

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Georgian Dream Criticizes U.S. Embassy and Foreign Donors

The Georgian Dream (GD) party has raised concerns about the actions of the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, USAID, and other foreign donors. GD's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, during an official visit to Kazakhstan, said that these organizations were working in a coordinated manner that he believes goes against the interests of Georgia.

"In Georgia, the U.S. Embassy and USAID, along with other institutions, have acted in a coordinated way that does not align with the interests of the Georgian people and state," Kobakhidze told journalists. He expressed hope that the new U.S. administration would improve relations and lead to a change in the approach of these foreign organizations.

On February 6, GD Parliamentary Majority Leader Mamuka Mdinardze also announced plans for new legislation aimed at regulating civil society organizations (CSOs) and media. This includes a proposed law to replace the current Foreign Agents Law, which Mdinardze described as "identical" to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). However, previous claims about the law being similar to FARA have been debated by legal experts.

The GD party's criticism of U.S. and European donors increased following U.S.



President Donald Trump's executive order, which temporarily suspended foreign aid. The order criticized foreign aid programs, suggesting that they may promote ideas that do not align with stable international relations. GD officials, including Shalva Papuashvili, supported this decision, arguing that foreign aid has sometimes been used to influence domestic affairs in other countries.

Papuashvili also raised questions about the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), a European organization that provides grants for projects in Georgia. He called for greater transparency regarding the funding of these organizations.

The announcement of new legislation coincides with ongoing protests in Georgia, where demonstrators are calling for new elections and the release of detained protesters. These protests have focused on the country's foreign policy, with many advocating for a stronger pro-EU stance. Kobakhidze reiterated his belief that foreign-funded NGOs have been involved in promoting political change, but emphasized that this situation poses challenges to the country's sovereignty.

U.S. Strengthens Counternarcotics Efforts in Georgia Amid Growing Drug Trafficking Challenges

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

The United States Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs has released its International Narcotics Control Strategy Report for 2023, which highlights the increasing role of Georgia as a transit hub for opiates and synthetic drugs. These drugs are trafficked from Afghanistan, Iran, and other Eurasian countries, using shipping routes to Europe via the Black Sea.

According to the report, since the onset of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, transnational drug organizations have expanded their operations, using new routes across Georgia to transport opioids and synthetic drugs from Europe to countries such as Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In response to these growing challenges, the United States has continued to strengthen Georgia's counternarcotics capabilities.

In 2023, U.S. assistance included training Georgian law enforcement in key areas such as detecting and preventing

drug smuggling, passenger screening, and identifying money laundering activities. Additionally, U.S. support included enhancing information sharing and fostering international cooperation to disrupt transnational criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking.

The report also details successful joint operations between the U.S. and Georgian authorities. For instance, in April 2023, a collaboration between the Georgian Central Criminal Police Department (CCPD) and Belgian authorities, facilitated by the U.S., led to the seizure of 400 kilograms of heroin. A subsequent operation in May 2023, also supported by the U.S., resulted in the identification of a commercial container from Iran, seized at the Poti Port, with 80 kilograms of heroin.

On the legislative front, the report highlights the adoption of a new Drug Strategy for 2023-30 in Georgia, which includes four key pillars: drug prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, harm reduction, and supply reduction. Additionally, the country has implemented an

Action Plan for 2023-24, introducing initiatives such as an Early Warning System to monitor emerging drug trends and a Drug Related Death indicator.

Georgia's commitment to international cooperation is also evident, as the country joined the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats in 2023. This coalition is focused on combating the global rise in synthetic drug use, and Georgia is actively participating in several working groups.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Drug-related legislation in Georgia continues to rely heavily on punitive measures and efforts to restrict the flow of drugs. Furthermore, geographical access to Opioid Substitution Therapy remains a significant barrier, with a long-term medical program for opioid substitution within the penal system still underdeveloped.

As the report outlines, addressing the evolving drug trafficking threat requires continued international collaboration, stronger infrastructure, and ongoing support to enhance Georgia's counternarcotics efforts.



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Bureau of International Narcotics
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International Narcotics Control Strategy Report

Volume I

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Control

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The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Georgian Dream Passes Restrictive Laws



Code of Administrative Offenses, and the Criminal Code. Critics argue these changes limit freedom of assembly and speech.

The new laws increase fines and jail

On February 6, the Georgian Dream party quickly passed a set of laws that tighten rules on protests and increase penalties for certain offenses. The changes were approved in just two sessions, raising concerns over the rushed process.

