

'My Moral Compass Demands It': Russian Emigres Rally Alongside Georgians Against 'Foreign Influence' Bill

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May 03, 2024



Thousands of Georgians rally outside the country's parliament building in downtown Tbilisi. **MT**

TBILISI, Georgia — Anton reached into his backpack and pulled out a pair of plastic goggles and a meager cloth face mask — protection against tear gas and pepper spray.

That night, like the night before, the 34-year-old Russian emigre and self-described political activist planned to stay out until daybreak alongside Georgian protesters, showing solidarity against what he sees as a potential Russian-style “dictatorship” emerging in Georgia should the country’s parliament approve a controversial “foreign influence” bill.

In a Thursday evening interview with the Moscow Times in downtown Tbilisi, Anton, who requested not to publish his surname over fear of running into trouble with the Georgian

authorities, said that he intends to keep going until the protests end.

“I can’t help but go out,” he said. “My moral compass demands it.”

Each night, he joins tens of thousands of Georgians who have taken to the streets across the country for over two weeks now in opposition to legislation that would require organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to identify as “agents of foreign influence.” The ruling Georgian Dream coalition maintains that such legislation is a necessary transparency measure, but critics say it is a facsimile of repressive laws in Russia.

Like Anton, other members of Tbilisi’s sizable Russian diaspora community have come out to demonstrate against the bill, highlighting a desire to protest against familiar traces of authoritarianism despite potential legal risks down the road.

The ongoing protests seem to have posed to them an uncomfortable question: Is this the time and place to speak out? Opinions diverge on the issue. And it is impossible to know how many Russians have attended the protests.

But those who do go often prefer to keep a low profile.

Many in the diaspora community simply choose to stay away, said Alexander, a 36-year-old Russian emigre in Tbilisi who requested to use only his first name due to concerns over possible reprisal by the Russian authorities.

“It’s complicated,” he said of his own thoughts on attending the protests as a Russian citizen. “I don’t want to be an imposter for Georgian people.”

Nevertheless, when a Georgian friend asked him if he wanted to attend a demonstration earlier this week, his curiosity got the better of him. He initially went just to observe, he said, but he could not help getting caught up in the emotion of the moment.

“It’s like a wave of inspiration that Georgia deserves to have a bright future in the European Union,” he said of the mood during the protest. Demonstrations show no sign of slowing down, and Alexander said he plans to go again.

Even so, he and others know they are risking potential legal troubles. Georgia maintains a liberal entry regime for foreigners including Russians, who can stay in the country for one year without a visa. But their access can sometimes depend on the whims of the authorities, who can refuse entry at any point.

That is to say nothing of Russians’ constant fear for the safety of loved ones back home if they are visibly active in politics, even while abroad.

In that regard, Moscow does appear to be watching the protests in the South Caucasian country closely. “Georgia is our neighbor. It is in our interests that the situation in Georgia is stable and predictable,” Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [told](#) reporters in early April.

State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin, echoing Georgian Dream’s rhetoric in an apparent attempt to discredit the protesters, [wrote](#) on Telegram on April 18 that “[those] who oppose the adoption of the law clearly act in the interests of another state, not exactly their own

country.”

Yet the warnings from Moscow appear to have little influence over Russian emigres in their decision to attend the protests or not.

At a demonstration in front of the Georgian parliament building on April 20, a group of Russian women unfurled a purple banner with a simple message written in English: “This law was passed in Russia,” referring to Russia’s own “foreign agents” law adopted in 2012.

They also carried signs decrying the law’s devastating effects. “That’s why a million Russians left [the country],” one sign read. “That’s why the war [in Ukraine] has been going on for two years,” read another.

One of the participants in that demonstration was Ekaterina, 30, who requested not to use her last name. She said that by taking part in the action, she wanted to draw a connection to how similar legislation has harmed people in other countries, including Russia.

“I certainly understand how Georgians feel with the possibility of this happening to them,” she said. “And I really want to support them.”

Georgians themselves seem to be welcoming — even encouraging — Russian emigres to participate.

When asked at Thursday’s rally whether he believed Russians should be attending the ongoing demonstrations in Georgia, 20-year-old protester Archil Tumanishvili said they should. “If they’re running away from the Russian regime, then yes,” he said. “Otherwise it means they’re using this [country] as a hideout and a shelter.”

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Russians have received a cold welcome in Georgia since arriving over the border in droves after the Kremlin announced a “partial” military mobilization in September 2022.

Even at the main protest site along Tbilisi’s main thoroughfare Rustaveli Avenue, signs of anti-Russian sentiment abound. Graffiti scrawled on walls and sidewalks reads “Fuck Ruzzia.” So, too, have Georgians adopted the slogan “No to the Russian law!” as their primary message at the demonstrations.

Ekaterina said that last year, she experienced one moment of anti-Russian sentiment at protests against a previous version of the “foreign influence” law — which Georgian Dream shelved following mass rallies — but the mood from Georgians this time around is anything but hostile.

“They hear that we speak Russian, they have no problem approaching us,” she said, adding that she believes some Russian emigres believe it is not their place to get involved with another country’s internal affairs.

But based on her experience, she thinks “Georgians who come out to protest will not say that you have no moral right to stand with us on Rustaveli.”

“But that’s what the Russians think.”

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