

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Council of Europe Sounds Alarm Over Democratic Backsliding in Georgia

THE CONGRESS

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The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has adopted a resolution today, expressing deep concern over democratic backsliding in Georgia. The resolution, titled "The Situation of Local and Regional Democracy in Georgia," passed with 101 votes in favor, 10 against, and 3 abstentions.

The resolution highlights threats to the rule of law, human rights, and public confidence in Georgia's democratic institutions, particularly at the local level. It specifically criticizes multiple amendments to the Electoral Code, which it says have strengthened the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's dominance. The Congress warns that these developments "are not conducive to holding the 2025 local elections in a trust-based environment."

The Congress points to the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the ruling party and the marginalization of the opposition, noting that the lack of political dialogue has led to opposition parties boycotting decision-making bodies.

Further criticism is directed at the intimidation of civil society and dissenting voices, particularly in the wake of the Foreign Agents Law and the pending Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The Congress strongly emphasizes that free-

dom of expression must be protected, even when critical of the government.

The resolution condemns the violent repression of peaceful protests, stating that authorities have violated freedom of expression and assembly. It also highlights concerns over the instrumentalization of public institutions, citing intimidation, dismissals, and political pressure on civil servants as tools used to consolidate power.

Additionally, the Congress warns of the politicization of public administration and the misuse of state resources to pressure voters during election campaigns.

Amendments to Georgia's electoral code are described as reinforcing the ruling party's control over the Central Election Commission, undermining its independence. The resolution argues that these changes have contributed to a collapse in public con-

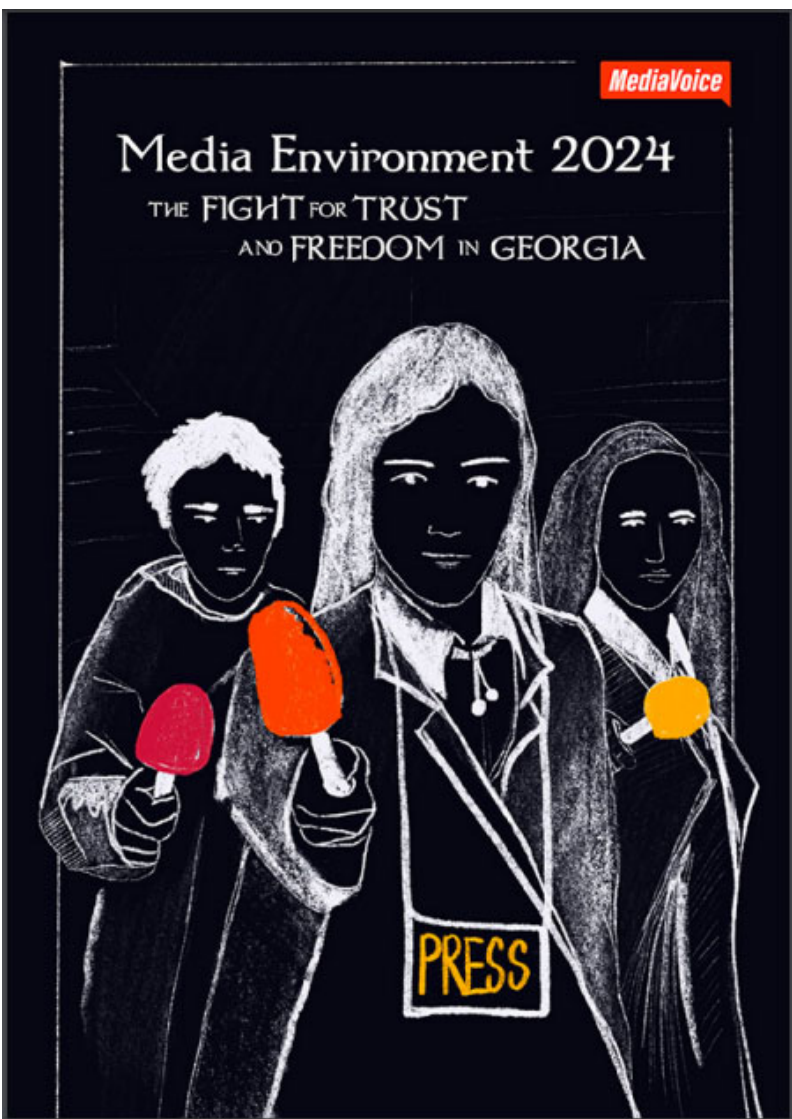
fidence in democratic institutions, especially among younger generations.

The Congress has instructed its Monitoring Committee to continue its oversight of Georgia's electoral conditions but has decided to postpone its monitoring visit on the European Charter of Local Self-Government until after the 2025 local elections.

Furthermore, the resolution leaves open the possibility of a high-level fact-finding mission to

evaluate Georgia's compliance with democratic norms. It also urges the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia to ensure that all local authorities are fairly represented, not just those aligned with the ruling party.

Despite its criticisms, the Congress reaffirms its commitment to dialogue with Georgian authorities and expresses support for the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Georgia (2024-2027).



