



## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# GEORGIA: AUTHORITIES TARGET WITNESSES AMID ALLEGATIONS OVER THE USE OF TOXIC CHEMICALS AGAINST PROTESTERS

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the wave of intimidation of experts, witnesses, journalists, and human rights defenders in Georgia, following findings published by BBC Eye's investigation indicating that Georgian authorities may have used harmful and potentially prohibited toxic chemicals against overwhelmingly peaceful mass demonstrations of November–December 2024.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of launching an effective and impartial investigation into the alleged unlawful use of force, the authorities have opened criminal cases targeting the individuals who had documented injuries, analysed medical evidence, or spoken publicly about the possible use of toxic chemicals.

The allegations of "assisting a foreign organisation in activities hostile to the state" they are facing, is baseless, and appears aimed at deterring people from reporting violations, restricting legitimate academic freedom and journalistic and human rights work as well as suppressing scrutiny of state conduct. Georgian authorities must halt harassment of witnesses, ensure effective and impartial investigation into the alleged use of prohibited chemical agents, hold those responsible to account and provide victims with medical care and reparations.

This abuse of investigative powers—combined with the government's refusal to disclose and update what chemical substances they hold for riot control purposes, or was added to the water cannons contrary to its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) highlights the urgent need for an international enquiry into the allegations and the government's conduct in relation to peaceful protesters.

Amnesty International calls for the creation of an international mechanism of enquiry into the allegations of use of toxic chemicals against protesters and other use of unlawful force by Georgian law enforcement during 2024 protests and for state parties to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to support an investigation through the most appropriate mechanism. It also urges Georgia's international partners to adopt robust measures, including a complete embargo on transfers of law enforcement equipment and weapons used against the protesters.

<sup>1</sup> BBC. "BBC Eye: When Water Burns." BBC Media Centre, 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2025/bbc-eye-when-water-burns>.

## BBC INVESTIGATION CORROBORATES THE ALLEGATIONS OF MISUSE OF TOXIC CHEMICALS

The BBC documentary *When Water Burns*, broadcast on 1 December 2025, presented strong evidence that Georgian police had used water cannon laced with toxic chemicals against street protesters during mass demonstrations in November and December 2024. The investigation found that the toxic chemicals were capable of causing severe burns and other long-lasting damage, with effects often persisting for a month and sometimes significantly longer. The investigation drew on multiple sources, including testimonies—among them a former police officer responsible for overseeing police weaponry with direct knowledge of the chemicals allegedly used—along with expert opinions, procurement records, and medical documentation, including findings published in a peer-reviewed journal article. The latter study, carried out by local doctors including Konstantine Chakhunashvili, surveyed 347 protest participants, 69 of whom underwent clinical evaluation. It found that nearly half experienced longer-term effects such as persistent cough, shortness of breath, and skin irritation, and in some cases showed changes in the lungs and heart.<sup>2</sup>

The findings corroborate reports which summed up months of documentation by several local watchdogs — including in a joint detailed report<sup>3</sup>—as well as Amnesty International’s own reporting about the effects experienced by protesters who reported being sprayed by unidentified chemicals from water cannon.<sup>4</sup>

Medical professionals in Georgia had also previously raised alarm: more than 1,000 clinicians signed an open appeal urging authorities to cease the use of harmful toxic chemicals and disclose the exact chemical agents deployed.<sup>5</sup> Yet for a year the authorities refused repeated requests from local watchdogs such as the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), the Georgian Public Defender, and civil society to release information about the types and quantities of less lethal weapons used during the 2024 protests.<sup>6</sup>

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: INTIMIDATION, COERCIVE SUMMONS, AND JUDICIAL PRESSURE

A formal investigation relating to these events was opened by the Georgian authorities only after the BBC’s documentary aired. The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) which opened the investigation a few hours after publication of the BBC report, stated that they were investigating in two directions: “On the one hand, the published material contains signs of a crime which, if confirmed, is directed against the life and health of citizens and substantially violates their and the public’s lawful interests. On the other hand, it contains signs of a crime that severely harms Georgia’s national interests, its international image and reputation, and is directed against the interests of the state.”<sup>7</sup>

