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Situation of local and regional democracy in Georgia

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Dear colleagues,

This report for your attention today is further proof of rapid and dramatic democratic backsliding in Georgia. It is based on observations made in Tbilisi during a visit of the three presidents in February. We met a wide range of interlocutors from NGOs, political parties, and local and national authorities and came back with a clear view that Georgia is facing extreme polarisation and the fragmentation of its society. Our impression was that in this tense climate, dialogue is extremely difficult, yet absolutely necessary.

Since the visit, no progress has been made,. There have been more arrests and purges of civil servants, and new legislative changes on elections, gender equality, the media and public demonstrations.

For all these reasons, we believe that this report is more than timely. It refers to opinions and statements of other Council of Europe bodies and in particular the Venice Commission and I take this opportunity to thank President Bazy-Malaurie for the Commission's absolutely necessary work on the legal framework in Georgia.

This is not the first time that we discuss the state of local democracy in Georgia. At the last Congress session, we agreed on a declaration which summarised our many sources of concern: clear signs of democratic backsliding, the weakening of human rights, increased polarisation and the adoption of repressive legislation.

We regret to see that the situation has only worsened and is having profound consequences on local democracy. In the aftermath of the widely rejected parliamentary elections and the decision of the ruling party to put EU accession on hold, political and societal divisions have deepened.

A key factor in the current crisis in Georgia is the progressive marginalisation of the opposition and the breakdown of dialogue between them and the Georgian Dream authorities. Georgia now faces a de facto absence of political pluralism, including within municipal councils. Power has become excessively concentrated in the hands of the ruling party, prompting opposition groups to boycott decision-making

bodies, including the Parliament. This trend threatens the foundations of a pluralistic and fair democratic system.

The Parliament is perceived as a rubber-stamping assembly, where formal opposition consists of parties that have split from the ruling party, but which have “no fundamental disagreements with it” and all legislative initiatives have been adopted in a rushed manner with no consultation.

Adding to these concerns, recent legislative developments—particularly the Law on Foreign Influence and follow-up legislation—have led to increased intimidation and the stigmatisation of NGOs and dissenting voices in the media. These now operate under very challenging conditions, undermining the fundamental freedoms of expression and association. One particularly striking example is the detention of the founder of two media outlets, Ms Mzia Amaghlobeli, who has yet to be released.

The repression of peaceful protests has also further undermined these freedoms. Law enforcement authorities have responded with violence against demonstrators across Georgia and particularly in Tbilisi. And recent amendments to public assembly laws have introduced heavy fines (up to thousands of euros) and vague provisions (on blocking roads for example), granting authorities excessive discretion in their application.

At the same time, the instrumentalisation of public institutions, including at the local level, has led to reports of purges, dismissals, intimidation, and pressure on civil servants—facilitated by controversial amendments to the Law on Public Service.

All these issues must be understood in the context of the upcoming local elections, to be held next October. Currently, the conditions cannot be said to provide for free and fair elections. Georgia’s electoral law has been amended 20 times since the last elections without meaningful consultation and often in breach of the principle of stability of electoral law. The independence of the Central Election Commission was undermined, and gender quotas were scrapped for all elections.

In December 2024, a set of specific amendments restored the electoral system which existed before the 2021 political agreement and was widely perceived to favour the ruling party. The Congress President therefore asked for an opinion to the Venice Commission, which will be presented to you after our interventions. Since then, two other sets of amendments have been ratified (in February and March), making it clear that the authorities have little intention of respecting European electoral standards for the time being.

As you can see dear colleagues, Georgia seems to be standing at a crossroads and the path forward, which my colleague will present, must prioritise restoring political pluralism, protecting fundamental freedoms, and upholding the integrity of democratic processes.