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# Review of Civil Space in Georgia

August 2024 – October 2024

Volume 4

ძლიერი სამოქალაქო საზოგადოება  
დემოკრატიის განვითარებისთვის საქართველოში

Strong and resilient civil society  
serving to democratic development in Georgia

# Review of Civil Space in Georgia

August 2024 – October 2024

Volume 4

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# Review of Civil Space in Georgia

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	2
Methodology .....	3
Implementation of Russian law.....	4
These difficulties further exacerbate the challenges faced by civil society organizations, hindering their ability to effectively provide advocacy and services, and ultimately worsening the overall environment in which they operate.....	5
Anticipating Fines.....	5
Constitutional Court Ruling on the "Russian Law".....	6
Case at the European Court of Human Rights .....	7
Discriminatory legislation .....	9
Suspension of Georgia's membership in OGP .....	11
Sadigov's Case.....	12
Government Initiative for Financing Civil Society Organizations .....	13
Sanctions and Severe Deterioration of Relations with the West .....	14
Discrediting Campaign Against Election Monitoring Organizations .....	16
War and Peace Campaign.....	18
Election Results and Subsequent Reactions .....	19
Raids on Homes of Disinformation Investigators .....	22

## Executive Summary

The implementation of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, commonly known as the "Russian law," has severely harmed civil society and restricted the enabling environment for civil society organizations. CSOs that choose not to register as entities acting in the interests of a foreign power, due to the law's repressive nature, face the risk of substantial fines. For many organizations, these financial penalties could lead to serious economic strain, potentially making it impossible for them to continue their work.

On the other hand, the strict requirements under the "Russian law" have proven harmful even for organizations that opted to register in this system.

During the reporting period, the Constitutional Court of Georgia issued a decision that had a negative impact on the enabling environment for civil society, as it ruled that the "Russian law" would remain in effect until a final decision on the case is reached. Consequently, the law's adverse effects on civil society continue.

An example of diminishing opportunities for cooperation between the state and the civil sector is Georgia's suspension from the Open Government Partnership. This decision has a negative impact not only on the enabling environment for civil society but also on international perceptions of the country.

In terms of the worsening enabling environment for civil society, the discriminatory legislation adopted by the ruling party is also significant. Together with the "Russian law," it poses another major challenge for organizations working on LGBTQ+ community issues, hindering their ability to continue their work.

The detention of Afghan Sadigov, an exiled Azerbaijani journalist, who may face extradition to his home country, is a clear indication of the deterioration of civil space for foreign journalists in Georgia, as well as for human rights advocates and organizations operating from the country.

Campaigns to discredit civil society organizations, including election monitoring groups, alongside the ruling team's promises to prosecute political opponents and the distrust in the election results voiced by the president and opposition parties, further heighten the risks of political polarization and tension. This, in turn, negatively impacts the enabling environment for civil society.

The confrontation with the West, the de facto suspension of the European integration process, and ongoing concerns about election violations also put the country at risk of international isolation.

## Methodology

The "Civic Space Review" is a tool for ongoing monitoring and analysis of the current situation. It not only examines the de jure reality in the country but also focuses on current trends, official rhetoric, and anticipated future challenges. The review is prepared by the Civil Society Institute (CSI) with support from the German Foundation "Bread for the World" as part of the project "Strong and Resilient Civil Society Serving to Democratic Development in Georgia".

The reporting period of the review typically spans three months and analyzes the facts and trends that occurred during this time in the following main areas:

- Disrupting the work of civil space or individual actors within it and interfering with their activities;
- Hostile rhetoric and discredit campaigns;
- Financial stability and access to funding;
- Space for cooperation between the state and civil society organizations;
- Opportunities for advocacy and service delivery by civil society organizations.

In addition to the mentioned areas, the review may also address other relevant issues that do not fit into the predetermined themes at the time.

The review involves monitoring and in-depth qualitative analysis of each significant issue and event. As such, it possesses both a descriptive and explanatory character.

When preparing the review, the subject of observation is the state of civil society. This involves analyzing variables and indicators such as empirical practices established by the state that affect the living environment of civil society, legislative initiatives and other legal documents, the actions of central and local legislative and executive authorities, public statements and assessments by representatives of the ruling party(ies), and information disseminated in the media.

During the monitoring process, the project team also examines secondary sources, including studies, reports, and evaluations prepared by local and international organizations.

When collecting data, depending on the importance and sensitivity of a specific issue, additional research may be conducted using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with targeted samples and several focus groups.

During the preparation of this publication, two additional focus groups and two in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed. A total of 20 representatives from civil society organizations participated in these sessions.

The review is published in both Georgian and English to reach local and international audiences. It is distributed through all of the Civil Society Institute's communication channels, including CSOGorgia.org, and is accessible to all interested parties.

## Implementation of Russian law

In the summer of 2024, after the “Georgian Dream” party officially adopted and published the Foreign Influence Transparency law, commonly referred to as the "Russian law," the Ministry of Justice issued the necessary acts for its practical implementation. This included an order by the Minister of Justice of Georgia, published on August 1, 2024,<sup>1</sup> which outlines the procedures for maintaining the registry established under the law, submitting financial declarations, and conducting monitoring activities.

Prior to this, on July 29, the Minister of Justice of Georgia issued a decision to establish a new unit within the National Public Registry Agency—the Department of Financial Declarations. This department, among its other responsibilities, was tasked with managing the creation of the “Register of Organizations pursuing the Interests of a Foreign Power”<sup>2</sup>.

The financial declaration, as determined by the normative act issued by the Minister of Justice on August 1, required, among other obligations, detailed identification data for all individuals associated with the organization, for whom expenses were incurred during the reporting period. Notably, this also applied to individuals providing financing<sup>3</sup>. This requirement also extends to data from 2023, and collecting such information in the new format poses significant challenges for many organizations. The process of searching for and processing this information, depending on its volume and sensitivity, necessitates additional human and financial resources. For many organizations, particularly small and local ones, this could lead to the de facto disruption of their operations.

It should be noted that in the future, the search for such detailed information may erode trust among beneficiaries. This will be particularly harmful to service providers and organizations working with vulnerable groups, ultimately significantly hindering the operations of these organizations.

It is also noteworthy that organizations had approximately one and a half months to prepare and submit the declaration after the publication of the normative act. This timeframe stems from the fact that the "Russian law" provides organizations with a one-month deadline to submit a written request for registration as an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power in physical form. Afterward,

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<sup>1</sup> Order of the Minister of Justice of Georgia No. 1016. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6234258?publication=0>

<sup>2</sup> Order of the Minister of Justice of Georgia No №1019. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6238278?publication=0>

<sup>3</sup> On September 20, changes were made to the declaration form, removing some personal data, including the personal identification number and bank account details of individuals receiving funds, from the expenditure section. However, it should be noted that during monitoring, the registry still has the right to request an unlimited amount of personal data.

within 2 days, the organization is granted access to the designated website, where it must complete the application, including the financial declaration, within 10 working days.

