

REPORT

QUARTERLY REPORT ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN GEORGIA AND RELATED FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE

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EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The last quarter (June – August 2021) has demonstrated that Georgia is facing major challenges that might undermine its future relations with Western partners. **The violent attacks against the LGBTQ+ community** on 5 July 2021 by violent far-right groups were also encouraged by some of the clerics of the orthodox church of Georgia. The absence of any adequate response from government to the violence against minorities has illustrated that Georgia seems to be drifting away from Western values, even though the country's leadership rhetoric claims to pursue further Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic foreign policy objective.
- The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has managed to persuade nearly all of the parties involved to sign the April 19 Agreement. The EU-mediated document, titled "A Way Forward for Georgia," outlined critical changes for the country's democratic advancement, as well as viable methods for holding early parliamentary elections and the prompt release of an alleged political prisoner. However, **the ruling Georgian Dream's decision to withdraw from the EU mediated agreement revived the political crisis**. Georgian Dream claimed that the ruling party abandoned this agreement as it had "completed its mission and exhausted itself".
- Despite international concerns that the measure would violate the terms of the April 19 Agreement, **the GD supported the nomination of six Supreme Court Justices in a special parliamentary plenary session on 12 July 2021**. The absence of political will on the side of the ruling Georgian Dream party to effectively reform this crucial democratic institution is demonstrated by the nomination of Supreme Court judges and the violation of the agreement's stipulated terms.

TIMELINE OF THE MAIN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN GEORGIA (JUNE–AUGUST 2021)

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- July 5, 2021** ● Violent attacks on LGBTQ+ community by far-right groups
 - July 6, 2021** ● Thousands of opposition supporters, civic activists, and ordinary citizens gathered outside the Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, to protest homophobic pogroms against the now-cancelled LGBTQ+ Pride march
 - July 12, 2021** ● The ruling GD party backs Supreme Court Judges appointment procedure
 - July 28, 2021** ● Georgian Dream pulls out of Charles Michel's brokered April 19 Agreement

VIOLENT ATTACKS ON LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN GEORGIA

Whether to hold the LGBTQ+ pride or not has always sparked debates in Georgia. Even though the country has passed anti-discrimination legislation attached to the introduction of its visa-free regime with the EU, it struggles to implement this democratic reform effectively. Key reasons behind that are the increasing nationalism and populism, as well as the minimal willingness from state institutions to protect minorities and ensure a safe environment.

The main and final event of the Tbilisi Pride Week was scheduled for 5 July 2021 in Tbilisi and would have been of huge importance for Georgia to demonstrate its adherence to EU values. Eventually, the Pride march was [cancelled](#) following massive protests against minorities largely attended by far-right violent groups, as well as some of the clerics of the Orthodox Church. The response from law enforcement agencies to these violent groups was minimal.

Far-right demonstrators [stormed](#) LGBTQ+ activists' headquarters and violently attacked journalists. More than 50 journalists were harassed and beaten, while they were covering a protest against a Tbilisi Pride parade. The journalist's equipment was damaged and smashed. Video footage also [showed](#) a journalist with a bloodied mouth and nose, as well as a man on a scooter driving at journalists. Violent groups also [scaled](#) Tbilisi Pride and Shame Movement buildings. They ripped down rainbow flags and destroyed the office. Tbilisi Pride organizers had to hide from the aggressive groups. Far-right demonstrators also tore down the EU flag in front of the Parliament.

According to the Interior Ministry, [investigations](#) into incidents of interference with journalistic activity (Article 154 of the Criminal Code) and assault (Article 126) were initiated. Following the Ministry's statement, Tbilisi Pride activists were also called not to hold the March "in an open public space" considering the [scale](#) of the ongoing counter-rally. The Ministry also added that its representatives have repeatedly [warned](#) Tbilisi Pride organizers about the high level of risks. According to a statement of the Public Defender, the situation posed a real threat to the life and health of journalists and hampered their professional activities. Whereas the Ombudsman, Nino Lomjaria [urged](#) law-enforcement agencies to remove alleged offenders from public spaces according to legal mechanisms and reminded state officials of their constitutional obligation to protect freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. However, the presence of police was perceived as significantly inadequate to prevent massive aggression towards several media outlet representatives and the LGBTQ+ community.

Prior to the Pride day, the Church had [lambasted](#) Tbilisi Pride, the EU delegation, the United States and country Ambassadors that have called for defending the peaceful celebration. The Georgian Orthodox Church also [announced](#) a counter demonstration against the Pride March under the name of March of Dignity. Based on their statement, the counter-demonstration aimed to prevent the Tbilisi Pride March.

