisfied with the Georgian Dream still consider supporting ENM unacceptable. In the coming months, travelers can expect frequent demonstrations throughout the country, especially in urban centers, with a heightened risk of violence. These protests may become especially frequent as October elections approach, as opposition parties begin their campaigns and clashes between counter-protestors become an additional risk.

Timeline

| Sample Table Format | | |
|---------------------|---|------------------|
| March 2023 | On March 7, 2023, the Georgian Parliament passed the first appearance of the foreign agent bill, with 76 votes for and 13 votes | Political Action |

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<https://apnews.com/article/georgia-parliament-law-foreign-influence-protests-final-66a08ba5ef849b24059ecfcf5420e9f0>

²⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-tbilisi-foreign-agent-law-crisis-explained-georgian-dream/>

²⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-protesters-elections-october-foreign-agent-law/32972822.html>

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|--------------------------------|---|------------------|
| | against. ²⁶ | |
| March 2023 | On March 8, 2023, 10,000+ demonstrators congregated outside the Georgian Parliament to protest the potential bill. ²⁷ | Protest |
| March 2023 | On March 10, 2023, the propositions for a foreign agent bill were retracted. ²⁸ | Political Action |
| April 2024 | On April, 3, 2024, the Georgia Dream Party (GD) aimed to bring back the foreign agent bill. ²⁹ | Political Action |
| April 2024 | On April 17, 2024, 10,000+ protesters clashed with security forces outside of the Georgian Parliament. ³⁰ | Protest |
| April 2024 | Thousands of protesters continuously protest in front of Parliament and through the streets of Tbilisi, with face-offs with police forces being frequent. ³¹ | Protest |
| May 2024 | On May 11, 2024, 50,000 rivals to the foreign agent bill rallied through the streets of Tbilisi. ³² | Protest |
| May 2024 | On May 18, 2024, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the foreign agent bill. ³³ | Political Action |
| May 2024 | On May 28, 2024, the Parliament voted to overrule the president's veto, and intensified demonstrations ensued, with clashes with police forces growing. ³⁴ | Protest |
| <i>Not an exhaustive list.</i> | | |

²⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/07/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-intl/index.html>

²⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/08/europe/georgia-protests-wednesday-intl/index.html>

²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgias-parliament-drops-foreign-agents-bill-2023-03-10/>

²⁹ <https://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/draft-law-of-georgia-on-foreign-influence-transparency>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgias-parliament-approves-law-foreign-agents-first-reading-2024-04-17/>

³¹

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-protest-georgia-against-foreign-agents-bill-2024-04-28/>

³²

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-deeply-alarmed-by-georgias-foreign-agent-bill-sullivan-says-2024-05-11/>

³³

<https://cpj.org/2024/05/georgian-parliament-overrides-presidential-veto-adopts-russian-style-foreign-agent-law/>

³⁴

<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-05-28/georgian-parliament-votes-to-override-presidential-veto-of-foreign-agent-bill>

