

## Fears for Georgia's NGOs

A contested election with allegations of vote rigging could be damaging to health NGOs in the country. Sharmila Devi reports.



Georgian opposition and civil society groups have vowed to fight the results of parliamentary elections won by the ruling Georgian Dream party amid alleged vote rigging and they fear further curbs on non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities and LGBTQ+ rights.

Georgia's Central Election Commission said Georgian Dream received 54% of the vote and four opposition parties collectively won 37%. "The country's political and civil leaders, NGOs, and prominent pro-Georgian international figures spoke up quickly and forcefully that the election was stolen", Nika Gvaramia, leader of the Coalition for Change opposition alliance, told *The Lancet*. Irakli Kobakhidze of the Georgian Dream party, and Prime Minister, rejected allegations of vote rigging, telling the BBC that "irregularities happen everywhere". The USA and EU, which has frozen Georgia's EU membership bid, called on the government to investigate concerns about the election but stopped short of calling them fraudulent.

Georgian Dream, which claims that NGOs only represent a privileged elite, passed legislation in May requiring organisations that receive more than 20% of their funding from overseas to register as "agents of foreign influence". Other countries, including Russia, have passed similar legislation, curbing civil rights. In September, the Georgian Government passed a "family values and the protection of minors" law that restates an existing ban on same-sex marriage and bans gender reassignment surgery. Khatuma Samnidze, leader of the Republican party that is part of the Coalition for Change, said the NGO and LGBT laws were aimed at

"threatening us and anyone who has a different opinion".

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"The government used half-truths in its propaganda. Some NGOs are more elite and operate in the capital but some are active in rural areas, providing legal services, for example", said Davit Zedelashvili, law researcher at the University of Georgia.

Zedelashvili told *The Lancet* that he fears the government may use these laws as bargaining chips and agree to drop them if the EU were to unfreeze Georgia's membership process but there was nothing to indicate this so far.

Ganna Dovbakh, Executive Director of the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, said health-related advocacy had been effectively frozen over the past year. "There is already anecdotal evidence that individuals from highly stigmatised groups—such as people who use drugs, sex workers, people living with HIV, and especially LGBTQ+ individuals—are avoiding approaching NGOs for receiving health and social care services out of fear that their data could be shared with state authorities", she told *The Lancet*.

The annual number of new HIV infections in eastern Europe and central Asia rose by 20% between 2010 and 2023, says UNAIDS. HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men in Georgia was 15.3%, one of the highest rates in the region,

according to UNAIDS data. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has spent about US\$170 million in Georgia over the past 20 years and it fears that gains made in reaching out to marginalised communities such as people who use drugs to persuade them to test for HIV, hepatitis C, and other diseases would be lost. "Even if a scientific breakthrough were to yield an effective cure for HIV tomorrow, it would be rendered ineffective if individuals remain fearful of seeking care due to punitive legislation or societal stigmatisation", Dumitru Laticeschi, head of eastern Europe and central Asia at The Global Fund, told *The Lancet*.

There is also concern about people who are incarcerated. "With the 'foreign agents' law coming into force and continued Russia-influenced internal politics, we won't be able to continue our work in the region, leaving people in prisons with limited opportunities to access better health-care services", Anna Koshikova, Executive Director at the Eurasian Movement for the Right to Health in Prisons, told *The Lancet*.

There are between 1200 and 2300 active NGOs in Georgia, according to a 2021 civil society mapping study. "Not many NGOs are involved in service delivery, partly because there's not a lot of room to exist because this area is the government's responsibility", Sopiko Japaridze, the Chair of Solidarity Network, an independent union for health-care workers, told *The Lancet*. "Meanwhile, people are getting sicker than 30 years ago and there's no incentive in the for-profit system to do check ups."

Sharmila Devi

For more on the **global crackdown on NGOs** see **World Report Lancet** 2024; **404**: 1390–91

For the **Civil Society Organisations in Georgia: Mapping Study** see <https://csogeorgia.org/storage/app/uploads/public/60c1e9/eea/60c1e9eea3cb6332083798.pdf>