The leading figure of the event was Guram Palavandishvili. He is a founder of the Society for Children's Rights, who had actively [advocated](#) against Tbilisi Pride in the name of protecting the so-called "Georgian morals and traditions". He and his fellow activists had gathered a night before the Pride March in Tbilisi, from where they had planned to reach the Pride location in the morning. Later in the morning, they violently removed the anti-government tents outside the Georgian Parliament on Rustaveli Avenue.

Tbilisi Pride [stated](#) that they cannot come out to the streets full of oppressors supported by the government, patriarchy and pro-Russian forces, and risk the lives of people: Instead of adopting "effective measures" to defend people's fundamental rights, government representatives have encouraged violent groups. Besides, rather than ensuring the safety of the queer community and its supporters, the authorities deliberately [impeded](#) the whole community from exercising the freedom of assembly", stated Tbilisi Pride. Pride organizers were also concerned due to fact that law enforcement agencies did not respond to the [violence](#).

The footage of events on 5 July 2021 might significantly damage the international reputation of Georgia and its western aspirations. It has revealed the absence of political will to uphold one of the core values of the EU. Also, it clearly illustrated the vulnerability of the state mechanisms as well as the general negative attitudes towards sexual minorities in the country.

Political statements followed the cancellation of Tbilisi Pride. While the presence of far-right activists seemed more of a well-organized act to violently prevent the Pride March, Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, in his speech, [said](#) that Pride March is “unreasonable” and contains a high risk of “civil confrontations”, as the majority of the country’s population considers it “unacceptable”. Garibashvili also claimed that the Pride march was organized by the radical opposition, namely with the leadership of ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili. Far from bringing the situation under control, the PM’s statement further emboldened these violent groups.

Following the PM’s statement, Irakli Kobakhidze, ruling Georgian Dream party chairperson [said](#) that the key objective of Tbilisi Pride was to advance political interests, and it had little to do with defending the rights of anyone. He added that Tbilisi Pride was backed by the United National Movement and other opposition parties. Interestingly, he also mentioned the following: “social confrontation, escalation of the situation, stirring anti-western feelings, is what these political forces did strive for all these years.” GD has been actively and repeatedly [linking](#) a high number of demonstrations with the largest opposition party - the United National Movement. However, Tbilisi Pride organizers have denied any UNM-linked allegations.

The opposition has [reacted](#) to the ongoing violence as well as on the accusations from the ruling party. Opposition parties [put](#) the blame on Irakli Garibashvili for encouraging the far-right groups against the Pride March. Based on the opposition party’s statements, Garibashvili’s statement strongly encouraged a cancellation of the event and attacks on journalists, as well as mob rides on Shame Movement and Tbilisi Pride offices. Members from the opposition parties, such as United National Movement, European Georgia, Lelo for Georgia, and Strategy Agmashenebeli, in their quick [reactions](#), mentioned that 5 July 2021 marks as a tragic day for Georgia. They have stated that the 5 July developments represent an open alliance between Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia and de-facto informal ruler of the country, and pro-Russian groups, such groups are not against one group of minorities only, but they are in confrontation with the idea of independent Georgia and its Western inclinations. Besides, they are openly [against](#) vaccination efforts in Georgia. The opposition parties also claimed that ripping down the EU flag represented a symbolic action from violent groups and actively blamed the government for backing such violence.

The President of Georgia, Salome Zurbashvili, has also [condemned](#) the violence, and has encouraged law enforcement agencies to ensure public order, stating that any “any incitement that supports radical actions, polarization among the public, fuels confrontation, harms the country and endangers the stability of the state is unacceptable”.

Diplomatic missions and Georgia’s international partners, including the Embassy of the United States, United Kingdom, EU Delegation, and the European Union Monitoring Mission, and the OSCE/ODIHR, have also swiftly [expressed](#) strong criticism towards government leaders for failing to condemn violence. Around 20 Diplomatic missions have signed a joint statement, which indicated that attacks that took place during the Tbilisi Pride counter-rally represented the failure of the government leaders and religious officials to condemn the violence. Diplomatic missions have jointly [called](#) on all Georgia’s leaders and law enforcement to act swiftly to protect those exercising their Constitutional rights to freedom of expression and assembly, to protect journalists exercising freedom of the press, and to publicly condemn violence.”

