

A POGROM OF THE MEDIA:  
**TBILISI,**  
**JULY 5 AND 6, 2021**





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Cover photo by Mariam Nikuradze  
The colleagues bid farewell to Lekso Lashkarava,  
pointing down the cameras at his funeral ceremony



TBILISI  
2021

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## METHODOLOGY

This document assesses the conditions and events that led up to a large-scale attack on the media in Tbilisi on July 5 and 6, 2021. It will detail the violent events that transpired over these two days and the consequences. It will examine evidence of the harm done to journalists and cameramen, cases of illegal interference in journalistic activities, and the decisions made by state officials. The practices that have been used to identify, detain, and prosecute offenders of the July 5 and 6 events will also be discussed.

This document was prepared using various sources and methods. They include:

- **Investigation of Facts:** Open source videos as well as audio and print materials were analyzed. Information collected by the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics from injured journalists, cameramen, and media managers was also used.
  - **Social Media Monitoring:** This report draws on the assessments prepared by Media Development Foundation, which outline how violent groups have used social networks and online media to discredit the traditional media. The social media monitoring was carried out using the Facebook analytical tool CrowdTangle.
  - **Request for Public Information:** This document uses public information requested from official agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Tbilisi City Court.
  - **Legal Analysis:** The Coalition for Media Advocacy, in cooperation with its partner organizations Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), Georgia Democratic Initiative (GDI), and Rights Georgia, studied and evaluated the practice of criminal liability and the legal mechanisms of the state response. Transparency International Georgia (TI) is also currently preparing to initiate administrative dispute proceedings against the state.
  - **Evaluation of the Communications Commission's Decision:** The Coalition for Media Advocacy, through its partner organization Media Rights, studied and evaluated the decision made by the Georgian National Communications Commission against individuals and legal entities involved in violent processes. Specifically, this report focuses on the Alt Info case.
- Analysis of Legislation:** This document analyzes the relevant legal safeguards used to prevent illegal interference with media activities and journalism.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 5 and 6, 2021, what started as media coverage of Georgia's Pride celebration became a vicious assault on the country's media as journalists and cameramen were [attacked](#)<sup>1</sup> on an unprecedented scale in Tbilisi. Violent far-right groups attacked media representatives, inflicted physical injuries and verbal abuse, and [deliberately smashed equipment](#)<sup>2</sup> to disrupt their journalistic activities.

On July 5, pre-organized groups, in line with [calls](#)<sup>3</sup> from violent far-right groups gathered in Tbilisi, near the Rustaveli metro and Kashueti Church to demand the abolition of the LGBTQ+ March of Dignity.

Violent groups initially dispersed opposition tents that had been set up against the government on Rustaveli Avenue. Shortly after, the European Union [flag was taken down](#)<sup>4</sup> in front of the parliament and a Christian cross was raised. Flags, bottles, sticks, crosses, combs, and even a motorcycle were used as a means of inflicting harm on journalists and proponents of the March of Dignity.

Activists, politicians and citizens held a silent rally in front of the parliament on [July 6](#)<sup>5</sup> to protest the violent events of July 5. Members of Tbilisi Pride joined the rally, where they unfolded an LGBTQ + flag and released colored smoke.

During the silent rally, members of a violent and homophobic group again gathered near the Kashueti Church on the opposite side of Rustaveli Avenue. On multiple occasions, they attempted to enter the area around the parliament but were stopped by a police cordon. After the silent rally ended and the police opened the cordon, the violent groups were allowed to enter the area of parliament. At that time, they again [lowered the European Union flag, burned it, and raised the Georgian flag in its place](#).<sup>6</sup>

The next day, on July 7, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Kakha Kuchava, stated that "it is unacceptable to allow the EU flag to be taken down. Our strategic partners are constantly keeping an eye on Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Their contribution to the development of Georgia is invaluable." At that point, the EU flag was [returned to its place in front of the parliament](#).<sup>7</sup>

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1. Statement on the large-scale violence against journalists. Available at: <https://bit.ly/390UiYu>
  2. Article: "Everything points to the organization of the July 5 violence except the investigation" Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z7TZWH>
  3. Article: "Opponents of 'Tbilisi Pride' gather in the vicinity of Rustaveli Metro, including clergymen" Available at: <https://bit.ly/38YGWMC>
  4. Article: "Opponents of 'Tbilisi Pride' removed the EU flag and raised a cross in front of the Parliament." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hq6uqz>
  5. Photo report: "Silent rally in front of the Parliament." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ln2fgD>
  6. Article: "Violent groups again lowered the EU flag in front of the Parliament." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C4AoIB>
  7. Article: "Kakha Kuchava raised the torn EU flag in front of the Parliament." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3CaoRb1>

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Despite preliminary calls from the civil sector, the state did not protect the safety of its citizens on July 5 and 6. The Prime Minister of Georgia, through personal statements, encouraged the aggression of violent groups and directed blame for the events towards the organizers of the March for Dignity.

Members of the violent groups attacked representatives of almost all media outlets. Particularly, aggression was channeled towards cameramen and photographers. Digital media representatives removed identifying signs for security reasons. Notably, Russian and Russian-language media representatives were not targeted and subjected to the same aggression as other outlets.

According to official information, a total of 53 journalists, cameramen, and photographers from more than ten media outlets were injured. Some of them were taken to the hospital with severe injuries and remain under medical supervision. One of the cameramen, TV Pirveli's Alexander (Lekso) Lashkarava, was the victim of violence by dozens of assailants in the office of the Shame Movement. His injuries included damage to his facial bones that required him to undergo surgery. On July 11, he was found dead in his home.

Following Lashkarava's death, media outlets, NGOs, activists and opposition politicians blamed the government and demanded the resignation of the prime minister and the interior minister.

The interests of most of the injured journalists, cameramen, and photographers are currently being defended by non-governmental organizations. Some media outlets decided to defend affected media staff on their own.

In response to the numerous violations committed, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of Georgia has so far detained only 31 people for illegal interference in journalistic activities. Despite explicit [evidence](#)<sup>8</sup> by witness journalists, publicly available [videos that demonstrate](#)<sup>9</sup> far-right groups' encouragement of the events, and these extremists' [own confessions](#),<sup>10</sup> law enforcement agencies have not made any arrests in relation to the organization of large-scale violence.

Authorities continue to discredit media representatives and respond to critical questions with aggressive rhetoric. The narrative of the ruling party has been repeated by the Georgian Patriarchate, which has issued a number of statements about the ongoing events.

On July 27, a group of investigative journalists, iFact, published an article on [Priests in the Violent Rally](#).<sup>11</sup> It included a list of priests who contributed to the July 5 events, either by mobilizing participants or supporting the organizers. In social media photos, these priests are seen explicitly standing with the leaders of the violent groups Alternative for Georgia, Alt-Info, and Georgian Idea.

