

# The State of Human Rights in Georgia



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## OVERVIEW

As a free and democratic country, Georgia recognizes and protects universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. The report on the state of human rights covers the rule of law in Georgia, law enforcement practices and accountability, and recent breaches of the rule of law through unfair trials and prison torture. The overview of human rights in Georgia also includes the state of human rights in occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including torture, ill-treatment, and freedom of movement. The report also looks at the issues of freedom of expression of the LGBTQ+ community, mass surveillance, and attacks on independent media.

An examination of the significant human rights monitoring reports indicates that the primary areas of concern in the field of human rights in Georgia are:

- Torture and degrading treatment of detainees;
- Lack of religious freedom;
- Lack of freedom of expression;
- Lack of independence within the judiciary;
- Infringements of the right of assembly;
- Politically motivated kidnappings;
- Political imprisonment;
- The plight of refugees, including internally displaced persons;
- Violations of socio-economic rights.

## RULE OF LAW

Article 7 of the Georgian Constitution proclaims: *"The State acknowledges and protects universally recognized human rights and freedoms as eternal and supreme human values. While exercising authority, the people and the state shall be bound by these rights and freedoms as directly applicable law."*

The process of constructing a free and democratic government system founded upon the rule of law began in Georgia during the times of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, the first modern establishment of the Georgian republic, which existed from May 1918 until February 1921. The 1921 Constitution, for the first time, recognized certain inalienable human rights and freedoms, including equal treatment under the law, abolition of capital punishment, the right to privacy, the freedom of expression and assembly, and the rights of ethnic minorities. The 1921 Constitution also ensured other universally recognized human rights and freedoms that were not expressly defined in the Constitution but could be derived from the wide-reaching principles ratified within the constitutional framework.

According to the Preamble to the Constitution of Georgia, it is the will of all Georgian citizens to establish a democratic social order that guarantees respect for all human rights through continued cooperation with other peaceful nations.

The Georgian Constitution envisages an executive branch of the government that reports to the Prime Minister, a unicameral parliament, and a separate judiciary. The government is accountable to the Parliament. According to the Georgian Constitution, the president is the head of state and a commander in chief. The President of Georgia is elected by members of the electoral college, comprised of all members of the Parliament, members of the high councils of the autonomous republics, and city council representatives.

After the admission of Georgia to the Council of Europe in April 1999 and ratification of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), Georgia recognized the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights as a guarantor of rights and freedoms enshrined in the Convention. The European Convention of Human Rights is the fundamental document that protects human rights and freedoms. The Convention addresses fundamental civil and political rights and has established a protection mechanism through the European Court of Human Rights.

The European Convention of Human Rights is an inherent part of the Georgian legislation. The Convention has supreme legal force over domestic normative acts, as envisaged by Article 6(2) of the Constitution of Georgia and Article 19(1) of the Georgian law "On Normative Acts".

The European Convention of Human Rights enables Georgia to apply to the European Court of Human Rights to redress the rights of any citizen under its jurisdiction.

Other governmental institutions responsible for law enforcement and the rule of law are the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service of Georgia. The ministry is the primary law enforcement institution comprised of the national police force, border security, and the Georgian Coast Guard. The State Security Service is the internal intelligence service responsible for counterintelligence, counterterrorism, and anti-corruption efforts.

The legal framework alone does not suffice to ensure the protection of human rights in the country. Therefore, institutions and other bodies enforcing existing rights and implementing changes are the foremost priority.

On 5 July 2013, with Government Decree No. 169, the Georgian government established the Interagency Council for Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan to develop a national strategy for protecting human rights.

The primary goal of the Human Rights Strategy is to develop a systematic approach to the implementation of human rights of all Georgian citizens and ensure the protection of human



rights by central and local governments.

Nevertheless, while the country's Constitution guarantees human rights in Georgia, it has been alleged by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United States Department of State, and the Georgian opposition that these rights are often breached.

Several reports include the following human rights violations:

- Lack of judiciary independence.
- Arbitrary or selective detentions, investigations, and prosecutions widely considered to be politically motivated.
- Breaches of privacy.
- Violence against journalists.
- Limits on freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association.
- Crimes involving violence or threats targeting LGBTQ+ persons and activists.