Georgian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have [held](#) the government responsible for the homophobic pogroms. They have stressed that the state institutions badly failed to uphold the rights of citizens guaranteed by the constitution, whereas state institutions have shifted responsibility to peaceful demonstrators, which

led to further exacerbation of tensions and violent actions perpetrated by homophobic groups.

In a [statement](#) denouncing violence, the Georgian Orthodox Church said it is very unfortunate that people, including journalists, received injuries during the anti-Pride rally, but argued that responsibility must lie first of all with Tbilisi Pride organizers. The Church also stated that the planned event bore symptoms of „moral, psychological, and doctrinal assault against our people and future generations, which would have required a swift response.“

The day after the pogroms, on 6 July 2021, thousands of opposition supporters, civic activists, and ordinary citizens [gathered](#) outside the Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, to protest homophobic pogroms against the now-cancelled LGBTQ+ Pride March, which wounded over 50 journalists. Tbilisi Pride activists also took part in the event. The LGBTQ+ activist organizations earlier urged supporters who were unable to attend the cancelled Pride to join the aftermath silent demonstration, noting that “it was a difficult day for Georgian democracy yesterday.”

Outside the Georgian Parliament, far-right homophobic protestors tore down and [burned](#) the European flag for the second time on 6 July 2021, just minutes after police let them take over the parliament square after an anti-violence, pro-LGBTQ+ march had left the scene. Despite being highly present in the area, police did not stop these actions. The European flag was removed from the Parliament for the second time in a row. The European banner was pulled down for hours on 5 July 2021 by radical groups linked alt-right parties and led by Levan Vasadze.

ABROGATION OF EU-BROKERED APRIL 19 AGREEMENT REOPENED THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN GEORGIA

In the last couple of months, Georgia's Western partners have been actively involved in dealing with Georgia's political crisis. [The EU-brokered April 19 agreement](#) appeared to be the [silver lining](#) of this political deadlock since it envisioned improvements critical to Georgia's democratic development, for example, crucial reforms addressing perceived politicized justice, the electoral system, the rule of law, and power-sharing in the Georgian Parliament, the highest legislative body in the country. Whilst reaching the agreement was widely welcomed and the EU's role as a mediator was widely perceived as successful, the political crisis reopened when Irakli Kobakhidze, Chair of the GD, [stated](#) that the ruling party quit this agreement as it "completed its mission and exhausted itself". It should be noted that several opposition parties, namely the United National Movement (UNM) and European Georgia (EG), had not [signed](#) this agreement¹. Therefore, it was painfully evident from the very beginning that the implementation of this document would be a challenge. Among several factors, the absence of political will among both ruling and opposition parties to adhere to the "spirit and letter" of the agreement, hindered the whole process and made it difficult for Georgia's Western allies to push Georgian political elites on the right track. As it was foretold, since several opposition parties refused to sign the agreement, the GD leaders used this as an additional opportunity to justify their withdrawal from the agreement and avoid implementation of stipulated reforms: "one-sided loyalty to the April 19 agreement is insulting for our party, and our voters will not forgive us this", as the GD Chair, Irakli Kobakhidze, [noted](#) during the GD's briefing on 28 July 2021. However, it is worth noting that this is not the most important factor that made the GD abandon the agreement.

As it is known, apart from the stipulated reforms for the country's democratic consolidation, the April 19 agreement paved the way for conducting early parliamentary elections. Per this [provision](#) of the EU-mediated document, in case Georgian Dream obtains fewer than 43 per cent of valid proportional votes in the October 2021 local self-government elections, snap parliamentary elections will be held in 2022. Even though the ruling party leaders claimed that overcoming this threshold will be uncomplicated for the GD, the recently published [poll](#) by the International Republican Institute (IRI) indicates that GD is a long way from overcoming this threshold during the upcoming October self-government elections in Georgia. Thus, one can assume that once GD leaders realized their limited chances to successfully overcome this threshold, they decided to annul the EU-brokered agreement in order to not commit to conducting snap parliamentary elections under the agreement. In the aftermath of the GD's announcement of its withdrawal from the EU-brokered document, Irakli Kobakhidze [stated](#) that the ruling Georgian Dream party would no longer engage in negotiations with opposition parties to reach agreements similar to Charles Michel's mediated document. He also [highlighted](#) that as the agreement is terminated, there will be no need for parliamentary elections until 2024. The GD's decision was heavily [criticised](#) by Georgia's Western partners and independent opposition political leaders. Jim Risch, one of the members of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [stressed](#) that this decision indicated that the GD is merely concerned with "its own future, not that of the entire country".