8. Documentary material chronologizes the attack on the office of "Shame" and Lekso Lashkarava. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3t6sZFq>

9. Documentary: "Organizing July 5." Available at: <https://bit.ly/38tPOJO>

10. Guest of the program 'Free Market': "The founder of Alt Info is Konstantine Morgoshia." This footage can be seen between the 17:18- 17:28 minute mark. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Y6Ppej>

11. Survey: "Priests in Violence." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3t6oKJZ>

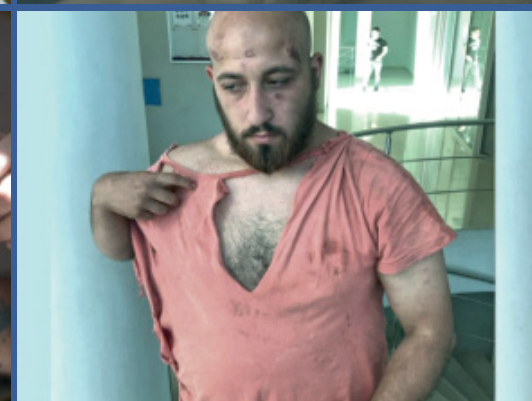
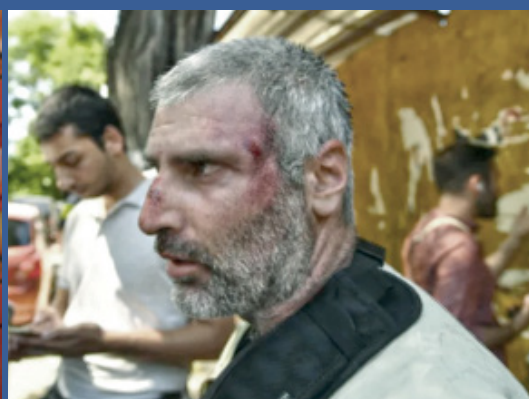
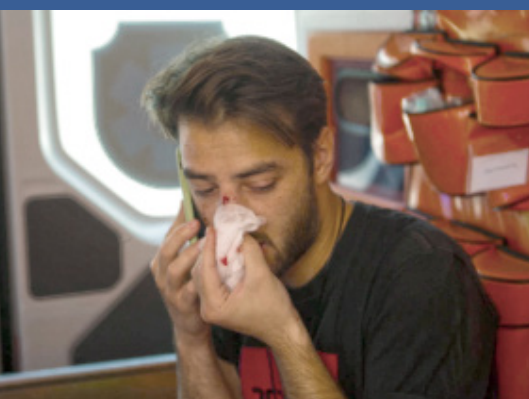
The violence in Tbilisi has prompted a number of international responses. Georgia's international partners have reminded the country's leaders and law enforcement agencies that they are responsible for holding relevant actors accountable and obligated to respect and uphold the constitutional rights of assembly and free expression.

On September 6, 2021, the Public Defender of Georgia applied to the prosecutor's office with a request to launch criminal proceedings against two more individuals. The request was based on publicly available evidence, which the Public Defender believes reaches the standard of probable cause for launching criminal proceedings regarding the organization of group violence and public calls for violence.



## CHAPTER 1

# TIMELINE OF EVENTS ON JULY 5 AND 6



The author of the photo: Media checker

**TBILISI,  
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In 2021, cases of journalists' rights being violated in Georgia approached a critical level. In recent years, [civil society](#)<sup>12</sup> has become increasingly vocal about the government's lack of action to ensure the safety of journalists, noting that attacks on media representatives have been largely uninvestigated.

When covering elections, rallies, or other issues, media representatives have often [become](#)<sup>13</sup> the target of verbal abuse and physical attacks.

The July 5 attack on the media escalated into large-scale violence following government encouragement. The March of Dignity was originally planned by Tbilisi Pride to occur on Rustaveli Avenue on this day. Pride Week is a peaceful tool of political advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community. It is an opportunity for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, during which the community emphasizes its needs and achievements. Members and supporters are given the opportunity to hold various events on the street with the objective of a more equal society.

This event has previously and persistently been threatened by far-right homophobic groups that publicly call for aggression and violence. Ahead of the July 5 events, they announced a counter protest against the participants of the March of Dignity.

Due to the history of aggression against the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia, the Coalition for Media Advocacy foresaw the threat of violence by homophobic groups and its potential to be directed towards the media. Three days before the event, on July 2, 2021, [the Coalition](#)<sup>14</sup> addressed the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and called on it to:

- protect the safety of the March of Dignity participants.
- protect media representatives from illegal interference in journalistic activities.
- provide a timely and appropriate legal response to all violent calls and attempts to incite hatred.

In addition to these calls, a preliminary statement was issued by the civic platform [No to Phobia](#). The NGOs called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to take appropriate measures to protect citizens.

The threat of human rights violations was highlighted in various public appeals. Numerous statements about the preparations against Tbilisi Pride were broadcasted by the platform Alt-Info with homophobic, xenophobic, sexist, and far-right sentiments. Representatives of the organization and presenters who organized the violent protests on July 5 and 6 were later questioned. However, the police released them soon after and the final results of the investigation are still unknown.

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12. *Manifesto of Media and Civil Society*. The request was signed by more than 1000 people Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A8qMfA>

13. Research: "Media Environment in Georgia" 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XbWNF1>

14. Statement: Coalition for Media Advocacy Calls on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to Ensure the Safety of Media Representatives and Participants in Coverage of the March of Dignity." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3E9Tijl>

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Despite preliminary calls from civil society, the authorities did not take appropriate security measures and did not mobilize a sufficient police force to protect civilians.

Moreover, on July 5, 2021, before the rally, the Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili made a [statement](#)<sup>15</sup> encouraging the perpetrators and indicated that the March of Dignity posed a threat of civil conflict and was inappropriate. Instead of enacting additional measures to protect the Pride participants, the Ministry of Internal Affairs called on the participants of Tbilisi Pride<sup>16</sup> to cancel the march planned for Rustaveli Avenue due to the scale of the rally planned by far-right groups.

Following these statements, violent groups initially dismantled anti-government tents on Rustaveli Avenue. Soon after the European Union flag was taken down in front of the parliament and the orthodox cross was raised.

Later that day, organized violent groups raided the offices of the Shame civil movement and the LGBTQ+ human rights organization, Tbilisi Pride.

Much of the violence was broadcasted live, and it was evident early on that police forces were acting inertly and unable to restore order. Instead of mobilizing additional police forces, the Ministry of Internal Affairs used the eviction of journalists from the violent scene as a media protection mechanism.

The attack on the media continued on July 6, 2021, during the “silent rally” organized to protest the government’s inactivity. While activists gathered at the parliament building, unfurled the LGBT flag, and blew colored smoke into the sky, violent groups tried to cut cables and disrupt the live broadcast of Formula TV.

Media representatives were also injured on July 6 as a result of having eggs, bottles filled with stones, metal pieces, and glass thrown at them. Several police officers were also injured, and in this case, [police actively detained](#)<sup>17</sup> the offenders.

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15. Article: “Prime Minister - I consider the march announced today is unreasonable, it contains the threat of civil strife.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A7Z1DS>

16. Statement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VC6xYx>

17. Article: “MIA: On July 6, we administratively detained 100 people at a rally, 32 of whom remain in pre-trial detention.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tzXLXw>

## 1.2. Damage Inflicted on the Media

The rights to freedom of thought, information, media, and the Internet are protected by the [Constitution of Georgia](#).<sup>18</sup> It is inadmissible to persecute a person for his or her opinion and expression. It is also a crime to illegally interfere in his or her [professional activities](#).<sup>19</sup> According to Article 154 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, unlawful interference with a journalist's professional activities, such as forcing a person to disseminate information or refrain from disseminating it, is punishable by a fine, community service for up to forty hours, or corrective work for a term of up to two years. The same act, with the threat of violence or done under an official position, is punishable by a fine, imprisonment for a term of up to two years, or deprivation of the right to hold office for up to three years.

On July 5 and 6, all media outlets covering the rallies became the target of attacks by violent groups. The perpetrators smashed cameras, beat cameramen and photographers with crosses and clubs, and kicked and spat at journalists. The attacks were mostly collective, although there were individual instances of assault as well. For example, one of the far-right protesters on Rustaveli Avenue deliberately collided with journalists on a motorcycle. In front of the court, he used the excuse of ["taking bread to the priest"](#)<sup>20</sup> to justify his actions, arguing that he could not control the vehicle properly.

As a result of the July 5 and 6 [attacks, 53 journalists, cameramen and photographers were injured](#).<sup>21</sup> Most needed immediate medical attention, and some continued to work despite their injuries. The injuries were of varying severity, although in most cases, head injuries were predominant, causing concussions, amnesia, and visual impairment. In the process, media representatives' cameras, tripods, microphones, and switching equipment were all damaged. It is not feasible to fully quantify the loss. However, a total of 10 media outlets reported property damage.

