

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

So full disclosure, as we like to say on this show, we like to show our workings.

And our workings were, on Friday afternoon, that our work was basically done.

We had prepared and done the full episode that you should be listening to.

And we are still going to bring you that episode, don't worry, we'll be coming up shortly.

But then, just as we were about to press the publish button, this happened.

And if you're just joining us, I want to bring you the breaking news that's come through in the past few minutes.

That Gary Lineker will be stepping back from presenting Match of the Day until, in the words of the BBC,

we've got an agreed and clear position on his use of social media.

BBC said, we have said that we consider his recent social media activity to be a breach of our guidelines.

The BBC has decided that he will step back from presenting Match of the Day until we've got an agreed and clear position on his use of social media.

This, of course, coming after his tweet, where he said that some of the language employed by the British government was on immigration

and on asylum seekers was reminiscent of the 1930s.

We're speaking about quarter past five on Friday afternoon and the news broke about half an hour ago.

And astonishingly, on a Friday, we've summoned up John and Emily, who are on the line.

It turns out we now know what it takes to get them both to work on a Friday.

I know you had John last week, but you know, to have two of us on a Friday is beyond the call.

I suppose it's a compliment to Gary Lineker, really, that we think this is a pretty big moment to step in and talk about something that was rumbling on all week,

but I don't think anyone actually thought would happen.

And mid-morning today, I was getting vibes news from inside the BBC that they were talking about trying to tighten up Gary Lineker's contract.

They were saying they were going to tighten it up so that he would stop the words were venting in theory.

And I wonder whether, and obviously this is breaking news, we don't have his version of events, we don't have yet the full BBC version of events,

but I'm just trying to piece together what I've heard and what I know so far.

I wonder whether that conversation was put to Gary Lineker and he went a way to think about it, but couldn't actually offer them that promise.

And at that point, they might then have said, well, if you can't promise to stop venting, we can't promise to let things go on.

I don't know this, but just from piecing together what I've heard, which is they were trying to tighten up the contract, that would all make sense.

And John, because it felt like the story had kind of died.

They reached a peak midweek and then nothing seemed to be happening and it had gone away.

And yet here we are on Friday afternoon, bam, he's been asked to step back.

And I was told that the director general, Tim Davy, and the chief executive of BBC News, Deborah Tonesse, were in Washington, DC,

my old stomping ground and kind of meeting staff from the BBC Bureau there.
So I don't know whether this has all been done transatlantically.
I think the other thing that is kind of slightly jarring from all of this.
And, you know, I don't want to go re-heat old arguments, but we are in a position where Gary Lineker's behavior has seemed to be so egregious,
even though he is a freelance and is writing on Twitter in his own capacity and is not a political reporter, has to go.
But the chairman of the BBC, Richard Sharp, who facilitated, without declaring it, an £800,000 loan for the prime minister,
at a time that he is trying to become the chairman, is fine.
And I think that that is what kind of, well, hang on, what planet are we on?
You know, doing stuff for the prime minister, oh, that's okay, you can stay as chairman, no statement, no declaration on that from the BBC.
But Gary Lineker, I'm sorry, you can't present much of the day.
I think you do want to re-heat that argument, actually, because that goes to the very heart of this.
And it was a conversation that I had privately with Gary Lineker a few weeks ago, where after the Richard Sharp thing sort of exploded,
he said, gosh, they're going to find these conversations with us.
And he meant, you know, him and his colleagues still at the BBC a lot harder now.
So that was something that clearly has been playing on everyone's mind.
As you said, soaps, you know, they don't have the editorial guidelines for what happens if you're about to lend a prime minister
or help a facilitated loan of £800,000.
That kind of stuff isn't written down, so we don't know what happens there, but it doesn't look right.
The other thing here, it seems to me, is that there was an opportunity for the BBC to finally, in a way, recalibrate their editorial guidelines
to make it pretty clear that, yeah, of course, as we said earlier in the week, if you're a BBC news journalist,
you can't say something like that for obvious reasons around impartiality.
But if you're freelance, if you're working for the BBC in any other sort of capacity, and one thinks of political statements
and people have been bringing up today, you know, about, say, well, Alan Sugar has said in the past about things,
or, you know, if you're kind of one of the dragons on Dragon's Den, are you not allowed to talk about politics?
There was an opportunity to basically say, yes, if you're in the news division, that's fine, everyone else, within reason,
can essentially express themselves as we would expect.
And I think now, just commercially for the BBC, and this is why I'm actually surprised it's happening, just in terms of retaining people and attracting people of Linnaker's calibre,
it's going to be really, really difficult, not least because you have also that counter-example of sharp in the background,
and that is why, as you say, John, the politics of this is so vociferous and it's exploding.
The Gary Linnaker example, it's now become a political dogfight,

where I think that it's clear what the government thinks about Gary Linnaker.