Therefore, the time allocated for collecting, organizing, and submitting information to the state is exceedingly short. The tight deadlines create an additional barrier for organizations and have a negative impact on their ability to function effectively. Moreover, these restrictions clearly demonstrate that the aim of implementing the law may not be to promote transparency among organizations, but rather to obstruct their operations.

Finally, the mentioned requirements, including the existing and future challenges related to the search and processing of information, as well as the shortened deadlines for submitting financial declarations, negatively impact the work of those civil society actors who have decided to register or are considering registration with the state. These factors further complicate their ability to submit the required financial declarations.

The participants in the interviews and focus groups conducted during the reporting period highlighted these difficulties.

*"Filling out the declaration is a very difficult process. The forms are somewhat ambiguous, and it's hard to fully understand what they are asking for. No one had prior experience with the declaration, so it turned out to be quite challenging for our organization,"* said a representative of a service provider organization during a direct interview.

The organization, according to the representative, made the "difficult" decision to register as an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power, driven by the motive of protecting the best interests of its beneficiaries. The representative also shared that, during the process of completing the declaration, she was contacted "every day" by a public registry official who "warned her about potential fines," adding pressure on the organization's staff. Another respondent confirmed similar communication from the public registry during the declaration process.

These difficulties further exacerbate the challenges faced by civil society organizations, hindering their ability to effectively provide advocacy and services, and ultimately worsening the overall environment in which they operate.

## Anticipating Fines

At the beginning of September, the deadline set by the law expired, by which organizations meeting the criteria of entities pursuing the interests of a foreign power were required to apply to the National Public Registry Agency for inclusion in the special register.

476 organizations applied to the state with such a request<sup>4</sup>. At the end of the reporting period, it was possible to view the declarations of approximately 350 organizations in the Public Registry. Due to the

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<sup>4</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. "476 CSOs Register by Foreign Agents Law Deadline". Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/archives/622253>

fact that the "Russian law" is unconstitutional for the majority of civil society organizations, most of them did not complete such registration within the time.

Under the "Russian law," organizations that fail to register will face a fine of 25,000 GEL and will still be required to submit an application and financial declaration to the public registry within 10 working days.

If the application and financial declaration are not submitted, the organization will incur an additional fine of 10,000 GEL. Furthermore, failure to submit the required documents in each subsequent month after the initial fine will result in an additional 20,000 GEL fine per month.

Participants in the focus groups conducted for the fourth edition of the Civil Space Review, who represent civil society organizations, stated that if the state imposes fines on them, they may resort to public campaigns to raise funds or seek emergency grants to cover the financial burden.

It should be noted that for small organizations working at the local level, the issue of mobilizing funds in case of fines is particularly crucial, as it may even result in the suspension of their operations.

The unreasonably high fines imposed by the "Russian law" further exacerbate the hostile environment for civil society organizations, posing a significant threat to their financial stability.

## Constitutional Court Ruling on the "Russian Law"

On August 29, the Constitutional Court began hearing the consolidated lawsuits filed against the Russian Law<sup>5</sup>. The court consolidated the lawsuits of the president, 121 civil society and media organizations, opposition deputies and two journalists<sup>678</sup>.

Ultimately, the Constitutional Court denied the plaintiffs' request to suspend the enforcement of the "Russian Law" until a final ruling is reached. The court justified its decision, stating that the law's implementation does not result in irreparable harm. The decision was published on October 9<sup>9</sup>.

The refusal to suspend the enforcement of the "Russian Law" until the court reaches a final decision enables the state to impose fines on civil society organizations that have not registered in the "organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power" registry. These fines present a substantial financial burden for many organizations and, in some cases, could lead to their closure.

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<sup>5</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. "Constitutional Court Hearing on Foreign Agents Law" Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/archives/621941>

<sup>6</sup> Tabula.ge. 2024. "The Constitutional Court accepted the President's claim in the proceedings on Russian law". Available at the link: <https://tabula.ge/en/news/720579-sakonstitutsio-sasamartlom-prezidentis-sarcheli>

<sup>7</sup> Interpressnews. 2024. "121 non-governmental organizations apply to the Constitutional Court against the law on transparency of foreign influence". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/NSGfa>

<sup>8</sup> Publika.ge. 2024. "Opposition MPs will file a constitutional lawsuit against the Russian law tomorrow." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://publika.ge/opozicioneri-deputatebi-rusuli-kanonis-winaaghmdeg-sakonstitucioshi-sarchels-khval-sheitanen/>

<sup>9</sup> Recording Notice of the constitutional court of Georgia: Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=17223>



However, the court did accept certain aspects of the constitutional lawsuits concerning the "Russian Law." Specifically, the court will examine whether the law infringes on the following articles of the Constitution:

- integration with Europe and Euro-Atlantic structures (Article 78 of the Constitution);
- inviolability of personal and family life (Article 15);
- freedom of opinion and its expression, as well as freedom of mass media (Article 17);
- the legitimate purpose of limiting freedom of expression (Article 17);
- freedom of association (Article 22);
- Article 31 of the Constitution.

According to the legislation, the Constitutional Court has a maximum of 9 months to consider a constitutional claim or submission, with the countdown beginning upon registration in the court. The Chairman of the Constitutional Court may, in special cases, extend this period by up to 2 months. It is worth noting that the expiration of this period does not necessarily mean the court will issue a decision, as no final deadline for a ruling is specified by law.

## Case at the European Court of Human Rights

Alongside the dispute in the Constitutional Court of Georgia, it was announced on October 17 that a case had been filed against the "Russian law" in the European Court of Human Rights. This collective lawsuit includes 16 media organizations, 120 civil society organizations—including the Civil Society Institute (CSI)—and four individuals<sup>10</sup>.

The authors of the lawsuit appealed to the court for violation of the following articles of the European Convention on Human Rights<sup>11</sup>:

- freedom of assembly and association (Article 11);
- freedom of expression (Article 10);
- Right to respect for private and family life (Article 8);
- Prohibition of discrimination (Article 14);
- Right to an effective remedy (Article 13);
- Limitation on use of restrictions on rights (Article 18).

Interestingly, on October 22, the European Court of Human Rights addressed the case of Kobalia and Others v. Russia, which is similar to the so-called "Agents' Law." This collective lawsuit included applications from 107 civil society and media organizations, as well as several individuals.

