



Gatherings and rallies of extremist groups report

(September – December 2021)

2022

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Contents

Introduction	3
Findings	3
Methodology	4
Legal framework governing the freedom of gatherings during the pandemic	5
1. Hate groups registering as political parties	6
The political organization entitled “Nation and State”	6
“The Conservative Movement”	7
2. Rallies in support of individuals accused of partaking in the organized violence on July 5 and 6	8
The rally of 26 September	8
The rally on November 24	9
3. Rallies to protest vaccination	11
3.1. Law enforcement members	11
3.2. Clergymen	12
3.3 Description of the antivaxxer rallies held.....	12
The antivaxxer rally of September 15, 2021	13
The antivaxxer rally of November 5, 2021	13
The antivaxxer rally of November 20, 2021	15
The rally in front the Public Broadcaster on November 28, 2021	15
The antivaxxer rally of December 5, 2021	16
The antivaxxer rally of December 7, 2021	17
The antivaxxer rally of December 12, 2021	18
The antivaxxer rally of December 26, 2021	19

Introduction

Democracy Research Institute (DRI) has been observing activities of far-right radical groups at gatherings and rallies since 2020. This report covers the results of our observation of far-right groups' gatherings and rallies during the period of September-December 2021. Overall, it analyzes what we detected as general trends at 12 different gatherings and outlines basic findings based on our observation. The report has been prepared with the aim of informing the public on the threats posed by far-right radical groups', which keep becoming more powerful.

The online media has been gaining increased importance against the background that far-right extremist groups' have been transforming themselves into political parties. In addition to utilizing it for ideological propaganda and misinformation, many far-right leaders have been employing social networks to marshal supporters and kick off protest rallies.

The far-right groups active in Georgia were ardently making efforts to kindle anti-vaccine sentiments in the public and have mobilized supporters to take part in protest rallies for pushing forward an antivaxxer agenda. Their support for individuals accused of taking part in the violent events on July 5 and 6 has also fallen within our focus. Far right leaders' speeches were characterized with anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric. The degree of involvement of children in protest rallies presented itself as a troubling trend, especially against the background of complete neglect of Covid-related regulations and safety measures by the gatherers.

Findings

- In 2021, antiliberal and anti-Western far right groups started converting themselves into political entities. On October 30, 2021, Zviad Tomaradze made a statement on the establishment of a political party entitled "Nation and State". On December 7, 2021, building on the Alt-Info team, a political party named "Conservative Movement" was registered – something that increased the visibility and legitimacy of antiliberal, pro-Russian anti-Western forces.
- Gatherings and rallies of far-right extremist groups were repetitive and well-organized. The groups were well-prepared and consistent in their actions. They have demonstrated the capability of mobilizing hundreds of people at their weekly gatherings. They have had enough funds to print billboards, posters, information booklets and other materials.
- The antiliberal and anti-Western far-right leaders and organizers are not vehement opponents of the ruling party. They have been criticizing the existing government mostly because of the actions of members of the Governmental Interagency Council who were responsible for vaccination matters.
- Protest rallies organized by the far-right groups were characterized by good coordination between law enforcement members and rally organizers as well as amicable and positive communications between the two.
- One of the purposes pursued by far-right groups was to shake confidence in human rights protection mechanisms. The Public Defender's Office has been among the targets

such groups gatherings and rallies were directed at. The far-right have been regarding the Public Defender as a sharply liberal and biased state institution.

- Antivaxxer gatherings and rallies orchestrated by far-right groups in Georgia were designed with goal of enhancing anti-Western sentiments in the society on the one hand and deepening mistrust in national healthcare institutions and the medical science in general on the other hand.
- There were not many women amongst the organizers of the far-right protest rallies. Men in their middle age were the usual contingent of protesters. Some rallies were attended also by children accompanied by their family members.
- In their speeches, far-right leaders have been repeatedly and aggressively attacking “liberal” media organizations known for their criticism of the ruling party. Western institutions, the embassy of the United States and the delegation of the European Union in Georgia have been other targets of their aggressive rhetoric.
- Clergy members were also taking part in protest rallies authored by the far-right groups. Their role usually was limited to that of regular protesters but in some cases clergymen addressed rally participants verbally.
- Covid-19 regulations were neglected during far-right protesters’ rallies. In the reporting period, wearing a face mask outdoors remained mandatory. Another rule applicable to open air gatherings implied limitation of the number of gathered individuals to up to 10 people. Nevertheless, rally participants were neglecting the mandatory Covid-19 regulations, which increased the risk of spreading the disease, especially when children were present alongside adults.

Methodology

In the reporting period, our monitors observed a total of 12 gatherings and rallies organized by far right groups in Tbilisi. This report describes major trends and findings of our observation activity. It also provides an overview of far right leaders’ rhetoric during the rallies.

Our monitoring covers the period of September - December 2021. We decided to sort the protest rallies of far-right groups by the following topics: rallies against vaccination and “green passports”; conversion of far-right groups into political parties; and support for individuals accused of participation in the violent events of July 5 and 6.