However, rather than focusing on whether chemical weapons or other prohibited means had been allegedly used against protesters, the State Security Service (SSG) pressed with inquiries into purported “assistance to a foreign organisation in hostile activity,” claiming that the BBC’s reporting harmed Georgia’s national interests.<sup>8</sup> The ruling party publicly denounced the documentary as “absurd and false,” branded the BBC “fake media,” and threatened legal action in international courts.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, **Chakhunashvili, Konstantine, Gela Gunashvili, Nino Jobava, George Chakhunashvili & Davit G. Chakhunashvili.** “Collateral Damage: Cardiovascular and Respiratory Implications of Tear Gas Deployment During Peaceful Protest.” *Toxicology Reports* 15 (November 2025): Article 102166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.toxrep.2025.102166>

<sup>3</sup> GYLA Slams Authorities for Concealing Composition of Chemical Agents Used During Protest Dispersals – Civil Georgia

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International. “Georgia: Brutal Crackdown on Protestors and Journalists in Georgia: ‘They May Have Broken Our Bones, but They Won’t Break Our Spirits.’” Research briefing, Index EUR 56/8845/2024, December 13, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/8845/2024/en/>

<sup>5</sup> JAMnews. “Doctors’ Petition in Georgia / Medical Professionals in Georgia Demand a Halt to the Use of Chemical Agents on Protesters.” JAMnews, December 8, 2024. <https://jam-news.net/medical-professionals-in-georgia-demand-a-halt-to-the-use-of-chemical-agents-on-protesters/>

<sup>6</sup> HRC – Human Rights Centre, Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), Democracy Research Institute (DRI), Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Partnership for Human Rights (PHR), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI), Social Justice Center (SJC), Rights Georgia (RG), Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), and Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT). 2025. *Human Rights Crisis in Georgia Following the 2024 Parliamentary Elections*. May 2025. [https://admin.gyla.ge/uploads\\_script/publications/pdf/HUMAN%20RIGHTS%20CRISIS%20IN%20GEORGIA%20-20Final.pdf](https://admin.gyla.ge/uploads_script/publications/pdf/HUMAN%20RIGHTS%20CRISIS%20IN%20GEORGIA%20-20Final.pdf). See as well:

p. 92 Public Defender of Georgia. 2025. *Report on the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2024*. Parliamentary report. <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2024052911382931838.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> State Security Service of Georgia, Facebook post on 2 December 2025. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/sssggeo/posts/pfbid033tYeTAuoFzmaTB9PS3kHt1etQhmH5N9m7sDkFNZF3rUN2tx6PWAw9y6kEcmPt1zMI?rid=OctYOA06JpG63Zeo> [accessed 3 December 2025].

<sup>8</sup> State Security Service of Georgia, Facebook post on 2 December 2025. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/sssggeo/posts/pfbid033tYeTAuoFzmaTB9PS3kHt1etQhmH5N9m7sDkFNZF3rUN2tx6PWAw9y6kEcmPt1zMI?rid=OctYOA06JpG63Zeo> [accessed 3 December 2025].

<sup>9</sup> BM.GE. 2025. “GD Announces Legal Action against BBC in International Courts over False Allegations.” December 3, 2025.

<https://bm.ge/en/news/gd-announces-legal-action-against-bbc-in-international-courts-over-false-allegations> (accessed December 3, 2025).

On 2 December, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze further escalated the threatening rhetoric, describing information used by the BBC as “deliberately false” and warning that cooperating with foreign media or providing information deemed harmful to the state could constitute a criminal act.<sup>10</sup> A day later, however, in a press briefing the Prime Minister acknowledged that a chemical substance had been added to the water cannon mixture used against demonstrators in November–December 2024. He refused to specify which substance had been used nor whether it was a permitted substance, while rejecting the BBC’s suggestion that it was likely Camite, insisting that the Interior Ministry had “never purchased” it.<sup>11</sup>

Individuals who provided evidence or testimony have been summoned by the SSG and questioned in front of magistrate judges, in an unusually intrusive process that appears to be aimed at intimidating witnesses rather than conducting effective investigation.