My God, didn't we hear it with Penny Mordent enough when she was at the Dispatch Box yesterday?

But it makes the BBC look like it has bent to political pressure.

And that is not a good look, whether it is a Labour government that's in power or it is a Tory government that is in power.

It looks like the BBC has had its decision made for it, to some extent, by the government, particularly after there was no pushback from a Sun story yesterday, which was saying, the BBC is moving on from this.

And sure, in the future it might have wanted to tighten guidelines, but it hadn't done that.

And so the BBC, it kind of has just sort of looks like, and we don't know the full stories of what's gone on,

it looks like it has bent to pressure.

OK, so I just want to bring in Rob Harris, who is a Sky News sports correspondent,

and he is tweeting now that a source close to Gary Linnaker has said he hasn't agreed to step back from match of the day,

which might confirm what I was saying earlier about refusing to sign up to a tighter contract.

He says, this is Rob Harris' says, the source believes the BBC has taken him off air

because Linnaker is unwilling to apologise for the tweets and admit he shouldn't have posted them, which I think does then set out the battle lines a little bit more firmly than,

oh, we're all going to have time in a sort of padded cell to reflect a little bit on what we've said and thought.

And this then becomes a PR battle between him and the corporation, and it's just nightmarish.

Yeah, I think that's really important because I think what happened was that Gary Linnaker found, according to his tweets,

he was actually kind of winning that PR battle, didn't he?

I mean, at the beginning, the language that he used, the 1930s, everyone sort of came down very heavy on.

And then sort of big figures like Armando Unici, who has, you know, written extensively for BBC comedy and film,

he stepped in and said, well, actually, let's look a little bit more at the language and let's put it back into the language of 1930s Germany,

not 40s Germany, but 1930s Germany, and maybe Nazi analogy language gets used the whole time, actually,

but people are only coming down hard this time because it's about government policy.

So I wonder whether Gary Linnaker actually thought, I'm not going to step back because I am winning the PR battle right now.

Well, look, I mean, clearly this story is just going to run and run and run, and by the time we come back on Monday,

there'll doubtless be more to say.

John, Emily, I'm so grateful to you for breaking away from your terrarium course in Wandsworth this weekend to join us,

humble Friday folk, and give the Friday listeners something to think about. So grateful to both of you.

Once every 30 years, isn't it?

Yes, yes, yes, exactly. When Sagittarius is in the night sky.

Look, see you on Monday, all right?

Thanks very much.

Okay, bye.

Right, and even after we'd finished that conversation with John and Emily, this news just kept rolling on with a suggestion that

Linnaker's fellow Match of the Day presenters, co-hosts, pundits are also going to pull out of the show in solidarity,

including his fellow presenter Ian Wright.

Political reaction is coming thick and fast.

This is a story, as I said, that is going to run and run and run, and we are going to have loads more to say about it next week, I'm sure.

But for now, as promised, back to the show we'd planned, which actually involves drag queens coming up after this.

You don't usually get many protests or much less counter-protests in leafy Bourgeois East Dullwich in southeast London,

but on Friday morning, on a sleepy street corner outside a pub, there were both.

And what was that about? Not eulairs or low-traffic neighbourhoods or library closures or the usual sort of thing which grips middle-class Bohemia.

No, it was the prospect of drag queens reading to some schoolchildren.

A far-right group had thought one such event was going to go on there.

It wasn't, but they turned up anyway, and some local residents and others did the same, wishing to protest their protest.

It comes after a similar clash between protesters outside the National Gallery in central London about a month ago.

These new battles are, I'm afraid to tell you, the latest embryonic front of the now ceaseless culture war.

You might not have heard about drag queen story hour, but you probably will soon.

The latest American Fisher opening up in Britain.

So we thought, before you hear about it in a classically fevered way somewhere else, which you will, we would explore what this phenomenon is, where it comes from, why some people object,

whether there is any truth in the idea of it sexualising kids,

and why in so many ways it's just a cipher for a bigger political and cultural battle with which we're much more familiar.

It's Lewis here. Welcome to The Newsagents.

The Newsagents

So why did I get interested in this story?

Well, you might remember a few weeks ago I reported from Rotherham at one of the protests orchestrated by the far right outside asylum hotels.