Our organization observed all of the far-right groups’ gatherings in Tbilisi during the reporting period.

We were learning about scheduled rallies and counter-rallies through open sources and the social media, which presented themselves as the most-frequently used means of information dissemination and supporter mobilization for far-right groups and their leaders.

An important research tool we used during our observation was online media monitoring, which allowed us to timely collect information on the timing, contents and locations of far-right groups' rallies and gatherings. At the initial stage of our research, we developed a special form for monitoring the gatherings. The form was designed in way to help sort remarkable facts and violations occurring during the rallies and counter-rallies. In additions to personal reports submitted by our monitors in the course of observation, we were greatly assisted by photo and video materials obtained from various media platforms.

As already mentioned, we first designed a monitoring form to record remarkable facts and violations occurring during the rallies.

Through freedom of information rules, we obtained information from the Tbilisi Townhall concerning notices submitted by antivaxer gathering organizers on their upcoming plans to conduct a rally or other public gathering.¹ As per replies from the Municipal Service Development Agency, the "Nation and State" political movement has not submitted any prior notice of gathering to the Mayor's Office during the reporting period save one case when it warned the Tbilisi Mayor's Office about their pre-planned procession of automobiles in demand of annulment of "the green passports" on January 23, 2022. To our knowledge, that rally never took place. In a week's time after that fate, on February 1, the Interagency Council issued a decision² annulling the green passports that were previously required for entering various institutions and organizations.

Deriving from the goals and objectives of our Project, we focused on the following when monitoring these gatherings and rallies:

- Whether the leaders of far right groups or rally participants were using hate speech;
- Whether the police was upholding public order during the open gatherings and rallies;
- Whether there were calls to commit violence against individual persons or groups.

Furthermore, the report examines whether the public gatherings and rallies of far-right groups' were compliant with the Georgian law and the international standards established by the European Convention on Human Rights. Also, our goal was to assess the consistency with the legal rules of the practical aspects of rallies organized by far-right extremist groups. Finally, we analyzed efforts of law enforcement members to uphold public order during the public gatherings and rallies from a legal perspective.

Legal framework governing the freedom of gatherings during the pandemic

In the first half of 2021, any exercise of the right to gatherings was subject to various restrictions imposed by the government in response to the pandemic.³ In June 2021, movement restrictions

¹ A reply letter from the Municipal Service Development Agency, not-for-profit entity, no. 21/0122041278-01 dated February 10, 2022.

² Government Resolution no. 53 dated February 4, 2022, entered into force February 4

³ See Public Defender's annual report to the Parliament for 2020, pp. 241-244.

were lifted;⁴ in September, individuals that had been imposed criminal and/or administrative sanctions for breaching pandemic-related regulations were amnestied.⁵

The wearing of facemasks in the open air was abolished on March 28, 2022⁶ but this rule had remained applicable during the reporting period. Also, in the reporting period, it was illegal for more than 10 individuals to gather outdoors.

Pursuant to a Government Resolution approving Rules of Quarantine and Isolation, until February 28, 2022, it was prohibited⁷ to hold a gathering of more than 10 individuals for social events (such as weddings, birthdays, jubilees, funeral receptions, etc), including entertainment.⁸ Starting February 28, 2022, the old version of the Government Resolution was replaced by a new one lifting the restriction on the gathering of individuals in connection with social habits and traditions.

It should be pointed out that no one had been held liable for breaching these restrictions in the reporting period.

1. Hate groups registering as political parties

The political organization entitled “Nation and State”

During the period we monitored the gatherings and rallies of far-right groups, two far-right movements — “Nation and State” and “Alt Info” — converted into political parties.

At the founding meeting on October 30, 2021, then-not-for-profit entity “Nation and State”⁹ introduced members of its political council to the public.¹⁰ Zviad Tomaradze, Chairman of the organization, along with his like-minded political associates, discussed their future political plans and perspectives presenting a plan of action to their supporters. The entity’s audit commission members were elected at the same founding meeting.

In their speeches at the meeting, the organizers of the gathering distanced themselves from both the “Georgian Dream” and opposition parties introducing themselves as a political force

⁴ Government Resolution no. 294 dated 22 June 2021 amending the Government Resolution no. 322 dated 23 May 2020 on approving Rules of Quarantine and Isolation, Article 1(1) and Article 2

⁵ The Amnesty Law as of 9 September 2021; Law of Georgia on the release from administrative liability as of 7 September 2021.

⁶ No respective changes have been made to the Resolution yet (last viewed on March 28, 2022)

⁷ Government Resolution no. 294 dated 22 June 2021 approving the Rules of Quarantine and Isolation, Article 5 (the version of 22 February 2022)

⁸ Government Resolution no. 91 dated 28 February 2022

⁹ The “Nation and State” entity (identification number 402 084 105) chaired by Zviad Tomaradze got registered itself as a not-for-profit entity in 2018.