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<sup>10</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. "The 'Russian Law' is being appealed in Strasbourg." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/747120/>

<sup>11</sup> European Convention on Human Rights. Council of Europe. Available at the link: [https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention\\_ENG](https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG)

The court found that Russia's current legislation violated the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and protection of private and family life. According to the Strasbourg Court, this legislation is stigmatizing, misleading, and applied in an overly broad and unpredictable manner.

- The Court found that the applicants' freedoms of expression, association, and assembly had been interfered with. Being designated as a "foreign agent" severely restricted their activities, imposing burdensome recordkeeping, auditing, reporting, and labeling requirements. It also limited their ability to participate in the electoral process or organize public events. Often, this designation led to sanctions, ranging from fines to the forced closure of organizations.
- The decision highlighted that the "foreign agent" label was both stigmatizing and misleading. To demonstrate its stigmatizing effect, the Court referenced public opinion polls indicating that most people associated "foreign agent" with terms such as "traitor," "spy," or "enemy of the people." Additionally, new restrictions in Russia prevented "foreign agents" from holding public office, participating in election commissions, supporting political campaigns, educating minors, and creating content for children, further reinforcing the stigma attached to the label.
- The Court also found that the "foreign agent" label was misleading, as under the law, any form of support—whether financial, consultative, or advisory—was deemed as foreign control.
- The Court concluded that these restrictions were punitive in nature, rather than being motivated by a genuine need for transparency or national security concerns. Similarly, the disproportionate sanctions imposed on the complainants were intended to punish or silence them, rather than to promote transparency.

"Overall, the legislation had a pervasive effect on public debate and civic engagement, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust of independent voices that undermined the foundations of a democratic society," the Strasbourg court said in its ruling<sup>12</sup>.

According to the court's decision, the Russian Federation is required to pay compensation ranging from 5,500 to 10,000 euros to the plaintiffs.

The court's decision was met with varying responses in Georgia. The Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, commented on the ruling, highlighting the restrictions in the Russian law that led the court to find a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, including:

- Branding all products as belonging to a 'foreign agent.
- Exclusion from all electoral processes;
- Prohibition of implementing professional training programs;
- Prohibition of implementing programs for youth;

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<sup>12</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. Strasbourg has once again determined that Russia's "agents law" violates rights." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/747919/>

- Prohibition of receiving advertising revenue from private companies;
- Disproportionate sanctions (discretionary fines, dissolution of the organization).

According to him<sup>13</sup> Georgian legislation does not have the issues described in the decision against Russia. Papuashvili stated, "It was a big lie when Georgian law was called 'Russian law.'"

In response, one of the organizations working on human rights issues in Georgia, the Social Justice Center, released a statement<sup>14</sup>. The organization noted that while the European Court of Justice had already addressed the main issues of the "agents" law in its 2022 decision, the Court once again clearly expressed its position on the law's provisions. These included the stigmatizing effect, audit and reporting requirements, and privacy concerns, which are also present in the "Russian Law" adopted by the Georgian Dream.

According to the organization, since the Strasbourg Court directly referred to the assessment of the Venice Commission while discussing certain aspects of the Russian "Agents" Law, and the same Venice Commission has criticized the law adopted by the Georgian Dream as problematic due to its violation of the principle of proportionality, there is a high likelihood that the Court's decision on the lawsuit of Georgian organizations and individuals will align with the conclusions of the Commission.

## Discriminatory legislation

On September 17, the Parliament of Georgia passed the anti-LGBT legislative package in its third reading with a vote of 84 in favor and none against<sup>15</sup>. Representatives from the main opposition groups abstained from voting. The package includes the primary bill "On Family Values and Protection of Minors" along with 18 accompanying amendments to various laws of Georgia<sup>16</sup>.

Before the third reading of the law, 32 non-governmental organizations issued a statement condemning the legislative package. According to the organizations, the "Georgian Dream" party is adopting a package of laws with the intent to manipulate the public ahead of the elections, divert attention from real issues, incite irrational fear, and create yet another obstacle to the country's European integration<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Shalva Papuashvili's statement on the decision of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the so-called "agents law" in Russia. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/XkHAehhGcYrbApqx/>

<sup>14</sup> Social Justice Center. 2024. Statement on the decision of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the so-called "agents law" in Russia. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/strasburgis-sasamartlom-agentebis-kanonis-gamo-rusetis-mier-uflebebis-darghveva-kidev-ertkhel-daadastura>

<sup>15</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. Parliament Adopts Anti-LGBT Legislation in Third Hearing. Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/624825>

<sup>16</sup> Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/368295>

<sup>17</sup> Media Development Foundation, MDF. 2024. "Statement of Civil Organizations of Georgia". Available in Georgian at the link: [https://mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view\\_statements/844?fbclid=IwY2xjawFWPKhleHRuA2FibQIxMQABHZtp6KfSZTEwQ7Iz\\_tbl4uesGvKBYk09BTjNYGEk5b2\\_K67zJ27sII3IC-Q\\_aem\\_ZtgiZdKaWw6HwDt-mOA4Qw](https://mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view_statements/844?fbclid=IwY2xjawFWPKhleHRuA2FibQIxMQABHZtp6KfSZTEwQ7Iz_tbl4uesGvKBYk09BTjNYGEk5b2_K67zJ27sII3IC-Q_aem_ZtgiZdKaWw6HwDt-mOA4Qw)

The non-governmental organizations that signed the statement emphasized that the legislative package effectively legalizes censorship and severely infringes on the right to assembly and demonstration. "This package not only targets one group, the LGBTQ+ community, but also sets a dangerous precedent, allowing the government to strip any citizen of the rights guaranteed by the constitution. There are numerous historical examples where the suppression of one group's rights leads to broader, more widespread repression," the statement warned.

- According to the adopted legislation, the registration of "alternative" marriage unions will be prohibited. Additionally, individuals who identify as a gender different from their biological sex, as well as single individuals who are not heterosexual, will be denied the right to adopt a child.
- The law prohibits indicating a person's sex on documents other than their own.
- It is forbidden to conduct surgery or use other medical manipulations to change the biological sex.
- Additionally, the law prohibits the promotion of "LGBT propaganda" in educational institutions, particularly the dissemination of information encouraging identification with a biological sex different from one's own, same-sex relationships, or incest.
- The law also prohibits broadcasters from airing content that promotes the attribution of a person to a biological sex different from their own, same-sex relationships, or incest.
- Additionally, the advertising of such content is prohibited.
- Public gatherings or demonstrations promoting a person's identification with a biological sex different from their own, same-sex relationships, or incest are prohibited.
- Any obligation, reference, or agreement imposed within the framework of the employment relationship that requires refraining from using any word or combination of words related to biological sex will be considered invalid.

