

European Parliament Delegation Calls for Election Rerun in Georgia

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

On December 12, a delegation of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) conducted closed-door meetings in Georgia with President Salome Zourabichvili, opposition coalitions, NGOs, and media representatives. The delegation emphasized the need for free and fair elections, stronger European Union involvement, and reiterated their commitment to Georgia's European future.

The MEPs declared the recent elections in Georgia "neither free nor fair" and urged the government to rerun the vote under conditions aligned with EU standards. Michal Szczerba, a Polish MEP, stated, "Georgia was granted with EU's candidate status with certain conditions, of which one of the most significant one was to hold free and fair elections." He added, "We ask the Georgian government to rerun these elections with certain conditions and according to the standards we respect in the European Union."

Ahead of the delegation's arrival, Rasa Juknevičienė, a Lithuanian MEP, outlined the purpose of their visit on social media platform X. She stated that the mission was meant to "show solidarity with Georgians fighting for a European



future" and confirmed plans to meet with the Georgian President, civil society organizations, and media representatives.

Following the meetings, Juknevičienė reiterated the delegation's role as a "fact-finding mission" aimed at understanding the situation on the ground. She called for greater EU engagement, saying, "We are not here to support any specific political party, but we are here to support Georgia as a country that is now at a very important and decisive moment."

Georgia's NGO sector also welcomed the delegation's visit. Nino Dolidze, head of ISFED, described the meetings as "very important" for expressing concerns and reaffirming support for Georgia's democratic development and European aspirations. She noted that the delegation had been briefed on human rights violations and the country's political crisis.

The delegation's visit comes amid heightened Western attention to Georgia's political challenges. Gustav Getberg, a Swedish parliamentarian and member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, is also in Tbilisi. He expressed solidarity with the Georgian people on December 11, stating, "Georgia is Europe, and Europe is Georgia – and no oligarch can change this essential fact."

GYLA Condemns Georgian Dream's Legislative Changes, Warns of Democratic Backsliding

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) has strongly criticized recent legislative changes introduced by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, warning that the amendments threaten democratic principles and risk reversing essential reforms. The watchdog highlighted concerns over rushed procedures and sweeping changes affecting electoral laws, public service protections, police appointments, and civil liberties.

In a statement, GYLA condemned the government's approach, noting that the changes were pushed through "under conditions of massive human rights violations" during ongoing pro-European protests. The amendments were introduced in parliament on December 11 and have already passed their first reading, with final approval expected before the end of the autumn session.

GYLA accused the GD of tailoring electoral laws to consolidate its hold on power ahead of the 2025 local elections. The proposed changes increase the majoritarian component in local elections to 2017 levels and raise the proportional threshold

to 4%, up from 2.5% in Tbilisi.

"This is happening under circumstances where a unilaterally adopted amendment in spring 2024 abolished the 40% electoral threshold for electing majoritarian members of city councils," GYLA stated. The watchdog warned that the changes disproportionately benefit larger political factions and eliminate safeguards like a second round of voting, making it harder for smaller parties to compete.

Proposed amendments to the Civil Service Law have also drawn criticism. GYLA warned that removing provisions protecting civil servants from arbitrary dismissal during reorganizations and limiting judicial oversight could open the door to political interference. The changes would make it harder for dismissed civil servants to challenge unfair terminations, further eroding protections.

GYLA raised alarms over amendments to the Law on Police, which would allow for non-competitive appointments across police ranks. While presented as necessary for certain police units, the changes grant sweeping powers to the Minister of



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Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.8512; Euro - 2.9946; GBP - 3.6359; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.7465; Swiss Franc - 3.2188

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Internal Affairs, heightening fears of further politicization.

"The growing use of police forces for political purposes, including violent crackdowns on protests, is deeply concerning," GYLA stated. The watchdog warned that these changes could undermine public trust and lead to the appointment of politically loyal officers.

GYLA also criticized amendments to the Law on Assembly and Manifestation, which would prohibit protesters from

wearing masks or using specific devices. Citing international norms, GYLA described the measures as disproportionate and repressive, particularly in light of recent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations.

"The government's pattern of silencing dissent continues with these changes, intimidating demonstrators and stifling opposition voices," the organization warned. The proposed measures also include higher fines for disrupting traffic or damaging property, further restricting protest activities.

The watchdog highlighted changes to the Law on the State Protection Special Service, which tie security for high-ranking officials to constitutional court rulings on impeachment violations. GYLA sees this as a direct attack on the independence of the presidency, particularly amidst tensions between Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili and the ruling party.

"This amendment clearly demonstrates the personification of the norms of the law," GYLA stated, accusing the GD of consolidating power

at the expense of institutional independence.

The organization called on the international community to monitor the situation closely and support efforts to safeguard democratic values and human rights in Georgia.

"These amendments represent a step backward for democratic development," GYLA emphasized, urging Georgian authorities to reverse course and prioritize reforms that uphold transparency, fairness, and the rule of law.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

UK Ambassador Condemns Democratic Setbacks in Georgia



The United Kingdom's Ambassador to Georgia, Gareth Ward, issued a strong criticism of the Georgian Dream party in a video address, denouncing its recent actions as a deviation from Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

"We are shocked by the violence used by law enforcement and informal groups," Ward declared in Georgian, describing such actions as "unacceptable" and calling for their immediate cessation.

Ambassador Ward highlighted a significant shift in UK-Georgia relations, driven by concerns over democratic backslid-

ing and escalating violence. Referencing a statement by the UK Foreign Secretary, he announced the suspension of bilateral cooperation, including funding for public administration reforms, the Peace Fund, and

military partnerships. "For instance, we will no longer assist Georgia's Ministry of Defense in building its cybersecurity operations center," Ward stated. The suspension also extends to political engagement, including the Wardrop Strategic Dialogue.