¹⁰ By March 2022, “Nation and State” was not on the list of the unified registry of political organizations. The Public Registry decided not to continue processing Party Chief Zviad Tomaradze’s petition of March 4, 2021. The Public Registry’s decision was apparently based on the applicant party’s failure to make good the inaccuracies in the registration data within the established deadline.

with new national values. Party Chief Zviad Tomaradze proclaimed God was his “only master”. As a leader of “Nation and State”, Zviad Tomaradze distinguished himself with racist, xenophobic, nationalistic and homophobic statements. Since 2016, he has authored a series of degenerative legislative initiatives.¹¹

An announcement about the gathering was published 3 days prior to the scheduled date by “Nation and State” leaders Zviad Tomaradze and Irakli Abashidze through their Facebook pages, at the organization’s official webpage and also through a blog belonging to Beka Vardosanidze, a far-right activist. The gathering was held in the 9th of April park. At the founding meeting, the leaders of the political organization made some nationalistic and religious-populistic statements.

About 250 individuals, including 5 children, attended the founding of the political party. A majority of rally participants and organizers were using facemasks in breach of the established rules. Some participants were actively involved in supporter marshalling. They were disseminating party booklets to people taking their time in the park. In the beginning, 2 police officers were present at the gathering but they left after a while.

By March 2022, the organization “Nation and State” was not on the list of registered political associations. The Public Registry decided not to proceed with processing Zviad Tomaradze’s petition dated November 4, 2021 on the ground that the petitioner failed to remedy a problem with registration data within the established deadline.

“The Conservative Movement”

A month after “Nation and State” was founded, on November 20, 2021, the Alt Info team founded a political party entitled “The Conservative Movement”.¹² Leaders of the newly founded “Conservative Party” are those who organized the violence on July 5, 2021 but they have not been brought to criminal justice this far. The only sanction incurred by Alt Info was that the National Communications Commission found the Alt Info television station in breach of the administrative legislation due to broadcasting profanity and use of uncensored language in their television programs concerning the July 5 events. Nevertheless, Alt Info has not been fined.

Founders of the Conservative Movement openly stated about their pro-Russian and anti-Western choice of course as a political party at the founding meeting. According to Zurab Makharadze, the party would strive for ending the “liberal dictatorship” and bringing about a

¹¹ For example, he [moved for](#) removal of the terms “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” from the Law on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, [put forward an initiative](#) on the prohibition of abortion, [proposed prohibition](#) of foreign-funded NGOs, authored a Bill on Hurting Religious Sentiments and another bill proposing to prohibit wearing chadors, niqabs and burqas in public, put forward an initiative to make it more difficult for foreigners to obtain Georgian citizenship, etc. Tomaradze was a member of a group that proposed holding a referendum on the matter of marriage; in particular, the referendum question was phrased in the following manner: “Do you agree to having civil marriage defined as a union of a man and a woman with the aim of creating a family?”

¹² The founding meeting elected Giorgi Kardava as Secretary-General and Zura Makharadze as Chairman of the party. Irakli Martinenko and Irakli Morgoshia were made members of the Party’s political council.

“Christian democracy”. Worth pointing out is the fact the Alt Info TV’s editorial policy is distinguished by xenophobic, homophobic and pro-violence rhetoric.¹³

Pursuant to the Constitution of Georgia, Art. 23(3), and the Organic Law on Political Associations, Art. 5(2), “It is illegal to found or operate a party ... which propagates war or violence or foments national, regional, religious or social discord.”

Many European countries provide for similar limitations so as to ensure having “militant democracy” mechanisms in place. “The enemies of democracy should not be allowed to use the rights and freedoms of democracy to undermine it.”¹⁴ Prohibition of abuse of rights is contained also in the existing fundamental international human rights instruments.¹⁵

On November 25, 2021, the Public Registry suspended registration of the Conservative Movement for the reason that the party’s registration documents contained errors. After the errors were rectified, though, on December 7, 2021, the Ministry of Justice’s Public Registry did grant an official political party registration to the Conservative Movement.

2. Rallies in support of individuals accused of partaking in the organized violence on July 5 and 6

The rally of 26 September

On September 26, a rally was held in front of the Parliament to demand release of individuals arrested on allegations of having attacked journalists on July 5 and 6. The rally was organized by the founders of the pro-Russian media platform Alt Info, Chair of the far-right political party “The Georgian Idea” and leaders of the Society for the Protection of Children’s Rights, a non-governmental organization that has made itself famous by their far-rightist rhetoric.¹⁶

The number of protestants at the rally was less than 150 and the roadway was never blocked. Three children and two clergymen were among the ones attending the rally.

The rally was advertised 4 days before its scheduled date by Alexander and Guram Palavandishvilis through their personal Facebook pages. Information on the rally was also put

¹³ DRI, 22.11.21, “DRI: The National Agency of Public Registry should not register Conservative Movement political party”, available at <https://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/805/>

¹⁴ Rory O’Connell, *Militant Democracy and Human Rights Principles* (2009). Constitutional Law Review, 1,102.

