

## Georgian Dream's President Mikheil Kavelashvili Signs Controversial Legislative Amendments

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Mikheil Kavelashvili, elected President under the Georgian Dream (GD) party, approved a series of legislative amendments immediately following his inauguration. The amendments, which had been adopted by GD's Parliament during the third reading on December 13, passed through the legislature in an expedited manner. These changes, which will take effect on December 30, have drawn strong criticism from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who argue that they undermine democratic principles and reverse crucial reforms in Georgia.

The amendments encompass several key laws, including the Law of Georgia on Public Service, the Law on Assemblies and Manifestations, the Law on Police, the Code of Administrative Offenses, and the Election Code. Below is a breakdown of the major changes:

### Changes to Public Service and Political Purges

The amendments make significant alterations to public service regulations. The most notable change is that heads and deputy heads of primary structural units in public institutions will no longer be professional public servants. Instead, these positions will be filled by individuals employed under administrative contracts. Critics argue that this move weakens the professionalism and independence of public institutions.

Additionally, the amendments simplify the reorganization process within public institutions, which could be used as a tool for political purges. Previously, public



servants had legal protections, including those offered through judicial mechanisms, but the new regulations reduce these safeguards, increasing the vulnerability of public sector employees to political pressure.

### Restrictions on Protests and Increased Penalties

The amendments also introduce stricter regulations on public protests. Among the most controversial provisions is the imposition of a fine of 1,000 GEL and a one-year driving license suspension for individuals who participate in protest marches that disrupt traffic, as determined by the police.

The laws also impose heavy fines for placing protest materials, such as stencils, inscriptions, or posters that damage the city's

appearance, with fines reaching up to 1,000 GEL. Another significant change is the introduction of preventive detention. Individuals can now be detained for up to 48 hours based on the assumption that they might commit an offense, even without any criminal act occurring. Contesting this detention requires navigating a complex, multi-level court system, with compensation capped at 150 GEL.

Furthermore, if a protest blocks a road but is deemed insufficiently attended to justify the disruption, participants face fines of 5,000 GEL, and the organizer could be fined up to 15,000 GEL. The same penalties apply to violations such as blocking building entrances, with the option of administrative detention of up to 15 days. Other provisions target the

use of pyrotechnics at protests, with fines for possessing such devices, even if not used, and penalties for organizers.

Additional provisions include fines for possessing laser devices or high-intensity light sources that interfere with state officials' activities during protests, as well as a fine of 2,000 GEL for covering one's face with a mask at a protest. Minors involved in protest-related offenses will result in fines for parents, ranging from 100 to 300 GEL.

### Changes to the Election Code

In a separate set of amendments, the Georgian Dream-led Parliament unilaterally abolished the 40% electoral threshold for electing majoritarian members of municipal councils and removed the possibility of a second round in local elections. These changes, signed by Kavelashvili, also increased the electoral threshold for the proportional system from 3% to 4%, up from 2.5% in Tbilisi. The changes have raised concerns that they could further consolidate power within the GD party and limit democratic competition.

### Additional Amendments

Beyond the aforementioned legislative changes, President Kavelashvili also signed into law amendments that will allow Georgian citizens who lost their citizenship due to acquiring another country's citizenship to restore or retain Georgian citizenship by January 1, 2027. Additionally, the Law on the Special State Protection Service was amended to ensure the personal security of the President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament throughout their term in office and for one year after leaving office, unless their actions are deemed unconstitutional or criminal.

## Transparency International Reports Surge in Violence Against Georgian Media in 2024

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

Transparency International (TI) has documented a significant increase in violence and obstruction against media outlets critical of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party in 2024. Nearly 200 cases of verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, and interference with journal-

istic activities were recorded this year, with 80% occurring in the past two months alone. This marks a nearly five-fold increase compared to 2023.

According to TI, the surge in violence coincides with the pro-European protests that began on November 28. Non-governmental organizations have reported over 90 violations of journalists' rights dur-

ing these demonstrations, including targeted attacks, severe injuries, unlawful detentions, equipment damage, and threats. Victims include:

- Maka Chikhladze and Giorgi Shetsiruli of TV Pirveli, who were brutally assaulted live on air by suspected government-sponsored provocateurs ("titushki").

- Guram Rogava of Formula TV, who suffered a serious head injury inflicted by a riot officer and remains in rehabilitation.

Numerous other journalists were injured by tear gas, water cannons, and direct physical violence during these protests, underscoring the escalating hostility toward the media.

The attacks on media representatives extend beyond the protests. TI categorized the violations into five key areas:

#### 1. Physical Attacks

- In January, police assaulted four journalists from the online outlet Broadcaster during a Tbilisi protest.