The indicator of the degree of protection of constitutional rights and the rule of law in the country is primarily based on individual cases and events that showcase and ability of the governmental institutions to fulfil the obligations imposed by the Constitution.

## 2021 Unfair Trials

In 2021, Georgian citizens raised concerns about state influence over the judicial branch due to the application of selective justice and politically motivated prosecution of political opponents, and independent media appeared.

On 23 February 2021, police arrested opposition party chair and parliamentarian Nika Melia for purported incitement of violence during the 2019 protests. He was released on 10 May after the European Union posted his bail (40,000 GEL) to ease government-opposition tensions.

In 2021, the trial of the director and co-founder of the pro-opposition TV channel Mtavari Giorgi Rurua continued the unfounded charges of abuse of power and embezzlement. Giorgi Rurua is one of the channel's principal shareholders. Rurua was pardoned and released in April from a four-year sentence imposed in 2020.

On 1 October, Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's former president, was arrested on his return from exile to serve a six-year sentence in his absence. Following a five-week hunger strike, he was forcibly transferred to a prison hospital without sufficient healthcare facilities. In the prison hospital, he faced threats and insults from other inmates and demeaning treatment by the prison authorities. On 20 November, he was transferred to a military hospital in critical condition but moved back to prison on 30 December. His doctors reported severe damage to his health due to ill-treatment. The State Inspector's Service was terminated, haltering the investigation into

the allegations. Mikheil Saakashvili's request for a retrial was denied.

In November 2021, the European Union ambassador to Georgia criticized the Georgian authorities' "setbacks in the area of the judiciary and the rule of law", including politicized, "non-transparent and non-competitive" appointments of judges to the Supreme Court and the High Council of Justice as well as the failure to adopt pledged constitutional amendments on the process of appointing the Prosecutor General.

In December 2021, Parliament hastily disestablished the State Inspector's Service, which investigated police abuses and passed amendments undermining judicial independence.

## 2021 Judiciary Scandal

In recent years, opposition groups have criticized the close ties between the ruling Georgian Dream party and a so-called 'clan' inside the judiciary.

On 12 July 2021, the Georgian Parliament appointed six judges to the country's Supreme Court despite calls from the opposition, NGOs, and the international community to suspend the process in compliance with the EU-mediated agreement.

On 27 June 2021, judges of the general courts of Georgia joined the meeting at the Higher School of Justice of Georgia to discuss recent developments in the judiciary system. As a result of the meeting, more than 300 judges signed an open letter to protest what they called a "Soviet-style attack on the country's judicial independence".

The statement came after an independent supervisory body, the High Council of Justice (HCOJ), nominated nine Supreme Court judicial candidates despite the warnings issued by the OSCE's Venice Commission related to the appointment. On 28 April, the Venice Commission recommended 'staying the appointment procedure' in the Supreme Court and renewing the composition of the High Council of Justice.

Reforming the judiciary was vital to the agreement between Georgian Dream and opposition parties to end the country's political crisis on 19 April 2021. On 23 June, the US Embassy in Georgia expressed concerns with the appointment process, suggesting that Georgian Dream was not meeting its commitments to making 'inclusive' judicial reforms.

## STATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Since 2008, the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain under the de-facto Russian government control. The jurisdiction of Georgia does not extend to its conflict regions. Russian-occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside central

government control, and Russian forces supported de facto authorities. For this reason, the state fails to secure human rights protection for people residing there. Despite efforts by the state authorities and international organizations to improve the human rights situation in the conflict zones, there are still many cases of human rights violations in these territories.

According to reports, two prominent human rights violations occur in the conflict zones — the discrimination against ethnic Georgians and the overall failure of the legal system.

Other reports include:

- Significant human rights issues in the conflict regions, including credible reports of unlawful detentions.
- Restrictions of freedom of movement for ethnic Georgians.
- Restrictions on voting rights and other ways to participate in the political process.
- Restrictions of property rights and ability to register businesses for ethnic Georgians.