Study Warns of Rising Repression and Media Censorship in Georgia Amid Election Year

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

A new study, "Media Environment 2024: The Fight for Trust and Freedom in Georgia," has revealed an alarming deterioration of press freedom in the country, linking the passage of the Foreign Agents Law to increasing media censorship, intimidation, and self-censorship.

The study, conducted by independent researchers under the Media and Communication Educational and Research Center's Media Voice project, assesses the media landscape in Georgia's "super-election year" and examines how political pressure has reshaped journalistic work.

One of the study's key findings is that the Foreign Agents Law—widely referred to as the "Russian Law" by critics—was instrumentalized by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party as part of a pre-election strategy to divert media focus away from election-related issues.

"During the pre-election pe-

riod, the media failed to ask critical questions and did not/could not investigate them," the study states.

According to the report, GD's reintroduction and adoption of the law created an information vacuum by monopolizing media attention, pushing election topics off the agenda, and draining journalistic resources. As a result, critical media entered a defensive and survival mode, with journalists facing physical, psychological, and legal exhaustion.

The study documents a sharp increase in aggression against journalists, both online and offline, particularly from GD-affiliated violent groups. It notes that journalists have been stigmatized as "agents", harassed on social media by organized troll networks, and physically attacked—particularly in regional areas.

"The election environment became toxic for regional media," the report warns.

It also highlights a troubling rise in self-censorship, as reporters struggled to access public information and sources became increasingly reluctant to speak. Even pro-government media expressed concerns over restricted access to information.

A particularly alarming finding is that not only journalists, but also their family members, have been targeted with violence following the law's passage. The study links this directly to the Georgian Dream government's rhetoric, accusing it of encouraging violence against the press.

"Brutal beatings of media professionals were broadcast live, contributing to the normalization of violence and criminal activity," the study states, adding that such crimes against journalists have been treated with impunity and downgraded to minor offenses like hooliganism.

Compounding the crisis, the study notes that international

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logical safety of journalists. The study paints a bleak picture of Georgia's media environment in 2024, concluding: "Journalists note that such a repressive media environment has never been seen under any government."

media donors have withdrawn from Georgia, forcing local outlets to prioritize survival over investigative journalism and development. The greatest challenge now, it says, is ensuring the physical, digital, and psycho-

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Abkhazia's De Facto Authorities Dismiss Georgia's Objections Over Sokhumi Airport



The de facto "foreign ministry" of Russia-occupied Abkhazia has condemned Georgia's aviation agency for calling the operation of Sokhumi Airport illegal, urging Tbilisi to "abandon confrontational rhetoric" and engage in constructive dialogue.

In a statement, the separatist authorities called on Georgia to sign a legally binding agreement on the non-use of force, arguing that Tbilisi must recognize the "political and legal realities" that emerged after the wars of 1992-1993 and 2008.

The statement also referenced the rul-

ing Georgian Dream (GD) party's past declarations of openness to dialogue with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia). In particular, it pointed to Bidzina Ivanishvili's 2024 pre-election promise of an apology to Abkhazians, suggesting that Georgia is now contradicting its own

ing the first such arrival since the 1990s. Georgia has strongly opposed any international air traffic to or from Abkhazia, asserting that it violates international law and Georgia's sovereignty.

Zourabichvili Meets Latvian Leaders on Baltic Tour



Georgia's fifth president, Salome Zourabichvili, met today with Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics as part of her Baltic tour, which focuses on strengthening ties and securing support for Georgia's European aspirations.

Following her meeting with Rinkevics, Zourabichvili expressed gratitude for Latvia's continued support, writing on X (Twitter): "Met President Edgars Rinkevics. He reaffirmed Latvia's unwavering support for Georgia and the Georgian people. Thank you for standing by Georgia on this path!"

During her visit, Zourabichvili also

held discussions with Deputy Speaker of the Saeima Zanda Kalnina-Lukaševica and members of the Latvian Saeima's Foreign Relations Committee, including Inara Murniece, Irma Kalnina, Juris Vilums, and Edmunds Cepuritis. She thanked them for backing Georgia's European integration, emphasizing: "Met with the Deputy Speaker of the

EU and UNDP deliver 16 ambulances to war-affected communities in Ukraine

The European Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in

Ukraine, in partnership with the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, have delivered 16 ambulances to regional centres for emergency medical care and disaster medicine in Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia,



Kherson, and Donetsk oblasts. These vehicles will strengthen the emergency medical care system in war-affected communities, improving accessibility, speed and quality of medical services to those most in need.

The eight Type B vehicles were designed to transport and provide basic medical care to non-critical patients even in the most remote areas.

The further eight Type C vehicles are being used as resuscitation vehicles in critical situations, such as heart attacks, severe injuries, or other emergencies.

The total cost of the vehicles is US\$ 910,880 (around Euro850,000).

The initiative was implemented as part of the flagship 'EU4Recovery – Empowering Communities in Ukraine' partnership between UNDP and the EU. (euneighbourseast.eu)

Weather

Thursday, March 27

Day Mostly Cloudy High: 21°C

Night Partly Cloudy Low: 9°C

Friday, March 28

Day Mostly Cloudy High: 21°C

Night Partly Cloudy Low: 9°C

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