Regarding the legislative package, the Venice Commission expressed its position, urging the Georgian authorities to "thoroughly reconsider this legislative proposal and refrain from proceeding with its adoption." Alternatively, if the adoption continues, the Commission recommended removing or amending certain provisions to ensure the elimination of discrimination against LGBT people and compliance with human rights under the European Convention.

The adoption of the legislative package was met with strong criticism from various international figures and organizations, including Mark Kulls, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe<sup>18</sup>, Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign

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<sup>18</sup> COE.int. 2024. "Congress President deplors adoption of anti-LGBTI legislation in Georgia" . Available at the link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/congress-president-deplors-adoption-of-anti-lgbti-legislation-in-georgia>

Affairs and Security Policy<sup>19</sup>, Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the US State Department<sup>20</sup>, Freedom House<sup>21</sup>, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum<sup>22</sup> and other international partners.

It is significant that the legislation, in addition to the clear risk of stigmatizing the LGBTQ+ community, also poses challenges for organizations working to address the needs of this community. The new legal requirements may create additional barriers for these organizations, making it more difficult to organize advocacy campaigns and directly express the legal or other interests of their beneficiaries.

President Salome Zourabichvili did not sign the mentioned legislative package. The draft law was published with the signature of the Speaker of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili. The law will come into effect 60 days after its publication<sup>23</sup>.

## Suspension of Georgia's membership in OGP

According to the decision of October 16, Georgia's membership of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) format was officially temporarily suspended.

The Open Government Partnership made this decision after Georgia failed to submit a plan and timeline for the implementation of the recommendations within the specified deadline.

Recommendations include:

- The withdrawal of current or proposed legislation that discriminates, stigmatizes, or hinders the freedom of expression and association of civil society organizations, media representatives and vulnerable groups.
- Safeguard freedoms of expression and assembly, the space for civil society and their ability to operate without physical and verbal attacks, including in election periods.

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<sup>19</sup> Statement of Joseph Borrell. Available at the link: <https://x.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1836303130624999460>

<sup>20</sup> Statement of Matthew Miller. Available at the link: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-september-19-2024/#post-585965-GEORGIA>

<sup>21</sup> Statement of Freedom House. Available at the link: <https://x.com/freedomhouse/status/1836057063744471282>

<sup>22</sup> Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Statement. Available at the link: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/dSa3hT5PCBJAJSun/>

<sup>23</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "Shalva Papuashvili signed the bill restricting LGBT rights". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33144424.html>

According to the OGP<sup>24</sup>, in order to regain active member status, the Government of Georgia must adequately address the concerns that led to the suspension of its membership. Additionally, the Government was given six months to present a concrete plan outlining how it intends to implement the recommendations by December 31, 2025. It is also known that the Steering Committee of the Open Government Partnership will revisit Georgia's situation in early 2026 and, based on the developments, will decide whether to reinstate Georgia's membership or permanently terminate it.

If the steering committee considers that Georgia has adequately responded to the existing challenges, its membership will be reinstated.

OGP is an international partnership format where representatives from both the state and civil society collaborate to develop and implement action plans, aiming to make the government more inclusive and accountable. This format enhances transparency, involves citizens in processes to empower them, combats corruption, and strengthens governance. Consequently, rejecting this format would significantly diminish the opportunities for cooperation between the state and civil society organizations.

Georgia has been a member of the Open Government Partnership since 2011. In 2017-2018, it even served as a co-chair country of the partnership. However, the adoption of the "Russian law" in 2024, along with other legislative changes that are fundamentally incompatible with the protection of civil space and basic human freedoms, has led to a deterioration in the country's standing within the partnership.

Georgia's suspension from the Open Government Partnership will effectively limit the opportunities for cooperation between the state and civil society organizations.

## Sadigov's Case

Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Sadigov was detained in Tbilisi on August 3, and the following day, the court sentenced him to three months of extradition detention. According to the Georgian court's explanation,<sup>25</sup> Sadigov is accused in Azerbaijan of threatening to spread defamatory information in order to extort a large sum of money. Local human rights defenders consider him a political exile due to his journalistic work and view the charges against him as politically motivated.

As Afghan Sadigov stated in an interview with the media before his detention, he did not feel safe in Georgia and wanted to leave the country, although he was unable to cross the border on July 18. According to his own account, he could only fly toward Azerbaijan. According to "Radio Liberty," the journalist's wife fears that Sadigov may face fatal consequences in Baku.

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<sup>24</sup> OGP. 2024. "Georgia Temporarily Suspended from the Open Government Partnership". Available at the link: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/news/georgia-temporarily-suspended-from-the-open-government-partnership/>

<sup>25</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "Afgan Sadigov – "Who is the Azerbaijani journalist placed in extradition detention in Tbilisi". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/XcbxG>

If extradited, Afgan Sadigov will become the second journalist in recent years to find himself in Azerbaijan after fleeing to Georgia. Afghan Mukhtarli, who disappeared from Tbilisi in 2017, was eventually imprisoned in Azerbaijan on charges of illegal border crossing and currency smuggling. He was sentenced to six years in prison, but was unexpectedly released in 2020. Mukhtarli claims he was abducted by Georgian authorities and handed over to Azerbaijan<sup>26</sup>.

The possible extradition of Sadigov, alongside the implementation of the "Russian law" in Georgia, serves as a significant and alarming signal for foreign human rights defenders, civil activists, journalists, and representatives of civil society organizations who are persecuted in their home countries and operate from Georgia. The existence and frequency of such cases may force these groups or individuals to flee Georgia, seeing it as a dangerous place for their work and safety.

The spokesperson for the US State Department commented on the journalist's detention, stating that they "call on the Georgian authorities to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and immediately release Sadigov [from extradition detention]." This statement was [spread](#) in the media by Alex Raufoglu, a journalist based in Washington. Sadigov's case could become another example of the recent deterioration in Georgian–American relations.

On November 1, it became known that the extradition detention of Afgan Sadigov was extended for another three months<sup>27</sup>.

## Government Initiative for Financing Civil Society Organizations

On September 9, Georgia's Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, announced plans to establish a grant program to allocate government funding to civil society organizations<sup>28</sup>.

According to Kobakhidze, those organizations that are not registered in the register of organizations pursuing the interests of foreign forces created by the Ministry of Justice should not be interested in the mentioned initiative.

*"This is just another attempt to buy us off, and I don't think it's fair. It was totally out of line,"* said one of the focus group participants.