Citing reports from Georgia's Public Defender, Ward stressed

the need for accountability, noting that over 400 detainees showed signs of physical abuse. He called for an independent investigation into the excessive use of force by police.

The Ambassador urged Georgian Dream to listen to Western partners who have supported Georgia's sovereignty for decades. While expressing concern over the current trajectory, he reaffirmed confidence in Georgia's potential to become a thriving democracy but issued a stark warning: "The alternative is autocracy."

Council of Europe Members Criticize Georgia's Democratic Backsliding and Attacks on Media

The Council of Europe issued strong statements on December 11, highlighting concerns about escalating violence in Georgia, democratic backsliding, and violations of media freedoms and human rights.

In a joint statement from 35 member states, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, the Georgian Dream party faced criticism for rejecting EU financial support and

halting EU accession negotiations — actions deemed contrary

to the Georgian constitution, the statement read, urging authorities to uphold democratic values and repeal laws that violate international commitments.

1515th Meeting of the Committee of Ministers (11 December 2024) Statement on Georgia

- This statement is made on behalf of Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, a total of 35 countries.
- We regret Irakli Kobakhidze's statement on the Georgian Dream's decision not to pursue the opening of EU accession negotiations and rejecting EU financial support until 2028, which appears to be in violation of the Georgian constitution.
- Following this decision and reacting to the irregularities, which took place in the run up and during the recent Parliamentary elections, the Georgian people have taken to the streets to reaffirm their aspirations for joining the European Union. We strongly condemn the violence against peaceful protesters, who are standing firm for their European and democratic future.
- We note with grave concern the repeated and growing violence and intimidation against Georgian civil society, independent media, and representatives of the opposition. We urge the Georgian authorities to cease the violence and intimidation immediately and guarantee the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression for the people in Georgia. All those responsible for violence must be held accountable.
- We reiterate our serious concerns about the continuous democratic backsliding of the Georgian government to the detriment of the Georgian people.
- We note the statement by the Commissioner for Human Rights, pointing to the disproportionate use of force by the police and urging the authorities to respect freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and media freedom. We also note the Secretary General reminding Georgia of its obligation to respect the Council of Europe's values and standards, including the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and his call to relevant actors to refrain from further escalation and the importance of investigating the reported instances of excessive use of force by law enforcement during demonstrations. We call on the Georgian leadership to reverse the current course of action and to uphold the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the European values and principles. Laws adopted in contradiction with Georgia's international commitments must be repealed.
- We stand with the Georgian people and their choice for a European future. Georgia's European integration remains viable with due respect for European values and is in the hands of the Georgian authorities.

The Council's Group of Friends for the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom further criticized the disproportionate use of force, including against journalists. Over 400 individuals have been detained during protests, with reports of torture and violence requiring urgent medical care for many. "Freedom of assembly and expression are being violated," the group

stated, condemning police crackdowns on media workers and the divisive "Transparency of Foreign Influence" law.

The Council called on Georgian Dream to cease its repressive actions, ensure media safety, and protect the rights of peaceful assembly, warning that these developments undermine the European values Georgia aspires to uphold.

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EU4Youth IV grant competition: nine winning CSOs selected in Georgia

Under the EU and BMZ co-funded 'EU4Youth: Youth Engagement and Empowerment' project, an impactful small grant scheme was introduced, encouraging youth organisations from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and

Ukraine to submit innovative project proposals. With grants of up to Euro15,000 per project, the initiative aimed to enhance the scope and quality of youth work across these countries.

The call for proposals received an enthusiastic response from the Eastern Partnership countries, with over 250 applications submitted by youth-focused CSOs. Georgian organisations were encouraged to focus their projects on two key priorities: the

inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities and addressing climate change and environmental challenges.

Following a comprehensive evaluation process, nine Georgian organisations were selected as winners. The selected CSOs are:

1. Young Pedagogues Union;
2. Atinati;
3. Youth Center Illuminator;
4. Step Toward Success;
5. Equal Education Opportunities for Everyone;

6. Foundation of Economic Education of Georgia;
7. Helping Hand;
8. Equality Movement;
9. Coalition of Independent Living.

The winning projects will be implemented across Georgia, with a strong focus on engaging youth from remote areas and empowering them to actively participate in local community development initiatives.

(euneighbourseast.eu)

Weather

Friday, December 13

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 8°C

Night Snow Showers
Low: -3°C

Saturday, December 14

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 0°C

Night Partly Cloudy
Low: -5°C

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Shodo Demonstration and Calligraphy Lecture by Ambassador Ishizuka

On December 12, 2024, Ambassador of Japan, H.E. Mr. ISHIZUKA Hideki gave a Shodo (Japanese calligraphy) demonstration and lecture on "Shuji" at the Georgian School.

While "Shuji" means "to study characters", Shodo is a genre of fine arts for self-expression through calligraphy with brush and paper. In 2021 "Shodo" was registered as a National Intangible Cultural Property of Japan. Under the traditional brush strokes and techniques,

"Shodo" is also rooted in Zen culture and emphasizes balance, beauty, and flow of the movement.

At the event, the Ambassador began by explaining the meaning of "Shodo" and "Shuji" and its importance in Japanese culture. Mr. ISHIZUKA then showcased Shodo, writing the Japanese character for "Snake", which is the zodiac sign for the 2025 year, according to the Sexagenary cycle. Ten participating students, under

the Ambassador's guidance, then wrote the character for "Snake". The students also practiced writing their own names in Katakana (the Japanese character).

The purpose of this event was to promote understanding of Japanese traditional culture and cultural exchange between Japan and Georgia. The Participating students and teachers expressed their appreciation and enthusiasm at the event.

