

By LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

The U.S. Department of the Treasury announced sanctions against two senior officials in Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs over allegations of serious human rights abuses. Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri and Deputy Head of the Special Task Department Mirza Kezevadze are accused of overseeing violent crackdowns on protesters, journalists, and opposition figures in 2024.

The sanctions, issued under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, block the officials' access to U.S.-linked assets and prohibit financial transactions with them. The Treasury stated the move reflects its commitment to holding individuals accountable for alleged abuses.

The sanctions follow international outcry over the handling of demonstrations in Georgia. Protests intensified in November after Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced a suspension of EU accession talks. Security forces, including the Ministry's Special Task Department, allegedly used excessive force against demonstrators, including physical assaults, verbal abuse, and threats of sexual violence.

Journalists reporting on the events claimed they were deliberately targeted by security forces, with some subjected to harassment and physical violence. Allegations also include abuse of detained protesters while in police custody.

Earlier in 2024, similar claims emerged during protests against Georgia's "foreign influence law," which critics said aimed to suppress independent media and civil society. Youth activists, opposition leaders, and peaceful demonstrators were allegedly subjected to violent suppression under the direction of Gomelauri and Kezevadze.

Under the sanctions, any U.S.-based assets owned by the officials are frozen, and American individuals and entities are prohibited from conducting business with them. Violations of these sanctions could result in civil or criminal penalties.

U.S. Sanctions Georgian Officials Amid Allegations of Human Rights Abuses



NEWS

Press Releases

Statements & Remarks

Readouts

Testimonies

Featured Stories

Webcasts

Press Contacts

PRESS RELEASES

Treasury Sanctions Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs Officials for Brutality Against Protesters, Journalists, and Politicians

December 19, 2024

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning two Georgian officials from Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs which has engaged in brutal crackdowns on media members, opposition figures, and protesters — including during demonstrations throughout 2024. These officials are being sanctioned under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818 (Global Magnitsky), following the September 16, 2024 sanctions of two other Georgian

The Treasury emphasized that the sanctions aim to promote accountability and reform, not punishment. It also noted that individuals have the opportunity to appeal for removal from the sanctions list if they can demonstrate meaningful behavioral change.

The sanctions coincide with similar measures announced by the United King-

dom, which targeted five individuals accused of human rights violations in Georgia. Both countries stressed the importance of addressing these allegations and protecting fundamental freedoms.

Acting Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Bradley T. Smith stated, "The U.S. stands with those seeking to defend their rights

and freedoms. We will continue to act against individuals accused of undermining democratic values and human rights."

The Global Magnitsky Act allows the U.S. to sanction individuals worldwide accused of human rights violations or corruption. These measures are intended to deter abuses and protect international financial systems from exploitation.

OSCE Member States Condemn Georgian Government's Human Rights Violations

By LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

A joint statement was delivered at the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna by the representative of the Netherlands, on behalf of 20 countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and several European nations. The statement expressed deep concern over the Georgian government's alleged use of excessive violence against peaceful protesters, opposition figures, and journalists, under the rule of the Georgian Dream party.

The coalition condemned the Georgian Dream government's continued use of repressive tactics, including arbitrary detention and physical violence, to silence those exercising their rights to peaceful

assembly and freedom of expression. The group expressed dismay over the ongoing crackdowns on Georgian citizens, particularly in light of the recent protests sparked by the government's suspension of EU accession talks and other controversial policies.

In line with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) commitments, the statement emphasized the need to strengthen civil society, uphold the rights of peaceful assembly, and prevent arbitrary arrests. The coalition urged Georgia to stop using excessive force and repressive measures against peaceful protesters, journalists, and political opposition.

CONTINUED ON Page 2



Our countries stand in solidarity with the Georgian people and their democratic and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Georgia

As delivered by the Representative of the Netherlands to the OSCE to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 19, 2024

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.8091; Euro - 2.9248; GBP - 3.5535; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.7123; Swiss Franc - 3.1348

OSCE Member States Condemn Georgian Government's Human Rights Violations

CONTINUED FROM Page 1

The statement called for the immediate release of individuals detained solely for peacefully exercising their rights, including protesters, media members, opposition figures, and those advocating for

Georgia's European integration. The coalition emphasized the need for accountability for those responsible for the unlawful use of force and urged Georgian authorities to respect the rights of their citizens.

