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A goal for democracy

In Georgia, football is emerging with renewed vigour — playing an important role in the Europeanisation of the country

In Georgia football and politics are closely intertwined. In the Soviet Union, football was the glue of Georgian national identity. And now, the game is coming back strong, as Georgian stars such as Napoli winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia are emerging in Europe and are becoming new idols for locals.

That's why it's especially noteworthy, that the intense street protests in Georgia against the bill on 'transparency of foreign funding', labelling civil society organisations 'Foreign Agents', were garnered by a Georgian footballers' social media flash mob through pro-European messages.

In February 2023, the splinter parliamentary group People's Power, which formally broke away from the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, initiated the bill. The move was strongly supported by the GD but broadly perceived as a deviation from the democratisation and Europeanisation of Georgia, which led to public turmoil in the streets of Tbilisi. The successful democratisation and EU integration of Georgia is supported by more than 80 per cent of the population. From the very beginning, the football community – young stars, veterans, local football clubs and fan clubs – clearly articulated their position against Georgia's impending democratic regression. Georgian football has also continuously supported the European path of the country – and this is crucial.

Footballer unite for a European future

One of the first reactions to the Foreign Agents draft law from the Georgian football scene was a Facebook post by Georgian legend Shota Arveladze, who is well-known for his strong positions on various social and political issues, such as the war against Ukraine. Arveladze is a bombardier of the Georgian National Team and his club performance is considered the most successful and stable career a Georgian player has

had in Europe since the 1990s. According to him, 'no government, nor any law, should have a mechanism to label someone an "Agent" due to a different opinion. This is our past.'

On the same day, several Georgian football clubs made consecutive official statements against the draft law. The largest and most historically significant club, Dinamo Tbilisi, published the following: 'any initiative that is a deviation from the European path is considered as a threat by the club, which historically had been one of the main markers of Georgian national identity' (this refers to the importance of the club for the Georgian people during the Soviet Union). European foreign policy identity and the European choice of Georgian people were the main themes in the statements of three more football clubs (FC Gagra and FC Zestaphoni among them). The Lokomotiv Tbilisi director posted: 'no to the Russian Law and no to anything Russian.'

The National Team captain Guram Kashia posted on his Instagram: 'there is no alternative other than the Europeanchoice.'

On 6 – 8 March, when protesters were attacked with water cannons and tear gas, and dozens of demonstrators were arrested, opposition politicians and journalists among them, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia posted on his Facebook account:'the future of Georgia is in Europe.' Important National Team players and top European stars such as George Mamardashvili, Georges Mikautadze, George Loria, George Tsitaishvili, Budu Zivzivadze and others showed unity under the same motto on their social media accounts. The National Team captain Guram Kashia posted on his Instagram: 'there is no alternative other than the Europeanchoice.'

This emotional reaction was reflected in the fans' narratives as well. The Black Sea Pirates, Dinamo Batumi's fan club, responded to MP Kavelashvili's statement with banners and posts saying: 'the EU is our goal, Article 78' (referring to the Georgian constitution in which European integration is embraced as a foreign policy priority of Georgia). Also, many of the Georgian footballers' posts about the country's European future were put on banners shortly before the opening Euro 2024 qualifying match against Norway in Batumi.

Views leaning towards the Russian orbit

However, there is also the flip side of the coin: two legends of Georgian football are among the architects and supporters of the controversial anti-democratic Foreign Agents bill. MP Mikheil Kavelashvili, a former

Georgian National Team forward (1992-2002) actually initiated the law. According to him, 'the EU is not a goal; [his] goal is the immortality of the Georgian nation and the eternity of Georgia'. This approach, as well as the generally anti-Western character of the People's Power's narratives, equalised the draft law as leaning towards the Russian orbit. Kavelashvili's statement was a signal to Georgian society that Georgia's Europeanisation is at risk.

As a GD MP, Levan Kobiashvili is among the voters in favour of the bill, who are frequently referred to as 'Russians', 'traitors' or 'slaves' by protestants.

Another Georgian football legend, the President of the Georgian Football Federation (GFF) Levan Kobiashvili, became a controversial figure too: Kobiashvili is a well-respected and broadly loved football veteran, author of the only Georgian hattrick in the UEFA Champions League (FC Schalke vs. PSV Eindhoven in 2005) and the winning goal-scorer in the historic victory against the Croatian National Team in 2006. As a GD MP, he is among the voters in favour of the bill, who are frequently referred to as 'Russians', 'traitors' or 'slaves' by protestants. Considering that Kobiashvili simultaneously runs the GFF under his second term, the anti-Foreign Agents law resonance from the Georgian football society was even more interesting and encouraging for the Georgian public.

Georgian football has started to wake up in recent years. Emerging world-class stars like Kvaratskhelia, Mamardashvili and Mikautadze made the game as precious as it was during the Soviet times for Georgians. Even more than that, football became a valuable actor in the democratisation and Europeanisation of Georgia. That is exactly why the positioning of the football society against the 'Russian law' and detachment from Europeanisation is important in galvanising the broader Georgian public's protest for the European future of Georgia.



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