

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Joseph Borell Calls 'Transparency of Foreign Influences' Bill 'Disturbing'

The Bill "On Transparency of Foreign Influences" initiated by the People's Power, the party founded by the deputies who formally left the Georgian Dream party, was recently registered at the session of the Bureau of the Parliament of Georgia and was handed over to the Legal Committee for consideration.

The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borell called the bill 'disturbing'.

Joseph Borell spoke to Radio Tavisupleba and reminded Georgia that creating a favorable environment for civil society and media freedom are part of the 12 recommendations issued by the EU for acquiring candidacy status.

"Creating a favorable environment for civil society, maintaining it and ensuring media freedom is the basis of democracy. This is also a key issue in the process of joining the European Union and is part of the 12 criteria.

Under international law, states are obliged to respect, protect and promote a safe environment for civil society, as well as to protect freedom of the media and expression.

International human rights law and standards recognize that access to resources, includ-



ing funding, is an integral component of freedom of association under Article 22 of the Interna-

tional Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Georgia is part of that.

Access to domestic and international funding should not be limited, but should be facilitated,

because it is necessary for the existence and essential work of civil society," Borell said.

MFA of Georgia Calls on Lukashenko to Respect Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Georgia Amid Aslan Bzhania's Visit to Minsk

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

The De Facto President of Occupied

Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, met with the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk.

The President of Belarus thanked Bzhania for his visit and told Bzhania that Belarus, Georgia and the

so-called Republic of Abkhazia should 'unite'. Lukashenko himself arrived in occupied Sukhumi

on September 28.

"Why shouldn't we visit each other? I ask this question, I have not heard why it is necessary to intensify relations based on this. On the contrary, our relations should be united. We are not giant states to divide several countries and people. We should be closer with each other in this difficult period: Tbilisi, Sukhumi, and Minsk. We should all somehow unite, strive towards each other. In this context, I will discuss your visit to Belarus and thank you once again for fulfilling your promise and coming to us," said Lukashenko.

In turn, Bzhania told him that his words will be heard by many, including in Georgia, and he hopes that his "wise words will

reach the hearts of these people." Before visiting Minsk, Bzhania was in Moscow.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia responded to the meeting between Lukashenko and Bzhania and condemned the meeting of the President of Belarus with the representatives of the Russian occupation regime.

MFA of Georgia called on Belarus to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia:

"The mentioned action grossly violates the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within the internationally recognized borders and represents an attempt to legitimize the Russian occupation regime.

We call on Belarus to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within the internationally recognized borders, to stop taking actions that contradict the fundamental principles and norms of international law," the statement reads.



The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Irakli Kobakhidze Says Ukraine Gov't Actions Don't Allow Participation in Official Formats



Chairman of Georgian Dream Irakli Kobakhidze responded to the invitation of the Georgian parliamentary delegation to Kyiv by the Ukrainian Rada on February 24 and said that the position of the Ukrainian govern-

ment 'does not allow' participation in official formats.

Kobakhidze accused the Ukrainian government of being 'busy spreading lies' about the Georgian Dream and said that they called Georgian people "to the second front", adding that in this situation, he considers an official visit 'unimaginable'.

"We express our full solidarity with the Ukrainian people and our friendly country, but the government's actions are directly directed, including against the will of the Ukrainian people. When they directly call the Georgian people to the second front, when they spread a shameful lie that the Georgian government is killing Mikheil Saakashvili, etc. When the authorities of a war-torn country are busy spreading such

lies, it is absolutely unthinkable, and when they directly call us to the second front, under such conditions, of course, an official visit is unthinkable. We express our full solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and this is not only expressed in words, but also in concrete actions; But as for the position of the Ukrainian government, this position does not allow us to participate in official formats, which is very sad," said Kobakhidze.

lies, it is absolutely unthinkable, and when they directly call us to the second front, under such conditions, of course, an official visit is unthinkable.

We express our full solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and this is not only expressed in words, but also in concrete actions; But as for the position of the Ukrainian government, this position does not allow us to participate in official formats, which is very sad," said Kobakhidze.

EU Spokesman Peter Stano Condemns Bill Initiated by People's Power

Peter Stano, EU Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy called the bill registered in the Parliament of Georgia, which is supported by the Georgian Dream, similarly to Joseph Borell, 'disturbing'.

"The bill submitted to the parliament by People's Power is worrying. Creating and main-

taining a favorable environment for civil society and ensuring media freedom is the basis of democracy. This is also key in the process of joining the Euro-



pean Union and is part of the 12 priorities," Stano said.

The speaker of the European Union also touched upon the principles of international law and the pact on civil and political rights signed by Georgia, the violation of which would limit the right to association.

"Under international law, states have a duty to respect, protect and promote a safe and con-

ducive environment for civil society, as well as freedom of expression and media. International human rights law and standards recognize access to resources, in-

cluding funding, as an integral component of freedom of association, as it is provided for in Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Georgia is a party. Access to domestic and international funding should not be limited, but it should be promoted as necessary for the existence and meaningful work of civil society," Stano stated.