Violent groups attacked representatives of almost all media outlets. However, the journalistic work of Russian and Russian-language media, such as Russia Today, was not hindered despite the fact that its [journalists covered](#)<sup>22</sup> the rally for several hours. It is evident that the attackers were generally less aggressive towards the Russian-language media. For example, a group approached TOK TV, the Russian language broadcaster for ethnic minorities in Georgia, with aggressive shouts while the channel was broadcasting live. [However, they left](#)<sup>23</sup> after hearing the journalist speaking Russian. No one was injured among the Russian-language media.

18. The Constitution of Georgia is available at: <https://bit.ly/3htCxWx>

19. The Criminal Code of Georgia is available at: <https://bit.ly/3z7ob3W>

20. Article: "Accused of violence against journalists: I could not control the motorcycle, I was cursing and shouting, I realized I could not catch it." Available at: <https://bit.ly/38ZNXwr>

21. Article: "A list of journalists attacked by violent groups." Available at: <rb.gy/gh5y8y>

22. Live broadcast in Russian. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3mTU7GW>

23. Live broadcast in Russian. Available at <https://bit.ly/3gOYrTO>

## Firsthand Testimony of the Violence

On July 5, Ilia Tvaliashvili, the cameraman of the Public Broadcaster's First Channel, was [physically assaulted](#)<sup>24</sup> by members of a violent group on Rustaveli Avenue while trying to leave the area around Kashueti church. The attackers tried to seize his camera, knocked him to the ground, and beat him. As a result, Tvaliashvili suffered injuries to his eyes and sustained a concussion. *"Everywhere I turned, I saw a fist. My camera was recording, and everyone can be identified. There were not two, three or five people there. There were many more. Before I fainted, I remember being kicked several times in the head and I think I got injured at that time,"* recalled the [injured cameraman](#),<sup>25</sup> who lost his sight temporarily and needs long-term treatment to regain his health.

RFE / RL journalist Tornike Mandaria and cameraman Davit Koridze also became the targets of the perpetrators. Mandaria recalls that the abusers attacked him near the Round Garden [UN Circle], an area in central Tbilisi.<sup>26</sup> After he got out of his car to help his colleague, Davit Koridze, he noted that *"We were both shouting and calling the police, who were standing 30, maximum, 50 meters away and could clearly hear our screams. Dozens of policemen stood still. Apparently, they were not moving outside of the building [where they were standing]. I could not understand what was happening. When about 20 people switched to Davit, and I saw that they were still coming towards us, I ran towards the police shouting: 'Are you here, police? Help!' None of them moved. Then one of them took me there, in the yard, [offered some] water. Nothing else has been done."*

Palitrane news cameraman Roma Tarughishvili [was attacked](#)<sup>27</sup> by a group near the parliament. *"When the tents on Rustaveli were dismantled, I was recording and at some point, they threw a stick at my camera. I tried to leave the area and was hit by a fist. Then a few people hit me. The camera was also smashed,"* said Roma, who underwent emergency surgery due to his facial injuries.

Giorgi Nikolishvili, a photojournalist for InterpressNews, was also attacked by homophobic and violent protesters near the Kashueti Church. [The photojournalist was attacked by several people](#),<sup>28</sup> which resulted in him losing consciousness. Consequently, Giorgi needed long-term medical care for bruises caused by blood clots in his head.

Vakho Kareli, a photographer for Formula, was also injured on Rustaveli Avenue. He noted that an extremely small number of police officers were on Rustaveli Avenue at the time. Vakho cannot remember the incident in detail, [but says](#) that he was attacked during the filming of the violent outburst. *"Several people beat me. I covered my face with my hands to protect my face and head. I wore a helmet, but at some point it fell off. Apparently, this led to me having a concussion. I think that compared to everything that was happening there, I*

24. Video: "Injured cameraman Ilia Tvaliashvili". Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BChAAI>

25. Article: "Another person arrested in connection with the attack on the Public Broadcaster operator." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3jCpALv>

26. Video: "Attack on RFE / RL Journalists." Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Yta3Wt>

27. Article: "What is the story of the operator of Palitrane news, who was physically assaulted by the opponents of the 'March of Dignity.'" Available at: <https://bit.ly/3By8xQV>

28. Article: "Interpressnews photo correspondent Giorgi Nikolishvili, who was physically assaulted by Pride opponents, is available as a victim." Available at: <https://bit.ly/38xMgWU>

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*survived more or less. I am under observation in the hospital now,”* Kareli recalled as he was treated for a concussion and amnesia.

The assailants severely [beat](#)<sup>29</sup> Formula TV journalist Rati Tsverava. He was hit and attacked by violent groups in front of parliament when he attempted to question the Metropolitan bishop, Ioane Gamrekeli. He made an effort to escape the aggressive crowd, although dozens of people followed him and continued to beat him. This attempted [escape](#)<sup>30</sup> lasted for approximately 200 hundred meters. As a result, Tsverava sustained injuries to multiple areas of his body.

On July 5, both Miranda Baghaturia, a journalist of TV Pirveli, and her cameraman, Lekso Lashkarava, became the [target of violent groups](#).<sup>31</sup> The pair was covering the storming of the Shame Movement office, when Miranda recalls that the attackers tried to silence her. A priest pulled her by the hair while the rest of the abusers kicked Lashkarava.

Only one police officer was present at the scene. Despite the fact that the threats of the offenders were broadcast live, and [the statements](#)<sup>32</sup> indicated their displacement plan and possible targets, immediate response from the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not follow.

### The Case of Lekso Lashkarava

On July 11, TV Pirveli cameraman Alexander Lashkarava was [found dead in his home](#).<sup>33</sup> At the time of writing, the investigation into Lashkarava’s death has not been completed. The immediate cause of death is still unknown, although his death was preceded by the July 5 attack that resulted in bodily injuries. Lashkarava suffered a concussion, facial bone fractures, and multiple bruises. He also underwent surgery and received treatment at home in the following days.

Despite resistance from his family, the Ministry of Internal Affairs [transferred Lashkarava’s body for examination by the state’s medical examiner](#).<sup>34</sup> At the same time, a briefing on the death of Alexander Lashkarava was held at the Ministry of Internal Affairs that asserted he may have died as a result of a [drug overdose](#).<sup>35</sup> The MIA said at the [second briefing](#)<sup>36</sup> on July 13 that “according to the conclusion of the chemical examination, drugs were found in samples taken from the corpse - morphine, codeine, tetrahydrocannabinol, gabapentin and monoacetin morphine. According to the exam-

29. Video: “Incident near Kashueti Church.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gSMGMg>

30. Video: “Program Chat: Rati Tsverava - Journalist Victimized by Homophobic Violence Group on July 5.” Available at <https://bit.ly/3DGfsjB>

31. Article: “Operator Beaten at Violent Rally Found on July 5 Found Dead.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/396Ysy0>

32. Video: “Organizing July 5.” Available at <https://bit.ly/38uJFNs>

33. Article: “Lekso Lashkarava, who was brutally beaten by a hate group, died.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Aanqst>

34. Article: “Lekso Lashkarava, who was brutally beaten by a hate group, died.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C7aGn6>

35. Article: “Overdose version is also being considered - MIA Lashkarava’s death.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VA0eok>

36. Ibid. <https://bit.ly/3lpe4TE>



ination, the cause of death may have been an overdose by these means. We note here that this conclusion is interim.”

