

## Council of Europe Calls for Democratic Integrity in Georgia Amid Concerns Over Backsliding

By Liza Mchedlidze

The Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities passed a declaration titled "The situation in Georgia," with 76 votes in favor, 10 against, and 6 abstentions. The declaration reflects deep concerns over the evident signs of democratic backsliding and the erosion of human rights in the country.

The Congress expressed alarm at the increasing polarization within Georgian society and the enactment of legislation that contradicts Council of Europe standards. This includes the controversial law on transparency of foreign influence and an anti-LGBTI legislative package. Such developments have drawn condemnation from the Congress President and other Council of Europe bodies.

The Congress Monitoring Committee, in a statement from July 2, 2024, noted a significant risk of Georgia deviating from democratic norms. There are rising concerns about attacks, intimidation, and various pressures on those expressing dissenting opinions.

The declaration underscores worries regarding the Georgian authorities' dedication to upholding European democratic principles. The upcoming

parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024, and local elections in 2025, make it crucial to foster an environment that allows all citizens to par-

ticipate fully and equally in political life.

The Congress emphasized the importance of local authorities in representing citizens' voices on

both local and national issues. It asserted that these authorities must be able to exercise self-government without fear of persecution, regardless of their politi-

cal affiliations.

There is a reiterated need for robust protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including non-discrimination and freedom of assembly. Local authorities should not be compelled by law to violate these rights or implement anti-democratic policies that hinder inclusivity and peaceful coexistence.

The Congress urged Georgian authorities to revoke the anti-human rights legislation and to avoid actions that could further polarize society or threaten political pluralism.

The Congress committed to pursuing constructive political dialogue with the Georgian government, planning a high-level visit once a new government is formed post-elections.

The Congress will continue to back the efforts of Georgian authorities and civil society in promoting democracy and the rule of law at the local level.

The declaration stressed that Georgian authorities must fulfill their obligations under the Reykjavik Declaration, adopted during the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, with accountability measures in place for any failures to respect these commitments.



### 47th SESSION

### The situation in Georgia

#### Declaration 10 (2024)<sup>1</sup>

1. The Congress expresses deep concern over clear signs of democratic backsliding and the weakening of human rights in Georgia, marked by increased polarisation of society and the enactment of legislation that runs counter to Council of Europe standards. These developments have been condemned by the Congress President in statements concerning the enactment of the law on transparency of foreign influence and the anti-LGBTI legislative package as well as by other Council of Europe bodies and the international community.

2. Furthermore, the Congress Monitoring Committee, in its statement of 2 July 2024, highlighted the risk of Georgia's deviation from democratic norms and standards, exacerbated by attacks, intimidation and various forms of pressure exerted against persons expressing dissenting opinions.

3. As a result, there are increasing concerns regarding the Georgian authorities' commitment to upholding European democratic principles and to moving towards a European future based on shared values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law at all levels of government.

4. In this context and bearing in mind the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia on 26 October 2024 as well as the local elections scheduled for 2025, it is all the more important to create conditions that enable all citizens, without discrimination, to participate meaningfully in society and contribute fully, peacefully and equally to the political life of the country at all levels of government.

5. The Congress underlines that local authorities are the carriers of citizens' voices on matters of both local and national importance and their right to exercise self-government without fear of persecution or retaliation must be guaranteed regardless of the political views of their leaders and representatives.

## Russia Reiterates Offer to 'Normalize Relations' Between Georgia and Occupied Territories

By Liza Mchedlidze

On October 17, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova reiterated Russia's willingness to help Georgia "normalize relations" with the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. She praised the current Georgian Dream government for its willingness to apologize to Tskhinvali and accused the West of trying to open a "second front" in Georgia.

Zakharova emphasized Russia's unchanged priorities in the region, which include obtaining legally binding guarantees from Tbilisi on the non-use of force and on border demarcation. Although she acknowledged that these goals have not yet been achieved, she expressed optimism, stating that Georgia's initiative to apologize to Tskhinvali offers "some hope."

She also claimed that Russia is "encouraged" by the growing public recognition in Georgia that former President Mikheil Saakashvili was responsible for the August 2008 war, referring to him as "a madman driven by passions and unhealthy ambitions." Zakharova referenced the Tagliavini report, claiming it

supports Russia's view of the conflict, while criticizing the EU for lacking the "courage to speak the truth" as it did 15 years ago.

Zakharova expressed hope that the Georgian Dream government's stance would shape the actions of the Georgian delegation in the next round of Geneva International Discussions. She stressed that occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali must also be willing to "turn the tragic page," while making it clear that the past will not be forgotten. She reiterated Russia's readiness to assist in the normalization of relations on both bilateral and multilateral levels, calling for a legally binding agreement on the non-use of force from Tbilisi.

Regarding concerns about opening a "second front," Zakharova stated that the people of Georgia now understand the root cause of past conflicts and the dangers of becoming involved in another war. "No one wants to get involved and become a bargaining chip in someone else's game," she said, adding that Russia aims to create a new security system under a "new world order."

