Commentary # 9

Téa Parulava

Ukraine Listens, Georgia Represses

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On July 23, while Russian missiles continued to strike Ukrainian cities, thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets of Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro and Odesa not in protest of war, but in defence of democratic values. It was the first major anti-government protest since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, a striking reminder that even in wartime, Ukrainians demand accountability from their leaders.

The trigger was Law 12412, passed by Ukraine's parliament and swiftly signed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It placed two of Ukraine's most critical anti-corruption institutions — the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) — under tighter government control. It gave the Prosecutor General the power to close high-profile cases and reassign investigations, thereby undermining the independence of institutions established after the 2014 Maidan Revolution, which aimed to ensure that Ukraine would never again fall into the grip of systemic corruption.

President Zelenskyy defended the move by claiming it was necessary to purge Russian influence from Ukraine's anti-corruption infrastructure. But many in civil society, as well as Ukraine's European partners, saw something far more dangerous: the erosion of hard-won democratic checks and balances.

Thousands of demonstrators rallied in front of the presidential office in Kyiv, chanting *"Veto the law," "Shame,"* and *"We are the power."* Despite the war, despite exhaustion, despite trauma, Ukrainians once again made it clear that democracy is not a luxury for peacetime — it is a necessity, even in war.

The law was introduced amid rising tensions between Ukraine's "old guard" institutions, such as the SBU and the Prosecutor General's Office, which are perceived as loyal to the presidency, and the "new" anti-corruption bodies established after 2014 with strong Western backing. Days before the vote, NABU accused a senior SBU official of accepting a $300,000 bribe to destroy evidence in a case related to conscript smuggling. It had also made corruption allegations against a former Deputy Prime Minister. In response, the SBU raided NABU's offices, accused several of its staff — including outspoken deputy director Vitaliy Shabunin — of ties to Russia or military evasion. Critics called the charges politically motivated and retaliatory.

The backlash at home and abroad was swift. Transparency International warned that parliament had "stripped society of its anti-corruption institutions" — some of the most important achievements since Maidan. EU officials, including Marta Kos, voiced serious concern. Germany said Ukraine's path to EU membership had been "hampered." Even longtime supporters abroad were alarmed, while Ukraine's enemies seized on the crisis for their own propaganda purposes.

President Zelenskyy didn't hesitate to act. He convened meetings with government and law enforcement officials, acknowledged public criticism, and pledged swift corrective measures. "Of course, everyone has heard what people are saying these days... It's not falling on deaf ears," he wrote on X. "We analysed all concerns, all aspects of what needs to be changed and

what needs to be stepped up. I will propose a bill to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine that will be the response. It will ensure the strength of the rule of law system, and there will be no Russian influence or interference in law enforcement activities. And very importantly – all the norms for the independence of anti-corruption institutions will be in place…".

In most countries under attack, democracy fades into the background. However, in Ukraine, even under bombardment, civil society continues to shape the political agenda. The president, once perceived as above criticism during wartime, is now being held to account by the people who elected him. The unwritten wartime contract — "we fight the war, you defend the future" — was violated, and the people responded.

Since 2014, Ukrainians have overthrown a kleptocracy, built independent institutions, and defended their sovereignty on the battlefield. They understand that being European means more than geography — it means embracing the principles of the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and justice. When those principles are threatened, they rise again and again.

> Ukraine doesn't need to prove it belongs in the EU. It already acts like a member, because its people behave like Europeans. They reject impunity. They demand good governance. And when necessary, they confront power — not with violence, but with banners, protests, and democratic resolve.

The contrast with Georgia

In Tbilisi and other major cities of Georgia, hundreds of thousands of citizens have taken to the streets to protest the ruling Georgian Dream party's efforts to halt the EU integration process—moves that violate the Constitution of Georgia. These protests also oppose a series of anti-democratic laws aimed at silencing independent media, civic groups, and anti-corruption watchdogs—laws that echo Russian authoritarian models. Citizens condemn the politicisation of the public sector through the dismissal of experienced, pro-European professionals, discarding invaluable institutional knowledge essential for Georgia's democratic development and European aspirations.

Shortly after Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023, instead of strengthening democratic institutions, the government chose to undermine them, betraying the public's desire for European integration and jeopardising the country's EU prospects.

Despite eight months of continuous protests, the government has responded not with reform but with escalating repression. Officials have intensified their crackdown, increasingly relying on oppression rather than dialogue. Excessive police force, arbitrary detentions, and punitive fines highly disproportionate to the average Georgian's income have become the primary tools to suppress dissent. In doing so, the ruling party has disregarded the public will and deliberately steered Georgia away from the European path, drawing it closer to Russia's orbit in terms of governance style and geopolitical alignment.

As time passes and protests persist, the government, rather than engaging with its citizens, has further isolated itself from both its people and the broader democratic world. Unlike Ukraine's leadership, which continues to prioritise its place in Europe, Georgia's ruling party shows no regard for international credibility or democratic values.

By contrast, Ukraine remains a vivid example of how European values endure even in the midst of war. The first protests in Kyiv led to tangible results, underscoring that Ukraine's EU membership is a matter of justice, not charity.

By Téa Parulava

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Téa is a Georgian journalist, editor, communications expert and blogger with extensive experience in media, cultural reporting, and international relations. Based in Vienna, she works as a correspondent for Georgian media, covering cultural and political developments in Austria, Central, and Eastern Europe.
www.euroambebi.eu

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