The Ministry of Internal Affairs also outlined what it quantified as suspicious activities of Lashkarava in the days before his death. It was underlined that witnesses had confirmed he bought drugs in Ponichala, a district of Tbilisi that is notorious for drug deals. According to the agency, Lashkarava and his accompanying friend injected the purchased drug in another Tbilisi district, Ortachala, where Lashkarava became incapacitated before later returning home. The ministry also released footage taken by surveillance cameras at various locations.

Lekso Lashkarava was [buried on July 13](#).<sup>37</sup> A civil funeral was held to honor him. On July 17, the broadcasting company Formula aired a journalistic investigation into the [“black spots in the case of Lekso Lashkarava”](#)<sup>38</sup> that revealed information about the falsification of important facts in the case of the cameraman’s death.

A state expert has been appointed to further investigate the death of Lashkarava. An independent expert has also been contracted by TV Pirveli to prepare an alternative report. Thus far, [six people have been arrested](#)<sup>39</sup> on charges of violence against Lekso Lashkarava, and the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association has vowed to protect the interests of the deceased and his family members.

Coordinated tactics have been deployed via social media to belittle the injuries Lashkarava suffered before death. Lashkarava’s death has become one of the most important components of the online smear campaign against the media.

### **1.3. Online Aggression and a Smear Campaign against the Media.**

The physical violence against journalists on July 5 and 6 was coupled with threatening statements from extremist groups toward media outlets. However, the campaign of the government and other actors to discredit the media, which aims to sow distrust in this institution, began much earlier.

**Violent Groups.** The hosts of Alt Info TV, who are affiliated with Levan Vasadze’s ultranationalist party ERI (Unity, Meaning, Hope), were among the organizers of the violent protest on July 5. They openly [state](#)<sup>40</sup> that aggression should become the standard of political and ideological struggle. Even before July 6, Alf-Info presenters did not restrain themselves from [statements](#)<sup>41</sup> about the protection of one’s own values through [the use of force](#)<sup>42</sup> and the

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37. Article: “Lekso Lashkarava was buried.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C7svCs>

38. Investigative report: “Black spots in the case of Lekso Lashkarava.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YmkM4P>

39. Article: “Gia Giguashvili, accused of violence against Lekso Lashkarava, was sentenced to imprisonment.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3no3G0t>

40. Article: “Strategy of Kremlin Violence Groups: Burning Western symbols should become the norm!” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A91hdR>

41. Video available at: <https://bit.ly/3BBmy0k>

42. Zura Makharadze, Alt-Info presenter: “They call us abusers, yes, I am an abuser! I can and I am going to defend my values, including by force.”

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necessity of [resorting to aggression and psychological bullying](#).<sup>43</sup> After the violent demonstrations, Alt Info's hosts portrayed the violence as an opportunity to tame [journalists and non-governmental organizations](#).<sup>44</sup>

The channel's presenters, who [incited](#)<sup>45</sup> the public to vandalize and burn Western symbols, also made [statements](#)<sup>46</sup> about their intention to paralyze European integration and transform protests against "Western colonizers" into a political movement. These far-right actors perceive having their own [broadcast license](#)<sup>47</sup> as a precondition to achieving this transformation; they have also highlighted what they see as necessity to [clear up](#) the media space from those broadcasting outlets whose editorial policies are not controlled by the government, [including Formula, Mtavari, and TV Pirveli](#).<sup>48</sup>

Irakli Absandze, a Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) journalist, became a target of Alt Info after he publicly criticized the interior ministry for its briefing on the death of Lashkarava before a full forensic examination was completed. Following his arrest for participation in a protest near the ruling party's main office, the hosts of Alt Info targeted the journalist on-air with [homophobic](#)<sup>49</sup> accusations and called for his [dismissal](#)<sup>50</sup> from the public broadcaster. Absandze, who became the target of a widespread negative campaign by anti-Western groups, also faced defamatory statements by the government media and Facebook accounts. He was fired on [August 9, 2021](#).<sup>51</sup> Officially, the public broadcaster justified his termination on the grounds that he breached his contract and labor law. This incident has prompted criticism from the [Media Advocacy Coalition](#).<sup>52</sup>

**A Smear Campaign against the Deceased Employee of TV Pirveli.** The fact-checking portal [Myth Detector](#)<sup>53</sup> has uncovered pro-government and anti-liberal media and Facebook accounts involved in a smear campaign against the late cameraman, Lekso Lashkarava. In the hours before the MIA's initial briefing on his death, the pro-government media outlet Marshalpress began circulating accusations of Lashkarava's drug usage. These allegations were also disseminated by anti-liberal Facebook accounts that position themselves as news platforms. One of these accounts, Information Blog, was created on July 11, the day of Lashkarava's death.

43. Shota Martinenko: "Yes, we must establish a standard that for all liberals and all middlemen, in reality, aggression, aggressive assessments, aggressive condemnation, psychological bullying, if you want to call it that, should be a positive event." <https://bit.ly/3CbmMve>

44. Shota Martinenko: "When people show anger and demonstrate force, the reality changes: journalists become polite, these NGO-LGBT activists themselves are wary." <https://bit.ly/3hx4IUt>

45. Article: "Vandal Calls by Vasadze's Alt-Info and Nation Supporters." Available at: <https://bit.ly/392Sy0Y>

46. "Strategy of Kremlin Violence Groups: Burning Western Symbols Must Become Normal." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C82LWm>

47. Video: "Alt-Info 12.07.2021\_21 MDF Media Monitoring." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A9FRxb>

48. Giorgi Kardava: "Know that from now on all journalists working for the National Movement and their outlaws, parties, so to speak, I am talking about the mouthpieces of 'Formula, TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi' and their brothers, they are all enemies of Georgia! Enemies of our state!" <https://bit.ly/2VFPhll>

49. Video available at: <https://bit.ly/3kO9kq5>

50. Video available at: <https://bit.ly/3kTE4Ga>

51. Available at <https://bit.ly/3k8oLdw>

52. Statement of the Coalition for Media Advocacy. Available at <https://bit.ly/3k8oLdw>

53. Article: "On behalf of the News Agency and the Fist of Violent Groups Against the Dead Operator of the First TV." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z7ksng>



During this time, personal data about Lashkarava's past conviction was leaked on Facebook. A representative of the State Inspector's Office acknowledged that this is a violation of law and promised that a relevant investigation would be launched.

The campaign to discredit the deceased cameraman continued later in the month. Pro-government media and Facebook accounts circulated a [false claim](#)<sup>54</sup> that Formula TV had manipulated a photo of Lashkarava to make his injuries seem more severe than they were. Information Blog, which originally disseminated this information, was linked to non-authentic accounts and subsequently removed by Facebook.

**Government Campaign to Discredit Critical Media.** Smear campaign against the media promotes distrust towards its outlets and platforms and has been carried out through formal and informal means for many years.

The platform [Media Critic](#),<sup>55</sup> under the umbrella of the Communication Regulatory Commission, criticizes mainly those [media outlets](#)<sup>56</sup> that practice critical editorial policy towards the government. The widespread campaign to discredit journalists also includes government-affiliated fake accounts, some of which [have been deleted](#)<sup>57</sup> by Facebook in the past.