There is still no official information regarding the state of human rights and humanitarian situation in South Ossetia. The de facto authorities are refusing most ethnic Georgians who were forced to relocate from South Ossetia during the 2008 conflict to return to their homes. The de facto authorities do not allow most international organizations regular access to South Ossetia to provide humanitarian assistance. Russian "bowdlerization" of the administrative-territorial lines increased, further restricting the freedom of movement and separating residents from their communities and livelihoods. Russian and de facto authorities in both regions reportedly commit abuses with impunity.

In 2021, the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region continued to detain civilians and restrict movement in and out of the government-controlled territory, including additional restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted a range of human rights, including economic and social.

## European Court of Human Rights Ruling

On 21 January 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) announced its verdict on the interstate case filed by Georgia against Russia, holding the Russian government accountable for the breach of six articles of the European Convention of Human Rights.

The Georgian government submitted the case on 11 August 2008, right after the Russian forces occupied 20 per cent of Georgian territory in the invasion of South Ossetia earlier that month. Four hundred and twelve Georgians were killed during the five-day war, including service members, police officers, and civilians, and around 35 000 residential buildings were destroyed. More than twenty-six thousand Georgian citizens are still denied the right to return to their homes; some are forced to live in the internationally displaced persons. The 2008

Russian-Georgian war, which culminated in Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region of South Ossetia as independent states, shocked the global community.

In 2021, the ECHR ruled that Russia is responsible for major human rights violations, including killing civilian populations, torture, breaches of freedom of movement, and destruction of private property. The Russian government was found responsible for torturing Georgian prisoners of war and expulsion of ethnic Georgians from their homes. The ECHR found that 160 detained ethnic Georgians were subjected to inhumane torture.

The court established that Russia has exercised "effective control" over the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia since 12 August 2008. Therefore, the European Court of Human Rights has legally acknowledged that Georgian territories are under ongoing Russian occupation. Any further aggression attempts will be linked directly to the Russian government. Russia has also been held responsible for procedural violations concerning its failure to undergo an investigation into hostilities and human rights violations.

The ECHR judgment may also positively impact the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigation into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the 2008 war.

## HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN PRISONS

Mikheil Saakashvili became the President of Georgia in January 2004 after former President Eduard Shevardnadze resigned from the post during the 2003 Rose Revolution. Early in his presidency, Saakashvili achieved significant success and international recognition for his anti-corruption reforms. There was a drastic reduction in crime across Georgia and a successful fight against organized crime. Nevertheless, his 'zero-tolerance' approach to justice often led to long prison terms for petty crimes and reportedly created a "dehumanizing discourse around crime and criminals."

By 2010, Saakashvili's determination to root out crime led Georgia, a country with a population of 4.5 million, to become the biggest incarcerator per capita in Europe and the fourth biggest in the world. Life inside the prisons was dirty, undignified, and dangerous. Several NGOs and human rights organizations reported on commonplace mistreatment and the culture of impunity that prevailed in the Georgian justice system.

The human rights committee's report collected testimonies from 400 former prisoners and found evidence that mistreatment in police custody was a common practice, including the use of harsh treatment to obtain evidence and the extraction of confessions under duress in pre-trial detention. High-ranking officials reportedly supported torture as a "tool of political persecution" to create "fear and a sense of insecurity" in society, leading to a nationwide scandal.



## The Gldani Prison Scandal

On 18 September 2012, several videos were released showing corrections officers and their superiors torturing, taunting, and sexually assaulting detainees in Gldani No. 8 Prison.

The footage, which confirmed long-standing allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners, was broadcast that evening on opposition TV station TV9. The broadcast triggered outrage and incited mass protests on the streets of Tbilisi just two weeks before hotly contested parliamentary elections, where Saakashvili's United National Movement Party faced tough competition from the opposition coalition of Georgian Dream.

The scandal was unique in Georgian history. The news was initially shared and discussed across social media before the story appeared on Georgia's large pro-government television channels. The highly controversial video footage resulted in orchestrated rallies in cities across Georgia, including Tbilisi, Batumi, Poti, Kutaisi and Gori. Upset by graphic images of prisoner abuse, protestors demanded justice and promised to continue their protests. Later that night, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze, who served as the Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, fired David Chakra, the Chairman of the Penitentiary Department. Several days later, Kalmakhelidze resigned from her post.

