



# NGOs condemn Physical Confrontations in Zugdidi and Batumi on Political Grounds

NGOs condemn recent physical confrontations and assaults on political grounds in Zugdidi and Batumi.

On March 15, supporters of the coalition Georgian Dream, Public Movement and other individuals held a protest march against the assembly scheduled to be held by the United National Movement on March 21 and urged them to stop meeting with constituents. The protest march eventually grew into violent actions.

In particular, demonstrators assembled outside the UNM office and later outside the office of non-governmental organization Freedom and Support Center, where MP Akaki Minashvili and UNM supporters were. Following a verbal confrontation, protesters invaded the building with batons. Inside the building, a clash broke out between them and UNM representatives who were armed with sticks. Afterwards, protesters returned to the territory outside the UNM office where representatives of the two political parties and their supporters started hitting one another with sticks, and throwing stones and eggs. Several persons including law enforcement officers suffered injuries.

Even though law enforcement authorities tried to de-escalate the situation, they had not been adequately mobilized at the time when protesters invaded the building; therefore, they failed at keeping the two opposing sides separate and preventing the clash.

It must be highlighted that according to footage aired by media participants of assembly, which grew into violent actions, included members of the coalition Georgian Dream and other officials as well as ordinary public servants that are

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representatives and activists of the coalition Georgian Dream, which violates the principle of neutrality in public service.

In particular, demonstrators included Chariman of Zugdidi Municipality Sakrebulo Merab KVaraia, Chairman of Sakrebulo Faction Georgian Dream □ Democratic Georgia Karlo Ghadua, Chairwoman of Sakrebulo Committee for Health and Social Affairs Natalia Sherozia, Chariman of Self-Governing Community Zugdidi Municipality Sakrebulo Lasha Gogia, Chairman of Christian-Conservative Faction Kakha Changelia, members of the ruling coalition in Sakrebulo □ Mamuka Tsoferia, Iuruzha Kakava and Lasha Todua, Member of Khoni Municipality Sakrebulo Lasha Gvasalia, employee of Zugdidi City Hall Tadeoz Patsatsia, employees of Zugdidi Municipality Gamgeoba Temur Todua, Meri Shengelaia, Mziuri Kvaratskhelia, Bezhan Churgulia and Edem Kekutia, employees of Sakrebulo □ office Magdalena Todua and Tamuna Jikia, head of the Museums □ Union in Zugdidi Municipality Kote Gurguliani, and Head of the Central Library of Zugdidi Municipality Madona Makatsaria.

Notably, confrontation on political grounds occurred in Batumi as well. On March 14 at the Civic Engagement Center two employees of Batumi Auto-transport Ltd. (subordinated to Batumi City Hall), Merab Ghoghoberidze, Giorgi Tushmanashvili and their associates verbally insulted Member of the Supreme Council of Adjara from UNM Petre Zambakhidze, and threw eggs at him. A group of men assaulted Petre Zambakhidze for his statement against the Chairmen of the Supreme Council of Adjara and for election of Jemal Putkaradze as Vice-Speaker of the Council. The Interior Ministry launched investigation into the incident based on Article 166 of the Code of Administrative Offences of Georgia (minor hooliganism). Notably, one of the participants of the incident Merab Ghoghoberidze submitted letter of resignation for personal reasons the same day.

Freedom of speech and expression, including freedom of political opinion is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia and international conventions. Therefore, these politically motivated developments in Zugdidi and Batumi are alarming and fall short of the principles of democratic society based on political pluralism, respect of differences in opinion and condemnation of violence by the authorities as well as all political forces and constituents.

We urge the government to provide environment in which all political forces will be able to operate peacefully and exercise freedom of expression without any violent

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repercussions. The government must take measures of both legal and political liability against public servants involved in these acts of violence (if the reports are proven to be true).

We urge the law enforcement authorities to ensure timely, comprehensive and effective investigation of the incidents, and to identify and prosecute perpetrators. It is also important for the law enforcement authorities to act in full abidance by the principle of political neutrality, meaning that they must act impartially and in good faith in the process of fulfilling their obligations. Police and investigating authorities must prove with their actions that they distance themselves from interests of political groups.

We urge all political forces involved in the confrontation as well as their supporters, all political forces and civil society organizations to refrain from any type of violence, and to respect and observe the Constitution and other laws of Georgia.

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)  
Transparency International – Georgia  
Georgian Young Lawyers' Association  
Civil Development Agency