¹⁵ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 29(2), Art. 30; The European Convention on Human Rights, Art. 17;

¹⁶ Zurab Makharadze (Alt Info founder), Giorgi Kardava (Alt Info founder), Konstantine Morgoshia (Alt Info founder), Shota Martinenko (Alt Info founder), Alexander Palavandishvili (a leader of the Society for the Protection of Children’s Rights non-governmental organization), Guram Palavandishvili (Chairman of the Society for the Protection of Children’s Rights), Levan Chachua (Chairman of “the Georgian Idea”).

up on the Facebook pages of the Georgian Idea, Alt Info and the Society for the Protection of Children's Rights.

The rally participants were referring to individuals arrested in connection with the group violence on July 5 and 6 as “prisoners of conscience”¹⁷ and “victims of liberal dictatorship” and were demanding their immediate release. These demands were addressed primarily to the Georgian Dream. According to the rally organizers, “liberalism” and “Western dictatorship” had the Georgian Government enslaved. In organizers’ words, the attempt to hold a “march of pride” was a provocation orchestrated by the liberal media and that journalists should bear all of the responsibility for the aggression unleashed by their “fellow activists”.

Zurab Makharadze, an organizer of the rally and a founder of the Alt Info platform, stated in his speech that his own and his “fellow brothers” primary goal on July 5 was to prevent “propaganda of perversion” in the Rustaveli Avenue and the Georgian people helped avoid the conducting of this “corrupt parade”.

Levan Chachua, a leader of the Georgian Idea, stated the “detained guys” were defending religious purity and Georgianhood on July 5. He said the arrests of their “brothers in arms” was the biggest shame for the Georgian Dream party and “a taint for the nation”.

During their speeches, rally organizers used homophobic language (phrases such as “propaganda of perversion”, “homosexual parade”, “a march of filth”, etc).

A vast majority of the rally participants and organizers were not using facemasks according to the established rules. The participants also failed to observe reasonable social distancing rules.

The rally on November 24

The rally of November 24, 2021 coincided with the period when the replacement of a custodial pretrial measure with a bail in regard to three individuals accused of breaking into the Tbilisi Pride office on July 5 was being discussed in court. The rally was held in front of the Public Defender’s Office. Protesters demanded that the Public Defender take action to defend individuals detained on charges of group violence on July 5 and 6.

The rally was organized by Zurab Makharadze, Konstantine Morgoshia, Shota Martinenko and Giorgi Kardava – leaders of the Conservative Movement, a far-right political party emerged on the basis of the Alt Info media platform. Beka Vardosanidze, an activist known for his ultra-right approach, declared his support for the rally and streamed the rally live on his personal blog.

The rally was advertised a week before on the organizers’ personal Facebook pages as well as on the Alt Info’s and Beka Vardosanidze’s online media platforms.

Relatives and lawyers of those arrested in regard to the July 5 and 6 events made a majority of the rally participants. Some 300 protesters gathered in total. Because the place was narrow and

¹⁷ These terms were being actively used by the defense also during the judicial hearings in the July 5-6 events case.

no longer capable of holding the number of protesters present, it became necessary to temporarily block the roadway.

According to our observation, around 60 law enforcement officers were deployed to manage the rally in front of the Public Defender's Office.

The protesters were holding posters with homophobic texts and messages such as "down with Europe's sodomite court", "no to perversion propaganda", "freedom for prisoners of conscience". The photos of Public Defender Nino Lomjaria, US Ambassador Kelly Degnan and EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell were displayed on the posters and were referred to as "LGBT SWAT team" and "LGBT fascists". Rally participants held trumpets and party flags.

Archpriest Spyridon Tskipurishvili addressed the demonstrators with a speech stating "the Public Defender's role is over and a matter of history. ... The times of liberalism are over and liberalism is dying."

Rally organizers' statements were predominantly anti-Western and homophobic. Zurab Makharadze told the demonstrators: "On the 5th [of July], we the plain people managed to preserve the dignity for our country, we kept our integrity. The boys who have been jailed they are jailed because they did not allow their motherland to be insulted in their own country, in the courtyard of the Kashueti Temple."

"The "liberal media" turned out to be another target for rally organizers' aggression. According to the protest organizers, "the liberal media" was the biggest culprit in July 5 events. Far right protesters labeled July 5 attacks against journalists as a premeditated provocation staged by liberal forces.

Beka Vardosanidze, an adamant supporter of the rally, interfered with the performance of professional duties by Ketii Tutberidze, a reporter for the Public Broadcaster. Along with other demonstrators, Vardosanidze besieged the journalist and insulted her. He was blaming the reporter for spreading misinformation.¹⁸ Neither did law enforcement members prevent hindrance to the work of the Public Broadcaster's reporter on the spot nor did they react to the incident any time afterwards. The Interior Ministry opened investigation only on the basis of Ketii Tutberidze's complaint. By March 2022, as we have been informed by the journalist, the investigation was being conducted in effectively.

As it was reported in the media, administrative liability was imposed on Beka Vardosanidze in regard to the incident on the same day. Allegedly, Vardosanidze verbally insulted a police officer. The City Court of Tbilisi found that Vardosanidze had committed an administrative offense under Article 173 of the Code on Administrative Offenses and ordered him to pay a fine of GEL 2,000 as a sanction.