The video evidence of prison torture was leaked by a former prison officer Vladimir Bedukadze, who fled to Belgium and was briefly wanted in connection with the abuse. The prosecution eventually decided to relieve him of criminal responsibility because of a plea-bargaining deal because Bedukadze helped uncover "systemic crimes in the Georgian penitentiary".

The footage of prisoner abuse contained the following violations:

- In several videos, prisoners are shown being raped with broom handles and police batons.
- The first video shows ten corrections officers conducting physical and verbal abuse on prisoners.
- In the second video, a man is forced to take off his underpants and do what he was told. He is then insulted and spat upon. During the offence, an attacker references him as a thief in law. In the last part of the video, the man is seen writing something under dictation.
- In the third video, an Armenian prisoner is shown fettered to a cell rod and cursing Georgian prison officers. In the same video, a masked man appeals to the torturers not to record a video of him. He is mocked, humiliated, and possibly raped. The third part of the video shows a rear view of a man who is repeatedly asked if he was a thief in law, answers of which were all: "I am a thief in law!".
- In the fourth video is shown youth detention centre, where inmates were physically abused and forced to insult thieves in law under threat of being raped if they did not comply.

"[They] were beating me. They were insulting me... During the torture, they drowned [me] in [a] bucket full of water and threatened [me] with rape," said a former prisoner in an anonymous

testimony released by the government's committee on human rights protection in 2016.

"They tore off my fingernails, damaged [my] skull, broke my leg bones, ribs, nose, and teeth," said another. "I am 43 years old but look like an old man. I often fall while I am walking."

In 2016, the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee of the Georgian Parliament released a report on torture in Georgia from 2004-2012. In the report, other victims described being hit on the head with the butt of a gun, a guard breaking their wrist with the heel of his boot and being forced to give evidence under the influence of sleeping pills.

In the October 2012 parliamentary elections, the ruling party United National Movement lost the elections to the Georgian Dream Coalition. The new administration promised to improve the penal system and prison conditions.

In 2013, for three months, the newly elected government granted large-scale prison amnesty reducing Georgia's 24,000-person prison population by half.

## **MASS SURVEILLANCE**

### **2016 Scandal**

In March 2016, two covertly filmed sex tapes were released on social media showing prominent political figures from both the opposition and ruling parties involved in adulterous encounters. The released videos were perceived as an intimidation campaign before the October elections.

Tapes were sent out to members of Georgian media by anonymous Facebook accounts on Friday, 11 March. The links opened up a video of a former government minister, recognizable to everyone, having extra-marital sex in high definition.

The anonymous post included threats to release more compromising footage unless two coalition members, an opposition politician and a well-known journalist, resign by the end of March.

Five people were arrested for possessing or intending to share sex tapes. Human rights experts have expressed scepticism about the authorities' ability to get to the bottom of a video scandal. However, they claimed the scandal would involve high-ranking government officials.

The scandal took place a few months before the scheduled Parliamentary elections.

## 2021 Scandal

On 12 September 2021, several files from the State Security Service of Georgia were leaked to the media, revealing proof of surveillance and wiretaps conducted by the Security Service. The files featured details about the personal lives of prominent journalists, civil activists, politicians, and diplomats. Yet, an investigation into the alleged illegal surveillance had produced no results.

Among the targeted figures were the president of Georgia, Salome Zurbashvili, the Minister of Culture Tea Tsulukiani, and film director Goga Khaindrava.

On 1 August, during an episode of the TV show "Mtavari Aktsentebi" (Main Accents) hosted by Mtavari Arkhi, the TV station's head, Nika Gvaramia, released documents reportedly obtained from the SSG that detail illegally recorded telephone and face-to-face conversations. Among the papers were accounts of secretly recorded sexual interactions.

The channel did not broadcast the names of the targeted individuals. However, Gvaramia said the documents included people's names and personal identification numbers.

Several individuals publicly identified themselves, confirming the leak's authenticity, including at least two journalists, Giorgi Mgeladze from RFE/RL and Nino Gelashvili from Formula.