Each side is currently accusing the other of being pedophiles.

And I noticed something.

Yes, much of the rhetoric they were shouting about, most of the banners and signage they were wielding,

were about, of course, the asylum seekers echoing Sorella Braverman's stop the invasion rhetoric.

But there were others about something else, about something which on the face of it was entirely different and separate.

There were flyers handed out and banners held aloft about drag queens and something called drag queen story hour.

Someone even shouted drag queen at some of the counter protesters as an insult.

These story hours are basically where people in drag read stories to children and they've become the focus of discontent on the conservative right in America.

Here's Tucker Carlson, Fox News' biggest primetime host.

So let's say you're interested in sexualizing children and unfortunately some people are, what would you do?

You might have a drag queen story hour at a library or a school.

That's where you would indoctrinate and sexualize children and it's happening across the country.

Here's one example from the Aspen Hill Library in Rockville, Maryland this summer.

I am a drag queen, female, a personator, a woman.

This is, if you're a drag queen and you know it, if you're a drag queen and you know it, strike a pose.

And this has been getting bigger and bigger and bigger in America.

So much so that this week Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed a bill which banned what they called adult cabaret from public property or anywhere where minors might be present.

This is Lee speaking earlier this week.

I think the concern is what's right there in that building, children, that are potentially exposed to sexualized entertainment, to obscenity and we need to make sure that they're not.

I think that's something that should happen in Tennessee and it will because of this bill.

Would you be okay with drag queens?

The bill they've passed has raised concerns that it could be used to target transgender people, but sponsors say that that isn't the intent.

Now, as ever, when America sneezes, Britain catches a cold.

You're starting to see the glimmers of more mainstream political discontent here as well.

Conservative MP Sarah Brickcliffe, MP for Heinborn, this week tweeted, she thought a drag queen story hour event in her constituency shouldn't go ahead, calling it wholly inappropriate.

She later deleted the tweet, though other Tory MPs have also previously expressed concern.

The wider right is increasingly exercised about the issue, with more and more articles appearing in the Conservative press expressing concern.

The performers say that the story hour events introduce kids to diverse role models and LGBTQ plus people.

Critics say they sexualize and confuse young audiences, claims which have been strongly rebutted by organisers.

Either way, many of these events in Britain are now being cancelled out of fears for the safety of the performers involved,

and as I say, they're being targeted by far right groups.

So what is the truth of the matter?

First up, we should hear from someone who has done one of these shows.

DJ, who goes by Manita when in drag, co-founded, dragged around London in 2017, runs walking tours in drag in the city,

but has also held drag queen story hours for kids.

And just a warning, inevitably there will be some sexual themes to our discussion.

DJ, so just talk me through the events that you've held with children and these other events here, drag queen story hour and so on.

What goes on? What's the purpose of them? What's the point of them?

What do you do? What do you talk to the children about?

So we literally read stories.

With our ones, we encourage our performers to read stories that maybe they read where they were kids and add some personal touch to it.

But honestly, most of the time, it's parents bringing their kids to something just to do something different with their kids.

And you're in full drag while you're doing this?

Oh yeah, absolutely.

And we're just sitting on a chair, storybook, reading it with great big animation, as you would expect any kind of children's event.

And compared to an adult event, it's really unpredictable what kids are going to do.

And how old are the kids generally?

We've had a range.

When we first started, that group actually had lots of babies.

So that was a really, really young group.

But at the bookstore, we tend to get maybe four or five and older.

But sometimes they'll have a younger sibling that's in a cart or something.

And how do they react to it?

Because obviously, it's presumably unlike anything that they've encountered before.

What's their reaction?

Honestly, when we first started, there was a lot more kids who were a bit like, are you a man or a woman and stuff like that?

Why are you wearing a dress?

Yeah, but in the more recent ones, we haven't really had those kind of questions.

They've more just been really happy.

You know, when a kid sees a performer of any kind, they usually just get really happy because the performer is usually full of energy.

And that's, I think that's what we're doing with just children's entertainers like any other children's entertainer.

So that's how you see it.

You see it as a form of children's entertainment and you are children's entertainers.

Yeah.

But then I think a good reason why parents would want their child to see a drag performer is to allow that child to know that there are possibilities

and that it is okay to wear a dress or to decide that they want to wear something that, you know, their crotchety old grandparent has said is not appropriate for them

or that they are allowed to be queer, you know, that they're allowed to be different.

What do you say though to those people who say?

I mean, obviously, there are lots of different events and they will have different tenors and they will do different things.

And this may not be the case at your event.

