

Venice Commission Urges Georgia to Revisit Recent Amendments on Public Assembly Laws

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

The Venice Commission has called for the Georgian government to revisit amendments made to the Code of Administrative Offenses and the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations. In its critical opinion, issued on March 3, 2025, the Commission warned that these amendments include vague and broadly framed provisions, which grant excessive discretion to authorities in their application. This lack of clarity, the Commission noted, significantly raises the risk of misuse and undermines the protection of fundamental freedoms.

The opinion was requested by Theodoros Rousopoulos, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The amendments in question were passed by the Georgian Parliament on December 13, 2024, and February 6, 2025, simultaneously affecting several laws, including the Code of Administrative Offenses, the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations, and the Criminal Code.

Among the key changes, the amendments notably increase fines for administrative offenses, including petty hooliganism, verbal insults, swearing, and other "offensive acts" against police officers during the performance of their official duties. Additionally, the amendments extend the period of administrative detention



from 15 to 60 days and criminalize threats of violence or attack against political authority, state authority, and public officials. They also impose heavy fines for actions such as covering one's face with a mask during protests, blocking roads, or using pyrotechnics.

These changes have faced significant criticism from civil society organizations (CSOs), Georgia's Public Defender Levan Ioseliani, and the country's fifth President, Salome Zourabichvili, who all ar-

gue that the amendments threaten fundamental freedoms.

In its analysis, the Venice Commission pointed out that the legislative process behind these amendments was rushed, with little to no involvement from relevant stakeholders. This process, the Commission stated, undermines the legitimacy of the amendments, especially given the broader political context of mass political rallies. The Commission stressed that this lack of consultation with civil society and po-

litical actors further casts doubt on the amendments' validity.

The opinion stressed that the vague provisions, granting authorities broad discretion, compromise the foreseeability of the legal framework and impair legal certainty in exercising fundamental rights. Furthermore, the necessity and proportionality of the restrictive measures introduced in the amendments were not adequately justified. The Commission expressed concern that the increased custodial

penalties and fines could have a chilling effect on the freedoms of assembly and expression.

The Venice Commission strongly recommended that the Georgian authorities revisit these amendments and engage in a more thorough law-making process. It suggested that a comprehensive impact assessment be carried out to ensure that any restrictive measures are strictly necessary and proportionate to the legitimate objectives they aim to achieve.

Key recommendations from the Commission include:

- Reviewing the nature and severity of sanctions related to the freedoms of assembly and expression;
- Introducing clear criteria for individualized assessments before administrative arrests are made, in line with Article 5 § 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR);
- Ensuring an effective remedy against administrative arrests and detention, with timely reviews and adequate redress;
- Defining specific elements of the new prohibition on laser and light-beam devices, and specifying the conditions under which face masks may be banned during public assemblies;
- Establishing a statutory procedure for the notification of spontaneous assemblies once they have commenced.

Baltic States Impose Additional Sanctions on Georgian Officials Over Human Rights Violations

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have imposed further sanctions against Georgian officials accused of involvement in human rights violations. The new measures target individuals believed to be responsible for enforcing repressive actions on behalf of the Georgian Dream (GD) party, particularly focusing on judges, prosecutors, police officers, and other key officials.

Estonia has sanctioned 55 individuals, Lithuania has added 74 people to its blacklist, and Latvia has placed 16 individuals under sanctions. These measures include travel bans and are aimed at those involved in judicial decisions and crackdowns on dissent.

"The violence used in Georgia against protesters, journalists, and opposition leaders is unac-

ceptable, criminal, and in violation of human rights," said Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna. "The list includes judges, prosecutors, police officials and police commissioners, platform creators and members of parliament, who are responsible for the prosecution of protesters by the judicial system and judiciary and law enforcement agencies. The listed Georgian individuals have either taken part in violence or threatened it," he added. Estonia has now banned a total of 83 Georgian officials from entering the country.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys reiterated his country's support for the Georgian people, stating: "We stand with the people of Georgia in their pursuit of democracy and a European future."