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<sup>26</sup> According to Freedom House, Azerbaijan's political rights and civil liberties are rated only 7 out of a maximum of 100 points, classifying the country as "not free." Additionally, in terms of media freedom, Azerbaijan scored 0 out of a possible 4 points. On December 30, 2021, Azerbaijan passed a law requiring journalists to register in a governmental "register." Journalists who are not included in this register are not recognized as legitimate by the state and thus cannot exercise their right to request information. The law also mandates that journalists report events "objectively," a vague provision that restricts critical and investigative journalism. Furthermore, journalists are prohibited from distributing photo or video material of individuals, including those taken in public spaces, without written consent. According to freedom defense organizations, the purpose of this law is to assert control over the media and institutionalize censorship.

<sup>27</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "The court extended the Azerbaijani journalist's extradition detention for three months". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33183305.html>

<sup>28</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "According to Kobakhidze, the state will allocate grants for NGOs." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33112760.html>

The launch of the budgetary grant program, coming at a time when the operating environment for civil society organizations has been further undermined by the adoption of the "Russian Law," appears to be an attempt to stigmatize the sector. This initiative may be aimed at creating a parallel civil society that is loyal to the government, ultimately designed to present a facade of cooperation between the state and the civil sector.

In the context of the implementation of the "Russian Law," where most organizations declare that they have not registered as "organizations carrying the interests of a foreign power," this initiative appears to be a clear attempt to divide the civil sector and create two distinct camps.

## Sanctions and Severe Deterioration of Relations with the West

During the reporting period, relations between the West and the Georgian government deteriorated, a trend evident not only in the statements made by officials but also in the resolutions adopted, financial sanctions imposed on members of the Georgian government, and the introduction of visa restrictions for members of parliament.

On September 16, it was announced that the United States had imposed financial sanctions on Zviad Kharazishvili, the director of the Special Tasks Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, and his deputy, Miller Lagazauri<sup>29</sup>. Sanctions were also imposed on Zurab Makharadze and Konstantine Morgoshia, whom the U.S. State Department identified as leaders of a violent, extremist group.

In addition, visa restrictions were imposed on more than 60 Georgian citizens and their family members due to their involvement in undermining democracy in Georgia. These restrictions targeted central and local government officials, business people involved in corruption, individuals spreading disinformation that fueled violent extremism, law enforcement officers who participated in violence against citizens, and members of parliament who played a significant role in passing anti-democratic legislation and restricting civil society.

In response, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, stated that the sanctions were "both frivolous and a very sad event." He further asserted that, in his view, American institutions require "de-oligarchization".<sup>30</sup>

The cancellation of the invitation to Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze for the official reception hosted by U.S. President Joe Biden should be seen as a clear indication of the significant deterioration in relations between the United States and the Georgian government.

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<sup>29</sup> US embassy in Georgia. 2024. "Promoting Accountability for Serious Human Rights Abuse and Anti-Democratic Actions in Georgia". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://ge.usembassy.gov/promoting-accountability-for-serious-human-rights-abuse-and-anti-democratic-actions-in-georgia/>

<sup>30</sup> Interpressnews. 2024. "Irakli Kobakhidze – Sanctions are simultaneously frivolous and sad event Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/3qDdj>



Washington's decision was explained by the U.S. Embassy, which stated that the Biden administration had canceled Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's invitation to the annual reception of the UN General Assembly and refused to meet with the Georgian delegation due to the anti-democratic actions of the Georgian government, the spread of misinformation about the U.S. and the West, and the increasing negative rhetoric, which had raised growing concerns.

Sanctions are also mentioned in the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on October 9, which was supported by 495 Members of the European Parliament. Seventy-three MEPs voted against the resolution, while eighty-six abstained.

Among other points, the resolution calls for the suspension of EU funds to the Georgian government until it repeals the anti-democratic legislation. It also urges the imposition of sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the honorary chairman of Georgian Dream, and recommends an assessment of Georgia's compliance with the criteria for visa liberalization. Additionally, the document advocates for "strict conditions" to be applied to any future funding for the Government of Georgia<sup>31</sup>.

The Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia called the adopted resolution "outrageous, shameful and disgusting"<sup>32</sup>.

The conclusions of the European Council about Georgia are even more critical. In the conclusions published after the meeting held on October 17,<sup>33</sup> It is written that the Council expresses serious concern about the actions of the Georgian authorities, which are against the basic values and principles of the European Union.

The European Council emphasized that such actions pose a threat to Georgia's European path and effectively halt the accession process. It urged Georgia to implement democratic, comprehensive, and sustainable reforms in line with the core principles of European integration.

Following the deterioration of relations, the amount of aid to Georgia from the Western partners is also decreasing. For example, it is significant that due to the decline of democracy, Georgia will lose 121 million euros of EU aid<sup>34</sup>.

Decisions made by individual countries at the national level are also significant. In Germany, one of the leading states of the European Union, a resolution was adopted on October 10. The Bundestag called on the German government to insist at the European level that no further progress be made in Georgia's

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<sup>31</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. Sanction Ivanishvili, Freeze EU Funds, Assess Visa Liberalization Benchmarks – European Parliament's Resolution on Georgia. Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/archives/627823>

<sup>32</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. Speaker: European Parliament Draft Resolution "Outrageous, Shameful, Disgusting". Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/archives/627779>

<sup>33</sup> European Council meeting (17 October 2024) Conclusions. Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/20241017-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Tabula.ge. 2024. „U: "Georgia will lose €121 million due to the backslide in democracy." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/724063-eu-demokratiis-ukusvlis-gamo-sakartvelo-eu121>

EU accession process as long as the foreign agents law remains in force<sup>35</sup>. The resolution also negatively evaluates the so-called Enacting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

Bipartisan bills in the United States of America are also important, including the "Friendship Act" and the "Georgian People's Act." According to Senator Gene Shahini, who is the co-author of the "Georgian People's Act", 10 more supporting senators were added to the bill registered in the Senate on October 23<sup>36</sup>. According to the US Foreign Relations Committee, the draft law seeks to hold high-ranking officials and members of the Georgian government accountable. The document outlines new sanctions and, as stated by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the bill will also strengthen the unwavering support of the US for the Georgian people.

The democratic decline and the deterioration of relations with the West, which ultimately results in the suspension of Georgia's European integration process, is a significant factor that exacerbates the already challenging environment for civil society organizations in the country.

The second enlargement report published by the European Commission on Georgia reflects the de facto suspension of the European integration process. As summarized by the European Union Ambassador Pawel Herchinski, "Georgia has gone backwards this year, while other candidate countries have moved forward."<sup>37</sup>

## Discrediting Campaign Against Election Monitoring Organizations

During the reporting period, the government and ruling party representatives continued their discrediting campaign against civil society organizations, including those involved in monitoring the election process.

