



Preliminary Findings on the Investigation of Torture and Ill-Treatment Against Protesters in Georgia from 28 November to 20 December 2024

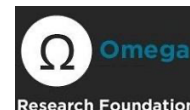
I. Introduction

On November 28th, the suspension of EU accession talks was publicly announced by the political party “Georgian Dream”, a decision in direct contravention of Georgia’s constitutional obligation “to take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”. This statement ignited mass protests across Georgian cities and came in the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections, during which, among other systematic breaches, voting secrecy was widely violated. This announcement also followed the adoption of the European Parliament’s resolution condemning significant irregularities and violations during the latest Parliamentary elections in Georgia from October 2024. The resolution qualified the elections as neither free nor fair and called for a re-run within a year, under thorough international supervision.

The protests were met with an unprecedented scale of police violence targeting protesters, human rights defenders, journalists, activists and political opponents both during the protests and outside of such settings. There are documented incidents of the use of less-lethal weapons in violation of their deployment rules, very violent physical attacks on protesters and media representatives at protest sites as well as during their transportation to detention facilities, and threats and insults towards detained protesters.

Seven months earlier, in April and May 2024, more than 210 individuals were detained in Georgia during a violent police crackdown on mass peaceful protests against the re-introduction of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. A large number of protesters were severely beaten by the police (mostly masked and unidentifiable) during arrests and in detention. The investigations carried out by the Special Investigation Service (SIS) into these events are not complying with international human rights standards, including the Istanbul Protocol, and there is no publicly available information about any police officers being sanctioned.

In light of this failure to investigate human rights abuses, on 13 December 2024, the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), the Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT), the Human Rights Center (HRC) together with other civil society organisations publicly launched a process to document the injuries and evidence of police brutality against individuals and groups participating in or supporting recent protests. The methodology for documentation is developed and implemented with the support of leading international anti-torture organisations from the United Against Torture Consortium (UATC).



From 10-24 December 2024, the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), together with its Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG), and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) conducted a joint mission to Tbilisi in support of GYLA, GCRT, HRC and other

Georgian organisations. Omega Research Foundation assisted this mission with research. The following presented the preliminary findings from these documentation efforts.

II. Evidence reviewed

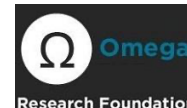
The evidence reviewed includes open-source videos and photographs documenting the arrest, abuse and physical injuries of at least 99 individuals, including 45 journalists; interviews conducted with direct victims, witnesses and representatives from civil society organisations; and the independent forensic medical examination of 11 victims of police violence, including their available medical records and other photographic evidence of their injuries.

III. Preliminary findings from interviews

Interviews conducted with victims, witnesses, civil society representatives, and other stakeholders consistently emphasized the peaceful nature of the overwhelming majority of the protesters.

According to the testimonies, the protests were violently repressed and dispersed with the use of various less-lethal weapons, including pepper spray, tear gas, and water cannons containing chemical irritants. The deployment of such weapons raises serious concerns. Many victims described the tear gas as highly potent, causing severe irritation even in the open air and from a distance, with lingering effects such as disorientation, headaches, and persistent physical discomfort. The use of water cannons is particularly alarming given the frigid temperatures in Tbilisi, ranging from -1°C to +8°C, and the addition of chemical irritants to the water. Additionally, despite calls for protesters to disperse, several victims reported that police provided no clear or safe exit routes, with some officers physically assaulting protesters attempting to leave through designated corridors or encircling them

Testimonies further revealed instances of protesters being isolated from the crowd and subjected to beatings from the police —receiving punches and kicks—despite displaying no violence or posing no threat. These incidents allegedly occurred on Rustaveli avenue (Tbilisi, Georgia) and surrounding streets, in police vehicles (vans and cars), and during transportation. Early testimonies mentioned kicks to the face, head, and body, while more recent accounts suggested that officers began targeting only the body — rendering injuries less visible. The victims also reported that attacks were often accompanied by insults, threats (including of sexual violence) and sarcastic and



humiliating comments. Interviewees also indicated incidents of journalists, even some being clearly identified as such, being attacked and arrested, both on-site and in nearby streets.

Arbitrary arrests of protesters exercising their right to peaceful assembly were widespread, up to 500 demonstrators were detained according to Georgian civil society legal aid network, with many detainees held in administrative detention. Reports indicate that detainees were often denied the opportunity to notify their families and lawyers of their whereabouts. When inquired about the location of detainees, authorities frequently claimed ignorance, leaving families without information on the whereabouts of the arrested protesters for hours. According to some of the protesters, upon release, they were asked to sign statements containing false information about the context of the arrest, including inaccurate information about the officers who conducted the arrest, and fabricated charges. These allegations extended to court proceedings, with victims indicating that police officers who appeared to testify in court were not present during their arrests. Furthermore, evidence presented by victims to refute these false testimonies was reportedly disregarded by judges.