MEP Viola von Cramon has also reacted to this decision, [criticising](#) not only the ruling party but the biggest opposition party, namely the UNM, for enabling Georgian Dream to abrogate the agreement. Salome Samadashvili, an independent MP and the only person from the UNM who has signed the April 19 agreement, [mentioned](#) that this was a critical juncture and demonstrated that "Georgia's foreign policy orientation has changed", equating the GD's decision to the rejection of the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU by former Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich. Several renowned NGOs in Georgia have responded to the GD's

¹ However, after months of hesitation, Georgia's main opposition party, the United National Movement have [decided](#) to sign the EU-brokered April 19 deal between the opposition and the ruling Georgian Dream party.

abandonment Charles Michel's mediated agreement and labelled this [decision](#) as a clear rejection of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. A couple of weeks after the annulment of the April 19 agreement, both Irakli Gharibashvili and Charles Michel [attended](#) the inaugural summit of the Crimea Platform in Kyiv. **In the aftermath of this meeting, the President of the European Council [highlighted](#) the utmost importance of the implementation of respective democratic reforms in Georgia per the April 19 agreement.**

Simultaneously, he pointed out that the deadline for financial assistance to Georgia "is looming" and the country should manifest its commitments and adherence to the accords, particularly the envisaged reforms crucial for Georgia's democratic consolidation. Considering the recent economic instability in Georgia, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the EaP state is in dire need of this financial assistance. It remains to be seen whether these threats will be sufficient to persuade the GD to resume its implementation of the necessary reforms. However, this is not the first time that EU authorities have threatened the Georgian government with the deployment of so-called „negative conditionality“, but the EU has never used this mechanism towards its partner so far². Despite that, the Prime Minister of Georgia [tweeted](#) that Georgia remains steadfast in its commitments to the reform agenda established in the April 19 agreement. The PM of Georgia has also underlined that a substantial portion of these changes have already been achieved, and the GD leaders are committed to continue working on the remaining key institutional changes as well. However, the Georgian PM has not commented on the section of the EU-mediated document concerning early parliamentary elections.

2 On August 31st Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that the country will reject a EUR 75 million loan from the European Union, conditioned on the court reform and upholding EU-brokered April 19 deal, citing the government's efforts to reduce foreign debt and avoid political insinuations.

RULING GD PARTY BACKS SUPREME COURT JUDGES APPOINTMENT PROCEDURE

Despite international [concerns](#) that the action would contravene several provisions of the April 19 agreement, the GD [backed](#) the appointment of six Supreme Court judges through a special parliamentary plenary session on 12 July 2021. It is worth noting that ensuring the independence of the judiciary has been extremely challenging for Georgia in recent decades. As [noted](#) by the Ambassador of the U.S. in Georgia, Kelly Degnan, the EU-mediated document represented a great opportunity for this Black Sea region country to address this problem properly. The nomination of Supreme Court judges and evading outlined provisions of the agreement highlights the absence of political will of the ruling Georgian Dream party to adequately reform this essential democratic institution.

CONCLUSION

Allowing crisis to expand is politically expensive for Georgia, which aspires to EU membership by 2024. The only beneficiaries of this development are the adversaries. Violent attacks on journalists and the LGBTQ+ community, abrogation of the EU-brokered April 19 agreement and the contested appointment of Supreme Court judges point to the wider political trajectory in Georgia. This sadly demonstrates that the country leans towards Moscow's orbit and while eroding democratic institutions, turns its back on the West. Such developments may result in less willingness from Georgia's Western partners to support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This will not come as a surprise considering the decisions made by Georgia that undermine key principles and values of its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Violent attacks on LGBTQ+ community members and journalists clearly showed that the majority holds the power to weaken the rights of minorities, which does not support the idea of democracy and democratic institutions. Besides, the abrogation of the EU-brokered April 19 agreement and the Supreme Court judges' appointment procedure through a special parliamentary plenary session by the ruling Georgian Dream proves that the GD is not demonstrating a political willingness to exit a crisis and be accountable to its Western partners.

Frequent moves from the ruling Georgian Dream include blaming opposition leaders for the majority of key drawbacks, and undermining international partners and their efforts to strengthen democracy and democratic institutions in Georgia. The outlined issues point to further political polarization and are hugely concerning for the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.