During this period, the government's hostile rhetoric targeted organizations such as "Transparency International Georgia" and its director, Eka Gigauri. On September 12, Eka Gigauri appeared before the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, where she addressed the current events in Georgia. She strongly criticized the Georgian government, stating that the Georgian people needed the help of the West following the adoption of the "Russian law." She urged the senators to impose sanctions on specific individuals rather than the Georgian people as a whole<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. "Bundestag Adopts Resolution "A European future for Georgia" Available at the link:

<https://civil.ge/archives/627975>

<sup>36</sup> Public Broadcaster. 2024. EU: "Georgia will lose €121 million due to the backslide in democracy." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://1tv.ge/news/senatori-jin-shahini-ackhadebs-rom-qartveli-khalkhis-aqts-mkhardamcherebi-daematnen/>

<sup>37</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. EC Publishes Enlargement Reports as EU Ambassador Notes Georgia's "Unprecedented Backsliding" in Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/archives/632690>

<sup>38</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. "Sanction specific individuals, not the Georgian people" – Gigauri to Senators. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/741788/>

Eka Gigauri's speech was met with harsh criticism in Georgia. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze referred to her as "Sergo Orjonikidze" (a Bolshevik revolutionary whose name has become synonymous with traitor in Georgia) due to her remarks in the Senate<sup>39</sup>.

It is significant that later, on September 24, the Anti-Corruption Bureau of Georgia declared "Transparency International" and another organization, "Choose Europe," as entities with "election goals," effectively depriving these organizations of the opportunity to observe the elections<sup>40</sup>. According to the bureau, "As a result of the monitoring, it was revealed that Transparency International Georgia and its executive director, Eka Gigauri, both directly and within the framework of the 'My Vote for the European Union' campaign, were actively involved in the pre-election campaign, which aimed to support specific political parties and called for refraining from supporting a particular political party."

According to civil society organizations, the decision taken by the Bureau against them was a step directed at the previously announced coalition monitoring. According to the representative of Transparency International Georgia, the government tried to fight against the organizations much more efficiently and quickly through the Anti-Corruption Bureau than through the Russian law<sup>41</sup>.

The mentioned decision was evaluated in the USA as "punishment for giving a speech in the Senate." Four senators released a corresponding letter, stating that the government's decision demonstrates how autocratic regimes unfairly use the law to silence independent voices<sup>42</sup>. Transparency International Georgia requested the annulment of the mentioned decision through the court, but the court rejected the request<sup>43</sup>. Later, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze called on the Anti-Corruption Bureau to withdraw the status of "Transparency International - Georgia" as an organization with an electoral goal, emphasizing that this action was necessary to protect state interests and prevent external manipulation in the election process.

In addition, according to Kobakhidze, it was preferable to apply the same approach to other entities that were recognized as organizations with declared electoral goals<sup>44</sup>. Finally, the Anti-Corruption

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<sup>39</sup> Public Broadcaster. 2024. "Witness Eka Gigauri – Testimony in the Senate." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://1tv.ge/video/mowme-eka-gigauri-mosmena-senatshi/>

<sup>40</sup> Public Broadcaster. 2024. "Transparency International Georgia, "Choose Europe," and their leaders have been declared subjects with electoral goals..." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://1tv.ge/news/ssaertashoriso-gamchvirvaloba-saqartvelo-airchie-evropa-da-mati-khelmdzghvanelebi-saarchevno-miznis-mgone-subieqtebad-gamockhaddes-da-matze-kanonit-gatvaliswinebuli/>

<sup>41</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "'Faster and more effective than the 'agents law' – the Anti-Corruption Bureau against non-governmental organizations." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/gM4YT>

<sup>42</sup> Publika.ge. 2024. "Eka Gigauri is being punished for her testimony in the Senate" – Statement from the Senators. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://publika.ge/eka-gigauri-senatshi-micemuli-chvenebis-gamo-isjeba-senatorebis-ganckhadeba/>

<sup>43</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "Transparency International Georgia" demands the annulment of the Anti-Corruption Bureau's decision. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33136356.html>

<sup>44</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. „Obakhidze urges the Anti-Corruption Bureau to reconsider its decision regarding TI and others“. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/744599/>

Bureau revoked the organization's status, which had previously restricted its ability to observe the elections. The situation created by the Anti-Corruption Bureau's granting of status to organizations with declared electoral goals, and later, following the Prime Minister's call, the cancellation of such status, raises doubts about the Bureau's independence and political impartiality.

It is also noteworthy that, according to a statement made by the "Georgian Dream" party on October 22, their new monitoring revealed that out of 102 registered monitoring organizations, 37 have direct connections to political parties, while 16 are involved in campaigns against the ruling party<sup>45</sup>.

It is important to note that the rhetoric of the ruling party portrays civil society organizations, including election monitoring groups, as politically engaged and biased, thereby stigmatizing these organizations in the eyes of the public. This narrative ultimately creates a significant obstacle to their work.

## War and Peace Campaign

Ahead of the elections, the government launched a campaign instrumentalizing the threat of war in Georgia. This campaign was reflected in the public statements of politicians, who warned that if opposition forces came to power, they would initiate a war against Russia. It was also evident in election banners created by Georgian Dream, which displayed images of Georgia's developed infrastructure—such as schools, churches, hospitals, theaters, bridges, and roads—alongside depictions of similar objects destroyed by Russian aggression in Ukraine<sup>46</sup>. The banners featured the slogan "No to war - choose peace," with the election numbers of opposition parties and coalitions placed on the side symbolizing war and destruction, while the election number of the Georgian Dream party was positioned on the "peace" side.

It is significant that if the ruling party secures a constitutional majority, one of their promises, referencing the 2008 war, includes the prohibition of opposition parties. According to Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, if "Georgian Dream" obtains a constitutional majority in parliament, the ban would apply to the following political groups:

- NM and the coalition created around it (Strategy Agmashenebeli, European Georgia)
- Ahali, Girchi, Droa – Coalition for Change;
- Coalition "Strong Georgia" (Lelo, Freedom Square, Ana Dolidze, Aleko Elisashvili, Giorgi Margvelashvili)

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<sup>45</sup> Interpressnews.ge. 2024. Givi Mikhanadze – The Central Election Commission (CEC) revoked the registration of the organization "Center for Law and Equality," which is affiliated with "United National Movement" and "Ahali". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/817236-givi-mikanaze-organizacia-samartlisa-da-tanascorobis-centrs-romelic-nacmozraobasa-da-axaltan-aris-apilirebuli-cesko-m-registracia-gauukma/>

<sup>46</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "Of course, it's the 'Georgian Dream' campaign" – The party explains the election banners“. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33135941.html>

- Giorgi Gakharia's party "For Georgia".