During the rally, organizers and participants neglected the duty of wearing facemasks applicable under Covid-19 regulations.

¹⁸ "Lawyer reports Beka Vardosanidze has been arrested", Radio Liberty, December 31, 0221, available at <https://bit.ly/387huHz>

3. Rallies to protest vaccination

During the reporting period far-right extremist groups planned and successfully conducted anti-vaccination information campaigns. Between September 1 and December 31 2021, Zviad Tomaradze, leader of the “Nation and State” ultra-rightist group, along with his like-minded people, held 8 gatherings and rallies against vaccination. The antivaxxer rallies would be organized several days before the schedule date through the Facebook social network.¹⁹

Democracy Research Institute’s monitors observed all of these eight gatherings. Each antivaxxer rally was monitored using a special questionnaire.

By our assessment, the number of participants at antivaxxer rallies ranged between 100 and 800 people. The number of gatherers by each rally is shown herewith: 200 people attended the rally on September 15, 170 people on November 5, 350 people on November 20, 800 people on November 28, 700 people on December 5, up to 100 people on December 7, 150 people on December 12 and around 200 people on December 26.

Half of the protesters were women. Presence of clergymen (at least 4 or 5) at the rallies was commonplace. As per our observation, around 10 children attended each gathering.

3.1. Law enforcement members

On average, around 50 police officers were deployed at each antivaxxer rally. Our observation shows that the number of police officers was not proportionally sufficient to the number of rally participants.

According to Democratic Research Institute’s assessment, 60 police officers were deployed at the September 15 gathering, about 80 police officers on November 5, up to 50 police officers on November 20, only up to 50 police officers were present at the November 28 rally in which around 800 people took part, about 600 police officers attended the December 5 gathering, 50 law enforcement members attended the rally on December 7, 30 officers on December 12 and around 45 officers at the December 26 rally. As for patrol police crews, ten patrol police cars were deployed to watch for the rally on September 15, ten patrol police cars on November 5, six cars on November 20, seven cars on November 28, nine cars on December 5, six cars on December 7, three cars on December 6, three cars on December 12 and six cars on December 26.

The largest number of law enforcement officers was mobilized during the November 5 gathering near the State Ceremony Palace (former presidential residence).

A large number of police officers and patrol police cars were deployed also during December 5 rally in front of the Georgian Patriarchate.

¹⁹ Information on the March 15 gathering was disseminated through the personal Facebook page of Zviad Tomaradze, Facebook blog of Beka Vardosanidze and a Facebook page entitled “Against the enemies of the country”

Democracy Research Institute's monitors observed private talks over the phone between organizers and law enforcement officers. Friendly chat between Zviad Tomaradze and police officers emphasized rally organizers' positive attitudes to the officers. Many times Tomaradze stated that police officers supported their demands. Overall, it is safe to say that this loyal relationship between rally organizers and law enforcement members was reciprocal.

Road blockade occurred in 4 out of 8 gatherings due to the number of protesters (but not on the basis of a prior notice submitted to the Mayor's Office). Article 5 of the Law on Gatherings and Rallies prescribes the duty of giving a prior notice to the executive authority of the relevant municipality if the gathering or rally will take up a roadway or impede public transport. In case of a majority of their rallies, the organizers made use of the legally prescribed exception that allows blocking the road due to a large number of protesters even if no prior notice on such blockade has been served on the government.²⁰

At the December 12 rally in front of the Government Administration building, organizers put on fire a poster with "a green passport" image on it. Worth mentioning is that police officers did not react to such behavior against the backdrop of numerous examples of police treating civic activists in a completely different way at other rallies and gatherings.²¹

3.2. Clergymen

As per Democracy Research Institute's observation, clergymen attended all of the antivaxxer gatherings. In some case they publicly addressed the protesters. It should be mentioned that the Georgian Patriarchate also was among the targets of some of these antivaxxer rallies.

At the September 15 rally, Irakli Abashidze, a clergy person who has been suspended as a priest by the Georgian Patriarchate's Synodal Commission since 2013, addressed the rally participants with a speech in which he vowed full support for the rally organizers. Irakly Abashidze referred to mandatory vaccination as "fascist approach" denouncing vaccination propaganda and intimidation of the public as unacceptable. Irakly Abashidze was partaking in antivaxxer gatherings systematically.

3.3 Description of the antivaxxer rallies held

All of the antivaxxer rallies conducted during the reporting period were authored by Zviad Tomaradze and other leaders of "Nation and State".²² Media coverage of the gatherings was being provided by Beka Vadosanidze, a blogger known for his sharply antiliberal statements.

²⁰ Law on Gatherings and Rallies, Article 11 *prima*.