Myth Detector has revealed new Facebook accounts that illuminate a coordinated and direct effort to discredit the media in 2020 and 2021. These accounts include Pearls of Georgian Journalist/JournalistFails, Juurnalists@juurnalistebi, Shournalists, Journalist@Epic. Journalists, Conscience Free Media, and Nodar the Storyteller. Some of these accounts were created immediately following TV Pirveli's publication of recordings allegedly featuring Bera Ivanishvili, the son of the founder of the Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and the current Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili. The mentioned pages, one of which was deleted by Facebook, aimed to discredit Nodar Meladze, the head of the TV company's [news service](#).<sup>58</sup>

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54. Article: "News Blog Spreads False Information on Lekso Lashkarava's Photo." Available at: <https://bit.ly/398PVdX>

55. Article: "Who's 'Worth' Media Criticism?" Available at <https://bit.ly/2Xfnt70>

56. Article: "Fight with the 'Domestic Enemy' and Cohabitation with Russian Propaganda" Available at: <https://bit.ly/3htDA8V>

57. Article: "Koka Kandiashvili Uses Facebook Unrightfully: Is That It?" Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Ee383N>

58. Article: "New Facebook Accounts and Old Trolls Pro Bera and Against the Journalists." Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YSAswX>

## CHAPTER 2

# PROTECTION OF THE AFFECTED MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES



## 2.1. Measures Undertaken by the Police and Legal Proceedings

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia made its [first statement](#)<sup>59</sup> on July 5, 2021, immediately after violence against the media was reported: “As a result of the response of the police on Rustaveli, the representatives of the media are placed in a safe location at this time.”

At the time, the MIA announced that an investigation into the incidents had been launched under Articles 154 (unlawful interference with a journalist’s professional activities) and Article 126 (violence) of the Criminal Code.

The ministry [later clarified](#)<sup>60</sup> that it condemned hate-motivated actions, including any form of violence against members of the media. It also called on the citizens that were gathered in the streets of the capital to maintain order, obey the lawful demands of the police, and to abide by the law while expressing the protest.

Soon after this, an investigation was launched under Article 187 of the Criminal Code. It looked into the illegal invasion of the Shame Movement and Tbilisi Pride offices. Article 187 refers to the damage or destruction of someone else’s property. The MIA also utilized the following articles from the Criminal Code: threats of violence (Article 156, Part 2, Sub-paragraph A) and participation in group violence (Article 225, Part 2 of the Criminal Code).

The police reached out to the affected journalists and cameramen to take their statements. Based on the investigative and procedural actions carried out, most of the affected were recognized as victims. However, at the time of publication, the investigative body had not yet identified all individuals involved in the violent acts, and no criminal prosecution had been launched against the organizers.

[At a briefing](#)<sup>61</sup> on July 7, a spokesman for the MIA emphasized that ministry officials had warned the participants of the Dignity March that “holding the event would pose a great risk to the safety of the marchers themselves.” Despite this anticipated risk, the MIA was unable to account for the lack of adequate police forces on Rustaveli Avenue. According to the MIA, “During the rally on Rustaveli Avenue, members of the counter-protest against the Dignity March **suddenly** became aggressive and started to get violent.” The ministry’s earlier statements and open-source information all indicate that violent acts were entirely expected. In the days leading up to July 5, aggressive and violent rhetoric against Pride participants and journalists was openly broadcast on the far-right media platform, Alt Info. Publika, an online media outlet, investigated Alt Info and [aired](#)<sup>62</sup> a twenty-minute documentary that depicted the preparations for July 5.

At the time of report publication, it is not possible to fully assess the effectiveness of the investigation, as a full analysis of the criminal case materials has not been completed. In

59. Announcement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z0utTa>

60. Ibid. <https://bit.ly/3tF2SpE>

61. Information of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the events organized by the police in parallel with the “Tbilisi Pride” week. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3EcVAhp>

62. Video: “How 5th of July was organized and executed.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WHcu6S>

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In addition, the information provided to the Media Advocacy Coalition by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and the Tbilisi City Court is incomplete.

The organizations representing the interests of the victims have sent a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to gain access to the investigation's evidence and case materials. However, despite the fact that the investigation is currently incomplete, it is evident that MIA has thus far been ineffective in identifying all of the participants and organizers of the violence.

No investigation has been launched into the actions of the interior ministry's officials and police officers. It is unclear how effectively the mobilization and execution of police forces were planned and carried out to prevent the violent development of events.

It is clear from video footage that the attacks were carried out collectively. The ministry issued a [statement](#)<sup>63</sup> on July 30 announcing that a total of 31 people had been arrested in connection with the events of July 5, [of which 27 were charged with violence against journalists](#).<sup>64</sup> However, the total number of people who have been identified and detained by the MIA remains unknown.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia previously published information actively on its website, but it has not responded to additional requests for information or questions, referring inquiries to [the July 7 statement](#).<sup>65</sup>

Information regarding the Tbilisi City Court proceedings concerning the events of July 5 and 6 has only been available through the news media. Despite high public interest, the court has not issued any public statements about the number of ongoing cases and their progress. When responding to requests regarding information withdrawal, the court has referred to a lack of resources as its justification for being unable to proceed with statistical accounting of the cases.

The Response of Tbilisi City Court:

*"As a response to an appeal made on 30 August 2021, the Court informs you that statistical accounting and synthesis of the Court's decisions does not take place at Tbilisi City Court. Due to the high volume of given information, its processing takes tremendous effort, time, and the Court's resources. Therefore, we are not in the position to satisfy your request.*

*According to the Georgian General Administrative Code, the decision of refusal to withdraw public information is subject to appeal, in the period of one month from the official issuance date of the decision at the Tbilisi City Court."*

On September 6, 2021, the [Public Defender of Georgia](#)<sup>66</sup> applied to the prosecutor's office

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63. Statement: "On July 5, the Ministry of Internal Affairs detained 2 more perpetrators during the anti-Tbilisi Pride rally." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lijZJW>

64. Article: "Ministry of Internal Affairs Detains 2 More Violators During Rally Against Tbilisi Pride on July 5." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z7X6On>

65. Statement of the Media Advocacy Coalition Hotline for Media Representatives. Available at: <https://bit.ly/392xyYs>

66. <https://bit.ly/3hmSY75>

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with a request to launch criminal proceedings against Alt Info presenter Zurab Makharadze and priest Spiridon Tskipurishvili.

The Public Defender justified this request, stating that the publicly available evidence reaches the standard of probable cause for launching criminal proceedings against two persons for organizing group violence as well as for publicly calling for violence.

In response to the public defender's request, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandre Darakhvelidze answered that "there is no sufficient evidence to press charges against the [individuals named by the Public Defender](#)."<sup>67</sup>

### 2.3. Judicial Support from the Civil Sector

In the wake of July 5 and 6, the Coalition for Media Advocacy's partner organizations [immediately expressed their readiness to provide legal assistance](#)<sup>68</sup> to those affected. Their stated objective was to assist media representatives in receiving compensation for the material and moral damage inflicted. Legal aid for victims has also been available via a hotline. Violence against the media has also been condemned by the Georgian Bar Association, which has [offered free legal aid](#)<sup>69</sup> to the affected media representatives.

Coalition for Media Advocacy partners and other human rights NGOs have pledged to legally represent the affected media staff to the investigative agencies. These organizations include: *Transparency International Georgia (TI)*, *the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)*, *the Georgian Democratic Party Initiative (GDI)*, *Rights Georgia*, *the Human Rights Center (HRC)*, and *the Social Justice Center (SJC)*. Out of 29 injured journalists and cameramen, 28 have already been granted victim status.

In order to protect their rights, Transparency International Georgia has assisted 29 people and is working with three media outlets on property damage cases.

In addition to legal aid, the civil sector has used other advocacy mechanisms:

- On July 19, 2021, during the Batumi International Conference, a joint action of civil society and the media was held at the initiative of the Coalition for Media Advocacy. The participants addressed the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

"Today, as never before, we expect Georgia's international partners to stand together in defense of democracy and fundamental human rights. We urge you to continue to communicate actively with the Georgian authorities and make public statements about democratic failures in the country and work with civil society

67. <https://bit.ly/391M0jb>

68. Statement of the Media Advocacy Coalition Hotline for Media Representatives. Available at: <https://bit.ly/394logi>

69. Statement: "Georgian Bar Association Responds to the Facts of Violence Against Media Representatives." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hL16i3>



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to continue the country's move towards Euro-Atlantic integration," said [an open letter](#)<sup>70</sup> signed by 62 media outlets and civil society organizations.