One of the promises of the ruling team was the impeachment of President Salome Zourabichvili<sup>47</sup>, which was to be carried out by the newly elected parliament.

The ruling team's positioning, claiming that the issue of war and peace in Georgia would be decided in the elections—with itself as the guarantor of peace and opposition parties portrayed as supporters of war—combined with promises to ban these parties and impeach the president, further deepens political polarization and confrontation. This heightened division negatively impacts civil society as a whole and worsens its operating environment.

## Election Results and Subsequent Reactions

According to the Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2,060,412 citizens participated in the parliamentary elections held on October 26, which were conducted under a fully proportional system. Preliminary data from the CEC indicates that<sup>48</sup> nearly 54 percent of voters supported the "Georgian Dream," giving it enough support to form the government independently. The opposition parties that surpassed the 5 percent electoral threshold collectively garnered about 38 percent of the votes, including:

- Coalition for Change: Ahali, Droa, Girchi - 11.03%;
- Unity - National Movement - 10.17%;
- Strong Georgia - Lelo, Freedom Square, Ana Dolidze, Aleko Elisashvili - 8.80%;
- Gakharia for Georgia - 7.77%.

According to the coalition observation mission of Georgian civil organizations, "My Vote", the elections were held against the backdrop of serious and substantial violations.

“At the end of the day, it became clear that the various problems identified during the monitoring of the election process during the day were part of a larger scheme, the purpose of which was to subvert the final result of the election. It became clear that a complex scheme of election fraud had been developed, for the implementation of which such methods were used as disruption of the verification system, violation of marking procedures and obstruction of observers from observing voter identification procedures. In the first half of the day, two or more ballots were given to voters en masse. Also, there were cases when ballots were already selected in favor of the ruling party”, - It is written in the statement issued by the coalition.

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<sup>47</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. „იმპიჩმენტის მცდელობა 2 - არღვევს თუ იცავს კონსტიტუციას პრეზიდენტი?“. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/2Xxxi>

<sup>48</sup> October 26, 2024 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia - Preliminary Results. 2024. Available at the link: [https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election\\_57/tr/dashboard](https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election_57/tr/dashboard)

According to "My Vote," as a result of these and other manipulations, including the confiscation of ID cards in the pre-election period, a decisive number of votes in favor of the ruling party were secured<sup>49</sup>.

None of the opposition groups that surpassed the electoral threshold recognized the legitimacy of the election results<sup>50</sup>. As a result, the opposition parties have expressed their refusal to engage in parliamentary work. The President also does not recognize the election results as legitimate, describing the elections as "totally falsified." Following the President's statement, the Prosecutor's Office, in response to an appeal from the Central Election Commission (CEC), launched an investigation into the alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections, based on signs of a crime under Article 164<sup>3</sup> of the Criminal Code of Georgia. The Prosecutor's Office also summoned President Salome Zourabichvili for questioning<sup>52</sup>.

It is noteworthy that prior to the initiation of the investigation into potential election fraud in Georgia, the spokesperson for the US State Department, Matthew Miller, had already addressed the issue. During a press conference on October 28, Miller stated that the US was in consultation with European partners to determine which body would be most appropriate to investigate the alleged election fraud in Georgia<sup>53</sup>. In response, the Chairman of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, raised a rhetorical question in his comments to the media: "Why do they not trust the domestic investigation [conducted in Georgia] in the West?"<sup>54</sup>.

It is important to note that the President of the United States, Joe Biden, called on the government of Georgia to conduct a transparent investigation into all violations related to the elections. According to his statement, the October 26 parliamentary elections were marred by the abuse of administrative resources, voter intimidation, and coercion<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Statement of "My Vote". Available at the link: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/evaluation-polling-and-precinct-closing-process>

<sup>50</sup> ON.ge. 2024 "Salome Zourabichvili: This was a total falsification of the elections". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/QDCJC>

<sup>51</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. "What will happen if the opposition does not enter parliament?". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/749160/>

<sup>52</sup> Netgazeti.ge. 2024. "An investigation has been launched into election fraud, and the president has been summoned for questioning at the prosecutor's office". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/749125/>

<sup>53</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "Who will investigate and what within 21 days...", Available in Georgian at the link: <https://shorturl.at/WkgSy>

<sup>54</sup> Publika.ge. 2024. "What's wrong with an internal investigation? what's the problem?" – Papuashvili on the international investigation of elections". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://publika.ge/ras-erchian-sashinao-rom-iyos-ra-problemaa-papuashvili/>

<sup>55</sup> President Joe Biden's statement on Georgia's democratic backsliding. U.S. Embassy in Georgia. Available in Georgian at the link: [პრეზიდენტ ჯო ბაიდენის... - US Embassy Tbilisi, Georgia | Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyTbilisi/)

In response to the concerns raised, Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, stated on October 30 that the elections "were held absolutely cleanly, democratically, and fairly." He emphasized that "everything will be absolutely open, and everyone can look into everything"<sup>56</sup>.

It is important to note that following the assessments made by civil society and monitoring groups regarding the election results and potential violations, Sweden decided to terminate its cooperation with the Government of Georgia<sup>57</sup>. The Canadian government also decided to revise the relations<sup>58</sup>. The foreign and European affairs ministers of 15 EU states issued a joint statement addressing the violations observed during the elections. According to the statement, these violations of election rules are incompatible with the standards expected from a candidate country for European Union membership<sup>59</sup>.

It is significant that the election results are considered unreliable by local civil society organizations. According to the Association of Young Lawyers, one of the most fundamental principles of the elections—secrecy—was violated. The organization has called for the annulment of the results from 2,263 polling stations and for the elections to be held again. Nona Kurdovanidze, the director of the organization, stated that "Georgian Dream" installed video cameras at polling stations, which, in some instances, were directed at the registrar's tables and verification machines, and in other cases, at the voting booths and the main ballot box. Additionally, in precincts where electronic devices for voting and counting were used, the quality of the ballots could not guarantee that they would not show traces of a colored circle on the back, which raised significant concerns about voter influence and violated the principles of vote secrecy and free expression of will<sup>60</sup>. The organization filed relevant complaints with the court, and hearings will be held in November.

The joint observation mission of the OSCE, ODIHR, The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) and Euro parliament (EP) highlights the issue of the "frequent compromising" of the secrecy of the vote during the elections.

