

# Georgia: Mass protests highlight political crisis in the Caucasus

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Since the end of last week a series of demonstrations have taken place in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi with tens of thousands of protesters demanding the resignation of President Mikhail Saakashvili. On Friday several thousand demonstrated in Batumi, Georgia's largest port.

The protests are the biggest since the so-called "Rose revolution" of 2003 that elevated Saakashvili and his pro-Western government into office with the support of the US and European powers.

The demonstrators regard the head of state as responsible for the consequences of the war with Russia in August last year. With the backing of the US, Georgia sent troops into the Republic of South Ossetia in an action that largely destroyed the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, resulted in hundreds of casualties and forced tens of thousands of south Ossetians to flee across the border to neighbouring Russia. In response, Russia sent in its troops and drove the Georgian army out of the region. Following the Georgian aggression the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized as independent by Moscow.

Saakashvili is also accused by his opponents of reacting inappropriately to the financial crisis, which has now struck the former Soviet republic with full force. In addition they criticize the myriad forms of corruption to be found at all levels of the Georgian state.

The opposition has announced it will continue its protests until Saakashvili resigns. For his part, the president has declared his determination to stay in office until the elections planned for 2013.

Saakashvili is profoundly unpopular with the mass of the country's 4.5 million inhabitants and has a tradition of cracking down hard on any opposition. In November

2007 the government forcibly suppressed peaceful demonstrations and imposed a state of emergency over Georgia. State forces stormed and shut down several transmitters, including the private station Imedi TV, critical of the government. Around 600 demonstrators were hospitalized by police at the time. Last year the country's regulatory commission banned the Maestro station from transmitting political programs.

At the same time poverty remains prevalent across the country, and the situation has not improved since Saakashvili took over government from his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze. Nearly half of the population lives below the poverty line and most families are dependent on funds sent from relatives working abroad. The average national pension amounts to approximately €20. While the country has registered economic growth of up to 9 percent in recent years, unemployment levels remain high and stand around 40 percent in the capital city.

The justified anger of broad layers of the population against the right-wing, corrupt government only finds a distorted expression in the protests, however. Behind the protests is an opposition alliance recruited in the main from former supporters of Saakashvili.

The most prominent representatives are Nino Burdshanadse (former parliamentary president), Irakli Alasania (former ambassador to the UN), Salome Zourabichvili (former foreign minister), Zurab Noghaideli (former head of government) and Irakli Okruashvili (former defence secretary).

They all are representatives of pro-Western, neo-liberal-type policies. Their main criticism of Saakashvili's politics is that the president failed to represent Georgian interests with sufficient vigour.

The former UN ambassador and former head of the Abkhazia government-in-exile made this very clear. He

publicly deplored the loss of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and demanded an uncompromising policy by Georgia against Moscow.

Former parliamentary president Burdshanadse also adopted a sharply anti-Russian stance. “We have lost 20 percent of our territory. We have become a country confronting great economic and political difficulties. There are once again Russian military bases”, she explained in an interview with the Austrian *Standard*. Even the timing of the protests was aimed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the crushing of a protest for Georgian independence by Soviet troops.

Noghaideli, who was prime minister until last year and stood foursquare behind President Saakashvili in Georgia’s aggression in South Ossetia, now brands his former mentor a “criminal”. Army general Chachibaia resigned recently, making clear that Saakashvili also faces opposition from inside the army.

The situation highlights the real character of the “Rose revolution”, described by former US president George W. Bush as a “beacon of democracy”. The latest developments in Georgia confirm that the “multicoloured revolutions” initiated by Washington and Brussels in a number of Eastern European countries had nothing to do with democracy. Instead rival political cliques struggle for influence and power at high cost to the masses in the countries concerned.

The US, European Union member states, as well as Russia are now seeking to ensure that the situation does not escalate. At the start of last week Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin and the US-ambassador in Moscow, John Byerly, held talks over the deteriorating situation in Georgia and the growing wave of protests. One of the main issues in their discussions was how to guarantee the security of the Georgian border with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Against the background of growing protests throughout the eastern half of the European continent, Western European powers and the US are currently exercising restraint and urging moderation. They are well aware the protests could develop very rapidly into a conflagration beyond the control of the weak governments in the region. Just last week there were violent clashes between police and masses of demonstrators calling for the resignation of the government in the Republic of Moldova.

The intensification of the political situation in

Georgia is clearly bound up with the country’s accelerating economic decline. Georgia has been in economic free fall since the end of last year. In the last quarter of 2008 economic growth slumped from over 7 percent in 2007 to barely 2 percent.

Under Saakashvili numerous reforms were implemented aimed at attracting foreign investors. Business taxes were lowered substantially and restrictions on foreign capital were largely waived. According to a poll carried out by the World Bank, on a scale measuring the “business-friendliness” of world states, Georgia soared from 112th place in 2005 to 15th place in 2008. In 2007 direct investments to the economy amounted to nearly 20 percent of gross domestic product.

The drying up of such investments in the wake of the international financial crisis has led to economic collapse in Georgia and many other Eastern European states. In September the IMF agreed to award Georgia a credit of \$750 million. It is already clear, however, that this sum will not be sufficient to guarantee the stability of the economy.



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