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Moscow Claims West Planning Regime Change in Georgia

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Georgians in Tbilisi protest the "foreign influence" legislation. **David Mdzinarishvili / EPA / TASS**

Russia's deputy foreign minister claimed Tuesday that the West may be planning to overthrow the government of Georgia ahead of its parliamentary elections later this year, as tensions continue to boil over in the South Caucasus nation after the recent passing of a controversial "foreign influence" law.

"We see Western attempts to escalate the situation in Georgia in the context of the parliamentary elections scheduled for October," Mikhail Galuzin told the state-run TASS news agency, without providing evidence for the claims.

"We don't rule out that the goal is to try to put in action the 'Maidan' scenario of regime change in the hope of creating another hotbed of tension near Russia's borders," the deputy foreign minister added, referring to the 2014 revolution in Ukraine that toppled former president Viktor Yanukovych. Like Ukraine, Georgia gained independence after the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov drew similar parallels between the mass demonstrations in Ukraine a decade ago and this year's protests in Georgia over the widely criticized "foreign influence" law — which requires NGOs and media outlets that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as entities "pursuing the interests of a foreign power."

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

Georgian parliament speaker Shalva Papuashvil on Monday signed the legislation into law despite weeks of mass protests, a presidential veto and condemnation from Tbilisi's Western partners.

Georgia's opposition has vowed to revoke the law if they win enough seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Washington, meanwhile, announced new visa restrictions for "anyone who undermines democratic processes or institutions" surrounding the Georgian elections as it launched a review of bilateral cooperation with Tbilisi.

The Georgian Dream ruling party faces mounting accusations of bringing the country closer to Moscow at the expense of deepening ties with the West. However, the party insists that it remains committed to Georgia's aspiration of joining the EU, which is enshrined in the constitution.

AFP contributed reporting.

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