

## **Open Letter from Friends of Georgia on the Current Political Crisis**

We, the undersigned, consider ourselves Friends of Georgia, who have long admired the resilience of the Georgian people in the face of adversity throughout Georgia's history; their staunch determination to maintain Georgia's independence and territorial integrity; and their commitment to democratic values. We have supported Georgia's aspirations and positive steps for Euro-Atlantic and European integration and have strongly advocated within our own organizations or governments for practical and political support towards that end. We also have not shied away from offering constructive criticism when called for.

We are therefore deeply concerned by recent political developments in Georgia, including the decision by Georgian authorities to storm the headquarters of the leading opposition party and arrest its leader. Failure to release him will make impossible the resolution of the ongoing impasse over last year's elections, which has resulted in the opposition's boycott of the parliament. A one-party parliament is not a sign of a healthy democracy. Not only do these developments hold up progress on tackling the pressing issues of security, the economy, and, in the time of the global pandemic, health, but they also damage the international image and reputation of Georgia as a stable partner in the region, and committed to the values underpinning the Euro-Atlantic community. Only those in Moscow who do not mean Georgia well are pleased by these developments.

We come from countries whose own democracies are also being challenged with moments of high political tension and polarization, when our institutions are tested, and our actions fall short of our ideals. But our institutions have held thanks to free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, a strong civil society sector, and media freedom. We all understand that democracy building in Georgia is a work in progress, but that process cannot include the arrest of political opponents. Elected governments need to fulfil the aspirations of their constituents by focusing their time and attention on implementing the policies on which they campaigned. Elected opposition politicians have the right to a fair and open adjudication of their claims of election irregularities. We also urge them to seize every opportunity provided by the European Union and other potential mediators to negotiate in good faith with the Georgian government a solution that will enable them to take up their mandates and strengthen Georgia's democracy. All sides should support the advancement of their country by using peaceful means and legal channels to resolve disputes. Their shared goal must be to constitute a multiparty parliament that reflects the will of all voters and therefore has the full trust of the Georgian people to move the country forward.

Georgia has withstood previous tests to its democracy. At previous critical moments, its leaders have drawn back from crisis or extreme steps, and allowed democratic transitions to take place. Georgia is at another pivotal moment now, which some describe as existential. The Government, as the presiding power, must take the first step by freeing the opposition leader. This will facilitate efforts by the European Union to mediate a compromise, efforts we strongly support. Recent events make the situation all the more urgent. Failure to take positive steps

could result in calls for consequences for those responsible for the ongoing crisis. Time is of the essence!

One of Georgia's strongest international assets has been the significant amount of goodwill felt towards it. That goodwill has been hard won and well deserved. But – in a time of pressing global priorities, economic turmoil and the destructive results of a global pandemic -- it is not infinite and if lost, will be hard to regain. We urge both the Georgian government and opposition leaders not to squander that goodwill, and to demonstrate their commitment to democracy, dialogue and respect for human rights. As friends of Georgia, we are of course willing to offer suggestions and support, and help facilitate resolution. However, the only lasting settlement will come from the efforts of the Georgian government and opposition leaders themselves to salvage Georgia's democracy and institutions.

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