- On July 27, at the initiative of the Coalition for Media Advocacy, a working meeting on media security issues was held at the Radisson Hotel in Tbilisi. Speakers at the meeting included journalists and media executives as well as representatives of local civil society organizations.

The main purpose of the overall event was to protect the media and develop appropriate [response mechanisms](#)<sup>71</sup> in the event of an attack on journalists. All participants agreed that journalists in Georgia are threatened on a daily basis while performing their professional duties and that active domestic and international mechanisms are needed to monitor the media environment.

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70. Statement. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3zcCSmI>

71. Video: "TV Pirveli: I expected the government to apologize for not being able to protect journalists." Available at <https://bit.ly/3yDKyhC>

## CHAPTER 3

# MEDIA PROTESTS AGAINST THE EVENTS OF JULY 5 AND 6



Photo: Euronews Georgia

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Following the large-scale violence of July 5 and 6, media managers, journalists, and cameramen protested in various ways. On July 14, 2021, some broadcasters resorted to one of the most extreme forms of protest; the Mtavari, TV Pirveli, Formula, and Kavkasia [ceased broadcasting](#)<sup>72</sup> for 24 hours. The names and surnames of the injured journalists were listed on a black background with the caption: “Irakli Gharibashvili should resign! Punish the perpetrators!”

On July 7, media representatives gathered at the Georgian State Chancellery to demand a safe working environment and protest the attacks by homophobic and violent groups. The rally was organized by the Charter of Journalistic Ethics. Charter signatories appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to demand a prompt and effective investigation into the incidents of violence against media representatives and hold the relevant individuals accountable. The question of the minister of internal affairs’ political responsibility was also put forward.

On July 11, media representatives, politicians, civil society representatives, and activists rallied in front of the parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue to demand punishment for the organizers of the July 5 and 6 violence as well as to express solidarity with the media. The main focus of this rally was the untimely death of TV Pirveli’s Lashkarava, who was [severely beaten](#)<sup>73</sup> on July 5. Journalists coordinated their calls of protest with the slogan #LekSOSvis.

One of the main demands of the July 11 rally was the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and Minister of Internal Affairs Vakhtang Gomelauri. According to the protesters, the Georgian government not only failed to protect the media from violence, but also encouraged and incited the violent groups that gathered on July 5.

A second large-scale protest was organized by media managers and held in front of the parliament building on July 12, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister and the punishment of the perpetrators. On July 17, 2021, a solidarity rally was held in Batumi as well.

Another rally was held by journalists concurrently with the re-nomination of the incumbent mayor, Kakha Kaladze, as a mayoral candidate. On July 20, 2021, the re-nomination event took place in Mtatsminda Park [amid protests](#).<sup>74</sup> Media representatives and civil activists carried photos and posters of the deceased cameraman with the caption “Punish the perpetrators.”

In his speech, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze compared the activities of the media to the actions of violent far-right groups. The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics responded to Kaladze’s statement by [calling on the authorities](#)<sup>75</sup> to stop encouraging attacks on the media and to immediately cease discussions on restrictive norms of freedom of speech and expression. The charter also called on the ruling party to show support for media freedom and restore professional relations with media representatives.

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72. Article: “4 TV Companies Stop Broadcasting 24 Hours.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hsggsa>

73. Rally demanding media solidarity and the resignation of the Prime Minister Available at: <https://bit.ly/3htU1LU>

74. Video: “‘Georgian Dream’ mayoral candidate nominated in protest’s.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3DEbS2M>

75. Statement of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3nxsTGp>



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The governing party responded to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics' criticism with a public attack: "It is clear that the Charter statement serves to misinform the public and is a slander."

On July 19, media managers held a rally in front of the Government Chancellery and [addressed Charles Michel](#),<sup>76</sup> President of the European Council, who was visiting Batumi. "As long as Irakli Gharibashvili is the Prime Minister of Georgia, the lives of all journalists and citizens are in danger."

Media representatives also held a protest rally in front of the prosecutor's office. They demanded the punishment of the violent attack organizers.

A number of public statements and calls to violence made by the leaders and presenters of the media outlet Alt Info has confirmed that they were the organizers of the July 5 and 6 attacks. After July 5, the outlet's leaders, Konstantine Morgoshia and Zurab Makharadze, continued to call for violence against journalists. Media representatives organized a rally in front of the prosecutor's office on July 16 and demanded punishment for the attack's organizers, writing in a [joint letter](#):<sup>77</sup> "Please, let us know if there are any ongoing investigations into the threatening statements made by the media outlet Alt Info and the direct calls for violence against journalists." In response, journalists were informed that an investigation was underway regarding gang violence and that over 200 people had been interviewed.

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76. Journalists' Appeal Available to Charles Michel: "You should know that as long as Gharibashvili is the Prime Minister, the lives of all journalists and citizens are in danger." Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A9tt0n>

77. Journalists held a rally in front of the Prosecutor's Office and addressed a general letter to the agency. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C7SGJ8>

## CHAPTER 4

# INCITEMENT OF VIOLENCE OR OBSCENITY? THE DECISION OF THE GNCC



ფოტო: პუბლიკა  
Photo: Publika

**TBILISI,  
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On July 6, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) issued [a statement](#)<sup>78</sup> that “the facts of violence and assault on media representatives on July 5, during which more than 50 journalists, cameramen and photographers were seriously injured, are unacceptable to the Communications Commission. In addition to physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, and obstruction of journalistic activities has also occurred. Media representatives were not given the opportunity to perform their professional duties; however, they managed to provide information to the public at the risk of their own lives and health.”

In the days following this statement, the GNCC, by its own initiative, examined the content of [Alt Info](#)<sup>79</sup> in the wake of the violence in early July. The regulator did not study the statements inciting violence and [announced](#)<sup>80</sup> on July 29, that the far-right outlet was guilty only of an administrative offense for using obscene language: “the case concerns the programs ‘Alt-Interview’ and ‘Alt-Analytica’ placed on the broadcast network of Alt Info on July 5, 6, 7, and 12. In these programs, obscene language was often used by both the presenters and the invited guests, and obscenity was repeated.” In the decision, the GNCC did not discuss [issues of incitement to violence](#),<sup>81</sup> an act that is punishable under the Criminal Code of Georgia. The commission examined only a couple of days of broadcasting instead of analyzing the outlet’s archives, which included over a month of broadcast material. It is evident that the GNCC conducted the administrative proceedings superficially, despite the fact that Article 96.1 ([Investigation of the case circumstances](#)<sup>82</sup>) of the General Administrative Code of Georgia obliges the commission to “investigate all the circumstances relevant to the case during the administrative proceedings and to make a decision based on the assessment and conciliation of these circumstances”.

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78. Announcement of the Georgian National Communications Commission. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tCU3ww>

79. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Xcc34C>

80. Statement: “The Communications Commission recognizes Alt Info as an offender due to obscenity replication.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VHniBO>

81. Documentary: “Organizing July 5.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gW9PgH>

82. The General Administrative Code of Georgia is available at: <https://bit.ly/2YPrr7L>

## CHAPTER 5

# RESPONSE OF THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT



Photo: TV Formula



### 5.1. Reactions of Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili

On July 6, 2021, in the wake of the attacks, Prime Minister Gharibashvili told reporters that [violence against the media was unacceptable](#)<sup>83</sup> and reprehensible. He added that “freedom of expression is protected, public dissatisfaction with the police is unfounded, and no one is persecuted for dissent. Violent groups have damaged both the church’s planned peaceful prayers and our government.”

