

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Tbilisi Court Sentences Protesters Over Foreign Agents' Law Demonstrations

On January 20, 2025, the Tbilisi City Court sentenced three individuals involved in the May 2024 protests against Georgia's controversial Foreign Agents' Law to prison terms. Omar Okribelashvili and Saba Meparishvili were sentenced to 10 months each, while Pridon Bubuteishvili received a five-year prison term.

Omar Okribelashvili and Saba Meparishvili both were convicted of damaging an iron protective barrier at the entrance to the Parliament during the May 14 protests. Initially sentenced to three years under Article 187 of the Georgian Criminal Code for participating in property damage as part of a group, their sentences were reduced to 10 months following a plea bargain and an amnesty. The damage was estimated at 400 GEL.

Pridon Bubuteishvili, 20, was sentenced to five years in prison. Arrested during the May 9 protest, he was accused of causing 500 GEL worth of damage to the Parliament's gate and injuring a firefighter by throwing a stone. He faced charges under two articles of the Georgian Criminal Code:

- Article 187, part 1: Damage or destruction of property causing significant damage, punishable by one to five years



in prison.

- Article 353 prima: Assault on a police officer, government official, or public institution.

The protests in May 2024 were sparked by the

government's introduction of a Foreign Agents' Law, widely criticized for its potential to suppress civil society and independent media. The law faced significant backlash, with demonstrators clashing with authori-

ties in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi.

The rulings have drawn criticism from rights groups and opposition leaders, who argue the sentences are disproportionate and reflect a broader pattern of

political repression. The sentencing of individuals for causing relatively minor property damage has raised concerns about the judiciary's impartiality and its role in stifling dissent.

GYLA Condemns the Detention of Journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Ongoing protests across Georgia have sparked widespread outrage following the detention of Mzia Amaghlobeli, the director of Batumelebi and Netgazeti. The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) has denounced the detention and criminal prosecution of Amaghlobeli as "unlawful" and labeled it a form of political repression.

The case has raised significant concerns regarding freedom of expression, legal procedures, and political persecution.

According to GYLA, the initial detention of Amaghlobeli on January 11 for posting stickers was arbitrary and baseless. The act, they argued, does not constitute an administrative offense and could not justify detention. Despite this, the police cited Article 173 of the Administrative Offenses Code, alleging non-compliance with a lawful order.

"No formal administrative offense report has been created, nor has a court confirmed that an offense was committed," GYLA emphasized, accusing authorities of fabricating the justification for the arrest.

Amaghlobeli's second detention on January 12 escalated the controversy. She was charged under Article 353 Prima of the Georgian Criminal Code, which pertains to an attack on a police officer. GYLA argued that none of the necessary elements—such as assault or intent—were present in the incident.

"Mzia Amaghlobeli's actions could not have caused physical pain, which excludes the applicability of this article or

any lesser criminal charge," the watchdog stated. They called the charges politically motivated and part of a broader

pattern of repression against dissent.

GYLA also pointed to numerous procedural violations in the handling of the case. The Batumi City Court delayed forwarding Amaghlobeli's complaint to the Kutaisi Court of Appeals, missing the deadline by four days. Moreover, the watchdog criticized the use of Amaghlobeli's administrative detention to justify pretrial custody, calling it a clear violation of her presumption of innocence.

"The court demonstrated bias in favor of the prosecution by accepting abstract claims about the risks of new offenses and destruction of evidence," GYLA said.

GYLA highlighted disturbing allegations of verbal and physical abuse during Amaghlobeli's detention. According to their report, a police officer, identified as Dgebuadze, spat on Amaghlobeli and attempted physical abuse before being stopped by colleagues.

Amaghlobeli also claimed she was denied basic necessities, such as access to drinking water, and her repeated requests to contact her lawyers were ignored for hours.

GYLA criticized the court's decision to remand Amaghlobeli in custody, stating it violated the Georgian Code of Criminal Procedure. Detention, they noted, should be an exceptional measure, with alternative preventive actions preferred.

"The court unconditionally accepted the prosecution's request, ignoring procedural safeguards and showing bias against Amaghlobeli," the watchdog said.