The leaked documents are from 2020 and include personal information, including details of the targets' sexual lives and, in some cases, sexual orientation and the names of their partners and family members.

The leaked documents were divided into two major parts. The first, according to Gvaramia, primarily involved intercepted conversations about the targets' personal lives. The documents also featured talks between government officials, people in business, actors, journalists, and high-ranking officials from the opposition and the ruling party.

"A high-ranking official is having a love affair with a journalist who got pregnant from him, and Bidzina Ivanishvili found out about it and forced her to have an abortion," Gvaramia read from one report during the TV show.

"Businessman I, an employee of a joint-stock company, was informed by D that a representative of one opposition party, T, is a lesbian. According to D, some time ago, T offered a woman who was in an intimate relationship with the latter to have non-traditional sexual relations," was another excerpt from the documents.

According to Gvaramia, at the end of each recorded incident or conversation, there is a note on further steps for the organization to take, typically instructing them to "continue operational activities."

The second part of the documents was rooted in political surveillance.

One of the leaked recordings was a conversation between director Goga Khaindrava and ex-Minister of Justice Tea Tsulukiani, talking about Nika Gvaramia and TV Mtavari host Giorgi Gabunia.

## LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

Georgian law no longer recognizes homosexuality as a crime. Nevertheless, the country is quite hostile toward homosexuality at almost every level of society. Many Georgians believe homosexuality to be a disease. Some see it as a sin, others as a perversion, but few consider it a sexual orientation.

Georgia is one of a few countries among former soviet republics, including the Baltic states and Ukraine, that directly prohibits discrimination against all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Since 2012, Georgian law has considered crimes based on one's sexual orientation or gender identity an aggravating factor in prosecution. Despite this, homosexuality is still considered a significant deviation from highly traditional Orthodox Christian values prevalent in the country, where public discussions of sexuality tend to be viewed negatively. Consequently, homosexuals are often targets of abuse and physical violence, which are often encouraged by religious leaders.

The Georgian government tries to bring the country's human rights record in line with Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration demands. Former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili has stated that "sexual minorities are the same citizens as we are... [and that] the society will gradually get used to it."

Since 2014, sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination have been outlawed. Nevertheless, recent street tensions in the country over LGBT rights have generated unprecedented media coverage and public discussion.

According to the 2021 International Social Survey Programme (ISSIP) study, 84% of the Georgian public considers sexual relations between two adults of the same sex wrong. Even though more young people aged 18-35 believe that queer rights are essential in society.

In March 2016, the ruling Georgian Dream coalition proposed a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union of a man and a woman. The Georgian Civil Code already defines marriage as a heterosexual union, effectively preventing same-sex marriages. Nevertheless, the Constitution of Georgia was gender-neutral, specifying that "Marriage shall be based upon equality of rights and free will of spouses." Such gender-neutral wording caused conservative elements in the Georgian society to worry that the Civil Code may be challenged in court, potentially paving the way for same-sex marriages.

The proposed constitutional amendment caused a backlash from Georgian civil society and human rights organizations. Civil society organizations attacked the legislation to politicise the issue and capitalise on popular societal prejudices ahead of the upcoming 2016 parliamentary

elections. LGBT activists also distanced from suggestions to use constitutional ambiguity to seek same-sex marriages, noting that gay people in Georgia face much more immediate and existential problems than marriage, such as "physical, psychological and verbal abuse and violence".

The constitutional amendment passed the Parliament on 26 September 2017, establishing that marriage exists solely as "a union between a woman and a man with the purpose to create a family". The amendment passed along with the amendment establishing direct presidential elections and a switch to a system of proportional representation in the Parliament. President Giorgi Margvelashvili vetoed the constitutional amendment on 9 October, describing it as an "anti-people constitution". Parliament overrode his veto on 13 October. The constitutional amendments went into effect after the 2018 Georgian presidential election and the inauguration of President Salome Zurbishvili on 16 December 2018.

Since 2006, Article 2(3) of the Labor Code has prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment relations.

According to the amended Georgian Criminal Code (since 2012), committing crimes against individuals based on sexual orientation is an aggravating factor that should result in significantly stricter sentences during prosecution.