²¹ For example, on November 9 and December 2, 2020, civic activists conducting a rally in front of the Parliament premises were not allowed to bring firewood to the place of gathering on the premise that the firewood could catch fire. See also Report of the Public Defender on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in 2020, pp. 244-247, available at <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2021040110573948397.pdf>

²² On October 2021, the movement converted itself to a political party. For further information, see chapter 2 of this report.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF SEPTEMBER 15, 2021

Information on the September 15 gathering was disseminated three days prior to the rally through the personal Facebook page of Zviad Tomaradze and a Facebook group page entitled “Against the enemies of the country”.

Among the demands put forward by rally participants were cancellation of compulsory vaccination, exclusion of Amiran Gamkrelidze and Paata Imnadze from the Governmental Interagency Council because of their attempts to impose Covid dictatorship, and dismissal from the office of Public Defender of Nino Lomjaria for her being “a supporter of Covid dictatorship”.

The area in front of the Government Administration was the most frequently choice as a location for antivaxxer gatherings. It was chosen also for the September 15 rally, which some 200 demonstrators attended. The rally started off in front of the Government Administration premises, continued at the headquarters of the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia and ended up at the Georgian Patriarchate with a general prayer.

Contrary to rally participants’ demands on the protection of children from Covid and children’s exclusion from the mandatory vaccination scheme, there were a number of children attending the rally. Moreover, most protesters wore facemasks inappropriately and neglected the social distancing rules.

At the September 15 gathering, Soso Manjavidze made a series of statements criticizing the World Health Organization:

“It is the WHO that instructs our Government to establish a Covid dictatorship; and now they want children to become part of compulsory vaccination, which is unacceptable.”

Beka Vardosanidze referred to pro-Western media as the main culprit in the implementation of “Covid fascism”:

“The media outlets in Georgia are disseminating a lot of misconceptions about goodness of vaccination. The media-reported statistics are aimed at planting fear in the society about deaths caused by Covid.”

The protesters did not block the roadway and hence, they were not obliged to inform the municipal executive authorities about the rally in writing.

In the beginning, when some 150 protesters were attending the rally in front of the Government Administration premises, up to 30 police officers were mobilized on the spot. But when the protesters moved toward the head office of the Georgian Dream party and their number increased to some 200 individuals, around 60 patrol police officers kept watch over the rally in front of the Georgian Dream office.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF NOVEMBER 5, 2021

According to the organizers of the November 5 antivaxxer rally, the rally was held in response to President Zurabishvili's statement on November 3.²³ At her meeting with the press, President discussed the importance of mandatory vaccination and the need for introducing Covid passports and imposing certain restrictions upon unvaccinated people.

The rally was planned to answer the President's briefing. Information on the rally was disseminated one day ahead through the personal Facebook pages of its organizers. The demonstration started at the Presidential Palace in Atoneli Street and ended at the State Ceremony Palace. Around 130 people were present at initial place of gathering, while 70 remained at the endpoint of the procession.

While rallying, the protesters learned President was meeting with diplomatic missions. Acting upon the organizers' demands to have a face-to-face meeting with the President, protesters started off toward the State Ceremony Palace in Avlabari.

The rally was organized by Zviad Tomaradze, Chairman of the "Nation and State" political association, Irakli Abashidze, Secretary General of the organization, Nikoloz Khomasuridze, member of the organization's political council⁶ and Beka Vardosanidze, a blogger.

In his speech at the rally, Zviad Tomaradze criticized the President for her call to the Patriarchate to galvanize the vaccination process. According to his words, the President wanted to have mandatory vaccination endorsed and discrimination against the unvaccinated legalized. Zviad Tomaradze stated he was boycotting the management of Wissol and Coca Cola urged the protesters that they too support "the boycott" because both companies stated they had all of their staff vaccinated.

Irakli Abashidze labelled President's briefing as an attempt to legalize unconstitutional rules and Covid dictatorship. He called for President's resignation.

A majority of rally participants and organizers were not using facemasks as per the prescribed rules.

Up to 40 police officers were there for the rally in front of the Presidential palace, while around 80 police officers were mobilized when the rally relocated to the State Ceremony Palace. This time too, much like in other cases, positive relationship and complete understanding between the rally organizers and the police were sensible.

Because the rally participants were not blocking the roadway, the organizers were not obliged to send a prior written notice to the municipal executive body.

²³ CIVIL.GE, November 4, 2021, President Calls for COVID Passports, Vaccine Mandates for Risk Groups, available at <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/452944>

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF NOVEMBER 20, 2021

The November 20 gathering was held in protest of the Government's decision²⁴ to allow physical access to various public and private premises only to those possessing the so-called "Covid passports"²⁵ since December 1, 2021. The participants denounced the mandatory vaccinations and children's vaccination and demanded abolition of Covid (green) passports.

The ralliers gathered at the First Republic Square. Later they proceeded to the Parliament building. There were some 300 people in the beginning (in the First Republic Square). During the procession, their number increased to 350.

As the procession was moving, the organizers told the demonstrators they were preparing a petition to marshal public opinion against the Covid (green) passports.

A majority of ralliers were either not wearing or improperly using facemasks. Nor were they observing the social distancing rule.