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რატომ უნდა შეწყდეს მზია ამაღლობელის საქმე?

საქართველოს ახალგაზრდა იურისტთა ასოციაცია

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.8452; Euro - 2.9360; GBP - 3.4694; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.7963; Swiss Franc - 3.1163

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

Georgia in Turmoil: Protests, Repression, and Political Uncertainty

Amid ongoing protests in Georgia demanding new elections and analogous calls from Western allies, Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, is doubling down on its position. In what opposition figures have described as the start of a new wave of political repression, the party has announced plans to launch legal proceedings against the opposition United National Movement (UNM).

At a briefing on January 9, Mamuka Mdinardze, the executive secretary of Georgian Dream, revealed that a temporary parliamentary commission will be formed to investigate the actions of the UNM-led government from 2003 to 2012. The commission, set to convene during the first week of the spring session, will operate for six months, presenting its findings to parliament in September.

The report is expected to recommend constitutional, political, and legal measures against those found culpable, with the findings forwarded to prosecutors and courts. The investigation will also scrutinize Georgia's role in the 2008 war, though officials stressed it will exclude military commanders and soldiers from its scope.

Ahead of the October 26, 2024 parliamentary elections, billionaire and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly outlined plans to hold the "collective United National Movement" accountable. Touring Georgia's regions encased in a bulletproof glass enclosure, he emphasized that Georgian Dream needed a

"constitutional majority" to achieve this objective.

The party currently associated with the jailed former president Mikheil Saakashvili and operating under the name United National Movement holds an estimated approval rating of 10–15%. However, Georgian Dream has broadened its narrative to include all pro-Western political forces under the label of the "collective United National Movement," including former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's political party.

This strategy signals that all political groups which surpassed the 5% electoral threshold in the October 26 elections—according to even Georgian Dream's calculations—now face the threat of legal action. Notably, these are the same opposition forces that continue to boycott parliament, refusing to take their seats.

Ahead of the October 26 elections, Bidzina Ivanishvili stated that the prosecution and banning of the so-called "collective United National Movement" were essential for "revitalizing the country's political system." He claimed their place would be taken by new "healthy" parties.

This immediately led to speculation that these "healthy" parties would likely consist of existing or future anti-Western political groups, potentially more pro-Russian than Georgian Dream itself. Following the October 26, 2024 elections, no opposition party

entered parliament, leaving Georgian Dream represented solely by its 89 MPs. However, a splinter faction, People's Power, broke away from Georgian Dream to form an "opposition" group in parliament. This new faction is virtually indistinguishable from Georgian Dream, apart from its stated intent to adopt a more critical stance toward the West. In essence, it represents the embryonic stage of an opposition tailor-made to suit the ruling party's preferences.

Pro-government politics reviewers welcomed Mdinardze's announcement, framing it as fulfilling the "will of the electorate". They echoed Bidzina Ivanishvili's rhetoric about the need to "eliminate the radical opposition," portraying them as "foreign agents" acting against Georgia's interests.

Pro-Georgian Dream analysts welcomed Mdinardze's announcement, framing it as fulfilling the "will of the electorate". They echoed Bidzina Ivanishvili's rhetoric about the need to 'eliminate the radical opposition', portraying them as 'foreign agents' acting against Georgia's interests.

The key difference from pre-election rhetoric is the frequent use of the term "deep state". It appears that Georgian Dream still hopes to "repair relations" with the new U.S. president, Donald Trump, and, in doing so, neutralize growing international

pressure and escape isolation. "Georgia needs to rid itself of the radical opposition just as the U.S. needs to free itself from the deep state," Mdinardze declares. The narrative has even extended to claims that the "Rose Revolution" and the 2008 August War were orchestrated by the "deep state".

Yet, with Trump's inauguration, Georgian Dream's optimism about the new U.S. administration is waning. If Trump maintains Biden's course, they are likely to claim he, too, failed to defeat the "deep state", leaving Georgian Dream to "defend Georgia's sovereignty" alone. In such a case, the party appears to be shifting its reliance toward anti-Western powers—overtly on China, now officially Georgia's sole strategic partner, and more subtly on Putin's Russia.