- In March, journalists from TV 25 and TOK TV were attacked in Batumi.

- In November, police assaulted Publika journalist Mindia Gabadze dur-

ing protests against election fraud.

#### 2. Unlawful Detentions and Fines

- Cameraman Sergi Baramidze of Mtavari Arkhi was unlawfully detained and assaulted during protests.

- In December, Mtavari Arkhi journalist Beka Khorishia was fined 2,200 GEL for covering a pro-European protest.

#### 3. Threats and Intimidation

- In February, a flammable substance was thrown into the office of the newspaper Alioni.

- In March, intruders damaged the property of TV Pirveli journalist Nato Gogelia.

- In October, ruling party officials accused critical media outlets of illegal activities, further fueling tensions.

#### 4. Parliamentary Restrictions

- In April, access for online media to parliamentary sessions was restricted during discussions on controversial laws.

- In June, journalists from TV Pirveli and other outlets had their parliamentary accreditations revoked.

#### 5. Judicial and Regulatory Harassment

**ABOUT 200 CASES OF VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION AGAINST JOURNALISTS WERE RECORDED IN 2024**



Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.8068; Euro - 2.9306; GBP - 3.5349; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.5405; Swiss Franc - 3.1118

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

# Georgia's Political Crisis: Power Clash Leads to Parallel Leadership

In the ongoing political crisis in Georgia, December 29 had emerged as another key date. On this day, the Georgian Dream inaugurated Mikheil Kavelashvili, chosen as president by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Meanwhile, President Salome Zourabichvili had identified December 29 as the ultimate deadline by which Bidzina Ivanishvili must have come to the presidential residence to negotiate the scheduling of new parliamentary elections. It was unlikely that such negotiations would take place, but with this proposal, Salome Zourabichvili would have exhausted the final chance for dialogue, pushing the political crisis into a new and more complex phase.

On December 22, President Salome Zourabichvili addressed protesters on Rustaveli Avenue, announcing a shift to a so-called "offensive tactic" following the publication of the OSCE/ODIHR report. The position of the president and the protesting public is clear: new parliamentary elections must be held following the rigged elections of October 26. This would be the logical way out of the current political crisis. To discuss the elections, Salome Zourabichvili invited the country's informal ruler, Bidzina Ivanishvili, to the presidential residence. Ivanishvili has the ability to bring the current leaders of the Georgian Dream, including Kobakhidze, Papuashvili, and Mdinardze, to

the table. However, the decision regarding new elections had to be made by December 29.

As expected, Bidzina Ivanishvili did not appear, and the spokespersons of Georgian Dream dismissed Zourabichvili's proposal as "not serious", instead announcing October 28, 2028, as the date for the next parliamentary elections.

Georgian Dream considers the 11<sup>th</sup> convocation of Parliament, composed solely of its members, as legitimate. Mikheil Kavelashvili's inauguration took place on December 29. By doing so, GD closes the door on negotiations for good. Meanwhile, Zourabichvili gathered citizens in front of the Presidential Palace on the same day and announced that she would leave the residence, taking the legitimacy with her along with the flag. She left the Palace, but remains as the only leader in the country that the West considers legitimate.

The position of Georgian Dream is clear. They refuse to agree to holding new parliamentary elections as doing so would mean acknowledging the rigging of the October 26 elections, for which they themselves would be held accountable. Calling new elections would be tantamount to losing power for the party and Bidzina Ivanishvili. In exchange,

they might secure certain guarantees of safety, but for now, they believe they can retain their hold on power.

Given the ongoing protests, Mikheil Kavelashvili's inauguration could not take place in an open space, such as Rustaveli Avenue or Freedom Square. Instead, the inauguration was held in the parliamentary chamber, attended exclusively by members of the Georgian Dream. No ambassadors from other countries had been invited to the event, which serves as a form of 'defense' for Georgian Dream — as Western ambassadors likely would not attend anyway. By nominating Kavelashvili, Bidzina Ivanishvili has effectively ruled out any possibility of compromise or negotiations with the West. Kavelashvili is well known for his anti-Western statements.

What will be Kavelashvili's first actions as president? Expectations are already forming: domestically, a declaration of a state of emergency is anticipated, which would lead to a renewed violent suppression of protests. Internationally, a visit to Moscow is expected, ostensibly presented as a step toward restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. In reality, this move would likely lead to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with

Russia and further entrench Georgia within Putin's sphere of influence.