Despite this condemnation of the violence, the prime minister also qualified the attacks on the media as “an attempt by radical, destructive forces and enemies to hinder the process of economic development.” In the days following the violence, he increasingly classified the media’s response as a political tactic, calling the rally in support of Lekso Lashkarava “a political rally and a political act.” The prime minister addressed the media by saying, “Let me offer my condolences for the death of your colleague. It is a great tragedy for you - for all of us - but it is very immoral to speculate on the death of your colleague and be so manipulative.” Soon after, Gharibashvili announced that the media’s protests were intertwined with the political forces surrounding opposition figure and former president, Mikheil Saakashvili: “I want everyone to understand that those who are now united around him are pursuing Saakashvili’s policies.”

On July 23, 2021, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [called journalists “abusers” and “party activists.”](#)<sup>84</sup> Despite [numerous appeals](#)<sup>85</sup> from civil society, the Prime Minister once again fueled aggression against the media.

On September 3, 2021, the prime minister classified the March of Dignity as a provocation of the opposition party, the United National Movement. He asserted that “the aim of the organizers is to discredit all the authorities, all the authoritative institutions: the army, the police, the court - that is why they are fighting against the church, the patriarch, that is why they are inventing a thousand provocations. So, they [the opposition] are behind the LGBT March campaign and they organized a provocation that we avoided. Of course, it was very unfortunate what happened, and we condemned it. Attacks on journalists are unacceptable. It was a catastrophic mistake.”

### 5.2. Response of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

Following the attacks, one of the primary demands of the media and civil society was for the Georgian parliament to schedule a parliamentary hearing on the events of July 5 and 6. Within the framework of its constitutional mandate, civil society representatives asked parliament to formally evaluate the steps taken by the government to protect its citizens.

The parliamentary faction Charles Michel Reform Group registered initiative to set up a temporary commission of inquiry into the July 5 and 6 events in Tbilisi. According to the

83. Statement of Irakli Gharibashvili: “Violence against journalists is unacceptable and of course it is condemnable.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C362X2>

84. Irakli Gharibashvili’s comment is available at: <https://bit.ly/3DNAx5d>

85. Address from the civil sector and the media to Charles Michel. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hwGVUD>

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regulations of Georgia, a temporary commission of inquiry may be set up by state bodies and officials to investigate the possible violations of legislation and to respond accordingly.

In addition to the mentioned initiative, some parliamentarians demanded a hearing with the minister of internal affairs. In response, Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri [noted](#)<sup>86</sup>: “It is not a problem for me to come to the parliament and explain what happened on July 5 to the deputies.” The interior minister also stated that “he could not have imagined that journalists would be attacked so massively,” and that “he has not seen violence against journalists of such a scale during his 27 years in law enforcement.”

On July 18, 2021, Minister Gomelauri, arrived in the parliament to deliver a speech, which was met with protests by media representatives and opposition MPs. Deputies held photos of Lekso Lashkarava and Irakli Gharibashvili, while journalists [displayed banners](#)<sup>87</sup> in the main hearing room with the words “Punish the perpetrators and take political responsibility.”

After warnings and media representatives’ subsequent refusal to remove their protest banners, the Georgian Dream party closed the special session. According to the speaker of parliament, Kakha Kuchava, the objective of the political groups that called for the special session was not to get answers from the minister of internal affairs. As the session closed, the minister left the parliament building without making remarks to the media.

The only government official who has presented a view different from the official Georgian Dream position is the president of Georgia, Salome Zurbashvili. In an interview, the president asserted: “I think this violence could have been prevented. As soon as it was announced that there would be prayers in the Kashueti church, I went in front of the church in the morning and saw that the people gathered there had not really come to pray.”

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86. Article: “Vakhtang Gomelauri: ‘I will go to the parliament and explain to the deputies what happened.’” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3no5UNP>

87. Article: “‘Punish Violators,’ ‘Take Political Responsibility’ - Journalists Protest in Parliament.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3z7dYVd>

## CHAPTER 6

# INVOLVEMENT OF THE CLERGY



Photo: Meta TV

## TBILISI, JULY 5 AND 6, 2021

In 2021, the number of verbal or physical attacks on media representatives by the Orthodox clergy increased significantly. On July 1, Guram Palavandishvili, a well-known hate group leader, announced that the clergy would be participating in the action against Tbilisi Pride. He estimated that about a thousand clergymen were going to take to the streets on July 5.

Giorgi Pavlov, a priest from Sagarejo, also made an open statement about the participation of the clergy on the morning of July 5: “Fighting, beatings, and sticks are ahead of us.”

[Spiridon Tskipurishvili](#),<sup>88</sup> a cleric on Rustaveli Avenue, mobilized others to violence with his statement: “You are obliged to resort to violence, to oppress for the homeland, to oppress for the country, to oppress for the sanctity!” While he was later severely reprimanded by the Patriarchate for his comments, he was only temporarily removed from office and questioned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The Georgian Patriarchate issued several statements on the events of July 5 and 6:

[June 29, 2021](#)<sup>89</sup> The Georgian Patriarchate appealed to the Georgian authorities to “adequately assess the current situation, act in the interests of state stability and civil peace, and avoid destabilization of the country and public life, which brings an unavoidable anxiety”.

July 3, 2023<sup>90</sup> The Patriarchate encouraged the population to resort to peaceful means of protest. [On July 5](#), at 5 PM, it called for a gathering at St. George’s Church in Kashueti to “offer a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary and show the world that we respect our dignity and that any attempt to degenerate it is unacceptable to us”.

The Patriarchate further elaborated that “it is disturbing and unacceptable for our Church and our citizens that there has been sharp interference by certain embassies and some MEPs in our public and spiritual life and we consider it an abuse of their authority.”

July 5, 2021: The Georgian Patriarchate called the violence against the media “very unfortunate”, “unacceptable”, and “totally inadmissible”; called on the public to calm down and disassociate from the violence: “We must remember that even the injury of one person not only endangers him, but also harms the whole society and contradicts Christian teaching.”

July 27, 2021: The Georgian Patriarchate issued an official statement sharply criticizing the media and indirectly called on the clergy to stop communicating with the media. According to the Patriarchate, after the events of July 5 and 6, the Georgian media became extremely aggressive with threats and insults directed at the Patriarchate, the Patriarch, the clergy, the priests, and the parish:

“It is true that there was some misconduct on the part of the clergy, but there is a deliberate generalization of the isolated case and a general emphasis on the violence of the church ministers. While not even mentioning how many priests have saved the same journalists from the July 5 and 6 violence. At the same time, of course, they do not expose the

88. Article: “‘Love dictated’ violence.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Ca1e2i>

89. Announcement of the Georgian Patriarchate 29.06.2021 Available: <https://bit.ly/3lptRBE>

90. Announcement of the Georgian Patriarchate 03.07.2021 Available at: <https://bit.ly/3971K4>



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OF THE CLERGY**

organizers and supporters of Tbilisi Pride, their psychological violence, provocative statements and actions...The norms of journalistic ethics are being grossly violated, and there is still a public demonstration of psychological violence and obstruction of civil peace, which for some reason remains unnoticed by embassies and the non-governmental sector.”

Clerical hierarchs also accused the media representatives of perpetrating violence and dismissed the significance of the clergy’s involvement. Metropolitan Ioane of Kutaisi claimed that on July 5, Formula journalist Rati Tsverava ripped off his own shirt and initiated a fight.

“One journalist was killed, and you are making such a fuss out of it?” Anton Bulukhia, Metropolitan of Vani and Baghdad, commented on the ongoing processes.

On July 27, a group of investigative journalists iFact published an article entitled “Priests in Violent Action”. The publication featured a list of clerics who contributed to the July 5 events, either by mobilizing the parish, ideologically supporting the organizers, or physically standing by them. Photos spread on social media show some of these priests standing by the leaders of far-right groups Alt Info, Georgian Idea, and Alternative for Georgia.