What prompted the announcement of a commission to investigate the "criminal activities" of the United National Movement from 2003 to 2012, heralding what many see as a new wave of repression? Primarily, this is a response to sanctions from the West. With this move, Georgian Dream aims to showcase its resilience, demonstrating to both domestic and international audiences that neither the widespread protests in the country nor external sanctions can undermine its position. However, despite efforts to project strength, the Georgian Dream's government is facing sig-

nificant challenges.

Another noteworthy aspect is the timing. The parliamentary commission has been given a six-month mandate, with its conclusions to be handed over to Georgian Dream's prosecutor's office by September. This aligns with the party's preparations for the fall 2025 local self-government elections. For Georgian Dream, these elections are likely to be a significant headache, particularly amid mounting domestic and international demands for substantial improvements in election standards.

However, in today's rapidly shifting political climate in Georgia, six months is a particularly long horizon to predict. The wave of protests in the country shows no signs of abating. While its mass scale may fluctuate periodically, the protests have continued uninterrupted, even through the New Year holidays. After an initial phase of violent crackdowns, Georgian Dream halted street-level repression but intensified its legal persecution, which has backfired—further fueling the protests instead of instilling fear.

The situation is evolving daily, and numerous developments could occur, both domestically and internationally, that might alter the trajectory of events. In such an unpredictable environment, the outcomes anticipated by Georgian Dream may prove far from certain.

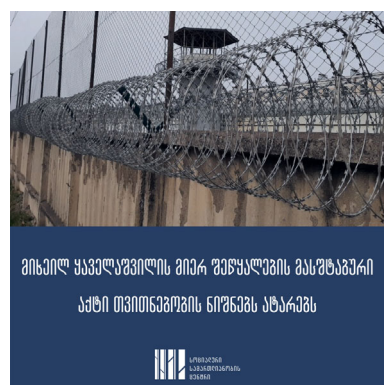
The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

SJC Criticizes Lack of Transparency in Kavelashvili's Pardons

The Social Justice Center (SJC) has expressed concerns over the recent pardon of 613 convicts by Georgian Dream (GD) President Mikheil Kavelashvili. The organization criticized the process as being closed and lacking transparency, raising doubts about its motivations.

In a statement, the SJC argued that the large-scale par-



dons, carried out shortly after Kavelashvili assumed office, create the impression that the president exercised this authority in a manner that served "arbitrary, narrow-party interests."

Under Georgian law, the power to pardon lies solely with the president, who is not required to justify their decisions or involve a review commission in the evaluation of cases. However, the SJC emphasized that this au-

thority must align with principles of public accountability and transparency.

"The pardon act itself must respond to the basic principles of politics and public accountability," the SJC stated, adding that the process and criteria used to grant pardons should be disclosed to the public.

The organization highlighted several unanswered questions regarding the pardons:

- Crimes Pardoned: It remains unclear which offenses were included in the pardon.

- Review Process: There is no information about the procedures followed, the material reviewed, or the involvement of experts or commissions in the decision-making process.

- Refusals: The public has not been informed about how many pardon requests were denied or the reasoning behind the decisions.

Kobakhidze Announces New State Commission to Reform Higher Education



On January 20, Georgian Dream (GD) Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze unveiled plans for a new state commission on university reform, aiming to transform Georgia's higher education system over the next four years. Levan Izoria, the former Defense Minister and Ambassador to Germany, has been appointed as the Prime Minister's advisor on education and science to support the initiative.

Speaking at a government session, Kobakhidze acknowledged shortcomings in the current higher education system, describing its quality as "not satisfactory." He outlined the commission's mission to "qualitatively transform the university and higher education system" and stressed the need to fully leverage available resources to create a "fundamentally renewed system."

While emphasizing the importance of the reforms, Kobakhidze refrained from providing specific details about the commission's operational framework or the steps planned to achieve its objectives.

The commission will be chaired by Kobakhidze himself, with Education Minister Aleksandre Tsuladze serving as deputy chair. Levan Izoria will act as the commission's secretary in his capacity as an advisor on education and science.

Weather

Tuesday, January 21

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 9°C

Night Clear

Low: -2°C

Wednesday, January 22

Day Clear

High: 6°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 0°C

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