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Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.7904; Euro - 2.9031; GBP - 3.5167; 100 Russian Ruble - 3.1596; Swiss Franc - 3.0932

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Latvian Foreign Minister Baiba Braze announced: "I have added 16 Georgian citizens to Latvia's persona non grata list,

banning them from entry into Latvia for an unlimited time. This decision was made in accordance with Section 61(2) of the Immigration Law."

The three Baltic countries have been among the first to act

in response to Georgia's reported democratic decline and the ongoing alleged repression of peaceful protesters. Previously, they had already sanctioned prominent Georgian figures, including GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili

and senior Interior Ministry officials. This new round of sanctions targets individuals believed to have played key roles in undermining Georgia's democracy.

Through these measures, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania re-

affirm their commitment to supporting Georgia's democratic ambitions and European integration while holding accountable those responsible for human rights violations.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Georgian Dream MPs Back Addition of 'Treason' Article to Criminal Code



The Legal Committee of Georgia's parliament, made up of MPs from the Georgian Dream (GD) party, has approved the first reading of a bill to add a "Treason" article to the Criminal Code. This measure is being presented as necessary to protect the country's sovereignty and national security.

According to the bill's explanatory note, the removal of the treason article during the National Movement's rule was unjustified. It argues that criminalizing treason is vital for fostering patriotism

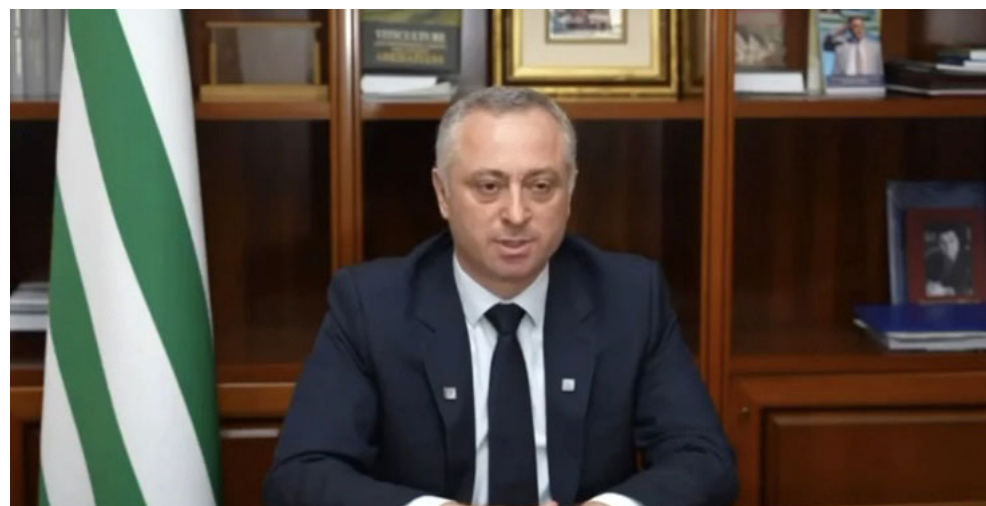
and loyalty to Georgia. "A country in which treason is considered a legitimate act has no future," the note states.

The bill outlines several actions that would constitute treason, including violations of territorial integrity, espionage, and aiding foreign hostile activities. The new article also includes provisions for punishing those involved in conspiracies

or rebellions aimed at changing Georgia's constitutional order.

The bill, introduced by GD MPs, claims that this move is essential for ensuring the long-term security of Georgia and strengthening its national unity.

Gunba Claims Victory in Abkhazia's So-Called Runoff Election



Badra Gunba has claimed victory over Adgur Ardzinba in the runoff election held on March 1, according to preliminary results published by the so-called Abkhazian "Central Election Commission" (CEC). The election, widely considered illegitimate by Georgia and much of the international community, reportedly saw Gunba favored by Moscow.