Despite the prevalence of these incidents, no public information has been disclosed about the investigation progress into the allegations or prosecutions of the perpetrators. Public officials have also refrained from issuing condemnations of police violence. Impunity has been further facilitated by the fact that many victims were unable to identify their assailants due to a lack of identifying insignia or number on the officers' uniforms, which were typically black and devoid of markings, and because the perpetrators' faces were concealed by masks. Also, some victims expressed reluctance to file complaints due to a lack of trust in the justice system.

While testimonies suggest that the repression of protests has become less overtly violent in recent days, instances of harassment against protesters, human rights defenders, journalists and political activists persist beyond the protest setting. Several allegations surfaced of individuals being visited by plainclothes police officers without identification, as well as reports of physical attacks by organized groups of unidentified individuals—so-called “titushkies”—seemingly aimed at instilling fear and discouraging dissent. These incidents, in a number of cases, were met with complete inaction from law enforcement agencies, which not only failed to respond but also emboldened the perpetrators and escalated the scope of violence.

The consistency of these testimonies, the recurring nature of such incidents throughout the three weeks of protests, and the lack of accountability for acts of torture and ill-treatment suggest a systematic and coordinated policy of repression. This appears to be designed to foster an environment of fear, intimidation, and retaliation against those publicly opposing government policies. The current crackdown is taking place in the lasting situation of shrinking civil space in Georgia, marked by the adoption of legislation on foreign influence targeting civil society organisations, smear campaigns and attacks on human rights defenders and journalists.



IV. Preliminary findings from forensic evaluations

The **forensic evidence** reveals a distressing pattern of trauma among victims, with facial and head injuries being particularly prevalent. Many victims sustained severe injuries, including nasal bone fractures, concussions, and extensive soft tissue damage. In some cases, evidence of potential neurological injury is present, as well as psychological trauma.

From our experience in the documentation of police and security force assaults against protesters worldwide, including in Belarus in 2020, the percentage of individuals sustaining severe head trauma and facial injuries is uncommonly high and indicates a widespread, consistent and purposeful practice of targeting physical force at the head of individuals. Many individuals testify to being punched in the face by police wearing 'hard shell gloves', which can inflict increased force and severe pain that is consistent with the injuries observed. Several victims also reported injuries to the ribs and spine further underscoring the severity of assaults.

Upon examination, many individuals also exhibited bruises and abrasions to the lower extremities, including the backside of the thighs, consistent with testimony that they were stomped on or beaten after falling, being forced to the ground and/or lying face down.

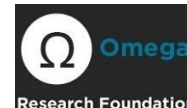
In many cases, the pattern of injuries sustained by individuals is highly consistent with victims' allegations that they were restrained and then punched and stomped on while subdued, frequently in a transport vehicle allowing secrecy, control and time. The pattern of injuries sustained by individuals does not support the suggestion of a two-sided physical altercation such as a common fight or brawl between protesters and police.

Altogether, the forensic evidence, including injury patterns, suggests a coordinated policy and practice of systematically torturing and ill-treating protesters and supporters, often after they are already under the physical control of the police.

V. Recommendations

The signatory organisations call on the international community, including UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to:

- Strongly and unequivocally condemn the systematic practice of torture and ill-treatment against protesters, human rights defenders, journalists and political activists.
- Urge the Georgian State Institutions to respect freedom of assembly and the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment in the context of protests, require all police officers to wear visible identification tags to facilitate accountability, investigate cases of torture and other ill-treatment in a timely, independent, impartial and efficient manner, provide comprehensive reparation to survivors, including medical treatment,



psychosocial support and financial compensation, and ensure the release of all persons unlawfully detained,

- Urge Georgia's authorities to publish comprehensive information on the units and battalions displayed in response to the protest and the weapons and tools used to disperse protesters.
- Take urgent actions to help protect protesters, bring the situation to the attention of regional and international human rights mechanisms, including call on the UN OHCHR and Human Rights Council to closely monitor the situation; and promote accountability for perpetrators of crimes and human rights violations including through the establishment of investigative mechanisms such as the Moscow Mechanism of the OSCE.
- Ensure support for local civil society actors and condemn any attempt of intimidation against them.

About the UATC

The #UnitedAgainstTorture Consortium (UATC), launched in June 2023, brings together the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT), the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), the International Federation of ACATs (FIACAT), Omega Research Foundation and REDRESS. One of the reasons behind the formation of the UATC was the growing concern of widespread violations of the right to be free from torture and other ill-treatment before, during, and after protests and other public assemblies across the globe.