On 2 May 2014, the Georgian Parliament approved the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, banning all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The law entered into force on 7 May 2014. Article 1 of the anti-discrimination law reads as follows:

*The present law aims to eliminate any form of discrimination and to ensure equal enjoyment of the rights set forth by the legislation of Georgia for all-natural and legal persons regardless of race, color, language, sex, age, nationality, origin, place of birth, residence, property or title, national, ethnic or social belonging, profession, marital status, health condition, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, political or other beliefs or other bases.*

The legislative amendment to article 53 of the Georgian Criminal Code ensures that bias, motivated by a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity, may be considered an aggravating circumstance when determining sanctions. Yet, there are still no official statistics about crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity. As several studies demonstrate, the law prohibiting hate crime is not efficient.

## **LGBTQ+ Freedom of Expression**

On 17 May 2012, the Georgian LGBT organization Identoba (იდენტობა) organized a peaceful march in observance of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. This was the first public demonstration in support of LGBT rights in Georgia. However, soon



after it started, the march was discontinued as religious counter-demonstrators, including representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and radical Christian groups, assaulted the participants. Only after the fight had broken out the police forces arrested the alleged victims instead of the perpetrators.

Amnesty International criticized the Georgian government for failing to protect the march. On 14 January 2013, the LGBT organization Identoba and the march participants filed an application against Georgia with the European Court of Human Rights. The application claims that Georgia failed to protect the participants of the LGBT March effectively and did not investigate the perpetrators or make them accountable.

Besides Identoba, Equality Movement (თანასწორობის მოძრაობა), is another Georgian LGBT advocacy group striving for equal human rights for LGBT people.

In February 2019, the group announced the first LGBT Pride Week to take place with Tbilisi Pride week from 18 to 23 June in Tbilisi. The event would include a "March of Dignity", scheduled on 23 June. Several ultra-right groups, including the Georgian March organization, responded by threatening to attack the participants during the activities. Sandro Bregadze, one of the organization's leaders, said, "they will have to march over our dead bodies if they decide to hold this celebration of perversion".

On 31 May 2019, two weeks before the scheduled Pride, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs said that it was "impossible" for Tbilisi Pride to take place in the planned locations "due to safety risks" and recommended a closed event indoors at a facility such as a stadium or a club. Civil society organizations, including the Open Society Georgia Foundation, Human Rights Education and the Monitoring Center and Georgian Young Lawyer's Association, called upon law enforcers to "take adequate measures to secure the security of participants in peaceful assembly" and said that "it was the State's obligation to ensure timely and adequate protection [of Tbilisi Pride participants] from possible violence". They called the ministry's actions "humiliating, anti-state, and anti-constitutional". The Equality Movement, the organizer of Tbilisi Pride, said they had been experiencing pressure for the past weeks from an "unidentified government official" to cancel the march.

Following riots, on 20 June, Tbilisi Pride postponed the march scheduled to take place on 23 June. Organizers said that "in this political situation, we cannot allow ourselves to escalate the tensions in the country further. We will not allow pro-Russian, neo-fascist groups to weaken Georgia's statehood. On 8 July 2019, a group of 20 to 40 demonstrators, human rights activists and members of the LGBT community held an impromptu, small-scale pride parade for about 30 minutes outside the Ministry of Internal Affairs building. The group was holding signs and rainbow flags and flying a drone that carried a rainbow flag over protestors who had gathered in front of the Parliament. Reports suggested information about the march was leaked online, raising security concerns, as violent radical groups gathered at several locations in Tbilisi to prevent the march. Far-right anti-gay groups planned to disperse protesters. However, by the

time they arrived, the march had already ended. Opponents spend the whole night on central Rustaveli Avenue protesting Tbilisi Pride, demanding the anti-discrimination law's abolishment, and introducing a law banning what they called "perverted behavior".

## 2021 Tbilisi Pride Attack

On 16 May 2021, a day ahead of International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, 15 political parties, including the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, signed the agreement "to fight to eliminate discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ citizens with all mechanisms at their disposal" with Tbilisi Pride. The Tbilisi Pride described it as a "historical agreement in Georgia on LGBTQI rights."