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<sup>56</sup> Civil.ge. 2024. "PM Kobakhidze on Investigation into Elections: Everyone Can Check Everything". Available at the link: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/632797>

<sup>57</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "The Swedish government decides to suspend cooperation with Georgia." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33176765.html>

<sup>58</sup> Government of Canada. 2024. „Statement on Georgia parliamentary election“. Available at the link: [https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2024/10/statement-on-georgia-parliamentary-election.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawGM4zVleHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHVejrPgcxli7vIEjUb1AwvA3ovvDr7WNOAYAYA1dQ8jW9cReUiDpEeo0og\\_aem\\_1-MzcNsJifRDRimwS7cqdw](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2024/10/statement-on-georgia-parliamentary-election.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawGM4zVleHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHVejrPgcxli7vIEjUb1AwvA3ovvDr7WNOAYAYA1dQ8jW9cReUiDpEeo0og_aem_1-MzcNsJifRDRimwS7cqdw)

<sup>59</sup> Statement from the Foreign and European Affairs Ministers of the EU member states. Available at the link: [https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/elections-georgia/2681910?fbclid=IwY2xjawGOzmdleHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHfdoOTInCR6b1mpWBkwOnzf294YcmRpcBgijuZhRhBP3MrR96Nu2DmCgCA\\_aem\\_Nj8YpRsDRjLbtevLPNJWgg](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/elections-georgia/2681910?fbclid=IwY2xjawGOzmdleHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHfdoOTInCR6b1mpWBkwOnzf294YcmRpcBgijuZhRhBP3MrR96Nu2DmCgCA_aem_Nj8YpRsDRjLbtevLPNJWgg)

<sup>60</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. "GYLA demands the annulment of the results in the polling stations where the elections were held electronically". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33179569.html>

“Vote secrecy was potentially compromised in 24 per cent of observations, due to the manner of ballot insertion into VCDs or inadequate polling station layout. IEOM observers frequently reported indications of pressure on voters and overcrowding, and procedural inconsistencies. In many cases, party representatives recorded the voting process and tracked voters, raising concerns about potential intimidation. While the presence of citizen and party observers contributed to transparency, many citizen observers appeared to act on behalf of contestants.” – the report states<sup>61</sup>.

The irregularities observed during the election process, which may have directly influenced the election results, further heighten political tensions in the country. Additionally, the potential mistrust of the election results from Georgia's European and American partners increases the risk of the country's isolation. This threat of isolation could present significant challenges, both politically and economically. Furthermore, the current situation exacerbates the challenges faced by civil society in the country, limiting its operational space and hindering its ability to effectively engage and advocate.

## Raids on Homes of Disinformation Investigators

Two days before the parliamentary elections, on the morning of October 24 at 8 a.m., the financial police raided the homes of Sofo Gelava and Eto Buziashvili, Georgian staff members of the American research organization "Atlantic Council," following a court order<sup>62</sup>.

According to media reports, during the searches, mobile phones, computer equipment, and memory cards were seized. On the same day, searches were carried out at several other locations in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. It is known that the financial police also entered the home of businessman Valery Tkeshelashvili in Kutaisi, as well as the apartment of brothers Onise and Sandro Tskhadadze in Tbilisi. Additionally, the American company Concentrix was searched, though the connection between the company and the Atlantic Council employees remains unclear.

The Investigative Service of the Ministry of Finance issued a statement on October 24, stating that investigative actions were carried out in connection with alleged criminal activities at a "call center." Minister of Economy Levan Davitashvili expressed confidence that it would be confirmed that Concentrix's operations were legal<sup>63</sup>. However, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze remarked that "the results of the investigation could be very interesting."

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<sup>61</sup> INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION. Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2024. STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS. Available at the link: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/579346.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024 "Pre-election raids on the homes of disinformation researchers and the office of an American company in Tbilisi – What do we know?". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33172213.html>

<sup>63</sup> BM.ge. 2024. "I am confident that it will be determined that Concentrix's activities are legal" – The minister's first comment." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://bm.ge/news/dartsmunebuli-var-gairkveva-rom-concentrix-is-saqmianoba-legaluria-ministris-pirveli-komentari>



In media comments, both Sofo Gelava and Eto Buziashvili, employees of the American research organization, stated that they have no connection with the Concentrix company. They also mentioned that they are unfamiliar with the other two companies involved in the financial police investigation.

The President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, called these searches "typical psychological pressure and intimidation" and linked them to the elections<sup>64</sup>. American Senator Jeanne Shaheen also responded to the incident, expressing concern over Georgia's ability to "conduct free and fair elections"<sup>65</sup>.

According to the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), a human rights organization, two procedural violations were observed during the search, including:

- According to public sources, the search and seizure orders issued by the Tbilisi City Court did not specify the subject of the search, violating the Criminal Procedure Code.
- There were also limitations on access to legal counsel and the opportunity to secure neutral evidence during the search and seizure.

According to the organization's statement, the individuals targeted in the investigative actions are publicly known for their work against Russian disinformation and their non-governmental civil positions. Given this, the GYLA will actively monitor these criminal cases and related developments in the context of the 2024 parliamentary elections.<sup>66</sup>

Two days following the elections, on October 28, access to the personal bank accounts of Buziashvili and Gelava was restricted<sup>67</sup>. The Helsinki Commission condemned the restriction of access to bank accounts for employees of the Atlantic Council, viewing it as an attack on Georgian civil society and the American organization that employs them<sup>68</sup>.

The search operations conducted in the homes of civil society representatives just days before the elections give rise to the impression that these actions by state agencies are politically motivated and intended to intimidate civil society actors.

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<sup>64</sup> Radio Liberty. 2024. „""Typical psychological pressure" – The President on the raids at the homes of Atlantic Council staff members." Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33172185.html>

<sup>65</sup> Publika.ge. 2024. According to Shaheen, the reports of the raids raise concerns about Georgia's ability to hold free elections. Available in Georgian at the link: <https://publika.ge/shahinis-tqmit-chkhrekebze-cnobebi-iwvevs-sheshfotebas-sagartvelos-shesadzleblobaze-chaataros-tavisufali-archevnebi/>

<sup>66</sup> GYLA. 2024. GYLA's assessment regarding the searches and seizures of several individuals' homes and office spaces by the Investigation Service of the Ministry of Finance in the morning hours of October 24, 2024. Available at the link: <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/24-octomberi-chkhreka-amogeba-gancxadeba>

<sup>67</sup> Radio Liberty. "Atlantic Council researchers have been restricted from accessing bank accounts". Available in Georgian at the link: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33178123.html>

<sup>68</sup> Helsinki Commission. 2024. "Chairman Wilson Expresses Condemns Georgian Government Actions Against Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava" Available at the link: <https://www.csce.gov/press-releases/chairman-wilson-expresses-condemns-georgian-government-freezing-bank-accounts-of-eto-buziashvili-and-sopo-gelava/>