## MEDICAL EXPERTS TARGETED, ACADEMIC FREEDOM UNDER THREAT

Georgian doctor Konstantin Chakhunashvili was the lead author of a study, Collateral Damage: Cardiovascular and Respiratory Implications of Tear Gas Deployment During Peaceful Protest, published in November 2025 in the respected peer reviewed journal Toxicology Reports. This observational study, which found long term evidence of harm to a significant number of protest participants, did not attempt to identify, and indeed made no mention of any chemical additives used during the protests beyond tear gas. Nevertheless, after Chakhunashvili and his study was featured in the BBC documentary he was called for questioning by the SSG, directly criticised by key government decision makers, and smeared in government friendly media.

“I perceive it as an attack on academic freedom first of all,” Chakhunashvili told Amnesty International. “This study is observational. It can’t confirm whether this chemical or that chemical was observed... But even if I detected the chemical and if I published it in an international journal, that cannot be a subject of persecution on the grounds that I’m sabotaging my country. That would still be [violating] academic freedom.”

Instead of being questioned about injuries or toxicological findings by the judge, he said the questions focused on his academic background, publications, and motivation.

“The Security Service wants to pretend it is ‘objectively’ investigating whether chemical weapons were used, while at the same time intimidating the people doing the actual work—collecting evidence, helping victims, documenting injuries. It is a classic tactic of intimidation,” Konstantine Chakhunashvili said following his questioning.

His co-authors, Davit Chakhunashvili and Gela Ghunashvili, were also questioned about their motives, qualifications, and professional experience rather than their findings, reinforcing the impression of a coordinated effort to discredit their work and deter reporting. Davit Chakhunashvili similarly reported that the apparent aim of his questioning was to “intimidate” him and others and prevent them from conducting similar work or speaking out about violations in the future.<sup>12</sup>

By attacking medical researchers in government friendly media and summoning the authors of peer-reviewed articles in for questioning, the Georgian government is putting academic freedom at risk, and creating a climate of fear for researchers whose findings appear to contradict government narratives.

<sup>10</sup> State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG). Facebook post 2 December 2025.

<https://www.facebook.com/sssggeo/posts/pfbid033tYeTAuoFzmaTB9PS3kHt1etQhmH5N9m7sDkFNZF3rUN2tx6PWAw9y6kEcmPt1zMI>. For English see: Gvadzabia, Mikheil. “‘False information harmful to the state’: Georgian authorities react to BBC investigation.” OC Media, December 2, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/false-information-harmful-to-the-state-reactions-to-the-bbcs-investigation-in-georgia/>.

<sup>11</sup> Live briefing by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=1179290697012542](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1179290697012542) see as well: Civil Georgia. 2025. “Kobakhidze Admits Substance Used in Water Cannons, Denies Camite.” December 3, 2025. <https://civil.ge/archives/713482>.

<sup>12</sup> Publika. 2025. ““შთაბეჭიდილება დამრჩა, რომ კვლევა წაკითხული არ ჰქონდათ” – დავით ჩახუნაშვილი გამოიკითხა.” December 3, 2025. <https://publika.ge/shtabechdileba-damrcha-rom-kvleva-wakithkuli-ar-hqondat-davit-chakhunashvili-gamoikitkha/>

## VICTIMS, ACTIVISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS TARGETED

Opposition politician Tamar Khundadze, who publicly revealed her own injuries during the crackdown, was also questioned about her social media posts.<sup>13</sup> Activist Zviad Maisashvili,<sup>14</sup> who described being severely beaten by riot police on 30 November 2024, was similarly summoned and interrogated about his public statements.<sup>15</sup>

Representatives of GYLA and Transparency International Georgia—two organisations that systematically document human rights violations in Georgia—were summoned to give evidence in the presence of a magistrate judge. Both groups condemned the process as a retaliation for their human rights work and a clear attempt to intimidate and silence those working to document abuses to shift attention away from human rights violations and failed investigations by the state.<sup>16</sup>

Transparency International's Executive Director, Eka Gigauri, described her questioning to Amnesty International:

"The purpose of the questioning was unmistakable. An investigator asked about my education, whether I had given information to the BBC about the chemicals, and even whether I had been paid for speaking to the media. This was never about establishing facts but about creating the illusion of a 'serious investigation' while silencing civil society and deterring anyone from speaking to international media."