But what do you say to those people who say that this is sexualization, that there are some of these events that have sexual themes and contents and reports of that and that that just isn't appropriate for children?

I mean, I guess there's a much wider debate about where the line is on what's appropriate for children.

I think the undercurrent of that is that the implication is that there's grooming happening, that somehow these drag performers being there is going to encourage these children to then go and accept pedophiles.

That's usually the thought.

It could be or it could be.

I mean, that could be one of the undercurrents and there definitely are people who say that.

But there could be a more moderate view, which is to say that, you know, kind of risque kind of language,

that sort of element of performance just isn't appropriate for children.

And that would be the case if they were in drag or if they were, I don't know, a heterosexual sexual performer or whatever it were, you know,

that that just wouldn't be appropriate either way.

I think to a degree that that is true.

And for our own events, our performers would never wear anything risque to it.

Like they have child-friendly attire.

And some of our performers are very consciously not child-friendly performers.

They do not do any child-friendly events because they don't want to do that kind of drag.

It's not their acts.

Exactly.

It's drag is an art medium and it has a broad range.

So there are child-friendly drag and there's less child-friendly drag.

And so we as an organization, that is what we do.

Me as a person personally, I'm a little more radically left in the way that I think that there's a bigger discussion around

why do we not talk about sexual things with children because there is actually a lot of reason

if we hide all these things from children and then they encounter it from someone who they trust because most child abuse happens from people they know.

If they encounter sexual things, they don't know how to interpret it as a sexual thing.

If you were discussing these things with your children, if you were like talking about what they mean and whether this is good or bad or right or wrong,

then that's a better discussion to have than hide the children away from the things.

What would your reaction be?

Imagine you were taking your show to a school somewhere in the country and there were parents who just said, I don't want my children there.

What would your reaction be to that and what would you say to them?

I mean, I think that's entirely their choice and they are free to do that.

I'm not someone who can tell another parent how to parent their child

but that doesn't mean that other parents shouldn't be allowed to have their children come to us

which seems to be the sentiment of a lot of those ones.
It shouldn't be in front of children rather than it shouldn't be in front of my children.
This week we've had a conservatory MP say that they're not comfortable with these sorts of shows being in schools.
Just today we've had a protest at what was going to be a drag event.
It's actually cancelled but the protest has gone ahead anyway.
As a queer person, as a person who does drag, how does this make you feel?
We had protestors at one of our events just before the pandemic and I think the initial reaction was frustration and anger at like, this is a fun event and you're making it like an intense event.
This is meant to be all fun and colourful and now there's people handing out mean flyers outside and it just feels a bit, in a more calm state, it just feels a bit ridiculous.
Why is this even happening?
It doesn't feel like it has a real point to it.
Does it scare you?
We do drag on the street.
I was scared from the very beginning.
Because as queer people you learn to be scared in crowds where you don't know what the temperance is.
We're always on alert.
I think in a society like the UK we start to let our guard down but when you're in drag it's a whole new level of queer and having that kind of fear.
With the protestors obviously they add that extra element of fear and in all of our drag events now there's always a little bit of fear of like, are they going to be protestors?
Are they going to get violent?
We've had lots of discussions with our performers about what we would do if protestors show up and are violent.
What is the reaction that we should be having?
It's just a bit unfortunate that we have to have that kind of discussion.
It's a bit like children being trained for shooters in America.
It's just like, what is this society with built?
To a degree it's like, this is the fight, right?
Since they threw that first brick at Stonewall we are still fighting a fight to be accepted, to be allowed to be who we want to be.
And this is just the current front.
TJ, thank you so much for coming in.
Thank you for having me.
But of course this is part of a much bigger battle

in the so-called culture wars
and someone who follows that very closely
and how we in Britain often get buffeted
by these American ideological battles
is Helen Lewis, staff writer at The Atlantic
and we'll be speaking to her right after this.
This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

Well, as I said, Helen Lewis from The Atlantic is with us.

Helen, thanks so much for joining us.

So Helen, you've been actually reporting on this in America
and in Florida in particular, haven't you?

What got you interested in the story
and what is going on in Florida
and what we should know about to inform
the kind of nascent debate here?

Well, I think there's always a case
where you have American cultures kind of get
either imported here deliberately
or they drift here through the internet,
through YouTube and Twitter and TikTok.
And what Governor Onda Sanders is doing,
the Republican governor of Florida,
is a very specific thing.

He calls it the war on woke, which is a phrase,
I'm sure you'll hear in Britain as well sometimes.

And so, for example, you know,
he's pointing his own people to the boards
of schools and universities.

