

Advocacy visit of the EaP CSF Georgian National Platform to Brussels Main messages and take-aways

15-16 October 2024

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Georgia's upcoming legislative elections on 26 October 2024, representatives of the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) conducted advocacy meetings in Brussels on 15-16 October 2024.

The delegation included **Lasha Tugushi** (*Director, Liberal Academy Tbilisi and EaP CSF Steering Committee Co-Chair*), **Ekaterine Tsimakuridze** (*Director, Democracy Index, and EaP CSF Working Group 1 co-coordinator*), and **Ketevan Chachava** (*Executive Director, Center for Development and Democracy, and EaP CSF Working Group 1 co-coordinator in Georgia*).

During these meetings, the delegation engaged with key EU stakeholders—including the European Commission (DG NEAR), the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Parliament (DG EXPO), and Members of the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), representatives from seven EU member states (COEST delegates), and Brussels-based think tanks and organisations (gathered through a public roundtable discussion).

The discussions focused on the challenges faced by Georgian civil society, particularly the impact of the “transparency of foreign influence” law, the pre-election environment, and Georgia's EU integration process.

Objectives of the advocacy visit:

1. Raise awareness about the impact of the law on the transparency of foreign influence on civil society;
2. Inform stakeholders about the current pre-election landscape in Georgia;
3. Advocate for continued support for civil society and Georgia's EU integration beyond the upcoming elections.

The advocacy meetings were supported by the EaP CSF Secretariat.

PRE-ELECTORAL CONTEXT IN GEORGIA

On 26 October 2024, Georgia will hold its legislative elections under a **fully proportional system with a 5% threshold** and the **use of new electronic voting technologies**. This election is pivotal for Georgia's EU integration and is seen as a referendum on the country's future. The **political environment is highly polarised**, with Georgian Dream (in power since 2012) framing the vote as a choice between "peace and war," while the opposition positions it as a choice between democracy and authoritarianism.

Polls show **conflicting prognosis for the results**. For example, Edison Research Poll (17-29 September 2024) published by [Formula TV](#) places Georgian Dream at 32% of the votes, while the Georgian Opinion Research Business International poll (18 -30 September 2024) published by [Imedi TV](#) places GD at 59,5% of the votes. Aggressive misinformation and disinformation campaigns also deepen existing polarization and creation of "parallel realities" on the ground. This, coupled with the new electoral reforms, makes post-election scenarios difficult to predict.

According to civil society views, given the unpredictability of the vote turnout and results, **the stakes are higher than ever**. Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023, contingent on progress in nine priorities. Since then, **Georgian Dream hindered the accession negotiation processes with the introduction of the transparency of foreign funding law (known as Russian law or foreign agent law) and the anti-LGBTQI propaganda legislative package, and its anti-Western rhetoric**. The impact of the infamous Foreign Agent Law on civil society is dramatic affecting organisations' ability to advocate and hold power to account, perform project activities and daily operations, and remain a trustful counterpart and stakeholder in Georgia's democratic reform processes.

Since the re-introduction of the law, on numerous occasions, through official statements made by the EC and the EEAS, European Council conclusions and coercive measures such as EU assistance cuts, **EU stakeholders' reactions have drawn attention on Georgia's democratic backsliding**.

WHAT GEORGIAN CIVIL SOCIETY CALLS FOR

1) Integrity of the electoral process: Free, fair and transparent elections!

The integrity of the upcoming elections is a key concern. **A free, fair, and transparent electoral process, with unhindered access for international and domestic observers, is a prerequisite for continued EU support.**

Key issues are:

- The introduction of a fully proportional system with a 5% threshold, without open lists and any gender quotas;
- Increased polling station capacity (from 1,500 to 3,000 voters), which could result in long queues and discourage voter participation;
- A change in voting methodology, moving from circling to filling in ballots; if not filled in properly papers ballots will not be considered valid;
- The introduction of a new three-stage electronic voting on election day, which could pose challenges for any voters as well as members of election administration, observers, political party representatives unfamiliar with new technologies.
- Polarized pre-election environment.

2) More support for civil society – financial, legal and advocacy support

As depicted by the recently published EaP CSF report [“Battered, but resilient. Georgian civil society in the context of the law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence”: an EaP CSF survey”](#),

- 94% respondents confirmed they received more than 20% of their funding from abroad. The law will directly impact their resource and the services they provide to the communities they serve.
- 64% have confirmed being victims of various forms of online and offline harassment including verbal threats, smear campaigns but also physical intimidation.

In this context, beyond elections and their results:

- **Donors and the international community must continue supporting CSOs’ operations financially.** 75% of survey respondents were worried about their financial future.
- The importance of considering new funding schemes for organizational support is paramount for civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly for medium and smaller-sized groups operating in the regions. These organizations often face financial constraints that limit their capacity to implement impactful programs and sustain long-term operations. Developing innovative and accessible

funding mechanisms tailored to the needs of regional CSOs would not only empower these groups but also ensure more inclusive and diverse civic participation, enhancing the overall resilience and reach of civil society across the country.

- **Pro-bono legal assistance** is essential as civil society is willing to take legal action against the Georgian authorities both in domestic and international courts (on 17 October, a group of CSOs filed an appeal with European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg);
- **Advocacy efforts** must continue at the EU and international level to put pressure on the Georgian government to remove this law, regardless of the results of the elections on 26 October.

3) More accountability and a sound justice system at home

An independent judiciary is essential for a functional democracy. Georgian civil society calls for holistic reform of the judiciary, including the introduction of a vetting process, in line with European Commission recommendations. Elections are being held in the environment of low level of public trust towards the judiciary. On 9 October, the Georgian Constitutional Court declined to suspend the law on “transparency of foreign influence.” On 17 October, civil society organisations filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights.

4) Genuine reforms to bring Georgia closer to the European Union

Regardless of the election outcome, with over 80% of Georgian society supporting the country's European integration and EU membership, civil society is calling for the immediate resumption of the reform process and the implementation of the nine EU recommendations. Progress on these recommendations is crucial for Georgia's EU accession, as they represent the foundational steps toward meeting the democratic, institutional, and legal standards required for membership.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the numerous challenges it faces, Georgian civil society remains resilient. Prior to legislative elections, their efforts focus on ensuring free, fair and transparent elections, upholding an independent judiciary and safeguarding human rights.

Five urgent steps are seen as necessary to bring Georgia back on its European path:

- 1) Ensure free, fair and transparent elections on 26 October;*
- 2) Abolish the law on the transparency of foreign influence;*
- 3) Abolish the anti-LGBTQI+ legislative package;*
- 4) Put an end to the anti-civil society rhetoric and "us versus them" discourse;*
- 5) Commit to a genuine reform process in line with EU's nine recommendations for Georgia.*

The advocacy efforts of the EaP CSF and the Georgian National Platform will continue following the elections.