Amnesty International is concerned that these summonings and questioning persons about their motives, possible financial incentives, their personal and academic backgrounds as well as exact information shared with the journalists, appear to be aimed at intimidating witnesses. Such tactics not only undermine independent scrutiny of the authorities' actions but also create a chilling effect, discouraging victims and witnesses from coming forward and obstructing effective investigation.

Furthermore, by framing information sharing on matters of high public interest with journalists as "hostile activity" and casting experts, civil society organisations and victims as actors harming "state interests," authorities are preventing journalists and human rights defenders from carrying out their legitimate work and violating Georgia's international obligation to respect the exercise of right to freedom of expression.

## INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND GEORGIA'S INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

The use of all weapons, including less lethal weapons, must comply with international human rights law and standards on the use of force. Among them, tear gas and water cannon can only be used in situations of widespread violence that cannot be addressed by targeting violent individuals alone, and only after issuing a clear warning with sufficient time for people to comply with the order. Mixing water and chemical irritants for use in water cannon must be prohibited and the tear gas must not be used repeatedly, in excessive quantities or in a confined space or in situations where people cannot disperse.

Amnesty International and local watchdogs have documented the repeated unlawful use of force, including water cannon, tear gas and chemical substances by Georgian law enforcement officials in violation of the above standards. This included the use of those weapons in confined or otherwise inescapable areas; firing chemically-laced water cannon at short range or at individuals who had no opportunity to disperse, as well as in absence of prior warnings, safe dispersal routes, and situations that did not meet international human rights law and standards.<sup>17</sup>

The Georgian government has admitted to using unnamed chemical substances in water cannons against protesters during November–December 2024 protests<sup>18</sup> and effectively confirmed the simultaneous use of use of tear gas and water

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<sup>13</sup> A video recording of Tamar Khundadze being reportedly summoned by SSSG posted on her Facebook profile page, 2 December, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/tata.khundadze>

<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International has previously documented the case of his beating, on which there has been no effective investigation or accountability a year on. p.6: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/8845/2024/en/>

<sup>15</sup> Civil Georgia. 2025. "Georgian State Security Service Summons Those Featured in BBC Report." December 3, 2025. <https://civil.ge/archives/713372> (accessed December 3, 2025)

<sup>16</sup> Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), Facebook page post 3 December on summoning of the GYLA representatives, <https://www.facebook.com/GYLA.ge>

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International. "Georgia: Authorities Must Stop Using Unlawful Force against Peaceful Protesters and Ensure Accountability." Public Statement, May 3, 2024, EUR 56/8015/2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EUR5680152024ENGLISH.pdf> see as well Georgia: Brutal crackdown on protesters and journalists in Georgia: "They may have broken our bones, but they won't break our spirits" - Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EUR5680152024ENGLISH.pdf>;

<sup>18</sup> Civil Georgia. 2025. "Kobakhidze Admits Substance Used in Water Cannons, Denies Camite." December 3, 2025. <https://civil.ge/archives/713482>



cannons during April–May 2024 demonstrations.<sup>19</sup> In the latter case, the Ministry of Interior however claimed that the measures were lawful and in line with international standards. In support of this claim the Ministry cited "Amnesty International's guidance," without referring to the specific document, insisted that the "guidance" made reference to dyes or irritants while failing to indicate in any way that mixing chemicals with water makes dosage uncontrollable, poses serious long-term health risks, and should be strictly prohibited.<sup>20</sup>