But also a big part of that is about
what is allowed in school libraries.

And so he had a press conference this week
in which, you know, stuff was read out
that was deemed to be inappropriate
that was being shown to children.

And so as soon as I saw the news
about Rishi Sunak launching this review,
which is actually, you know, it was going to happen anyway, right?

It was a three-year review into the material
used in schools and sex and relationship education.

I thought, oh, okay, here we go.

So this is something else that is from the kind
of cultural war platter that the
Conservative Party is now picking up.

And what is it that the Santis is saying
and other American conservatives, Republicans
are saying about Drag Queen Story Hour
and the associated events that is a problem?
What are they saying about it?
Well, there's a mishmash of different things.
And as with so many things that are in this cultural space,
it's very hard to talk about because there are both
legitimate concerns and some overhyped
kind of moral panic adjacent concerns, right?
So there is a fact that you will see sometimes
inappropriate literature is put into schools.
And there is, in any case, an enormous, big
and legitimate debate about what children
should be taught about gender, specifically gender identity,
gender expression, given that the science
and the consensus on that is still so disputed.
So that all kind of happens.
But specifically with Drag Queens,
the question is whether or not those are, you know,
what we might think of more like Panto Dames
in this country, big, fun, colourful,
costumed characters, or is it something that is sexualised
and adult and not appropriate for children?
And the problem is that they're both.
I mean, I personally have seen footage
from some Drag Queen events that I would be really unhappy
about children seeing, to be honest.
And the one that I went to in Florida
at a place called Arhouse-Winwood in Miami
was exactly like that.
It was full of, I have to say, bachelorette parties now
because I've spent too much time writing for American magazines,
but Hindus, basically, having, you know,
bottomless mimosas and listening to people, you know,
dance to Jenny from the block, it was, I mean,
it wasn't exactly family entertainment,
but it wasn't kind of, you know, something you'd find
in a Berlin fetish club at 3am in the morning.
And without necessarily being too graphic about it,
the stuff that you say is less appropriate,
what sort of things are we talking about here?
Because most people probably listening to this
will have no familiarity with what we might be talking about.

Well, there is, for example, people in extremely skimpy costumes. One of the big ones that is referenced quite often, which happened in Florida, is a drag queen who was wearing a very skimpy pair of pants and essentially nipple pasties over quite obviously enormously enhanced breasts, walking around holding the hand of a child. And that is just obviously not, I think, for most people, something that makes them feel pretty uncomfortable, actually. So there's that, there's the sexualization aspect. And then there is the new progressive orthodoxy on gender, which some people also find really uncomfortable. They find it very uncomfortable that you would have, for example, nominated, I think, for Waterstone's Young Adult Children Book of the Year, is a book that specifically has pictures of kind of natal females having double mastectomies. You know, the idea that this is something that you would tell kids, if there's something wrong with your body, then they're probably, you know, you're probably right if you think that. And actually we should give you surgery to treat that. Lots of people find that very, very offensive and they don't want children to be taught that. They want the freedom to make their own decisions about what's put in front of their children. So those would be two of the kind of really high profile examples, I think, that are the kind of things that people have a problem with. So in a sense, this is at least to some extent an evolution of adjacent to the wider transgender debate, even though it's not the same, which is so advanced in the United States and even now really in the UK. Yeah, I think you can't see it without seeing the parallels between what's happening in the teaching of gender and the kind of idea about the sexualization of children. And that comes to its head in what is known as gruma discourse, which is this idea that LGBTQ adults are in some way grooming children into their lifestyles. And again, it's a very complicated one, right, because that has explicit echoes of things you would hear in the era of the section 28, about the promotion of homosexuality, right? The idea that the time that if you allowed gay adults to speak freely about who they were,

then in some ways you were kind of corrupting the innocence of children and sort of teaching about these things that they didn't need to know about.

By and large, I was saying Britain, the consensus has moved on from that. If someone's got two mums or two dads, it doesn't really bother that many people.

And it's not seen as something that needs to be kept away from children. So I think, you know, that's definitely part of it.

But the difficult thing is it does intersect with, particularly in America, the child gender medicine debate.

And what is appropriate, you know, there's a very lively debate there and to some extent here as well.

If a child announces they want to use different pronouns or a different name at school, is that something that the school should conceal from parents?

And so you can see how these different issues end up meshing together into a big mass of questions about what are our kids being taught?

Are we allowed to know what those things are?

Are we allowed to have input into that?

And, you know, are we being excluded from decisions in our children's lives?