The amendments were announced on February 3 by Mamuka Mdinardze, the GD's parliamentary majority leader. They affect eight laws, including the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations, the

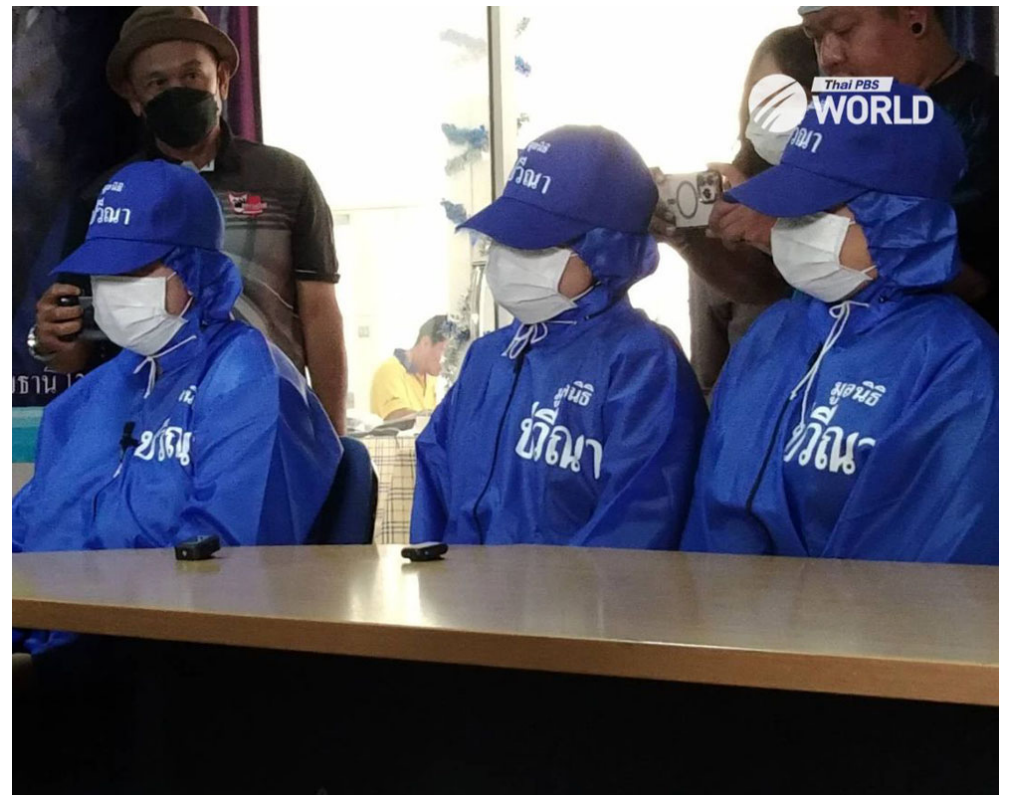
time for offenses. For example, petty hooliganism, which used to be punished by fines of 500 to 1,000 GEL or up to 15 days in jail, will now carry fines from 500 to 2,000 GEL and up to 20 days in prison. Verbal insults or offensive acts against police officers during their duties will result in fines of 2,000 to 5,000 GEL or up to 60 days in jail, with repeat offenses carrying even higher penalties.

Penalties for vandalism have also in-

creased, with repeat offenders facing up to 60 days in prison instead of just five. Disobeying a police officer during protests will now lead to fines of 2,000 to 5,000 GEL or up to 60 days in jail, up from the previous maximum of 3,000 GEL and 15 days in jail.

The amendments have faced strong criticism. Public Defender Levan Ioseliani warned that the new laws pose a threat to basic rights like freedom of assembly and speech. He urged the parliament to follow the proper procedures for reviewing the laws.

Three Thai Women Rescued from Human Trafficking in Georgia



Three Thai women have been rescued from a human trafficking ring in Georgia, where they were forced to undergo illegal egg harvesting, *The Nation* reports. They were among around 100 Thai

nationals allegedly held by a Chinese criminal gang.

On February 6, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs launched an investigation following a report from Interpol Bangkok. Victims were promised legal surrogacy jobs but instead faced forced egg collection procedures.

One victim, Na, managed to return to Thailand after her family paid a ransom. She later alerted Thai authorities about three other women still trapped. Thai NGO leader Paveena Hongsakul coordinated with the Royal Thai Police and Interpol, leading to their rescue on January 30, 2024.

The U.S. State Department ranks Georgia as a Tier 1 country in anti-traf-

ficking efforts. However, while 70 foreign nationals were questioned, only the three Thai women filed complaints. The investigation is ongoing.

EU Commissioner for Enlargement: 'Latest developments in Georgia are alarming'

EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos today described the latest developments in Georgia as "alarming".

In a post on X, she wrote that legal amendments proposed by the Georgian Dream would "further undermine citizens' rights to freedom of expression and assembly".

"We call on Georgian authori-

ties to reverse course and return to Georgia's EU path, respecting the will of Georgian citizens," Marta Kos said.

Earlier, on 2 February, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas condemned the brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters, journalists and politicians in Tbilisi, calling it "unacceptable".

"Georgia falls short of any expectation from a candidate country," Kallas wrote on X. "The EU stands with the people of Georgia in their fight for freedom and democracy."

(euneighbourseast.eu)



Weather

Friday, February 7

Day Mostly Cloudy

High: 9°C

Night Mostly Cloudy

Low: 2°C

Saturday, February 8

Day Rain/Snow Showers

High: 4°C

Night Snow Showers

Low: -1°C

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