On 4 June, Tbilisi Pride announced the Pride Week to take place during 1–5 July, featuring a public screening of the March for Dignity, a British documentary film about the events of the first Tbilisi Pride, an open-air Pride Fest, and a march for dignity. The Tbilisi Pride activists promised to demand "the implementation of a human-oriented policy by the government, fulfil all international obligations to ensure the environment free from homophobia and discrimination, to investigate hate crimes and ensure the safety and freedom of expression of each citizen of the country".

On 15 June, conservative political figure Levan Vasadze, a founder of the ERI movement, urged the government to cancel the Pride events to "prevent destabilization". He stated that 5 July Tbilisi Pride events and march on Rustaveli Avenue in the city centre would not occur anyway because people will gather there and will not allow the "anti-Christian and anti-Georgian activities".

On 24 June, approximately 30 conservative and Christian groups held a briefing, announcing that "the agreement was signed between national forces to mobilize against the Pride march and block the Rustaveli Avenue". The agreement was joined by public movement ERI, Alt-Info, Georgian Mission, Georgian Idea, NGO Mamulishvilebi, Society of Chokhosans, Movement for the National Media, and pedagogical association Education and Ethics, business association Solidarity, and society Davitiani.

Embassies of the European Union, United Kingdom, and the United States urged the Georgian government to enable the activists to hold the Pride Week as planned. Georgian Orthodox Church has issued a statement calling members of the European Parliament working group on LGBTQ+ issues and the heads of the EU Embassy in Georgia "to refrain from supporting and encouraging Tbilisi Pride". The Church also urged the Georgian government to prevent "the destabilization of the country and public life". It said that Tbilisi Pride "propagates non-traditional way of life under the disguise of human rights" and that Church deems "hatred and violence directed at anyone unacceptable, but also denounces pride of sin and attempt to influence other people". According to the statement, activities of the Tbilisi Pride discredit western values in

Georgia; it is necessary to confirm that European democracy doesn't go against most of the population's way of life and religious feelings.

On 1 July, the first of the three events planned in the framework of Pride Week took place.

On 5 July, the Tbilisi Pride march was cancelled after the violent counter-protesters attacked the organizers. Counter-protesters destroyed the tents erected by the opposition political parties against the sitting government in the preceding months because those parties signed an agreement on LGBT rights with Tbilisi Pride. They tore down the EU Flag, announcing that "the flag which was torn down will remain down until ambassadors come here and apologies for supporting pederasty", and erected the cross in front of the Parliament, signifying that "Christian morals will write laws in this country".

The same day, a violent homophobic mob raided the Tbilisi Pride office building and forced the organizers to flee. More than 50 media representatives, who remained in the office covering the events, were assaulted by the anti-LGBT protestors. Among the severely beaten was the camera operator of TV Pirveli, Lekso Lashkarava, who was found dead in his house six days after the incident. The authorities denied responsibility, blaming the Pride organizers for inciting violence, and published extensive CCTV footage of Lashkarava's last day, implying that he might have consumed drugs. The authorities failed to identify the organizers of the mass violence or lead a proper investigation of the violent events. The counter-protesters successfully tore down and burned the Pride flag hanging outside the balcony of the headquarters of the Tbilisi Pride office. The clashes between media representatives and counter-protests resulted in 53 journalists reporting the live events being injured.

After the passing of Lekso Lashkarava, a new protest was announced on 11 July, demanding that Prime Minister Gharibashvili and his government take responsibility for the events and resign, which he categorically ruled out. The Prime Minister also stated that 95% of the Georgian population opposed the Pride parade and that he was obliged to obey them.

On the evening of 12 July, after protesting at the Parliament Building, the demonstrators gathered at the headquarters of the Georgian Dream party. Twelve protesters were detained on the spot, including Irakli Absandze, a prominent journalist of Georgian Public Broadcasting, a state-controlled media. The arrest happened after the protesters threw eggs toward the building and tried to use spray red paint to signify the blood.

Overall, the police arrested 102 participants of the riots in various forms; 68 were released on parole, the rest were left in custody, and the government continued making additional arrests.

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