The participating countries reiter-

ated their unwavering support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, they called for the government to return to the path of European Union integration, which remains a key aspiration for the majority of the Georgian people. The coalition underscored that democratic reforms and respect for human rights must be central to Georgia's future and Euro-Atlantic trajectory.

The joint statement also highlighted the intention to explore all available mechanisms within the OSCE context to address the human rights situation in Georgia. It reflected the concerns of the international community over the government's failure to uphold fundamental democratic principles and the rule of law.

Despite these concerns, the statement reaffirmed the long-standing partnership between the signatory nations and the people of Georgia, particularly in supporting the development of democratic institutions, economic reforms, and education over the past three decades.

Concluding the statement, the coalition expressed its solidarity with the Georgian people, standing by their democratic aspirations and their desire for greater integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The signatories emphasized that their support for Georgia's sovereignty remains resolute, stressing the importance of Georgia's role as a partner in the region and on the world stage.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

EU Ambassador Criticizes Attacks on Journalists and EU-Georgia Relations



At a meeting with journalists organized by the Charter of Journalistic Ethics, EU Ambassador to Georgia Pawel Herczynski expressed solidarity with journalists, condemning the rising attacks against them as "disgusting." He stressed that EU-Georgia relations are at their lowest point due to a series of undemocratic decisions by the Georgian parliament and government.

Herczynski highlighted the suspension of Georgia's EU accession process, stating that this crisis in relations is particularly striking given it coincides with the first anniversary of Georgia being granted EU candidate status. He lamented how the focus

of media development had shifted from improving media standards to protecting journalists from physical and verbal aggression, persecution, and even torture.

The Ambassador condemned the Georgian government's attempts to silence the media, reinforcing the EU's firm stance in supporting independent journalism. Drawing on a statement by EU Foreign Affairs Chief Kaja Kallas, Herczynski reiterated that "democracies do not oppress opposition voices or curtail the freedom of media." He confirmed that while EU funding to the Georgian government has been halted, the EU would in-

crease its support for civil society and independent media.

In his remarks, Herczynski praised journalists' courage and resilience, stressing the importance of their work in shaping public understanding of complex issues and underscoring that foreign diplomats rely on their reporting.

RSF Condemns Attacks on Journalists in Georgia Amid Protests and Police Brutality

Based on a recent report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), over 70 journalists have been attacked while covering protests in Georgia, which erupted on November 28, 2024, after the Georgian government suspended the EU membership process. These attacks, which include beatings, chemical burns, arrests, and equipment damage, have raised serious concerns about the growing violence against media professionals.

RSF condemned the coordinated violence carried out by Georgian law enforcement, which has spe-

cifically targeted journalists covering the protests. High-profile attacks include those on reporters Guram Rogava and Mariam Nikuradze, both of whom sustained severe injuries. RSF has called on the European Union to take immediate action and launch an international investigation into these attacks to hold the perpetrators accountable.

In addition to the violence, RSF highlighted recent legislative amendments introduced by the Georgian government that restrict peaceful assemblies and give law enforcement greater power to target protesters and

journalists. These changes include a ban on wearing masks, which are vital for journalists exposed to chemical agents. RSF warned that these measures, combined with the ongoing violence, signal a decline in Georgia's democracy and press freedom.

According to RSF, this situation underscores the growing authoritarian influence in Georgia, driven by political manipulation and alignment with Russian interests. The organization has called for urgent EU intervention to safeguard press freedom and democracy in the country.



Without borders but never without you

Violence against journalists news

Georgia: the violence against reporters covering protests has been met with shocking impunity



More than 70 reporters have been attacked in Georgia – some of them assaulted multiple times – while covering the protests that began three weeks ago. Alarmed, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemns the police's systematic, organised violence and urges the European Union (EU) to act against the impunity of Georgia's law enforcement, which threatens the country's democracy.

Weather

Friday, December 20

Day Partly Cloudy High: 7°C

Night Partly Cloudy Low: -1°C

Saturday, December 21

Day Partly Cloudy High: 8°C

Night Partly Cloudy Low: -1°C

published by

The Messenger

43, Chovelidze st., Tbilisi, 0108, Georgia

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All contributions should be submitted by e-mail.

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*On the occasion of the National Day of the State of Qatar
H.E. Hassan bin Ahmed Al-Mutawa, Ambassador of the State
of Qatar to Georgia held the Reception on December 18.*