These clerics were also identified as supporters of the organizers of the July 5 rally on social media. They actively shared the posts and statements of Levan Vasadze, Alt-Info, Zurab Makharadze, and Emre Kuchuk.

Notably, the pathos of the patriarchate’s statements is consistent with the public narratives of the ruling party.

## CHAPTER 7

# INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS OF JULY 5 AND 6



*Photo: Associated Press, Shakh Aivazov*

## TBILISI, JULY 5 AND 6, 2021

Violent attacks on media representatives, activists, and members of the LGBTQ+ community on July 5 and 6, as well as the [death](#)<sup>91</sup> of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava on July 11, sparked protests in Georgia. [Reactions from](#)<sup>92</sup> partner countries' foreign ministries, ambassadors, and European parliamentarians followed swiftly.

International partners called on the Georgian authorities to publicly condemn the violence and punish all perpetrators who engaged in the acts of violence against journalists.

- Embassies of **Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, the European Union Monitoring Mission, Finland, Greece, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United Nations System in Georgia, the U.S. Embassy, and the EU Delegation to Georgia** released a [joint statement](#)<sup>93</sup> on the violence in Tbilisi: “We condemn today’s violent attacks on civil society activists, members of the public and journalists, as well as the denial of such violence by government leaders and clerics.”
- **Reporters without Borders (RSF)**, [described](#)<sup>94</sup> the July 5 attacks on journalists in Tbilisi as a significant setback for press freedom in Georgia; stressed that “the intensity and coordination of violence was unprecedented”; condemned “criminal inaction on the part of the authorities” and called for the perpetrators of all acts of violence against journalists to be punished.
- On behalf of the **U.S. Department of State**, spokesperson [Ned Price stated](#)<sup>95</sup> that “Georgia’s leaders and law enforcement agencies have an obligation to protect the constitutional rights to freedom of expression and assembly and to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.”
- **The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** [condemned](#)<sup>96</sup> the “threats and attacks against journalists and organizers during Tbilisi Pride” and called on the Georgian authorities to protect peaceful protesters and investigate cases of violence and discrimination against LGBT people.
- [According](#)<sup>97</sup> to **Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights** Dunja Mijatovic, “the violence of 5 and 6 July once again demonstrated the dangers facing LGBT people in Georgia”. She reminded the Georgian authorities of their human rights commitment to “protect freedom of expression and assembly, ensure the safety of demonstrators and journalists, and punish the offenders”.
- **Council of Europe** spokesperson Daniel Holtgen asserted: “We condemn the violent clashes that took place around Tbilisi Pride today and which were canceled after

91. Article: “Cameraman Lekso Lashkarava dies.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3914VKS>

92. Article: “The reaction of the international community to the events of July 5 and the death of Lekso Lashkarava.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hqMFO2>

93. A joint statement on the violence in Tbilisi is available at: <https://bit.ly/3EfmKUU>

94. Announcement by Reporters Without Borders. Available at: <https://bit.ly/38vWQh0>

95. Announcement by the US Department of State’s Ned Price. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gPWaYl>

96. Announcement of the UNHCR. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WIFCuc>

97. Announcement of Dunja Mijatovic Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Bw7TmR>

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS OF JULY 5 AND 6

threats against the LGBT community and attacks on journalists. Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly must be guaranteed and protected [by the state](#).<sup>98</sup>

- **The OSCE / ODIHR** also [expressed concern](#)<sup>99</sup> over the violence and the cancellation of Tbilisi Pride: “Each of these targeted attacks on activists, journalists and their property must be investigated promptly and thoroughly.”
- **The Dutch Foreign Ministry** [called on](#)<sup>100</sup> Georgian leaders and law enforcement to “protect those who exercise their constitutional rights to freedom of assembly and expression”, noting that “Violence and threats against journalists and LGBT people, including Pride, are unacceptable.”
- **MEP Viola von Cramon** [voiced](#)<sup>101</sup> her criticism of the government: “When the leaders of Georgia, instead of acting as guarantors of the constitution, speculate on this issue and do not properly condemn the perpetrators, they only encourage violence.” The MEP continued on Twitter: “When a violent group beats journalists and LGBT+ people while the Georgian government is watching, it is a dangerous sign of the collapse of the [rule of law](#).”<sup>102</sup>
- **Amnesty International’s** Deputy Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Denis Krivosheev, [said that](#)<sup>103</sup> “Instead of preparing for such events and giving a strong response to the violence, the authorities deployed inadequately small numbers of police officers who did not respond to violent attacks and did not provide organized protection for LGBT activists.

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98. Announcement of the Council of Europe. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WJHd3r>

99. Statement of OSCE / ODIHR. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Y8Mm5m>

100. Statement of the Dutch Foreign Ministry. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gRlNlq>

101. Announcement by Viola von Cramon. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BzqsXk>

102. Announcement by Viola von Cramon, Available at: <https://bit.ly/3t4gevf>

103. Announcement by Amnesty International. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3zDPJ1Z>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is crucial for the executive and parliamentary branches to undertake the following actions:

### Parliament of Georgia

- The Parliament of Georgia should immediately schedule a parliamentary hearing on the events of July 5 and 6 to assess the steps taken by the government to protect citizens.
- Members of the Georgian Parliament should stop aggressive rhetoric, encouragement of hatred towards media representatives, and unequivocally condemn violent calls and actions.
- Members of the Parliament of Georgia should directly and clearly support the inviolability of journalistic professional activities.

### The Government of Georgia:

- Members of the Georgian government should stop aggressive rhetoric and encouragement of hatred towards media representatives.
- The Government of Georgia should end the boycott of critical media and re-establish professional relations with it.
- Senior officials should publicly disavow all types of violence against journalists.
- The Government of Georgia should take measures to create a peaceful and safe working environment for media representatives as is guaranteed in the law.

### The Ministry of Internal Affairs

- The Ministry of Internal Affairs should conduct an efficient and objective investigation into the allegations of harm to media representatives.
- Ministry officials must ensure the identification of the organizers and perpetrators of the crime.
- Given the high public interest, the MIA should periodically provide information to the public on the progress of the investigation and the investigative actions carried out.
- Given the scale of the July 5 violence, the MIA needs to create special guidelines for law enforcement agencies regarding media safety.

**The Georgian General Prosecutor's Office**

- The prosecutor's office must conduct an efficient and objective investigation into the allegations of harm to media representatives. It should ensure the identification of the crime's organizers and those who publicly incited violence.
- The prosecutor's office needs to promptly conduct objective investigations into the deployment of preventive measures by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on July 5 and 6 in order to identify the responsibility of leading officials, law enforcement, and Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri.
- Given the high public interest, the prosecutor's office should periodically provide information about the progress of the investigation and the investigative actions carried out.

In order to prevent violence against the media, it is essential that the court adjudicates the relevant cases in a timely manner and in full compliance with national law and international standards. The court must examine the motives of the offenders and clearly demonstrate the standards of media security protection in the state where rule of law prevails.

It is equally important that diplomatic corps accredited in Georgia continue the monitoring of investigations regarding the violent events that took place on 5 and 6 July. It is critical that they continue intensive communication with the Government of Georgia aimed at improving the media environment and creating a safe working environment for journalists.

## **MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA ADVOCACY COALITION:**

Georgian Alliance of Regional Broadcasters

Georgian Young Lawyers Association

Georgian Democratic Initiative

Georgian Association of Small and Medium Telecommunication Operators

Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics

Georgian Regional Media Association

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy

Institute for Development of Freedom of Information

Liberal Academy Tbilisi

MediaClub

Media Development Fund

Open Society Georgia Foundation

Rights Georgia

Rights of Media

Transparency International - Georgia

TV Network





**Media Advocacy Coalition**  
კომალისია მედიის ადვოკატირებისთვის