Late on election night, Gunba ad-

ressed supporters at his campaign headquarters, declaring his win. "This is not a victory for Badra Gunba and Beslan Bigvava's team. This should be a victory for the people of Abkhazia," he stated.

Preliminary data released by the so-called CEC showed Gunba receiving 54.73% of the vote (54,954 votes), while Ardzinba secured 41.54% (41,708 votes). The commission reported a turnout of

nearly 70%, with 100,412 ballots cast. Additionally, 2,065 voters selected the "against all" option, and 1,687 ballots were declared invalid.

Following the announcement, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a congratulatory telegram to Gunba, expressing confidence in the continued strengthening of Russian-Abkhazian relations "for the benefit of our fraternal peoples."

Georgia's economy grows by 9.5 per cent in 2024 but downside risks remain elevated, EBRD says

Georgia's economy is estimated to have grown by 9.5 per cent in 2024, surpassing expectations and accelerating from 7.8

per cent in 2023, says a flagship report by the European Bank for Reconstruction and

Development (EBRD), published on 27 February.

ICT, trade, education, public



administration, and construction drove the expansion, while the electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply sector contracted. The tourism sector reached record highs in 2024, attracting 7.4 million international visitors. Despite fading war-related financial inflows and Russian migration, domestic consumption remained strong, fuelled by credit growth and wage increases.

Meanwhile, inflation remained low in 2024, averaging 1.1 per cent, down from 2.5 per cent in 2023 and well below the National Bank of Georgia's (NBG) target of 3 per cent.

Real GDP growth is projected

to moderate to 6 per cent in 2025 and 5 per cent in 2026, close to the potential growth rate, as political uncertainty, weaker external balances, and slowing credit expansion weighs on economic activity.

Lower foreign direct investment and weaker tourism revenues, the result of recent political unrest and widespread protests, may further constrain private-sector growth, while public infrastructure projects and government-backed initiatives, particularly in the transport, energy, and ICT sectors, will help to cushion the slowdown. Downside risks remain elevated.

(euneighbourseast.eu)

Weather

Tuesday, March 4

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 9°C

Night Clear

Low: -2°C

Wednesday, March 5

Day Clear

High: 12°C

Night Clear

Low: 2°C

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2025 National Day Reception on the occasion of the Birthday of His Majesty the Emperor of Japan

On February 27, Ambassador of Japan to Georgia H.E. Mr. ISHIZUKA Hideki together with his spouse, hosted the national day reception in celebration of the Emperor's birthday at the Pullman Hotel in Tbilisi.

After singing of the national anthems of Japan and Georgia by the traditional Georgian polyphony choir of students of Georgian School Tbilisi*, the Ambassador delivered his opening speech to welcome all the distinguished guests at the celebration. As the guest of honor, Mr.

Giorgi Zurabashvili, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, also delivered his speech.

More than 250 attendees, including officials and non-governmental representatives, local cultural figures, businesspersons as well as members of the diplomatic corps, attended the event. In addition to a booth introducing Japan International Cooperation Agency's (JICA) Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, which marks its 60th anniversary this year since the establishment, there were various information booths with

video clips, which showcased: activities of Japanese local governments and Japanese companies; attraction of Japanese local communities and culture; and the Grassroots Development Assistance projects. The chef of the official residence of the Ambassador also conducted a sushi demonstration, and many attendees tasted sushi, Japanese tea and sake.

Building upon the outcomes of this reception, the Embassy will continue to make efforts to further develop friendly relations between Japan and Georgia con-

tinuously in the future.

**Georgian School Tbilisi has provided education of the Japanese language and culture since its establishment in 1995. With Japanese language being mandatory for 6th graders and an elective subject for 7th to 12th graders, students also start learning about Japanese culture, such as art, music and traditions, from their 1st grade. For their contributions to promotion of Japanese language and culture, on February 3, 2023, the school was awarded with Commendation of Foreign Minister of Japan.*



