

GYLA Calls for Investigation into Facial Recognition Surveillance

By Liza Mchedlidze

The Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a leading legal watchdog, has urged the Personal Data Protection Service to investigate the Ministry of Interior's use of facial recognition cameras, warning that the practice poses a serious threat to fundamental rights.

In a statement, GYLA argued that the use of remote biometric technologies for law enforcement undermines democratic freedoms, including privacy, data protection, freedom of expression, and the right to assembly. The organization compared the surveillance practices to those employed by autocratic regimes, highlighting the risks of mass monitoring.

According to GYLA, the Public Safety Command Center-112, a department within the Ministry of the Interior, recently purchased 30 cameras with facial recognition capabilities. The acquisition was reportedly made after the agency's director cited damage to 115 surveillance cameras in central Tbilisi during last year's protests.

"The use of such cameras, in practice, for human rights violations is widespread in autocratic and totalitarian regimes," the watchdog stated, citing Human Rights Watch's concerns about the impact of biometric surveillance. GYLA stressed that these technologies not only



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violate the right to privacy but also suppress freedoms of expression and association.

GYLA has called for an immediate inspection to determine whether the Ministry of Internal Affairs has conducted a data protection impact assessment and adhered to legal standards on data processing and security. The organization specifically seeks clarity on whether access to facial recognition data stored in electronic databases aligns with personal data protection laws.

The debate over biometric surveillance in Georgia has intensified following last year's pro-European protests. GYLA noted a sharp increase in the use of facial recognition cameras after November 28, particularly targeting protesters who blocked roads. The watchdog claims that authorities have relied almost exclusively on facial recognition images as evidence in court cases, often without verifying the legality of identification methods or whether officials had proper authorization to access sensitive databases.

Concerns over mass surveillance have added to broader fears of an authoritarian drift in Georgia. On February 6, RFE/RL's Tbilisi bureau published a report highlighting the rapid deployment of surveillance cameras across the country and the lack of transparency in their oversight.



SJC Warns of Critical Health Decline in Journalist Afgan Sadigov After 143-Day Hunger Strike

By Liza Mchedlidze

The Social Justice Center (SJC) has issued a report detailing the critical health condition of Azerbaijani journalist and editor Afgan Sadigov, who has been on hunger strike for 143 days. According to the organization, his condition has reached a life-threatening stage, and immediate action is necessary.

The SJC report states that on February 2, 2025, after months of refusing solid food, Sadigov escalated his protest by declaring an absolute hunger strike and refusing to take water. His decision came after a Georgian court extended his pre-trial detention for another three months, despite the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issuing an interim measure prohibiting his extradition to Azerbaijan.

According to the SJC, although Sadigov agreed to resume water intake on February 6 at the request of his family and lawyers, he continues to refuse essential supplements that had previously been administered through trans-

fusions. The report highlights that his weight has dropped to 56 kilograms, over 40 kilograms less than when he was arrested and that medical professionals warn of irreversible damage to his body.

The SJC also notes that his current condition is compounded by a previous hunger strike lasting 242 days in 2020, following his second imprisonment in Azerbaijan. The prolonged starvation left him in such poor health that long-term rehabilitation and treatment abroad became necessary.

The Social Justice Center is urging the Public Defender of Georgia to create a special multidisciplinary commission to regularly monitor Sadigov's condition and enhance mediation and psycho-social support efforts. The organization is also calling on Georgian Justice Minister Anri Okhanashvili to reconsider Sadigov's extradition case, arguing that the severity of his condition and the European Court's ruling provide legal grounds for Georgia to refuse his transfer to Azerbaijan under the Law on International Cooperation in the Field of Criminal Justice.

აფგან სადიგოვის ჯანგაბრთვით გლობალური

დაპროტესტი და უპილოტო პრიტიკულია



The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Formula TV Ownership Shifts as Co-Owner Transfers Shares for 1 GEL



Davit Kezerashvili, the co-owner of the Georgian opposition TV channel Formula, is transferring 26% of his shares in the company to Zurab Gumbaridze, the channel's general director, for a symbolic price of 1 GEL.

Gumbaridze, who already owns 12.25% of the company, applied to the Public Registry on February 7 to formalize the change in ownership. Once the transfer is registered, the new distribution of Formula TV's shares will be as follows:

Zurab Gumbaridze - 38.25%; Freedom Formula - 25%; Mikheil Mshvildadze - 12.25%; Irakli Saghinadze - 12.25%; Giorgi Liponava - 12.25%

The ownership shift comes amid ongoing financial difficulties for the opposition-aligned broadcaster.

In February last year, Formula TV scaled back its operations, cutting entertainment programming to focus solely on news and analysis. The financial strain also led to staff reductions.



In 2023, Kezerashvili announced that he would give up control of the Formula TV company and transferred 25% of his 51% controlling stake to TV management and journalists for a symbolic 1 GEL, with the remaining share to be transferred in full after the end of the "oligarchic rule."

Kutaisi Court Fines Protesters Over Rally at Judge's House

The Kutaisi City Court has fined nine individuals 5,000 GEL each for participating in a 30-minute protest rally in front of a judge's house, condemning the imprisonment of journalist Mzia Amaglobeli.

The protest took place on January 26 at the residence of Judge Malkhaz Okropirashvili, who had declined to review Amaglobeli's appeal for a change in preventive measures a day earlier.

Judge Tsitsino Mosidze ruled that the protesters had violated the law by staging the demonstration. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) had requested that

all participants be found guilty and penalized.

During the hearing, the defense argued that the gathering was symbolic and did not pose a threat or create discomfort for residents. Lawyers also questioned why law enforcement officers present at the scene did not warn the protesters of any legal violations. The MIA representative countered that such a warning would not have altered the fact that the alleged offense had already been committed.

EU says latest political developments in Georgia are a 'serious setback'

The "rushed" adoption by Georgia's ruling party 'Georgian Dream' of amendments to the Code on Administrative Offences, Criminal Code and the Law on Assemblies and Manifestations will have "far-reaching effects on Georgian society", EU High Representative Kaja Kallas and European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos said in a statement on 7 February.

These amendments will significantly undermine the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and media freedom, the EU officials said.

"These developments mark a serious setback for Georgia's democratic development and fall short of any expectations of an EU candidate country," Kallas

and Kos said in the statement. "We urge the authorities to suspend these measures, refrain from further tensions, and await the opinion of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), as requested by the Public Defender."

They also called on the Georgian authorities to release all journalists, activists and political detainees detained unjustly and to ensure a dialogue with all political forces and representatives of civil society.

"The case of the currently detained journalist Mzia Amaglobeli is yet another such example on how the authorities are treating journalists and anyone who speaks freely. Mzia, currently on hunger strike, is a symbol of courage of all those unjustly detained," the statement said. "Those responsible for the violence must be held accountable."

The EU high officials added that the European Union remained ready to support all efforts towards a democratic, stable, and European future for Georgia.

(eunighbourseast.eu)



Weather

Tuesday, February 11

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 7°C

Night Clear

Low: -3°C

Wednesday, February 12

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 7°C

Night Clear

Low: -2°C

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