And that's always going to be incredibly tricky terrain for any politician or any school to navigate.

And Helen, although as you say, absolutely, there are obviously legitimate questions and legitimate contestation about this debate and sets of debates.

I was really struck when I was in Rotherham a few weeks ago, one of the far-right rallies protesting against asylum hotels.

And all of the groups, groups like patriotic alternative and others, there were obviously their main focus was about the hotels and asylum seekers and echoing Swelle Braverman's language about stop the invasion and so on.

But the second order of priority and the second greatest number of posters and banners they had were about drag queen story hour.

And it's extraordinary how these things sort of become enmeshed and also are lighted upon by pretty far-right groups, which then becomes pretty mainstream quite quickly.

Yeah, I think that stuff's really worrying.

What it feels like now, my life, articulating the difference between the kind of traditionally left-wing feminist concerns about changing attitudes to gender, the position exemplified by someone like JK Rowling, which is about female sports and single sex spaces

and child gender medicine.

And you're right, what definitely does exist,
which is a kind of won't-someone-think-of-the-children moral crusade
that has been glommed onto a far-right politics.

And really kind of traffics also in kind of slightly reactionary ideas
about the fact that the world is changing very fast
and everyone's got 92 genders now.

And it's very hard in those situations
to kind of make an interesting, limited, reasonable critique
of the things that I think are wrong
when there is this kind of big miasma hanging you over
that the fact that there are people who are seizing on this issue
in order to make political points
and also leaning quite close to political violence in some cases.

Helen, thank you so much.

All right, bye.

Right, we'll be keeping an eye on this story, of course,
and how it develops.

But after the break, we'll be bringing you up to date
with another story which didn't get as much attention this week
as perhaps it should.

Huge protests on the streets of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

And how it plays into the war

Vladimir Putin's next move

and what happens next in Ukraine.

Stay with us.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

So, the other big news of the day on Friday
was President Macron and Rishi Sunak meeting in Paris
to finalise new arrangements for the border
and to try and stop channel boat crossings.

Emmanuel and I share the same belief
criminal gangs should not get to decide
who comes to our countries.

Within weeks of my coming into office
we agreed our largest ever small boat steal.

And today we've taken our cooperation
to an unprecedented level
to tackle this shared challenge.

We're announcing a new detention centre in northern France,
a new command centre bringing our enforcement teams together
in one place for the first time
and an extra 500 new officers patrolling French beaches.

Now, we covered that extensively on Thursday
and we'll be following it closely to check whether this time
anything actually changes.

But at that press conference in Paris
they were also asked about a big international story this week.
What has been happening in Georgia?

Listen to this.

The President.

Georgia today is affected by worrisome movements
and we saw images these past few days worrying.

As both of us, as Europeans,
our resolve is to assist Europe,
public opinions as freely as possible
to express their views and countries to conduct
in a sovereign fashion the course of their existence.

Georgia is subject to very strong pressure
and I hope it can find the path to greater calmness
which is compatible with the European prospect
that we held out to it, I would add, also in this regard.

So you may have seen pictures of enormous protests
in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital,
protesting against a draft law
which protesters have dubbed the Russian law
and would limit press freedom
and undercut Georgia's efforts
to become a candidate for EU membership.

The law, which is backed by the ruling Georgian Dream Party,
would require any organisations
receiving more than 20% of their funding from overseas
to register as, quote, foreign agents
or face substantial fines.

This is a really big deal in terms of what happens next
in all of these former Soviet states
and Putin's ongoing attempts to keep them in his orbit.
Someone who has been following this story very closely
is Matt Fry, presenter and Europe editor for Channel 4 News.
He joins us now.

Matt, thanks so much for coming on The News Agents.

It's an absolute pleasure.

So Matt, you've been following the story very closely.

What has been happening in Tbilisi and why does it matter?

Okay, so first of all, what's been happening
is that the government, read by the so-called Georgia Dream Party,
introduced a foreign agents registration law

that got lots of people really upset
outside the government, on the streets,
led to tens of thousands of people demonstrating
in the centre of Tbilisi, which is the capital of Georgia,
basically saying, get rid of this law because we smell a rat.
The rat is called Vladimir Putin.

Why do they smell it?

Because this law, which essentially requires all NGOs,
media companies who have even the smallest hint
of any kind of foreign funding to be registered,
to be declared foreign agents,
and possibly subject to internal surveillance,
spying by the state.

Now, this is exactly the same law that was introduced in Russia in 2012
and was the basis for the Russian government under Vladimir Putin
to gradually tighten the screw on any dissenting voices
in either amongst NGOs or Russian media,
or indeed foreign media operating inside Russia.