Soso Manjavidze who was one of the rally organizers stated:

"Against the background of the ongoing protest rallies, the Government must hear the people's perspective that Covid passports and mandatory vaccination will lead to economic breakdown and complete destruction of small businesses."

Beka Vardosanidze, another of the rally organizers, was especially critical of the media:

"The liberal media are spreading misinformation of various kinds in regard to the Covid virus; they withhold the truth; and they must receive their punishment under law."

Zviad Tomaraze staged a small performance naming Amiran Gamkrelidze "a top Covid fascist" with a color smoke in the background. He said "the only master for the Georgian people is God" and they will not tolerate serfdom under anyone.

About 30 police officers escorted the procession. We counted around 50 police officers when the protesters were rallying in front of the Parliament premises.

THE RALLY IN FRONT THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER ON NOVEMBER 28, 2021

²⁴ The decision was announced several days prior to the actual amendments in the law. The Amendment itself was made to Government resolution no. 562 as of November 30, 2021 through a new Government Resolution dated December 1, 2021.

²⁵ Since December 1, all persons of age of majority must have possessed "the green status" in order to physically enter buildings and premises such as hotels and other places for accommodation, dining places (restaurants, cafes and bars – whether indoors or outdoors, including those inside shopping malls), movie theaters, theaters, concert halls, opera houses, entertainment places, casinos and gambling halls, spa centers and gyms, and ski resort cable cars. For more information, see <https://covidpass.moh.gov.ge/>

The November 28 rally was aimed against the Public Broadcaster's editorial policy and its failure to provide live coverage of their rallies. The rally organizers stated they were determined to start a battle at the legislative level against "Covid regulations" and "Covid passports".

Rally participants gathered in First Republic Square and headed to the Parliament building. The endpoint of the process was the Public Broadcaster. According to the assessment by the Democratic Research Initiative's monitors, around 700 people were gathered at the rally in the beginning, in the First Republic Square. During the procession, this number increased by about 100 people. At the Public Broadcaster's premises, the rally ended up with only around 300 people.

The rally was led by Zviad Tomaradze, Chairman of "Nation and State", Irakli Abashidze, one of the leaders of the organization, Beka Vardosanidze, a far-right activist and blogger, and Soso Manjavidze, an adamant supporter of ultra-right forces and a political scientist. The team of organizers was joined also by Irakli Pirskalava, a singer living in the Russian Federation who is known for his antivaxxer sentiments.

Ralliers stressed the unacceptability of mandatory vaccination. A majority of the rally participants were not wearing facemasks or wearing them in breach of the rules.

The organizers were making it clear that they were unhappy about introduction of "Covid passports" and were demanding that the Government abolish their decision [on Covid passports]. Beka Vardosanidze demanded that the Public Defender stream their rallies live.

In the opinion of Democracy Research Institute, about 30 and 50 police officers were deployed at the First Republic Square and in front of the Parliament building, respectively. Patrol police cars were also mobilized to manage the rally. Police officers formed a human chain to protect the entrance door of the Public Broadcaster but no verbal altercation happened between the demonstrators and the law enforcement officers. Interestingly, unlike the previous rallies, the number of both the participants and the police was double this time.

Because of the number of rally participants, the roadway from the Republic Square toward the Parliament got blocked. Because there were ongoing works for the installation of New Year decorations, it would be impossible to accommodate the demonstrators without blocking the road in front of the Parliament.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF DECEMBER 5, 2021

The December 5 rally started out in the First Republic Square, continued at the Parliament building and ended up in front of the Patriarchate. Rally leaders demanded that the Government abolish the green passports and that the Patriarchate announce its stance clearly and indubitably.

Protesters gathered in front of the Parliament were shouting slogans: "End the Covid dictatorship!", "We don't want Covid passports!" and "Do not impose Covid regulations!".

650 demonstrators were present at the rally in the First Republic Square. Their number increased to 700 as they moved toward the Parliament and only around 400 demonstrators remained at the final location, the Patriarchate.

The rally participants said a prayer in front of the Patriarch's Office and urged the Patriarchate to clearly articulate their stance. Some demonstrators were unhappy for the fact that representatives of the Patriarch's Office turned down the request to meet with them. A Facebook comment posted by the Patriarchate's public relations officer was met with a particularly negative attitude.²⁶ The rally participants referred to the post as treason and "flight from the battlefield".

Habitually, Beka Vardosanidze blamed media organizations "guided by a liberal agenda" for spreading misinformation concerning the Covid pandemic. Soso Manjavidze focused on the importance of holding protest rallies like this. Zviad Tomaradze criticized the vagueness of the Patriarchate's position on the matter and its refusal to meet with the rally participants. Tomaradze thanked couriers from Glovo and Wolt delivery companies for their participation in the gathering.

Up to 60 police officers and 9 police cars were doing their duty in the First Republic Square. Some of the police officers walked alongside the procession as it moved, while others followed the demonstrators in police cars making sure the road remained unblocked. Because of the number of rally participants, the Rustaveli Avenue was jammed for a while in front of the Parliament. Police officers were giving the rally organizers instructions to not impede the movement of people and vehicles. Despite the blockage in front of the Parliament, the roadway in front of the Patriarchate remained unimpeded. Also, the number of rally participants reduced at this last location.