She concluded by asserting that once this system is established, discussions about a "second front" and other divisive strategies will become irrelevant.



The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Georgian President Raises Concerns Over Ruling Party's Alleged Moscow Ties

POLITICO

Georgia's pivot to Russia 'might be a plan,' president says

Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili faces a second impeachment attempt over her visits to European capitals.



In a recent interview with POLITICO, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili expressed her concerns regarding the ruling party's connections to Russia, particularly focusing on the influence of Bidzina Ivanishvili.

While she emphasized that she does not subscribe to conspiracy theories, Zourabichvili noted a troubling shift in the Georgian Dream party's trajectory away from its European aspirations.

"I do not have a logical, rational explanation for the Georgian Dream's deviation from the European path," she stated, highlighting the historical risks posed by Russia. "The main risk for Georgia comes from Russia. The risk of war increases when Georgia is isolated from its partners, when it's alone, divided, and weak," she added.

The upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for October 26, are described by Zourabichvili as "existential" for the nation. She warned that even if the ruling party secures a victory, restoring relations with Western allies, including the EU and the U.S., will be challenging due to ongoing tensions and attacks against these partners.

Zourabichvili expressed uncertainty about the ruling party's future actions, questioning whether they would pursue their radical agenda, which includes the possibility of banning opposition parties, or seek to mend ties with the European Union.

Civil Society Takes Fight Against Foreign Agents Law to European Court of Human Rights



On October 17, a coalition of media outlets, civil society groups, and individuals announced their decision to escalate their legal battle against Georgia's "Foreign Agents" Law to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). This move follows the Constitutional Court of Georgia's refusal to temporarily suspend the controversial law.

Nona Kurdovanidze, Director of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), confirmed during a briefing that 16 media orga-

nizations, 120 civil society groups, and four individuals will file a joint complaint. "The Russian law is designed to suppress civil society and the media, while also creating division and silencing dissenting

voices," Kurdovanidze stated.

She emphasized that the organizations involved in the lawsuit are committed to key social issues, such as environmental protection, judicial reform, disability rights, and fighting corruption, all of which are threatened by the law. The complaint to the ECHR will argue that several fundamental rights have been violated, including the right to freedom of assembly, expression, and privacy, as well as protection from discrimination.

EU strongly condemns Russian killings of Ukrainian prisoners of war

The European Union strongly condemns the increasing executions of Ukrainian prisoners of war by Russia, EU High Representative Josep Borrell said in a statement released yesterday.

He said that these killings are another "abhorrent example of Russia's brutalisation of the Ukrainian people".

Borrell quoted reliable sources as saying that at least 177 prisoners of war have died in Russian captivity since the start of Russia's war of aggression. Nine Ukrainian prisoners of war were reportedly shot by Russian troops in the Kursk region on 10 October. On 1 October, 16 prisoners of war were reportedly executed by Russia in Donetsk oblast after their surrender.

According to Borrell, these cases are appalling and represent grave breaches of the Geneva

Conventions: "They demonstrate Russia's continued and systematic disregard for international law, and in particular, international humanitarian law. Russia has clear obligations under the United Nations Charter and international law it must fulfil," Borrell said.

"That Russian public figures publicly call for the execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war, and glorify these executions, calling for more, exposes yet again the real nature of the regime in the Kremlin," added Borrell.

The UN Human Rights Office

(OHCHR) has already confirmed the systematic use of a wide range of different methods of torture, including sexual violence, against Ukrainian prisoners of war by their Russian captors. The EU also condemned prisoners' lack of access to the outside world and the denial of humanitarian access for independent monitors.

In his statement, Borrell also reiterated the EU's firm commitment to holding to account all perpetrators and accomplices of Russian war crimes against Ukraine. (euneighbourseast.eu)



Anti-corruption activist from Azerbaijan shortlisted for 2024 Sakharov Prize

Members of The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs and Development committees have chosen the three finalists for the 2024 Sakharov Prize in a vote on Thursday.

These are, in alphabetical order:

Dr Gubad Ibadoghlu, academic and anti-corruption activist in Azerbaijan;



María Corina Machado, as leader of the democratic forces in Venezuela and President-elect Edmundo González Urrutia;

"Women Wage Peace" and "Women of the Sun", Israel/Palestine.

The Conference of Presidents (EP President Roberta Metsola and the leaders of the political groups) will choose the 2024 laureate of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought on Thursday 24 October. The winner(s) will be announced immediately afterwards in the plenary session in Strasbourg.

The award ceremony, which foresees an endowment of • 50,000 for the winner(s), will take place during the December plenary session in Strasbourg.

Named after Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is the EU's highest human rights award. It has been awarded by Parliament to individuals or organisations every year since 1988, in recognition of their work in defending human rights and fundamental rights.

(euneighbourseast.eu)

Weather

Friday, October 18

Day Mostly Cloudy High: 16°C

Night Partly Cloudy Low: 8°C

Saturday, October 19

Day Partly Cloudy High: 15°C

Night Mostly Cloudy Low: 6°C

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