Now, why does it matter?

It matters because there are some uncanny parallels
between what's going on in Georgia today
and what went on in Ukraine in 2014
in the centre of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev,
which of course then led to the oust of the Ukrainian president.
That then led to the annexation of Crimea.

That then led to the annexation of Eastern Donbass
and finally, eight years later, led to the war
that we're now all trying to deal with.

And the people of Georgia, two-thirds of which, roughly,
are against this new law,
see history repeating itself on their own soil.

It's curious, isn't it?

Because Georgia has said that it wants to join the EU,
and yet its government has chosen to orchestrate this law,
which would be exactly the sort of thing
that could potentially disbar them from EU membership.

So why are they doing it?

Well, this is really fascinating.

I think you have to look at both Ukraine's role in 2014
and Georgia's role in the last year
like a custody battle

between a strict stepmother, the European Union,
that says, you can come and live with me, son or daughter,
as long as you do the following 10 things.

And on the other side is the sugar daddy,
that would be Russia under Vladimir Putin,
perhaps a bit of an alcohol habit,
maybe sometimes a little bit too quick
to kind of deal out some slaps,
but essentially he's saying, come back to daddy,
come back to the fold, come back to me.
And in the middle, you had Ukraine,
and now you have Georgia.
Now, these countries that are caught in the middle,
the kids over which the custody battle has been fought,
have to make choices.
So in Georgia's case, last year,
they made the choice to apply together with Ukraine
and Moldova for EU membership.
And the EU turned around in the summer and said,
you know what, we're going to give that particular prize
to Ukraine for obvious geopolitical reasons,
and to Moldova, but not to you young Georgia.
Why?
Because as the Dutch Prime Minister put it at the time,
you're one step behind.
So you need to do more when it comes to reform,
when it comes to rule of law, when it comes to institutions.
But Georgia goes to the back of the queue.
They're in the waiting list, as it were.
Now, the government run by the Georgian dream party,
controlled by an oligarch called Vigena Ivanishvili,
a fabulously wealthy man,
whose personal wealth, by the way,
is greater than the annual expenditure of his country,
there's a thought, makes Vigena Ivanishvili
rather poor by comparison.
Anyway, this guy was so upset by this cold shoulder
from the EU that he's now pushing in the other direction,
which of course is music to Vladimir Putin's ears.
So he is thought to be behind this foreign agency law,
which has now been thrown out by the parliament,
and actually led to a punch-up in parliament a few days ago.
But it's this sort of idea, if you don't want me, EU,
you can't have me, and I'll go to the other side.
I'll go to sugar daddy in Moscow.
I think that's sort of what's going on at the moment.
And this sort of ambiguity of the former Soviet republics

like Georgia, like Ukraine,
it's a bit of a theme, to be honest,
in that kind of tussle, that existential tussle
between the West, broadly speaking, and Russia.
Well, it's the first time the word sugar daddy
has been used on this show, and frankly, I'm all for it, Matt.
But the point is, in a way, you've summed it up, right?
The way to understand this story is that much like
as we saw with Ukraine over the past 10 years
before the war started, you've basically got a power struggle,
both within and without.
Georgia, in this case, basically battling over
the future geostrategies, but at grandly direction,
of that country, whether it stays close to Russia
or whether it looks west.
Indeed. And within that country, there are many contradictions.
So rather like with Ukraine,
the majority population in Georgia,
you may have heard them on television or, you know, on the news,
are incredibly pro-Western.
They are pro-European.
They've never, ever seen the European flag wielded
with such passion as on the streets of Tbilisi,
or indeed, back in the day, eight, nine years ago,
on the streets of Kyiv.
They really, really want to be members of the European Union,
just as we are kind of, we were having our arguments with the EU.
The syphorises, though, in 2014, the Ukrainians were desperate to join.
The same can be said for the Georgians today.
On the other hand, there are people running the country
who are basically ambivalent about it.
You get to the figure that I mentioned earlier, Vigena Ivanishvili.
Remember that name.
You won't know what he looks like.
In fact, most people outside Georgia don't,
because he's rarely seen in public.
He is your typical reclusive billionaire,
who, by the way, like a lot of reclusive billionaires
who became prime ministers or presidents, as he did in Georgia,
have a private zoo.
What is it about private zoos and oligarchs, you know,
and strongmen? Interesting little thing to look into,
maybe for another program.
There's a guy who's worth \$6.5 billion, which, as I said earlier,