According to the assessment of Democracy Research Institute's monitors, people gathered at the Patriarch's Office were greater in numbers than those in front of the Parliament building. At the Patriarch's Office, law enforcement officers and rally organizers worked in a concerted manner instructing the rally participants to stand in the territory designed as a footway.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF DECEMBER 7, 2021

The December 7 rally started off in front of the Government Administration building where protesters once again requested that mandatory vaccination be repealed. They also demanded holding a meeting with members of the Interagency Coordination Council that was in session at that time and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. Afterwards, the protesters relocated in front of the TV Pirveli building blaming TV Pirveli for biased media coverage. Zviad Tomaradze demanded that the TV Pirveli Company publicly apologize for the incorrect interpretations in their media reports.

²⁶ "The Patriarchate considers the way the demand for a meeting was made, the form of ultimatum, unacceptable", - Andria Jagmaidze, December 5, 2021, available at <https://bit.ly/3qGbwUw>

Information on the upcoming rally was spread 2 days prior to the rally through Facebook pages of “Nation and State” leaders Zviad Tomaradze and Irakli Abashidze and the blog of far-right activist Beka Vardosanidze.

This time, the rally was stood out by a small number of participants and, by Democracy Research Institute’s assessment, only up to 100 people attended it. No roadway blockage occurred during the rally.

Some 40 police officers and 10 police cars were deployed at the Government Administration building and nearby streets. About 50 patrol and criminal police officers were protecting public order in front of the TV company premises. The police did not let demonstrators stick posters onto the walls of the TV company building. Patrol police officers and criminal police members formed a human shield to protect the entrances of the Government Administration and TV Pirveli.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF DECEMBER 12, 2021

Primary objectives announced at the December 12 meeting were cancellation of the “green passports” and dismissal of the Interagency Governmental Council chaired by Prime Minister.

Around 150 demonstrators started off at the First Republic Square to head through Rustaveli Avenue to the Government Administration where their number increased to some 350 people.

The protesters demanded that a Covid Pandemic Prevention Coordination Council be set up within the Parliamentary Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee and Zviad Tomaradze be included in the Council as a member. They also asked for resignation of Amiran Gamkrelidze and Tengiz Tsertsvadze. The rally was joined by representatives of various restaurants and fitness clubs asking for abolition of the Covid regulations imposed on business subjects. A vast majority of rally participants and organizers were not wearing facemasks or observing the social distancing rules this time too.

Rally participants were holding posters saying “No to green passports!”. They also received lots of small-size leaflets saying “Down with the dictatorship”, “The green passports will not work in Georgia” and “No green passes”.

Speakers at the rally talked about threats posed by the World Health Organization-imposed regulations. In their opinion, Georgia should not adopt Western countries’ practices involving anti-Covid regulations and restrictions. In addition, rally organizers informed other participants that Lado Kakhadze, an MP from the Georgian Dream, was supportive of their views.

In front of the Government administration, rally organizers put to fire a poster with a green passport image on it. Law enforcement members did not intervene.

Rally organizers were insistently instructing the protesters to obey police officers’ demands. Cordiality of Zviad Tomaradze’s communication with police officers demonstrated the existing positive relationship between the parties. According to Zviad Tomaradze’s words, police officers were supportive of their stance.

No roadway blocking took place. About 3 police cars and 30 police officers were keeping order at the First Republic Square.

THE ANTIVAXXER RALLY OF DECEMBER 26, 2021

At the December 26 rally, protesters were again demanding abolition of the “green passports” and denouncing the spreading of misinformation on the Covid virus by the liberal media. The rally was announced at personal Facebook pages of the organizers. Some 200 demonstrators marched from the First Republic Square through Rustaveli Avenue toward the Administration of the Government where the number of protesters increased to about 260 people.

A large number of small-size leaflets was distributed to the gathering participants saying “no to the Covid dictatorship”. Some participants were using percussion instruments that had the images of Amiran Gamkrelidze and Paata Imnadze on them.

In his speech, Zviad Tomaradze told about the serious impact of the existing Covid regulations upon the restaurant industry. He announced his upcoming television debate with Allergist Bidzina Kulumbegov. He said it was the achievement of rallies like this that the Public Broadcaster decided to allocate air time to their matter.

A vast majority of demonstrators and organizers was not observing the social distancing rule. Most people did not wear facemasks or wore them incorrectly.

The demonstrators did not block the roadway. Six police cars and 40 officers were stationed at the First Republic Square, while about 45 police officers formed a human chain in front of the State Chancellery. Tomaradze instructed the ralliers to obey the law enforcement officers and to not create obstacles on the roadway as the procession moved. Once again, the loyal mutual attitude between law enforcement officers and the rally organizers was pretty much conspicuous.

The organizers announced further protest rallies were to come in a post-New Year period if the Government would not change their position on Covid regulations and green passports.