

Anti-gay violence goes unpunished in Georgia, again

The festival's organizers said the government acted in concert with the violent demonstrators to thwart the event.



Right-wing demonstrators on their way to loot the recently evacuated festival grounds (photo: Mariam Nikuradze/OC Media)

The violent spectacle that the Georgian capital saw on July 8 was only torches and pitchforks short of a medieval witch hunt scene. An angry mob came running through the fields to scatter an LGBTQ+ festival, looting and vandalizing everything in its path. Yet, this scene has played out again and again in Tbilisi, with subtle variations, over the past 10 years.

Every time the nation's queer community comes out to claim its share of the public space, they are pushed back into the social periphery by crowds led by far-right activists. This year's event, while openly advertised, was in fact held in private space and access was tickets-based, but that did not prevent the attack from happening. As in previous cases, police failed to contain the mob and arrest its leaders, prompting allegations that authorities are gaming both sides in the nation's ongoing culture war.

Law enforcement was fully aware that a right-wing mob was going to attempt to shut down Pride Fest on July 8, the concluding event of Pride Week 2023. Far-right groups like Alt-Info had been openly making threats and mobilizing supporters, even raising cash to bus people in from the provinces, to crack down on the festival.

On the eve of the event, the Interior Ministry [warned](#) the organizers of the anti-Pride rally to keep their actions within the limits of the law and vowed to maintain order. On the day of the festival, police cordons were placed around Lisi Wonderland, an open-air venue situated on a hill overlooking Tbilisi. All of this created grounds for optimism among the festival organizers, but in the end police did little to prevent the attack.

In the afternoon of July 8, just as some journalists were headed up to cover the festival, an angry crowd was climbing up to the location from another side. One group of journalists, including this correspondent, was still on its way when they got a frantic warning from festival organizers: "Dear media and photographers, please avoid festival areas and nearby territories. It is not safe."

Climbing up the hill, the crowd broke through security cordons without meeting much resistance from the police. The festival participants and organizers were evacuated by the police, barely making it out with their lives. By the time that group of journalists arrived, the area had been overrun by a violent mob.

The assailants, mostly men clad in black, staged a festival of their own. They helped themselves to [beverages and yoga mats](#) left behind by the organizers, destroyed festival sets and danced folk dances to celebrate their victory. Police did little to stop the chaos. Media carried [images](#) of police officers showing mob leaders around the venue to convince them that the festival was indeed canceled.

Tbilisi Pride, the group that organized the festival, accused the authorities of collaborating with the violent groups. "We saw it loud and clear that the attack on the LGBTQ+ activists and Pride Fest was a well-planned operation orchestrated jointly by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Alt-Info, against human rights and democracy," Tbilisi Pride said in a [statement](#).

The group pointed out that not only did the police fail to deliver on their promise to provide security this time, but that also the leaders of the hate groups have still not been brought to account for their previous acts of violence. Alto-Info and its factions led a [brazen attack](#) on a planned march of LGBTQ+ activists in 2021. Failing to capture the activists, hate groups beat over 50 reporters who were covering the events and staged a pogrom at the office of Tbilisi Pride. Police did make some arrests, but the leaders of the far-right movement remained at large and free to continue with their hate campaigns.

This prompted the allegation that there is some degree of collaboration between the hate groups and the ruling Georgian Dream party. In the past, the party has claimed that it was trying to avoid civil confrontation and use of excessive force against its citizens, but the Georgian Dream has had no qualms about using the [full arsenal of crowd-control](#) mechanisms when its authority is challenged.

Members of the ruling party condemned the violence of July 8, but skeptics pointed to the anti-liberal rhetoric that the party has engaged in of late.

The government and its allies have particularly [ramped up their homophobia](#) in recent weeks, railing against a local publisher and McDonald's fast food chain for engaging in "LGBT propaganda" and entertaining passing legislation to combat that supposed propaganda.

Georgia's figurehead president, Salome Zourabichvili, who is in open confrontation with the ruling party over its illiberal turn, has vowed to veto such a bill, though her veto can be easily overridden.

She did not mince words when it came to the thwarting of Pride Fest, remarking that, "By effectively egging on the counter-rallies and by failing to condemn hate speech and actions, the parliamentary majority is encouraging violence and bears responsibility for all the consequences."

The fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia is effectively folded into a broader geopolitical game, where Moscow and the West are the top antagonists. While formally seeking membership in the EU, Georgian Dream has recently [sounded](#) euro-skeptic notes and has been increasingly

accommodating to Russian interests. These notes are broadly in harmony with the fiercely anti-Western and pro-Moscow rhetoric of the hate groups like Alt-Info.

As a result, some critics maintain that the Georgian Dream is in cahoots with the Kremlin and its right-wing apologists in Georgia. Others say that the Georgian elite is playing both ends against the middle and will stick with whichever geopolitical alliance or value system prolongs its stay in power.

In either case, Georgia's embattled LGBTQ+ community is left to fend for itself in the face of brutal force from radical groups.