is more than Georgia's annual expenditure,
wasn't particularly close to Putin,
but it's been sort of dragged further and further into Putin's orbit.
Also, because he's friends with some of the oligarchs
who kind of exist in Putin's inner circle,
because there's no such thing as an oligarch
in the circle of Putin himself,
but who kind of are one of the outer moons of the Putin world.
Now, these guys have been subject to sanctions by the West,
and this guy, Ivanishvili, is accused by the European Union
of helping them to forgo the sanctions, to break the sanctions.
He has rejected this, of course.
He says, I'm innocent. I've got nothing to do with the Russian oligarchs.
But he himself is subject, or maybe subject to sanctions,
by the EU.
So when the EU rejected Georgia's application for membership,
they said, not are you not ready,
but also there are some very important people in your country
like this dude, who we think are really corrupt
and they're helping bloody Putin.
That's another reason why he is decided to kind of edge closer
towards the sugar daddy in Moscow.
So finally, Matt, what happens now?
I mean, the government has said it will now withdraw the law
after the pressure that has been exerted by the protesters
and the demonstrators.
Putin presumably reasonably content to see more chaos
at his border in a state that he's been worried
has been drifting away from him.
What's going to happen now?
Well, at the moment, you could say it's great news at the end of the week,
because Keeper power seems to prevail against this law,
because the law was overturned by parliament.
But most Georgians you speak to,
and we spoke to a few of them yesterday by phone,
they said, yeah, this story is not over yet.
You know, there's still a lot of road here that we have to travel
and it could get really nasty.
So either they could try and reintroduce the law,
which would lead to more trouble,
or maybe they could do something more dramatic
by, you know, arresting some people.
Remember, the former president of Georgia,
the one I spoke to in 2008,

Mikhail Sakashvili, is currently in jail
on charges of corruption, embezzlement
and political violence.
So they have form on that front,
as indeed did Ukraine.
Now, the interesting thing will be,
will Vladimir Putin,
as he feels the kind of rather reluctant love
of these Georgian leaders,
will he ask them to make choices
as he did in 2014 with Ukraine?
If you really want to be on my gang,
he might say, you've got to show me
with another sacrifice, maybe a blood sacrifice.
You know, kill a few protesters
on the streets of Tbilisi, do something dramatic.
That shows me that you're worth my time
in my political investment.
And then, of course, he could say,
Ukraine may not be going my way so much,
but in Georgia, look,
they want to be part of my world.
They want to be part of our Eurasian dream
and not part of the European dream.
So there's always that possibility,
and of course, ordinary Georgians on the streets
of Tbilisi, the demonstrators,
who want to be able to live freely,
not just in Georgia,
but also travel to Berlin or Paris
or, you know, or even London.
They're saying this is unacceptable.
And that poses questions as to what the West
will do as well, right?
Who they back? Who we back?
Yes, but of course, the European, indeed,
but the European Union, which is the part
that matters here, because Georgia's
not about to get NATO membership,
partly because part of its country is occupied
by Russian forces, but the European Union
has to make a choice, and it's a difficult one.
If we invite them into the fold,
despite the fact that we know

they are not
achieving all the things we've asked them to achieve,
you know, it's an imperfect democracy.
Do we kind of bring out the goodness
in them by inviting them into the fold,
or does that create, you know,
potentially another hungry down the road,
a liberal democracy in the European family
that's causing Europe, Brussels,
an awful lot of headaches?
Or if we push them away and hold out
the goal of perfection,
you know, institutions, rule of law,
transparency, anti-corruption,
my favourite new word there is
de-oligarchisation.
Magnificent!
It's a bit much for a Friday afternoon.
And if we do all that,
perhaps we push them even further into the Russian fold.
So that's the dilemma for Europe,
and as far as I can tell, they haven't really
come up with an answer.
Matt, thank you so much, really appreciate it.
Total pleasure. Matt is, of course,
also an LBC presenter, and you can hear
his show from 10 till 1 every Saturday.
Right, I think that is
more than enough for today.
You've had the full episode and a bit of an extra episode as well.
Normally, I would tell you why John and Emily
weren't able to join me,
but astonishingly, they were.
It'll never, ever happen again.
Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week
on Global Player, thanks to our production team
on the newsagents as ever.
Gabriel Radus, Ellie Clifford, Georgia Foxwell,
Will Gibson-Smith and Rory Simon.
Our editor is Tom Hughes, our executive producer,
Dino Sofos. It's presented by Emily Maitlis,
John Sopal and me, Lewis Goodall.
On Monday, have a lovely weekend.