

## **Political Prisoner Controversy in Georgia**

**Author:** [Nino Jomarjidge](#)

Parliament postpones decision on how to handle cases of people deemed to have been wrongfully incarcerated by the last government.

Georgia's new leaders continued to stir controversy this week by coming up with a list of around 200 people they say were harassed or jailed by the last government.

The list submitted to parliament is the product of a working group set up by the majority Georgian Dream coalition of new prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Georgian Dream defeated President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement, UNM, in the October 1 parliamentary election. Saakashvili remains president until an election next year, but the new government has already moved to curtail his influence. (See **New Georgian Government Rolls Up Sleeves** and **Georgian President Cries Foul After Ally's Arrest**.)

The list names 184 people whom the working group found to have been jailed for political reasons under the Saakashvili government, and another 22 who it said were harassed on political grounds.

Heated debates took place in parliament as UNM members, now in the minority, disputed the list. Eventually, discussion of a draft resolution on the list was postponed until December 5.

To UNM politicians, the process looks like an attempt to discredit them.

"It isn't clear who drew up this list, or on what basis they identified these prisoners," UNM member David Sakvarelidze told parliament. "Hence, we cannot have confidence in this list. It would be better termed a 'list of [Georgian Dream] associates'."

Opponents of the Saakashvili administration began accusing it of hounding them in 2007, after large protests were broken up. By the time the UNM suffered defeat at the polls this October, the number of people declared political prisoners by rights groups had risen to several hundred.

The working group compiled its names largely from research done by one of these organisations, the Tbilisi Helsinki Group. But opinion in the human rights community is now divided. Two other major organisations, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association and Article 42, withdrew from the working group, arguing that its recommendations had not been thought through properly.

"It was impossible to prepare complete, well-founded and objective assessments... within the two-week deadline. Despite many attempts, it proved impossible to change the format of the working group or to reach any internal agreement on this," Ekaterina Popkhadze, executive director of the Young Lawyers' Association, said. "That is why the Association and Article 42 left the group."

On November 15, a number of individuals who are named on the list and remain in prison issued a statement expressing hope that they would be freed by the end of the month.

"Given that we have a democratic government, it is not only nonsensical but absolutely intolerable that we are in prison," the statement said.

However, no one has announced a date for their release, or what the legal mechanism for doing this will be.

"It isn't clear how parliament intends to free the people whom the working group has ruled to be political prisoners. I think parliament needs to make this publicly known," Popkhadze said.

Ucha Nanuashvili, who heads the Human Rights Centre and is among the activists who stayed on the working group, suggested that parliament might announce an amnesty for the individuals concerned, and they might then be allowed to go to court to claim damages and restore their good names.

**Nino Jomarjidge is a freelance journalist in Georgia.**

**Location:** [Georgia](#)

**Topic:** [Rule of Law](#)

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