Opinion & Analysis

Is Georgian Dream About to Start Looking for 'Agents of the West?'

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The party People's Power submitted a draft law on the detection of 'foreign agents' to the legislative body. As experts note, this is the transfer of a similar law existing in Russia to Georgia and aims to limit those non-governmental organizations that receive a certain part of their funding from the West. Adopting this law will further distance the current government of Georgia from the West.

It's easy to believe that a few deputies in the parliament, who call themselves People's Power, will not be able to pass any bill and their initiative should not be given much attention, but it must be taken into account People's Power consists of deputies who left the Georgian Dream remain in the parliamentary majority nevertheless.

People's Power announced for the first time on December 29, 2022, that it intends to present a draft law on non-governmental organizations operating with foreign funding. On February 14, 2023, the draft law was officially submitted under the title "On transparency of foreign influence".

According to this bill, a register of agents of foreign influence should be created, where all non-business legal entities and media organizations with more than 20% of their revenues financed by a 'foreign power' should be registered. Avoiding registration, as well as the failure to submit the financial declaration within the time limit set by the law, should be fined in the amount of 25 thousand GEL.

There are other obligations, the non-fulfillment of which also provides for fines. In addition, payment of the fine does not release the entity from the obligation to register as an 'agent of foreign influence'.

People's Power claims that the said draft law is mainly created according to the relevant legislation in force in the USA and

also takes into account "the best practices of other democratic countries". However, the representatives of the opposition are more reminded of the law on 'foreign agents' adopted in Russia, which has existed in this country since 2012 and has been gradually expanded over time - it has also been extended to individual citizens and activists.

In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russian legislation on foreign agents violated human rights. It is also worth noting that a similar Russian law on 'foreign agents' has been in force in Hungary since 2017, although according to the decision of the European Union Court, the said Hungarian law contradicts the legislation of the European Union.

The representatives of the Georgian Dream do not disagree with the bill on 'agents of foreign influence' and noted that they have nothing against it in principle. Mikheil Sarjveladze, the chairman of the Human Rights Protection Committee of the Parliament, said that "the public has the right to see who is being fi-

nanced and how".

Deputy Rima Beradze, a member of the Georgian Dream, states that although the financing of non-governmental organizations is still transparent today, the draft law on 'agents of foreign influence' will add 'more light' in this regard. Irakli Kadagishvili, the Committee on Procedural Issues and Rules Chairman, noted that the adoption of this law "will be useful for everyone".

The opposition directly criticizes the Georgian Dream and considers it to be the real author of the bill introduced by People's Power. Lelo representative Davit Usupashvili believes that People's Power directly voices Bidzina Ivanishvili's interests and initiates "the existing law in Moscow". The Georgian Dream declares everyone who takes a pro-Western position as a 'foreign agent'.

According to the opposition, the purpose of the bill is short and clear: to smear the reputation of non-governmental organizations and critical media organizations that receive grants from international, authorita-

tive, democracy-oriented organizations. In short, in this way, the critical media and the third sector disappeared in Putin's Russia. It should be noted that the proxy regime of Abkhazia intends to adopt a similar law on 'foreign agents'. According to the opposition, the non-governmental sector, which receives support for projects important to democracy, receives transparent funding and has nothing to hide. The West transparently finances non-governmental organizations, but the funds received from Russia are completely concealed. People's Power and the Georgian Dream have not said a word about this. Badri Japaridze, General Secretary of Lelo notes that the Georgian Dream has not identified even one Russian agent during its 10-year rule.

There is also an opinion that talking about the bill on agents of foreign influence is a kind of tactic of the ruling party, by which it intimidates the opposition forces inside the country and also tries to respond to a frequent criticism from the West. However, the situation is such that there is no time for such 'maneuvering'. In today's international situation, copying the 'Putin model' is certainly possible, but it is hardly a rational step.

Weather

Wednesday, February 22

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 10°C

Night Mostly Cloudy
Low: 3°C

Thursday, February 23

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 8°C

Night Mostly Cloudy
Low: 0°C

published by

The Messenger

43, Chovelidze st., Tbilisi, 0108, Georgia
Founded by Prof.

Zaza Gachechiladze

Tamar Gachechiladze
Publisher

Mob.: +995 599 565621; +995 577 760000
E-mail: messenger@messenger.com.ge
http://www.messenger.com.ge/

Nino Metreveli
Commercial Director

Mariam Mchedlidze
Editor-in-Chief

Khatuna Gogichaishvili
Layout Designer, Photographer

The Messenger welcomes your contributions. If you are interested in submitting an article or news item please contact.

All contributions should be submitted by e-mail.

The Messenger Georgia's English language daily is an independent newspaper, and,

therefore, the opinions expressed in some articles do not necessarily coincide with those of the newspaper. We take no responsibility for any claims made in advertisements.

The Messenger preserves the style of a source written in English where possible.