

## Crisis in Georgia: How to support civil society while pressuring the authorities

18 December 2024

On 18 December 2024, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) held a discussion with Georgian civil society representatives and EU and international stakeholders about the unfolding situation in Georgia.

This closed-door meeting offered the opportunity to exchange insights, updates and recommendations with EU and international stakeholders on the current situation in Georgia and how Georgian civil society is responding to the ongoing protests, its expectations from the EU and its Member States and how the EU can better support Georgia's democratic aspirations and civil society efforts.

**Overall context:** The Georgian government's decision to suspend the country's EU integration process on 28 November has triggered widespread protests over the past three weeks, reflecting deep public discontent with the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party. With around 80% of Georgians in favour of EU membership, these actions have alienated large parts of society and raised concerns about Georgia's democratic trajectory and its relationship with the EU. The protests have been met with a surge of violent measures, including hundreds of arrests and incidents of police brutality and repression. In this context, the country is sliding towards authoritarianism. In response to violence against protestors, the EU proposed sanctions against Georgian leaders, blocked in the EU Council by Hungary and Slovakia, with whom the GD government has established close connections. The Baltic countries already introduced restrictions unilaterally against Georgian officials in early December 2024. The recent case of Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze publicly stating that Romania, Italy and Spain opposed sanctions against members of GD party only to be later disproven by official statements from these countries – is proof of the fact that government representatives need foreign recognition and legitimisation.

**Media:** Since the beginning of nationwide demonstrations, more than 90 media workers, particularly critical journalists, have faced physical attacks, verbal abuse or damage to their equipment. Notable cases include journalists Rugam Rogava and Maka Chikhladze, who were violently beaten during protests with perpetrators

benefitting from complete impunity. Despite these hostile conditions, Georgian independent media continues to operate documenting the protests and ongoing violence, meanwhile instances of abuses and obstructions remain uninvestigated and unpunished. The international community should pay closer attention to these cases to allow journalists and independent media to continue to show the local and international society what is happening in Georgia. More repressive measures against civil society and media organisations are expected as the Government can start any time the implementation of measures under the Foreign Agent Law. The risk that repression expands to political opposition remains high. Independent media will not be able to continue operating freely in the existing context, and the risk to end up in a Russia-like scenario is extremely high, making crucial the exertion of international and internal pressure to revert the current trajectory which is taking Georgia to downright authoritarianism.

**Civil society:** The Georgian Dream government is facing growing isolation both internationally and in the country. Ongoing repression is making GD lose moral ground within the Georgian society including among those who previously supported the ruling party. The Georgian civil society is showing strength and resilience in a context of increasing authoritarianism and brutal violence against protesters who took the streets in Tbilisi and in the regions. In the context of relative weakness of the political opposition, Georgian civil society, in particular youth, maintain leading role in the protests.

Civil society representatives expressed concerns about the timing of EU financial support to Georgian civil society and independent media, particularly for organisations operating in the regions, which are those most in need of assistance. The support of CSOs working in the region is also crucial to maintain the nationwide aspect of the protests, which exerts the necessary pressure on the government. Civil society representatives also urged the EU to limit funds to Georgian state agencies through ongoing multilateral and bilateral agreements or mandate the inclusion of civil society organisations in related process to keep the pressure on the Georgian government. The outcome of the protests will depend highly on how strong the pressure on the government will be both internally and externally.

**Legal aspects:** The crisis that Georgia is currently experiencing is political, constitutional and human rights related. All institutions are controlled by Georgian Dream. Currently, over 500 people are in administrative detention, while over 40 individuals face criminal charges, with some risking prison sentences of up to nine years. Reports of torture and the excessive use of force against demonstrators during detention highlight widespread abuses. Nevertheless, police and special forces are not being investigated for misconduct as well as the institutions, including the judiciary, which is under control of the ruling party. In response, civil society organisations have established legal aid networks and are raising awareness on such cases of impunity, including through joint letters addressed to UN bodies and international institutions, which call on them to visit Georgia and assess the situation on the ground. Addressing the International Criminal Court is being considered as civil society observers deem that the threshold of crime against humanity has been reached.

In the context of increasing authoritarianism, Georgian Dream is employing new forms of pressure against Georgian civil society by weaponising legislation. The government is using six laws under the administrative offenses code and increasing financial fines to limit freedom of speech and assembly, while introducing new offenses, such as wearing masks during protests, which carry high fines of up to 2000 Georgian Lari, aimed at discouraging protesters. These measures violating international standards mirror similar laws adopted in Russia and Ukraine during Maidan protests. Other alarming changes include preventive detention and the forced resignation of public servants through legal mandate. In this regard, Parliament has already gone through the three hearings and the Chairperson of the Parliament can sign and publish the law without the President's approval. Another concern is a law that strips the outgoing President of security guarantees in case of violation of the Constitution. This move is particularly relevant as an impeachment procedure has been initiated against President Salomé Zourabichvili in the past months. Therefore, there are no signs that the Georgian Dream will retreat from its autocratic course since Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze recently announced that the monitoring of the Foreign Agent Law will start soon.

## **Recommendations to the EU, its Member States, and international organisations**

**The government is in need of international recognition and legitimisation, and measures should be taken to further its isolation, increasing international pressure.** These can include:

- Imposing sanctions on Georgian officials to isolate the Georgian Dream government, on the model set by the unilateral sanctions imposed by the Baltic countries; It would be particularly important if big EU Member States would follow suits, such as Germany, France, Poland and others;
- Continued strong political statements from the European Parliament, but also from individual Members of European Parliament, ideally from a wide range of countries and political groups, going beyond the usual suspects;
- Meeting with civil society and opposition representatives. EU leaders have not yet visited Georgia: it would be highly significant if they were to come to the country and show themselves side-by-side with the protests;
- Not inviting Georgian Dream representatives to high level meetings and inviting civil society and academia instead, making a reverse in this practice contingent with the return to constitutional order and meeting of the demands of the democratic community.

**Civil society and media are maintaining strong internal pressure while facing harsh repression.** They should be supported by:

- Providing stronger political and financial support to Georgian civil society and independent media, in the capital and in the regions, also in view of the implementation of the Foreign Agent Law; financial support should be rapid, flexible and nationwide to sustain the momentum of the protests and their nationwide character;
- Supporting civil society's monitoring on the situation in Georgia;
- Identifying ways to offer direct financial support to civil society organisations operating under the constraints of the Georgian authoritarian regime.
- Increasing pressure on the Georgian Dream government to release the people who have been arrested and continue supporting the individuals who have been charged with criminal and administrative offences and their rehabilitation.

**Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**  
Avenue de Cortenbergh 120  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium

[www.eap-csf.eu](http://www.eap-csf.eu)  
[info@eap-csf.eu](mailto:info@eap-csf.eu)