The immediate plans of Georgian Dream, or more accurately, Bidzina Ivanishvili, are relatively clear: no compromises, retaining power, ignoring or attempting to suppress protests, and moving toward establishing an authoritarian regime. However, what remained uncertain for Dream is Salome Zourabichvili's next moves. Having announced an "offensive tactic," Zourabichvili has also stated that new elections will either be the result of negotiations or the regime "collapsing on its own", a process she claims has already begun.

Zourabichvili's potential actions are a significant concern for the party, evident in the direct threats of arrest made by Irakli Kobakhidze. Should such an arrest take place, GD would likely face even harsher sanctions, a scenario they are well aware of. As a result, they assert that they have no intention of imprisoning a 72-year-old woman unless she crosses so-called red lines.

What specifically worried Ivanishvili? Several scenarios had been suggested:

a. Salome Zourabichvili could have declared the 11<sup>th</sup> convocation of Parliament dissolved and

called for new elections. While Dream would refuse to comply, this would exacerbate the legitimacy crisis.

b. Salome Zourabichvili could have refused to vacate the presidential residence after December 29. Notably, opposition political parties had already proposed this to Zourabichvili, stating that they were ready to physically protect her. In this scenario, Georgian Dream attempting to storm the presidential residence would undoubtedly damage its public image.

Both scenarios represent steps toward a form of "dual power" in the country. However, Zourabichvili can take similar actions now that she has left the residence. Since December 22, she has been intensively negotiating with political parties that crossed the 5% threshold in the October 26 parliamentary elections. It has already been decided that two advisory councils will be established under the president: one consisting of political party representatives and another of civil society representatives.

Discussions are actively underway on how to conduct elections that are free and democratic. Holding new elections is increasingly seen as inevitable, especially given the growing wave of protests and external pressure.

## Transparency International Reports Surge in Violence Against Georgian Media in 2024

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The Communications Commission issued contested violation protocols against critical broadcasters, leading to fines.

In July, simultaneous lawsuits were filed against TV Pirveli by ruling party affiliates, seen as an attempt to intimidate the outlet.

Inadequate State Response  
Despite the increasing violence, state institutions have

failed to address the crisis adequately. TI reports that from January to November 2024, only 16 criminal investigations into alleged interference with journalists' activities were initiated, with 9 cases still pending. Seven individuals were prosecuted, but no significant progress has been reported, and many perpetrators remain unpunished.

According to TI, this lack of accountability fosters a culture of impunity, suggesting that these attacks are tacitly sanctioned by the authorities. Additionally, foreign journalists have faced entry denials without justification, further highlighting the hostile environment for the press.

### Weather

Tuesday, December 31

Day Cloudy

High: 8°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 2°C

Wednesday, January 1

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 9°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: -1°C

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## The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

### Sanctioned Supreme Court Judge Shalva Tadumadze Appointed Deputy Interior Minister

Shalva Tadumadze, a sanctioned Supreme Court judge and chairman of the Chamber of Criminal Affairs, has been appointed as the deputy to Georgian Dream's Minister of Internal Affairs, Vakhtang Gomelauri.

Tadumadze, who is under sanctions from Lithuania and Ukraine, brings a controversial background to his new role. Since 2019, he has served as Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court of Georgia and held a lifetime appointment as a Supreme Court judge.

Previously, Tadumadze held prominent government positions, including Chief Prosecutor of Georgia from 2018 to 2019

and head of the administration of the Government of Georgia.

However, his qualifications for the Supreme Court have been challenged. Transparency International (TI) has raised concerns over the absence of evidence confirming that Tadumadze meets the mandatory educational requirements for the role, such as holding a master's degree or its equivalent.

### Kakha Kaladze Denies Knowledge of Shaishmelashvili's Claims About Rally Crackdowns

Kakha Kaladze, General Secretary of the ruling Georgian Dream party, stated he was unaware of an interview given by former senior official Irakli Shaishmelashvili to TV Pirveli. In the interview, Shaishmelashvili claimed close ties between Bidzina Ivanishvili and Zviad Kharazishvili, nicknamed Khareba, suggesting that

orders for breaking up protests may have come directly from Ivanishvili.

"Who is Shaishmelashvili? No, I don't know, I haven't heard [the interview]," Kaladze responded when questioned by journalists.

When pressed further, Kaladze defended the actions of law enforcement during protests, asserting that the police acted independently to maintain public order.

"As for the demonstrations, I state with full responsibility that the police act independently to maintain public order. We have witnessed specific incidents and numerous examples where violent protesters approached the police, verbally and physically abused them, and threw Molotov cocktails, heavy objects, and stones. Naturally, there is always a reaction to such actions. Believe me, if there were no violence, not a single person would have been harmed," said Kaladze.

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