Amnesty International's position has been unequivocal that adding chemical agents to water cannons is inherently dangerous, as it makes dosage impossible to control and greatly increases the risk of serious or long-term harm. For these reasons water cannons should never be used to deliver irritants, dyes, or any chemical substances. Their deployment in such a manner violates basic safety principles and undermines the strict conditions under which water cannons may lawfully be used.<sup>21</sup>

## NEED FOR AN INDEPENDENT INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION AND WEAPONS EMBARGO

The BBC's findings, along with extensive medical documentation and witness testimony, raise serious legal concerns under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). As a state party, Georgia is strictly prohibited from using toxic chemicals as weapons, except within the narrow bounds of permitted riot control agents (RCAs) for law enforcement purposes, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes. Such agents must cause only rapid and temporary irritation. The OPCW Scientific Advisory Board recognises only 19 chemicals as RCAs—none capable of causing the deep burns, blistering, and prolonged injuries documented in Georgia.<sup>22</sup> The chemicals identified in the BBC documentary do not feature in the CWC's list of riot control agents permitted for use in law enforcement. If Georgian law enforcement have used these toxic chemicals on protesters, this would represent a serious violation of the CWC.

Amnesty International calls on state parties to the CWC to initiate and support an OPCW investigation through an appropriate mechanism specifically tasked with investigating these allegations. The investigation should examine whether Georgia deployed toxic chemicals not permitted for use in law enforcement, evaluate the circumstances of their use, and collect relevant samples and testimonies.

States should also press Georgia to disclose fully and transparently the toxic substances used in water cannon operations, their source, concentrations, and the legal basis claimed for their deployment. Such disclosure is essential to protect the health and rights of affected persons and to prevent potential use of prohibited toxic chemicals.

The allegations also raise serious concerns about the international transfer of law enforcement equipment including water cannon equipment, dispersal systems, or toxic chemicals to Georgia. While under the EU Common Position and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), exporting states must deny licences where military equipment is likely to be used in internal repression, there are few binding regulations governing the trade in law enforcement equipment. The EU Anti-Torture Regulation controls the trade in some law enforcement goods, including kinetic impact projectiles, water cannon and pepper spray.

Amnesty International calls on exporting states to conduct urgent reviews of past and current transfers of all law enforcement equipment, including water cannon systems and toxic chemicals. States must also strictly monitor transfers of dual use precursor chemicals to Georgia. States must immediately suspend the export of law enforcement equipment until: an independent investigation is completed; effective mechanisms to ensure that weapons will not be used to commit serious human rights violations are in place; alleged violations are thoroughly and impartially investigated; and there is full accountability for past abuses. Such measures are essential to prevent further abuses, and reinforce international law against the deployment of toxic chemicals not exempted by the CWC for the purposes of law enforcement.

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<sup>19</sup>Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia's post of 21 October 2024:

<https://www.facebook.com/MIAofGeorgia/posts/pfbid02z5bzat1ncVWutYuFGMoctzJtuCEbKwv6Hf75xhkPLqAHqak3Mo7Wm4bt9CR5k5rl>;

see as well: Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA). 2024. "Statement on the Ministry of Internal Affairs' October 21 Response on Use of Force during Protests." October 21, 2024. <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/saia-Shinagan-saqmeta-saministros-gancxadebaze-21octomberi>.

<sup>20</sup> Amnesty International. 2021. *Chemical Irritants in Law Enforcement: An Amnesty International Position Paper*. June 2021.

<https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2021/07/Amnesty-position-paper-chemical-irritants.pdf> Readkong+1

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International. 2021. *Chemical Irritants in Law Enforcement: An Amnesty International Position Paper*. June 2021.

<https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2021/07/Amnesty-position-paper-chemical-irritants.pdf> Readkong+1

<sup>22</sup> Article II(7). Response to the Director-General's Request to the Scientific Advisory Board to Consider Which Riot Control Agents are Subject to Declaration Under the Chemical Weapons Convention (SAB-25/WP.1, 27 March 2017), OPCW, [https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/SAB/en/sab25wp01\\_e\\_.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/SAB/en/sab25wp01_e_.pdf) [accessed 3 December 2025].